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Article

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How to Defuse the Time Bomb of Hunger

When the UN World Food Conference met in Rome in the autumn of 1974, its background was that of a crisis: The world's grain stocks, which had been sufficient in 1961 for 105 days' food supplies, had since gone down to the equivalent of only 33 days. Since then, there has hardly been any change in the basic data of the world food situation. Not only is the overall situation highly critical, as can be seen from the extreme scarcity of world stocks. Former surplus areas tend to become deficit regions. Especially, the former suppliers of farm produce surpluses in the Soviet Bloc have now progressively grown into buyers of grain in the world markets. On the other hand, particularly in the last few years, the USA has become a production reservoir of the first order, and the states of the EC, under massive protectionism, are quickly approaching self-sufficiency, unless they have not gone long beyond it in the case of several products.

Admittedly, part of the developing countries have also succeeded in slightly improving the ratio between their own food production and consumption. Evidently, it is not the basic problem that it is not possible to produce enough food. The main difficulty is that it has not yet been possible to build up a mechanism or to find a method to direct actually or potentially available food produce there where demand is most urgent, in order to obviate genuine famine. In the food market, the situation which is well known in the case of other commodities repeats itself: those who own sufficient

raw materials or foodstuffs earn an extra profit from rising prices, whilst the real sufferers are again the poor countries which own neither raw materials nor food nor fertilizers.

How can this problem be overcome? To reduce the growth rate of the world population is undoubtedly one of the basic conditions for securing sufficient food, in the long term. But this policy operates far too slowly for expecting the main solution along this way. To appeal to the countries with surpluses to save food, on the other hand, is more than naive and such a policy only betrays a lack of sense of reality. A solution of this problem is only conceivable if a number of basic political measures could be agreed upon:

Wherever possible, long-term supply agreements ought to be concluded, between the surplus-producing areas and others which, with great likelihood, will be grain buyers in the world market also in future years, and which own sufficient foreign currency to buy. Under this condition, producers would have it much easier to make long-term plans. Long-term supply and purchase agreements should, at least, prevent such potential buyers, who can pay, from suddenly appearing as big buyers in the world markets, pushing prices upwards there and thus making conditions even worse for countries that are in actual want.

Nobody can ask, in our "economized" world, farm producers to throw their produce on the market free of charge — after all, this is not expected of producers

of other things. Nor can it be expected of the surplus countries to bear alone the costs and the burdens of surplus production and assume the rôle of the helper in need.

What is needed, therefore, is the formation of a kind of emergency or aid fund, which may be used for carrying on a "world social policy", to protect against famine those countries which cannot help themselves even if they had the best will of the world to do so.

It must be found out which countries possess the natural resources for increasing their crops but which do not achieve the needed success because of low efficiency or lack of organisation. To such countries, it must be made clear which is their responsibility, and they ought to be asked to undertake efforts of self-help. Such countries should have access to the general emergency stocks only after the latter have grown beyond a certain volume, and then they would have to buy deliveries from these stocks under the usual market conditions.

The problem of feeding the world is largely a political question. Big world conferences in a wide framework fail their purpose unless they lead to practical political initiatives. Nobody will be helped by solemn declarations or by painting an apocalyptic future as long as the politicians are not prepared to take their responsibilities seriously, or as long as they evade them by always blaming all the others first instead of themselves.

Alfons Lemper