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REVIEW ARTICLE

ARTHUR McCORMACK, *The Population Explosion and World Hunger*.
London: Burns and Oates, 1963. 9s. 6d.

THE population scare of the last decade has been dramatically epitomized by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, who state that while it took 200,000 years for the world's human population to reach 2,500 millions, it will take a mere thirty years to add another 2,000 millions.

The richer countries of the world, in which the surplus of production over consumption, accelerated by technical progress, is constantly rising, may seek to dispose of their surplus by making gifts of food to governments at the other end of the world; but charitable institutions, on whatever premiss they may be based, have never constituted an acceptable form of aid to the recipients excepting in the direst emergency.

Neither does the provision of capital in itself generate rapid development, contrary to the belief of governments in some of the poorer countries that if only they could borrow more from abroad they would develop faster. Rate of growth of individual economies will depend largely on the response of communities following outmoded agrarian methods, to new forms of social organization, new habits and attitudes.

What is urgently needed is a rise in the present low levels of agricultural productivity in areas in which rate of population growth appears to be overtaking rate of growth of agricultural product. With some half of the world's population still living by a poverty-stricken subsistence agriculture in which each family produces the greater part of its own food under the constant threat of shortage, the provision of transport and access to markets are urgent priorities. Given transport and access to markets, much of the efficiency gain required to accelerate rate of growth of agricultural production will be brought about by simple scientific improvements, particularly in irrigation, the use of fertilizers, and plant breeding.

Some people, however, try to buy time by fanatical preoccupation with family planning and birth control. The open encouragement given to Indians to undergo an operation for sterilization, with cash rewards to volunteers, and special leave to civil servants, is a pathetic example of evasion of the real issues to be faced in planning economic development.

The economics of large-scale industry demand large markets which are only obtainable with a large and growing population; but the process of industrialization has always required, and has generally been preceded by an expansion of agricultural output. Outlets for capital are created through pressure of opportunity, however, which calls forth latent entrepreneurial talent; but shortage of skills and the ability to mobilize skills are serious bottlenecks which need bold educational programmes.

Fr. McCormack explores these and other technical and economic obstacles to growth, and meets the challenge of a rapid rise in population in areas where measures against disease have outstripped measures to raise productivity from

the land. Whilst his ten years' service in (former) British Cameroons permits him to speak with authority on the debilitating effects on communities of varied and heavy parasitization and the secondary effects of malnutrition, it should not be overlooked, however, that, unlike Asia, Africa is a thinly peopled continent. High infant mortality rates in rural areas, the inaccessibility of much of the country which lacks central rivers, and the large proportion of the land surface area covered by tsetse flies which carry *trypanosomiasis*, are instrumental in keeping Africa's millions pressed close to the limits of subsistence afforded by the axe, fire and fallow system of agriculture. It is this relative abundance of land which encourages cultivators to perpetuate this most primitive form of agriculture, despite low yields per unit of area, because they can gain higher returns per unit of labour than they would receive from the practice of more intensive methods involving many hours hand-weeding. In Asia, however, social attitudes and institutions which are unfavourable to economic growth, are additional bottlenecks to continuing development in some regions of high concentrations of population living near the margin of subsistence.

But how does he arrive at a figure of 30 million deaths in the world annually from starvation and undernourishment? His tendentious use of very specious data on calorie requirements and *per caput* incomes detracts from his attempt to convey the enormity and immediacy of the problem of world poverty which faces this generation. On the other hand, he skilfully places the population 'scare' in its relevant context of requiring an agricultural revolution and, under four main heads, gives highest priority to water as the chief agent in the more productive use of land. In particular, he stresses the need for networks of minor irrigation schemes to solve immediate problems of seasonal shortage of staple-foods, which is the very real concern of millions of cultivators in low-income agricultural regions of the world today. He draws attention to the phenomenal rate of growth of Japanese agricultural production, which is a direct measure of the effect of water supply for double-cropping, and the use of fertilizers, pesticides and better seed. It is significant that the subsistence requirements of this densely populated country can now be produced on only 0.06 hectares per head of population per year.

The more rapid the rate of development, however, the more urgent will be the need for capital, assuming technical progress and a widening of markets; and although the burden of finance should rest chiefly on domestic savings, foreign capital will be needed to accelerate growth to the point at which it becomes self-sustaining.

Cairncross, in a paper on the contribution of foreign and indigenous capital to economic development read to the Eleventh International Conference of Agricultural Economists, emphasizes that improvement in the structure of low-income economies will require 'foreign borrowing from International Agencies for the larger projects especially in transport and power, and from private investors for the introduction of new manufacturing techniques and products'. He goes on to say that 'if we are contemplating higher rates of income growth than have yet been experienced, we must almost certainly contemplate higher rates of investment than were necessary in the past; and there is nothing in the historical record to suggest that savings-ratios will rise in countries emerging

from a desperate state of poverty not merely to the level of their more fortunate neighbours, but above them'.

Inevitably Fr. McCormack confronts his readers in his final summing-up with this onerous responsibility of western economies, because of the principal part they have played in provoking the present worldwide movement of revolutionary change. In exploring the contribution which various sectors will have to make if decisive improvement in the structure of low-income economies is to be achieved, he lays special stress on the need for positive action by Christians everywhere on earth freed from the limits imposed by doctrine, dogma and a divided Church.

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Contents of Volume I

- No. 1. THE PROBLEM OF SURPLUS AGRICULTURAL POPULATION (*October 1939*)
- No. 2. THE CHANGES OF EIGHT YEARS IN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS (*October 1947*)
- No. 3. INTERNATIONAL WHEAT AGREEMENTS (*September 1949*)
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- No. 6. THE ECONOMICS OF WATER SUPPLY AND CONTROL: JORDAN, IRAN, PERU, POLAND (*May 1960*)

Volume III

- No. 1. THE ECONOMICS OF WATER SUPPLY AND CONTROL: CANADA, EGYPT, DENMARK (*January 1961*)
- No. 2. THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURE IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (*April 1961*)
- No. 3. CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS IN THE ECONOMICS OF AGRICULTURE (*September 1962*)
- No. 4. THE ECONOMICS OF WATER SUPPLY AND CONTROL: GREECE, ITALY (*January 1963*)
- No. 5. AGRICULTURE AND THE COMMON MARKET (I) (*June 1963*)
- No. 6. AGRICULTURE AND THE COMMON MARKET (II) (*August 1963*)

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