

# One good harvest is not enough

Ernest Corea

A plenteous harvest had strained the storage capacity of the Food Corporation of India, it was reported earlier this year. Some 8 million tons packed the FCI's warehouses full. Another 5 million tons were stored in the open, with a protective covering of polythene. This portion of India's grain stock required regular fumigation and aeration, at considerable cost. The FCI hired privately-owned warehouses to store 5 million tons more.

In Sri Lanka, the chief administrators in each province met in February to plan an unusual exercise: ensuring that the heavy harvest presaged by copious green stalks of paddy blowing gently in the wind should be adequately stored and speedily distributed to non-producing areas.

Nevertheless, the adequacy of food supplies over the long term in both countries is fraught with uncertainty. Indeed, this assessment could be applied to many developing countries, where good harvests have been recorded from time to time, but where many people remain underfed and malnourished.

The contrast between apparent plenty — as evidenced by an eye-catching bumper crop — and actual want in some developing countries is a timely reminder that one good harvest or two do not automatically wipe out a food deficit. The road to plenty is long and difficult.

A food deficit is defined as the difference between anticipated cereal production, based on known production trends, and increased demands for food, resulting from higher population and increased per capita income.

Thus, eliminating food deficits is a long-term process; a few exceptionally good harvests can only offer a country passing relief — and perhaps complicate the food supply situation by raising expectations that may not be fulfilled, come next harvest time.

The adequacy, or inadequacy of food supplies in any given country has to be assessed against a number of interlocking factors such as population, income, transport, storage, distribution, and social expectations. An adverse change in one or more of these could minimize or even cancel out the benefit of a good harvest. Thus, effective food strategy — global, regional or national — has to be a combination of many activities, all directed at the overall objective of improving the human condition.

An important prerequisite of multifaceted approach to food, is that world food trends should be monitored, and that policies and practices which affect these trends are studied, analyzed and made known. In 1975 the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) was established to conduct research on policy problems affecting production, consumption, availability, and equitable distribution of food in the world. The world's poorest countries are a special focus of IFPRI.

The Institute was established as a result of a recommendation made by the Technical Advisory Committee of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, and is funded by the IDRC, the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

It is governed by an international Board of Trustees, which is chaired by Sir John Crawford of Australia and includes seven members from developing countries. IFPRI's first director is Dr. Dale E. Hathaway.

The Institute's research program covers four areas:

- An analysis of world food trends and the basic factors underlying them;
- Policies that influence the rate of technological change, investment and resource productivity and thus, the food production potential in developing countries;
- Policies that affect the total availability and distribution of food between and within countries;
- Policies that affect the trade and concessionary food aid flows of significance to developing countries.

IFPRI's studies to date<sup>1</sup> suggest that there is as much need now for a concerted global effort to increase food production as there was at the time of the headline-catching World Food Conference of November 1974 — despite relatively good harvests in 1975-76 when world grain production was 1,216 million tons — 30 million tons more than in the previous year. This was lower than the 1973-74 world figure, however, and some 63 million tons below long-term production trends observed during the preceding 15 years.

The 1975-76 harvest in developing (market economy) countries was 30 million tons over the previous year, and about 10 million tons over long-term

trends. Further increases were expected in the 1976-77 harvest.

While these figures are encouraging in absolute terms, IFPRI's analyses show that without a major, indeed, unprecedented increase in cereal production, developing countries could be 100 million tons short by 1985. To put the situation in perspective, IFPRI has pointed out that the possible shortfall of 100 million tons "compares with a shortfall of 45 million tons in the crisis period of 1974-75, and an average shortage of 28 million in the relatively good production period 1969-1971."

The figure of 100 million tons is based on a projection of the production trend of 1960-1974, an average increase of 2.5 percent a year until 1975. But, IFPRI reports, "during the last half of that period, 1967-74, the production growth rate has slowed to 1.7 percent." If future production follows the lower, and not the higher, trend, "cereal production could fall short an additional 100 million tons, doubling the deficit to 200 million tons."

The way out of this probable nightmare is to increase production more rapidly, says an IFPRI report. Avoiding the 100 million deficit "would require increasing the production growth rate from 2 percent a year to almost 4 percent. To approach this goal would require very substantial increases in investment in resources devoted to food production and a greatly improved agricultural performance in the countries concerned. This will not be possible without heavy transfers of capital and technology from developed countries."

This is not a doomsday warning. It is a warning nevertheless, and one that deserves single minded attention by policymakers, scientists and all others who realize that food deficits mean more than statistics . . . they mean continuing hunger and malnutrition for underprivileged people. □

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<sup>1</sup>Research Report No. 1, February 1976 — Meeting Food Needs in the Developing World: The Location and Magnitude of the Task in the Next Decade.

Current Food Policy Report No. 1, March 1976 — Grain Supply and Policy Developments. 24th PAG Session, New York, 31 January - 4 February 1977 — Recent and Prospective Developments in Food Consumption: Some Policy Issues — Draft report prepared by the International Food Policy Research Institute.