

# THE POLITICS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF FOOD

"At its core, the world's food security is a political not an economic or even a scientific question." This was the message that IDRC President W. David Hopper delivered to the symposium.

The politics of food, he said, involved more than economic development, economic growth, and the interaction between rich and poor nations: "Because it is a commodity charged with emotional symbolism as well as material substance, it has a special politics." Following are highlights from Dr Hopper's presentation.

- 'Revolutions and coups are made and executed in the cities by urban elites and urban masses. For Third World leaders political stability rests on keeping cities peaceful. This is accomplished best by providing employment, the products of secondary industry, and, above all, ample supplies of cheap food.'

- 'To offset a worsening food situation, some developing countries carried the exploitation of the rural sector to the point of importing food supplied by surplus-producing developed nations on concessional terms, to ensure the continued availability of cheap grain to urban consumers. They held domestic farm prices well below levels that would have prevailed had the imports not been available, destroying the incentives higher farm receipts would have had on generating local increases in food production.'

- 'The experience of Taiwan, South Korea, Brazil and a few other non-OPEC Third World nations that have attained sustained high rates of economic growth, suggests that a prospering rural population is an important, if not vital, stimulant to a buoyant national economy. If further analysis bears out the hypothesis. . . the old two-sector model and the policies of rural exploitation it still spawns will be seen as an anachronistic, although costly mistake.'

- 'The Gangetic basin would require perhaps as much as \$60 billion to unlock its full agricultural potential — a potential that could add 80 percent or more to present world grain output. Without massive external help from the wealthy nations, significant rural development is. . . a dream.'

- 'Until the FAO is forced to take its mandate seriously, there will be no strategic plan. The result will likely be more waste and duplication. . . the usual chaos of ad hoc, unplanned, and uncontrolled investment activities. Hardly a program to generate political enthusiasm, or even much political interest.'

- 'I do not see the major food-exporting countries. . . ever using food as a significant political weapon in their relations with other countries. I do not believe that the governments of these countries could long survive the public revulsion that would arise if, by their actions, food was withheld from starving people, regardless of the provocation, short of a state of war.'

- 'Underlying Third World demands for a new international economic order is the drive to shift economic events from the international marketplace to the arenas of world politics. We hear of bauxite and banana and coffee and copper cartels, and of special arrangements for supporting balance of payment deficits and handling nonconvertible currencies, all part of the call of developing nations for a new international deal.'

- 'It is difficult to bring the politician and the scientist to a common understanding. Each deals with limits. It is difficult to convey to the scientist the practical reality of limits to political action; just as it is difficult to convince the politician that science has. . . tight limits on what can be accomplished. Political problems will not evaporate with an improved understanding on both sides, but a better comprehension by each of the constraints acting on the other would do much to focus the work of each on those matters that will yield to a complementary attack by both.'

The role of the individual and of rural society in the process of modernizing traditional agriculture was the theme taken by Ruth Zagorin, Director of the IDRC's Social Sciences and Human Resources Division in her presentation on the sociology of food.

Dr Zagorin presented a strong argument for leaving agricultural production in private hands, while encouraging cooperative action. The costs of substituting social goals for food abundance, she said, were simply too high. Following are some of the key points of her address.

- 'In most traditional rural communities the distribution of wealth in the form of land and capital among its members is highly skewed in favour of a few. But this distribution is seldom reflected or even approximated in the distribution of the economic income produced by that wealth, which is much more equally shared among all members of the community.'

- 'The products of the early industrial era were brought by the colonial powers to Asian and African territories. The gates opened to a flood of products that competed directly with traditional goods, or were totally new. These goods absorbed real resources from the community that would have been distributed internally had they not been used for imported purchases.'

- 'In some countries rural schooling has greatly expanded, and the barriers of illiteracy to communication with the outside world have fallen as radio, and in a few cases television, have opened vistas of a life unknown to traditional heritages. The exposure to new knowledge. . . has created desires among the rural people, especially the younger members of the community, for both more material benefits and for altered forms of social organization.'

- 'The basic desire of rural people in developing societies is to increase their economic well-being, not only in terms of traditional consumption patterns, but also to participate more fully as producers and consumers in the national economic systems. Rural people have been left frustrated as consumers and held within the confines of traditional methods of farming as producers.'

- 'China solved some of its rural difficulties by enforcing collectivization on its farmers. But collectivization did not occur without violence, and even now individual freedom is sharply circumscribed. In countries preserving individual freedom there is evidence that increasing food production through the application of scientific technologies is accomplished best when individual farmers make private decisions on how they will handle their land, labour and tools. Essentially this is capitalistic agriculture.'

- 'The growth of rural population and the already small size of many traditional farms entail great diseconomies of scale in the application of modern farm technologies. To overcome these diseconomies, there can be strong incentives for private farmers to build social systems that enhance their market bargaining power and provide them with effective control over resources that are not made available easily to any one individual.'

- 'If there is a distinct sociology of food, it arises from the interaction between social organization and the transformation of traditional agricultural systems to those incorporating modern applied technologies. The impact of social structures upon this transformation, and the effect of the transformation upon the traditional social structure are the central elements in the development question: "What kind of a society and a nation do we seek to build?"'

*The full text of **The Sociology of Food** is available as an IDRC monograph. See page 23 for details.*

*The full text of **The Politics of Food** is available as an IDRC monograph. See page 23 for details.*