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NUTRITION: THE LEADING GOAL FOR FOOD

AGRICULTURAL POLICIES?

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Notes for discussion on an Invited Paper Session, Joint Meetings
of the AAEA and CAES, Blacksburg, Virginia, August 7, 1978.

In preparing discussion notes on this subject, I have been graced with almost total freedom of thought. As I indicated to you in accepting the task, I would not be encumbered by any prior knowledge of the subject; this, of course, can be a substantial advantage to a critic. ^{However} ~~However~~, I have not been encumbered by the comments that our speakers have just presented because I have had the opportunity only to skim them, then hear them now.

However, I am inclined to answer your question, which might be considered somewhat rhetoric, with another question: What other possible main goal could there be?

My comments will be limited to the domestic, i.e., Canada and the U.S. scene. The reason for this is that I am much less confident of off-shore production/nutrition problems than with aspects of domestic food policy. Moreover, Canada and the U.S. appear to be attempting to take some initiatives in the food policy area and they have been generating considerable noise around the supposed positive and significant efforts that will be made towards better nutrition. Nor will the comments be directed toward the vehicles for nutritional upgrading. They are in a sense problematic, and they are certainly the outcome of the political climate of the time.

Food and Nutrition

As a lay observer, I would suggest that food serves four general functions for humans:

--providing energy (a very short term function, but necessary and continuous),

--providing nutrition (which is fundamental to longer term health and productivity),

--meeting certain social objectives of people,

--providing prestige satisfaction for some.

Again as this lay observer, I would submit that these functions are listed in their order of priority. Indeed, this ordering is consistent with the "needs hierarchy" that psychologists impute to human behavior. If we further consider what the psychologists say about needs, we see that the functions served, in terms of needs, are very different. The first two functions (that is, the most important functions) are really serving the basic, biological needs or, as they refer to them, the "biogenic needs." The second two functions are meeting "psychogenic needs." With such basic human needs being met, it would not be difficult to respond to your question - + Nutrition in Food Policy? in the affirmative.

Furthermore, Marshallian economics says that the purpose of all economic activity is consumption. We are told by businessmen, politicians, bureaucrats, farmers (and indeed, much of our own literature [except J.K. Galbraith]) that today's society is dominated by "consumerism," that our priorities are all consumer oriented, and generally that Marshall's prophecy is true.

To further reinforce the affirmative, consider these factors.

Sabry [1975: p. 291] estimated that the cost of "hospitalization, medical-dental care and loss of productivity due to premature death and absenteeism ... related to nutrition" was \$7.8 billion in Canada in 1975. He also estimated that "improved nutrition" could reduce this figure by \$2.5 billion. These are only rough estimates, and they are not full social costs. But they do represent about \$115 per Canadian, or about \$250 per labor force member. The costs are large. The combined federal and provincial expenditure on direct nutrition programs was about \$1 million.

With this kind of evidence, how could one possibly conclude that nutrition cannot have a role in Agricultural and Food Policies. (I will try.)

What the above arguments, and most of those that I have seen in the limited reading that has been done, miss is the "political" environment within which these policy decisions have been, and will be, made. That is the thesis that I would like to develop. The \$1 million that Canada spends on direct nutritional upgrading is evidence of this thesis.¹

Even though my scope is limited to Canada and the U.S., there is likely a substantial degree of similarity in other countries even though the fundamental reasons for nutritional problems may be greatly different.

The Political Process

Because of the very limited time available, my comments will be grossly abbreviated. The political process has a fundamental importance

¹The Food Industry in 1975 spent an estimated \$76 million on advertising.

to the question. By the political process, we mean the political philosophy, institutions, power structure framework. Specifically, I will discuss two areas: the political philosophy surrounding private enterprise and the consuming unit as a micro economic unit, and some consequences of the balance of political-economic power in public decision making.

Political philosophy. For the majority of domestic consumers, nutrition problems are a matter of choice. Few disagree that "adequate, nutritious" supplies are available at affordable (as opposed to reasonable) prices. It is, therefore, attitude and life style that is the nutrition problem. Of course, the qualification must be made here that this statement would not be as true for residents of remote communities, natives, the poor and the aged. These groups represent significant numbers and they are a different problem.

Perhaps our Prime Minister summarized the political philosophy argument well when he said "the state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation." He didn't say it, but it is implicit, that many also believe that neither has the state any business in our kitchens and dining rooms.

Home management, eating habits and personal life styles remain off-limits to government intervention. There are exceptions: tobacco, alcohol, red food coloring, D.E.S., cyclamates and so on, but these are all additives of sorts which are perceived or proven to have harmful effects. Natural foods which taken in the wrong proportions have just as severe effects, perhaps worse, but they are accepted because we believe individuals should have that "free" choice.

Complicating this situation is the expense of penetrating life styles to achieve a significant effect. Simple additives are easy--they can be banned. Effectiveness of the anti-smoking campaign has been elusive and expensive. Consequently, significant efforts to upgrade nutritional status among North Americans through alteration of life style have been limited.

Similarly our political philosophy results in considerable reluctance to infringe on those portions of the free enterprise environment that contributes to non-nutrition. Pre-processed, further processed, highly refined foods, and empty or junk foods represent innovation personified in an otherwise undramatic industry. They have also met with a high degree of consumer appeal. And they have revolutionized or maintained portions of agriculture, for example, potato production. In both countries, we have a reluctance to tinker with this high degree of free enterprise success.

Political power. The relevant considerations here can best be conveyed by Galbraith's arguments on consumer non-sovereignty [Galbraith, 1970, 1973]. Consumer sovereignty in the market is largely a myth, and real consumer clout in the political process is sporadic. Another reason why nutrition problems, nutritional upgrading and education are low priority lies not in the non-existence of real problems, or indeed their documentation, but because the political pressures restraining a meaningful thrust toward their solution far exceeds the disjointed efforts to achieve progress. This situation is common to most "consumer" problems.

Nutrition is a complex subject. The experts do not even seem to agree what constitutes problems related to nutrition. Nor does there appear to be a great number of experts on the subject in either country. And apparently, most of those who understand the problems, not already in the employ of food producers are, as Sabry [1975: 291] has said, "mainly in the employ of governments or universities. With the politicians controlling the government apparatus and with the universities relying almost solely on government funding, the initiative for action falls back on the politician's shoulders." Progress is slow; my perception is that the time is not now.

If further reinforcement is required let me briefly relate an experience of two years ago within the Federal bureaucracy. Food policy discussions were at the indepartmental consultative stage. A draft document had been prepared which included a few paragraphs on the relevance of nutrition in food and agricultural policy. These paragraphs had been prepared by myself and one of my staff because the relevant department was not available to make a contribution. During the consultative process we tried repeatedly to have that department represented because of their acquired mandate in nutrition matters. After repeated attempts, we gave up when a very senior official very clearly pointed out to us that he could see no reason why they would be interested in food policy! The final document which received public circulation had less than motherhood references to the role of nutrition.

One Farm Policy Reference

For years, it has been accepted that one component of food and agriculture policy should be differential pricing between domestic and foreign markets. Usually the export market is more elastic in demand, consequently the domestic price is highest. The concept is institutionalized and examples are abundant: in Canada at present it is used in bread wheat, winter wheat, white beans, dairy products, eggs, poultry meats, and a few hog sales. The list in the U.S. would likely be different in composition but similar importance. Despite the negative economic implications, political forces perceive this to be an acceptable, perhaps "good," pricing policy for certain farm products.

But viewed in the consumer/public interest context and, in the context of nutrition in food policy, it raises some questions. For example, given a nutrition problem, and given the likelihood that differential pricing will continue, could we not segment the total market into components which might at least improve domestic nutrition problems? This might involve domestic commercial, offshore, and domestic less-than-commercial partitioning. Presumably demand elasticity in the latter market would be ~~less~~ ^{less} than that of the commercial market. In this manner a given policy for agriculture ~~should be~~ should be meshed with a policy for food and nutrition, rather than aggravating it as may now be the case. I doubt that this effort has been made in Canada, and I doubt that it was really the spirit of school lunch or food stamp programs in the U.S. It is this kind of broader perspective that is needed on food policy, and an effort to harmonize policy instruments among competing goals.

Summary

My somewhat reluctant conclusion to your question "Can nutrition be a leading goal for food and agricultural policies" is: Not at present!

My reasons, which were presented in a very limited fashion, lie in the political/economic priority/interest/power interfaces. It is, in my opinion, unfortunate that much of the discussion which our organizations have generated, including most of that presented today, does not come to grips with this issue. It remains my bias as a social scientist that if the problem is not correctly identified and prioritized, the solution will be more difficult to attain.

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