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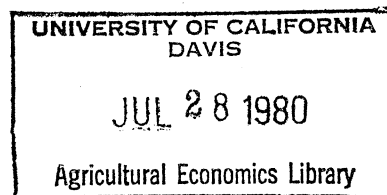
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THE CONTRIBUTION OF FOOD AID TO NUTRITION

by

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DIET

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF FOOD AID TO NUTRITION

I interpreted the topic to mean the contribution of food aid to improved nutritional status. There is an extensive literature on this topic but the reported findings are often contradictory. I shall, therefore, only attempt to summarize some of the important highlights and viewpoints and indicate where they point to some tentative conclusions.

Food aid can only contribute to improve nutritional status if it reaches those who are undernourished or malnourished, i.e., whose nutritional status is below "satisfactory" levels however defined. The malnourished are, almost without exception, the poor whether they be the unemployed, refugees, landless, the indebted, or the women and children in poor households. Characteristically, food aid only reaches the malnourished if there are properly designed government policies. Even in the case of disaster relief food does not ordinarily reach the hungry without government permission (Cambodia).

To understand the contribution of food aid to improved nutritional status it is necessary to understand the motivations of its suppliers, who will determine what will be available and what it will cost; the influence of the

suppliers and their policies on the disposition of the food aid; the intent of international agencies promulgating nutrition programs; the motivations, nutritional policies and programs of the demanders of food aid, i.e., the governments and government agencies of the receiving nations; and finally how the programs operate to improve nutritional status of those who ultimately eat the food.

Suppliers

Suppliers of food aid have, for the most part, been the countries with surpluses of agricultural products, i.e., the United States, Canada, Australia, West Germany et al. and their motivations have been economic and political as well as humanitarian. The economic motivations have been reduced in recent years as nonmarketable surpluses have in many cases decreased (particularly for grains) but they still play a part in determining the character of the commodities offered (e.g., skim milk powder from the European Economic Community--European Economic Community, 1980, p. 78). Political motivations may involve strengthening the economic (and military) viability of friendly governments. Humanitarian considerations have been dominant in the

case of disaster relief and relevant in many cases. Suppliers' policies and preferences have particularly influenced the type of nutritional programs adopted (the feeding of mothers and small children). These have also been influenced by such agencies as UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, FAO, and The World Bank, and international donor groups such as CARE. It has been argued that programs aided by supplying countries and international agencies, even though they have resulted in an improvement in the nutritional status, may have acted so as to encourage dependence of recipients upon continued supplies from donor nations. This argument particularly applies to the introduction of unfamiliar or less familiar foods to which recipients become accustomed (wheat instead of rice, reconstituted milk, corn-soymeal) and despite the good intentions of sponsoring agencies there may be some validity to this charge. The effects on nutritional status of food recipients may be favorable in the short-run but perhaps not in the long-run unless the food aid continues indefinitely. There have been cases where food aid commodities replaced commodities formerly bought in local markets (e.g., milk) and local suppliers have been left without sufficient sales revenues to survive. Moreover, where specific food aid commodities have increased supply at a particular point in time in

uncontrolled markets, prices have at times been depressed. That this has caused shifting to more remunerative crops is acknowledged (FAO, p. 11) but this may not be unfavorable to improving nutritional status in the long-run. The lower prices may also help the poor in the short-run. Where markets are controlled food and commodities can be distributed through separate channels, farm prices can be supported, and the funds from government sale of the commodities can be used to build needed agricultural sector infrastructure or support agricultural extension services resulting in increased agricultural income. Where the additional income accrues to poor rural households in need of food, it can contribute to improved nutritional status. Singer, the author of "The World Food Programme's Study on Food Aid Policies and Programs," contends "theoretical analysis gives no proof that food aid, if properly handled, has serious disincentive effects on food production in recipient countries" [in the long-run] (FAO, p. 2).

Demanders

Demanders, in the first instance, are food deficit countries and generally those with large low-income populations which are predominantly rural (Indonesia, Central American countries, Columbia), but countries like

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Egypt with large urban centers also have large low-income rural populations. Where the recipients' development policies are focused on urban industrialization (Egypt) the food aid may help make "cheap" food in the cities possible. This serves to improve nutrition among low-income city dwellers as opposed to low-income rural residents and food aid has been accused of having an urban bias. To quote Singer "Some critics have also pointed out that food aid usually arrives at the main port; differentiated distribution is easier to organize in the urban areas. Even projects such as the feeding of vulnerable groups are easier to set up in urban areas In addition, it may pre-empt the best storage and milling facilities" (FAO, p. 3).

Governments of recipients nations vary in their stages of development, commitments to develop and attitudes toward the agricultural sector but there now appears to be a far greater appreciation of the role of agricultural in development (Todaro, p. 209). But this is not enough. Compulsory food purchases by the state at below market prices, limiting or banning private sector sales, imposed cropping patterns et al. are still widespread and limit farmers' incomes and incentives to produce (Egypt). To quote Singer again,

"the risk of disincentives does not seem to exist where the food aid is given in the form of agricultural inputs, as, for example, feed grains This also suggests the value of combining food aid with the provision of other agricultural inputs, e.g., fertilizer and seeds, as well as the use of revenue derived from food aid for lowering the unit cost of agriculture by providing needed inputs" (FAO, p. 3).

Another problem is infrastructure (roads, etc., which only government will provide) and efficient market technology and institutions not being available or facilitated result in farmers being paid less and consumers paying more for food with deleterious results on nutrition for low-income households (Zaire; Wall Street Journal, 6/26/80, p. 1). Therefore, one of the most important contributions of food aid can be the making possible through "Food for Work" projects, despite all their many problems, of infrastructure required to increase agricultural output (irrigation) and movement of that output to market at lower prices. Food aid can make a contribution to nutrition wherever government invests the funds from its sale in projects improving productivity and income of malnourished low-income people or their

children and if the beneficiaries are farmers, this is indeed a long-term investment.

Direct Distribution Programs

Direct distribution programs have had a measurable and positive effect on food consumption (Gavan, George). P.S. George from his analysis of the effects of the program in Kerala, where food grains are distributed to low-income consumers through ration shops, concluded "the short-term solution for areas such as Kerala is an effective public distribution system." Kumar also studying the Kerala system found "subsidized rice to have a positive impact on the household diet and child nutritional status greater than a cash subsidy (equivalent to the amount saved by purchasing the ration rather than open-market rice)". He also found "increasing income from own-food production could result in significant improvements in child nutrition, where aggregate wages could not" and "where woman participated in the labor force, increments in wage income (of both parents, but particularly of the mother) were associated with improved child nutritional status" (Kumar, p. 41).

Thus, the evidence, although limited to specific areas, points to the effectiveness of direct distribution systems in increasing food consumption

and , to some extent, nutrition. This is confirmed by the Sri Lanka study (Gavan). The use of food aid to strengthen direct distribution programs and the small holder portion of the agricultural sector seemingly results in improvement in nutritional status (this is confirmed by Benito for Mexico, (Benito)) and the providing of work for mothers seemingly results in particular improvements in child nutritional status.

Supplementary Feeding Programs

Singer in his excellent summary of the literature on Food Aid and Supplementary Feeding Programs points that in the case of expectant and nursing mothers and pre-school infants, a prime target group for these programs, the total coverage from all of the food aid sources put together is of the order of 5 percent of the potential target population (FAO, p. 44). Supplementary feeding programs "are a feasible way of raising food intake" (FAO, p. 44). But raising food intake will not, in itself, eliminate malnutrition (Scrimshaw, Taylor and Gordon). Health factors (infectious diseases, parasites) nutritional beliefs and prejudices (hot and cold foods--no hot foods for post-partem mothers) and nutritional imbalance in local diets (too many starchy-staples) may lead to malnutrition.

Environmental and social conditions (poor crops, inadequate incomes) and family food priorities in some cultures (lower priorities for girls and infants) may also lead to inadequate quantities of food intake and thereby to malnutrition.

Singer reviewed 11 studies dealing with effects of supplementary feeding and found eight reporting a significant short-term impact. In three in which an attempt was made to assess the long-term effects the results were not consistent. He concludes "the overall impact has been mixed" (FAO, p. 50). Apparently some programs, and particularly programs directed toward women and small children, have had a significant impact and he justified the use of food aid for both supplementary feeding programs for these groups and for school age children (FAO, p. 51). Johnston contends increasing employment and improving productivity so as to increase food availability and food intake as an effective way of improving nutritional status of older children and adults but there is still a need for supplementary feeding programs for women and young children. Gavan has concluded that because of the cost of food subsidy schemes and the resources of low-income countries where they are needed being inadequate "foreign assistance must meet a major part of the burden."

Conclusions

In conclusion food aid can and has been used in programs that have had a possitive effect on the nutritional status of the malnurished, especially women and children, in the short-run and possibly in the long-run. But it can only make a long-run contribution if it is properly targeted; government policies are economically sophisticated and supportive of a faster rate and improved pattern of agricultural development as well as of food aid programs; the handling of the food aid is such as to prevent or mitigate impacts on local food production and local markets; food aid programs are integrated with health, population and education programs, and it leads to increases in real income for the poor who are the malnurished.

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