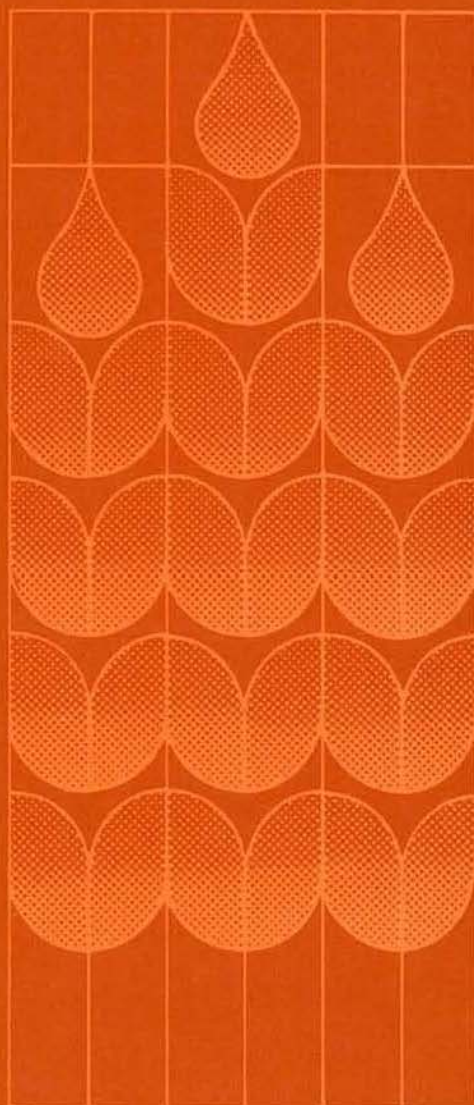


The Politics of FOOD



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IDRC-100e

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IDRC-100e

The politics of food. Ottawa, IDRC, 1977. 24p.

/IDRC pub CRDI/. Address on the /political aspect/s of /food production/ and /food supply/— discusses the effects of /political power/, /agricultural policy/ and /rural development/ on production particularly within /developing country/s; /agricultural surplus/ in /developed country/s; /international relations/, /international cooperation/, /food aid/, and the New /International/ Economic Order (/economic system/).

UDC: 641: 320

ISBN: 0-88936-153-3

Microfiche Edition \$1

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Presented at the symposium "Canada and World Food," sponsored jointly by the Royal Society of Canada and the Agricultural Institute of Canada, 22 August 1977, Ottawa, Canada

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the International Development Research Centre.

The stark statistical projections of virtually all who claim to foretell the future from computer printouts point to world net food deficits of from five to eight percent of present global cereal output within the next decade unless production increases or population growth declines. Since the latter is notoriously insensitive to short-term policy interventions, even in authoritarian societies, world leaders have focused on means to increase the global output of food, especially the enhancement of levels of production from that group of countries clustered between and around the tropics, the so-called “developing” or “Third World” nations. These nations are experiencing both the largest rates of increase in their numbers and the slowest rate of growth in domestic food availability.

The Central Role of Political Decision

The development of any nation is a political matter. If politicians were so foolish, Canada could grow its bananas on that expanse of land we call the tundra. Although such a political decision would be an obvious absurdity, its substance would yield to the technical capacities of our engineers and biologists, and with a vigorous press of political will, it could be done.

Indeed, even more absurd proposals have been advanced in all seriousness for the consideration of those who wield political power. The suggestions to colonize the moon, an environment infinitely harsher than that of the Canadian tundra, is no more absurd than the call for the elimination of the use of science-based technologies of food production because of their alleged “unnatural” effects. These proposals strive for a political recognition that will manipulate the power of intervention and control for their accomplishment.

I can even recall a serious UN proposal of little more than a decade ago that world nations agree to implement policies that would allocate to the tropical developing countries responsibility to become global producers of industrial products, while the present industrial nations, because of their seemingly obvious comparative advantage in food production, would hold responsibility to supply the world with its daily bread. Obviously, if this proposal were to reach fruition it would require a massive exercise of political determination.

Economists like to talk of an “economic reality” and I do so frequently. But in contemporary societies it is the play of political power through subsidy, taxation, coercion, or moral suasion that sets the underlying, short-term rules of reality for economic affairs. In the longer run, forces of supply and demand, real resource costs, and the allocations and misallocations that result from manipulation by political power of economic variables will be evident, and their consequences may lead to large political headaches. But it is truer for politicians

than for economists that death greets those who procrastinate while awaiting the long run.

For those of us who have experienced the frustrations and exhilarations of working with developing-nation scientists, officials, and politicians to foster agricultural advance, there is a nearly unanimous belief that the impediments to change are less technical or economic or social than they are the absence of an organized and sustained political will to undertake and persist with those actions necessary to transform traditional agricultures. The complex apparatus of a modern, science-based farm economy cannot be built quickly, but unless there is vigorous political leadership, it will not be built at all. At its core, the world's food security is a political, not an economic or even a scientific question.

The Politics of Agricultural Development

The late Lester Pearson used to warn me that all politicians thought themselves experts on education and agriculture: the former, because they had been schooled; the latter, because if not part of a personal past, farming was a part of our heritage only a generation or two ago, and besides, it seems so easy to do, just scratch and plant and God does the rest — look how many illiterates have mastered its art.

In fact, for politicians and many others, including many farmers, economic development is epitomized by the glamour of factory smokestacks, the ringing of hammers, the bending of metal, the goodies of the assembly line, and the modern conveniences that seem so liberating of the physical burdens of traditional modes of work and styles of living. However, it is not glamour alone that focuses political attention on the creation of an industrial capital structure as a central and first concern of leaders in virtually all developing countries. It is the realization that jobs for an urban proletariat hold the key to political survival. Revolutions and coups are made and executed in cities by urban elites and urban masses. It is the workers of industry and their leaders who pose the greatest threat to those who wield political influence. 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. In some parts of the developing world, as many as half of all urban families spend over 50 percent of earned income on meeting food requirements. Slight changes in food prices have profound implications for the well-being of these people. Urban food riots are ugly manifestations of discontent; they are matters of great political consequence.



There are good economic arguments to underpin a political policy of cheap food for urban consumers. Stable, low food prices contribute to maintaining a stable, low industrial wage rate that will encourage entrepreneurs to invest in new industry, an investment necessary to enlarging the economic capacity of the nation. Indeed, the most influential theoretical economic model of the development process divides Third World economies into two sectors: the modern or industrial-urban sector and the traditional or agricultural-rural sector. The action takes place in the modern sector. Economic investment in the industrial-urban infrastructure is to be supported by the exploitation of the traditional sector for its savings (by a direct mobilization through tax collection, or through savings accounts in post offices and rural banks, or by indirect means through a studied neglect to maintain or augment rural social capital or by market interventions that would obtain food and other agricultural products at rates below their supply-demand prices), its food supplies, and its large reserves of unskilled labour.

Traditional farmers are organized into small, dispersed communities. They are, for the most part, unsophisticated and inexperienced in dealing with the political and bureaucratic machinery of a modern state. They are not as much a threat as the urban masses to the holders of political office. They have no effective lobby, no unions to speak and bargain for them; indeed, they have little voice or influence in national affairs (unless, as India's recent election demonstrated, the nation is an open democracy — a rare phenomenon among developing countries). Because of this, political leaders in the Third World have felt free to pursue urban-industrial development priorities at the exploitive expense of rural people. Sheltered by the relative self-sufficiency of traditional agricultural and village artisan technologies, those who dwell in rural areas, usually a large majority of the national population, did not protest or even grumble loudly. They remained traditional producers in an almost stagnant rural economy, a stagnation that resulted in growing food shortages in many countries as population growth and a rising urban economic prosperity combined to push the demand for food beyond the slow supply growth.

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 assistance terms, to ensure the continued availability of cheap grain to urban consumers. The politics of food aid is complex, but in essence the impact of these imports, when not provided to meet a genuine threat of famine because of major crop failures, was twofold. They held domestic farm prices well below levels that would have prevailed had the imports not been available, thereby destroying the incentives higher farm receipts would have had on generating local increases in food production. And, because the food aid was essentially free (being paid for by promissory notes that have subsequently been forgiven), its sale within the country by the recipient government directly augmented national treasury resources reducing the need to tax more heavily or to encourage larger savings for domestic investment programs. It was a free lunch. It blunted incentives for local development, and it removed any urgency to look further into measures to promote the more rapid development of indigenous farming. I recall vividly once being asked by a senior official of a developing nation why his government should invest in its own agricultural advance when "it is so easy for us to farm the fields of Kansas and Saskatchewan and have our treasury paid for doing so." It was difficult for me to

find a satisfactory short-term answer. In the long term, his nation did suffer for its neglect of its rural economy.

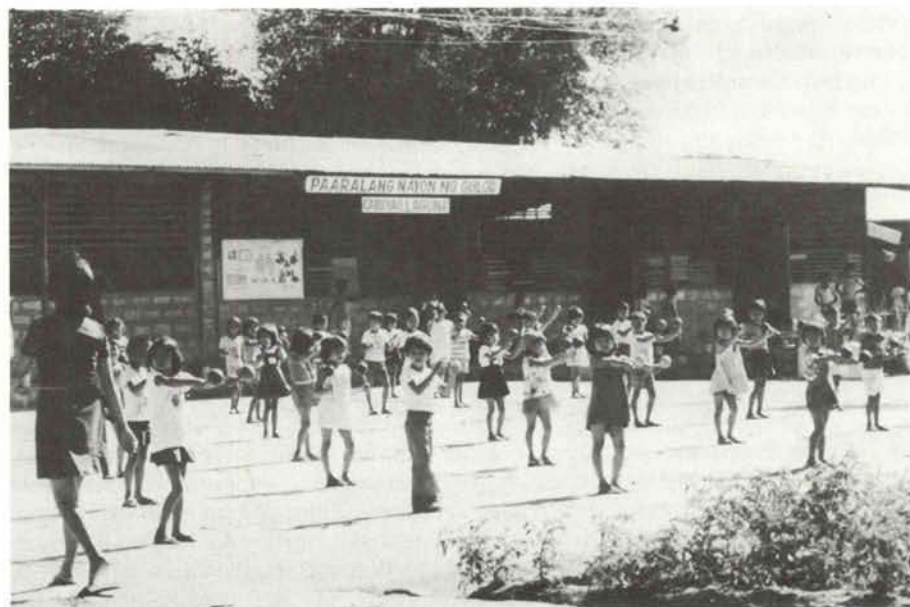
The real accountability for the creation of this particular opportunity to pursue a development policy that exploits those who farm rests less with the nation receiving food aid, for they can hardly be criticized for accepting a free good, than with those who offered it because it relieved them of the costly embarrassments of the consequences of their own farm policies. It is one thing for wealthy surplus-producing nations to pursue agricultural policies that generate large stocks of domestically unsaleable food. It is quite another thing for these nations to give that food to friendly countries (with no immediate need of it for emergency purposes) when such gifts will have the effect of undermining the rural prosperity and agricultural advance of the recipients. It is incumbent upon the donor to be careful with the wealth he possesses so that in its use he does not damage the long-term well-being of those who receive his charity. Neither this country nor our great neighbour to the south has been careful enough with the disposal of the abundant food supplies that flow from our farms in response to agricultural policies designed specifically to provide a continuing incentive for the production of quantities far in excess of our own needs or the needs of those to whom we traditionally export. Food assistance should not be denied in cases of genuine emergency or hardship. And we must be thankful for the surpluses Canada has available to succour those who are less fortunate and who need our help. Too often, however, our gifts of food have not been transferred to meet genuine hardship, but to provide additional real resources supposedly for development.

The long-term cost of a rural exploitive development policy became evident in 1972 when an almost worldwide shortfall of grain production left many developing nations critically deficient in food supplies, facing greatly increased world cereal prices and restricted availability. A pattern set during the droughts of the mid-sixties in South Asia was repeated for some nations in 1972. During the sixties, India and Pakistan were criticized severely by food donor countries, especially the USA, for neglecting the domestic development of their farming sectors. Resting on the output from Kansas (and Saskatchewan) so freely given before the drought had its costs in political sovereignty, when those who alone could provide needed supplies in 1965 and 1966 gave from their storage bins only after the national economic strategies in the recipient nations were reoriented to emphasize farm development. At best, it was a political humiliation for the recipient governments; at worst, it was external political blackmail by the parties guilty of aiding and abetting the previous South Asian policies of benign neglect of the rural areas. As with most imposed programs, the emphasis on rural development did not last. A good harvest following the drought, and the widespread adoption by farmers, spurred to innovate by the high prices of the drought aftermath and the promise of large profits, of the use of high-yielding, fertilizer-responsive varieties of wheat and rice convinced planners and politicians that the route to food abundance had been found and development priorities could return to their normal and proper emphasis on the growth of the modern sector.

In the mid-sixties, emergency relief supplies of food were exchanged for changes in development policies. In 1972, emergency supplies were available only in limited quantities and leaders in many Third World countries began themselves to examine their past development efforts. Agricultural growth became the "in" topic. The President of the World Bank called in 1973 for an emphasis on rural development, and particularly, on assistance to enhance the

productivity of the small farmer whose numbers are proportionately the largest in the rural regions and in most nations. It was, and for that matter still is, fashionable to talk of aid to the poorest, to the bottom 40 percent, and to the poorest of the poor countries — the double poor. The slogans of the professional development community complemented the urgency many leaders in developing nations now felt to attain some measure of food self-reliance. The result was an acceptance by politicians in both rich and poor countries of programs for rural and agricultural modernization. The new slogan became "integrated rural development." Once the slogans are hatched, planners, scholars, and officials of nations and of international agencies that serve nations begin to generate the paper necessary to illuminate (or obfuscate) what implementing the slogans entails. During the process of conferring, defining, researching, discussing, and conferencing — each activity yielding new fashions and new slogans — I fear the central purpose of the exercise has been lost.

It is clear that there is a deep world concern for expanding the rate of growth of developing-nation rural economies; it is not clear, however, that an expansion of food agriculture is central to this concern. The many papers and definitions of integrated rural development leave one uneasy about the priorities given to enhanced food production in comparison to those given to improved living conditions, better shelter, expanded health care, cleaner water supplies, and so on. Because it is easier to deliver social services than it is to provide the complex apparatus of a modern agriculture, many planners and politicians may be tempted to substitute the more easily attained goal of social services for the hard task of raising the levels of rural economic output on a sustained basis. In the final analysis, however, I believe that once the slogans have become clichés, the "in" people will turn to new fashions, and the job of meeting man's food needs will be left to those few whose work it is to leave a quiet legacy of accomplishment.



Fortunately, they will have greater political support than they have had in the past. The early efforts of those of us engaged in promoting farm development were focused mainly on getting the subject placed higher on the economic agendas of political leaders. Food is now high on these agendas. If the numbing effects of widespread food aid are not again permitted to dull the sense of urgency created in the early part of this decade (something I worry about much as I watch the traditional exporting nations again building large grain surpluses), the focus now must shift from establishing agriculture as a priority subject among development strategies to defining what strategy for rural and farm development can be implemented most effectively. It is now that a sustained and vigorous political will to grow more food is most needed. To succeed in doing so requires time and patience and, above all, the pressure of a continuous resolve.

In an increasing number of developing countries the politician will be aided in his resolve by the rise of fledgling farm organizations giving voice to the economic and social interests of cultivators. The changes in tradition-based technologies brought about by the introduction of high-yielding, fertilizer-responsive varieties of wheat and rice, and hybrids of corn, sorghum, and millet have brought tens of thousands of farmers into direct contact with the infrastructure of services necessary to initiate and sustain the use of modern agricultural practices. In many countries, fertilizer availability is now an urgent political matter. As are market arrangements, storage and transport facilities, research, extension and credit services, farm supply depots, in short, the whole paraphernalia of assistance needed for the application of science-based technologies. In increasing measure, farmers are building their own associations and organizations to act as political lobbies and economic bargaining units to secure these off-farm supplies and services. In time, these groups will become major factors in the play of national politics.

However, the rise of farm lobbies and the pressures they will generate will not make the practice of developing-nation politics smoother. Farmers will require and will demand greater returns for their labour, food prices in most developing countries will, at least at first, increase to reflect better conditions of production and demand. The conflict of interest between urban and rural peoples will be sharpened, not resolved as readily as they have been in the past, by the easy exploitation of the rural mass.

Similarly, subnational regional economic disparities will grow as agricultural modernization progresses. Science-based farm technologies are more demanding of the natural resource endowments of an area than are traditional cropping practices. Tropical acid soils are less responsive to fertilizer than those of a higher pH. The availability of water from irrigation opens a potential for farming that can raise annual output by as much as ten to fifteen fold. The provision of irrigation to farmers in such areas will leave far behind those areas not so blessed but that were comparably productive under the rainfed moisture regimes of the past. It is the familiar story of differential development potentials that is so much a part of the agrarian history of the agriculturally advanced nations. It is also a nightmare for politicians. They must decide what areas will receive development expenditures and benefit further by the results of these expenditures. And it is they who must deny to areas with little potential a similar consideration. The political volatility of regional allocations of investment resources was well illustrated in the brief history of development allocations between East and West Pakistan before the breakaway of Bangladesh, or by the Biafran tragedy in Nigeria. No politician

anywhere can view this history without feeling that it holds the ingredients of horror for his own nation.

Agricultural progress also carries with it a set of inherent conflicts between economic and social objectives that must be resolved in the political arena. Such conflicts are not unique to agricultural progress for they are inherent in all aspects of social change, and they cannot be “managed” away. The policy dilemmas posed by economic advance most often can be overcome only by actions that are detrimental to the interests of one group or another. In development, it is inevitable that someone’s ox will be gored. Adding agriculture and rural people to the list of development priorities of a nation expands the scope for conflict and necessary reconciliation.

As farming becomes more profitable, land values rise and compensated reforms of tenurial arrangements to meet social goals of distributive justice become more expensive and more difficult to implement. As farmers become more active politically and powerful economically, their social positions become more entrenched. They may dispossess peasant cultivators in order to regain control over land in which they hold rights of ownership; they will strive to increase labour productivity, often by replacing hired hands with machinery; and they will shift and combine crop enterprises in an effort to maximize profit, but with little assurance that the mix of output produced will be the best nutritionally or the most socially desirable range of goods for the nation.

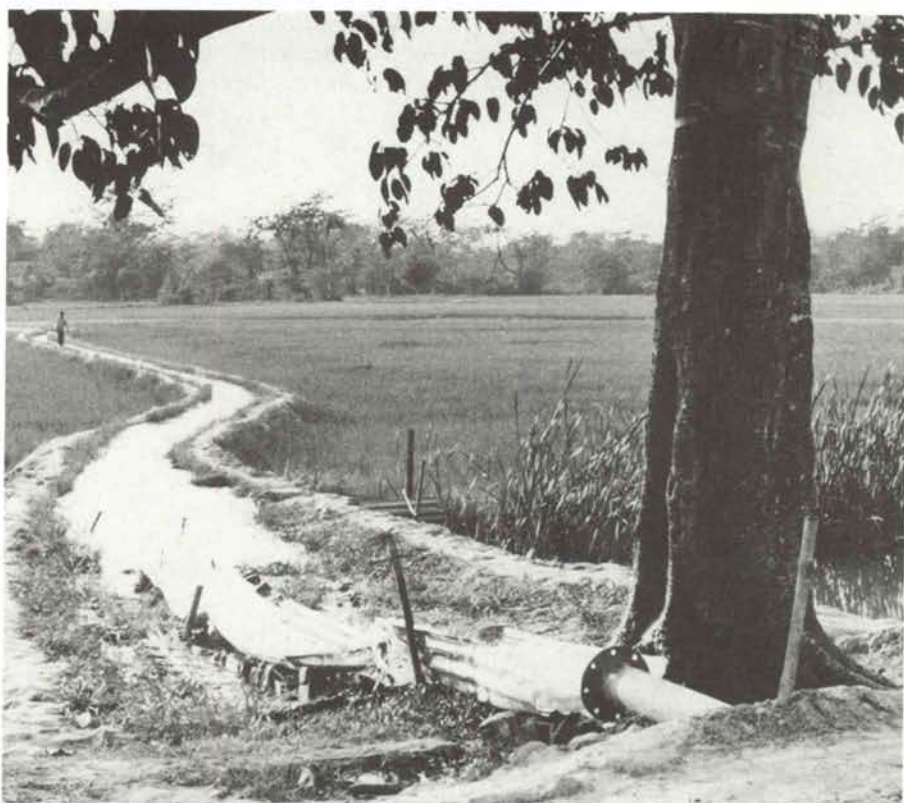
Studies of the so-called green revolution, that is, the use of high-yielding, fertilizer- and water-responsive dwarf varieties of wheat and rice, have shown that the direct and indirect effects of the use of modern farm technologies have resulted in increased economic disparities between landholders and landless labourers within similar, naturally endowed areas, and between areas with dissimilar capacities to support the use of the new cropping techniques. (The early fears that large farmers would benefit unduly in comparison to their neighbours who held small acreages have been allayed by experience. Small cultivators become later adopters of the modern technologies following the investments made by their wealthier neighbours to reduce the risk of innovation and pay the cost of learning.) In one country, there was a long debate as to whether modern farming methods should be permitted because they would introduce new sources of economic difference when material egalitarianism was a major plank of the national constitution. The outcome was determined by a leading politician asking how people were to be fed without the use of modern technologies, a question that is seldom asked of those who would resolve the conflicts of social progress and economic growth by eschewing the elements of economic advance.

The interaction of social and economic objectives raises other, more subtle political questions. The recent world price rise for coffee has posed for political leaders in countries like Brazil and Colombia difficult questions of who should benefit: their coffee farmers or the treasury of the nation on behalf of all citizens. The political leadership in these countries has responded by levying large export taxes on all coffee sold abroad, and by holding down the domestic price received by growers to roughly the preshortage level. In Colombia, this policy has resulted in a large increase in coffee smuggling to the nearby Netherlands Antilles where growers can obtain higher prices. In Brazil, coffee is being held from the market by large growers awaiting more favourable returns; small producers who must sell to meet daily needs are receiving only the low, government-imposed price.

Marketing boards, operating in a similar manner, that is, by depressing prices to cultivators while selling at high rates of return to export buyers, control the trade of nearly all the agricultural products exported from African nations. The Thai government's handling of rice, in a similar manner, caused its farmers to divert good rice land to the production of corn and, later, cassava because the returns from these crops, when exported to Japan for livestock feed, were not affected by government controls. The effect of the Thai rice export tax was to raise the world price of rice, for Thailand is the principal exporter of this food product. These and other kinds of political intervention in the operations of the market distort the incentives given to cultivators as producers and possible innovators, and reduce their purchasing power as consumers and potential customers for the goods and services of the nonfarm sectors of the economy.

The evidence is not yet firm, but 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, suggest that a prospering rural population is an important if not vital stimulant to a buoyant national economy. If further analysis bears out the hypothesis that national economic growth is best founded upon a high-income rural population, the old two-sector model and the policies of rural exploitation it still spawns will be seen as an anachronistic although costly mistake.

The implementation of agricultural modernization rests heavily on the bureaucracies of national governments. The small "p" politics of bureaucratic



maneuvering and protective obstruction can frustrate even the most determined of political leaders. I am convinced the internecine wars between the central and state governments and among a multiplicity of departments and authorities and agencies and organizations is more responsible for India's failure to realize the vast agricultural potential of its Ganges Plain than any intransigence at senior levels of Cabinet.

Our own farm history is filled with examples of interdepartmental struggles for power and responsibility that were transmitted to ministers and left undecided by Cabinet action. How else can a Canadian explain the nonsensical division of responsibility among departments for Canada's international agricultural policies? One department sets and controls the production policies affecting our farms, another handles virtually all grain marketing including international sales, a third handles export sales of nongrain products, and a fourth sets the rules for transportation; and this says nothing of the responsibilities of several separate Boards and Commissions or of the role of various provincial bodies. In the short run, we may be better able than Third World nations to afford the waste that results from the disharmony and confusion of policies and practices pursued by these several agencies; but I doubt it. The evidence is clear that Canada's antiquated grain-handling techniques may lose us markets or require heavy tax subsidies if we are to remain competitive with other nations in selling our agricultural products abroad and provide an adequate return to our farmers. I am sure, also, that because we contrive to hold to long outdated standards of grain quality in determining the official release of new varietal materials, we are foregoing perhaps as much as a 20 percent increase in the weight of our wheat output. And weight is the measure by which we sell our wheat in international markets. Bureaucrats have their politics, too. And they can have as devastating an impact on the future supply of man's food as any other political process.

The Politics of Food in Advanced Countries

I will say a little about the politics of food in developed nations. You, better than I, are aware of the part political policy plays in shaping the agricultural industry of the wealthy countries. The basic character of these interventions differs from that of a developing country only because commercial farmers in the advanced nations are well organized and, therefore, are a potent political force whose demands for recognition far exceed their importance in the population or their contribution to the national product. The main political issues posed by farmers in wealthy nations centre on problems of oversupply, not on problems of deficit production. Except in the Soviet Union, where a totalitarian adherence to the preservation of an idealized rural social structure has resulted in a farm economy that is much less productive than it should be given the natural endowments of the nation, the wealthy countries have integrated into their economic systems a vigorously innovative agricultural sector that yields high returns to its cultivators and provides a wide assortment of abundant food for its consumers.

The problems of food oversupply in wealthy nations derive essentially from a conflict between economic and social policy goals. A progressive agriculture, that is, an agriculture that has high and increasing rates of productivity per worker and per unit of land and capital, builds upon a continuous flow of technical innovations that incorporate scale economies. The social impact of expanding farm size and output per worker is to reduce the number of farms and farmers needed to meet food demand. Because farmers are loath to see unfettered considerations of economics squeeze out their neighbours, these considerations must be fettered, but fettered in a manner that allows all to enjoy economic advance and social stability. Overproduction is paid for by exploiting consumers through higher prices and taxpayers through direct farm subsidies. The headache for the politician is the disposal of the surplus food produced. The disposal must be undertaken in a manner that is not blatantly wasteful (remember those tens of millions of dozens of eggs?). Food aid to developing nations seems humanitarian and useful as long as one does not look too closely.

It has been argued by some scholars that it is not clearly to the advantage of the wealthy, food-surplus countries to encourage the development of agriculture in the less-developed nations. India more than doubled its wheat production between 1967 and 1971. It now produces 50 percent more than Canada. If it were to harvest the water resources of the Gangetic Plain, grain production could, with present technology, far surpass India's immediate food needs. At low national wage levels, India could be a formidable competitor for the present grain-surplus countries in international markets. Already Brazil has surpassed China as the world's second largest producer of soybeans. With an output still less than half that of the USA, it has emerged as the major international source for sales of soybeans, oil, and cake to the Japanese and Western European feed markets. New methods of refining tropical palm oil also threaten to upset the export vegetable markets of North America and Europe. Indeed, the US House of Representatives recently wrote into an authorization bill for World Bank funds that no American money was to be used for projects to expand palm oil, sugar, and citrus production

in developing countries. In Canada, we seem not as concerned about restrictions on our assistance to potential farm competitors, but for all our protestations of support for world food production, if the aid that permits developing countries to purchase Canadian food and fertilizer materials (especially potash) is removed from the bilateral help the Canadian International Development Agency gives to developing nations, it is instructive to note how little of our assistance goes for agriculture and rural improvement activities. In 1974, it was only 11 percent, and this included a project for beekeeping in Tanzania. Because rural development projects of the kind Canada finances do not need large infusions of foreign exchange, and because CIDA's operating rules make it hard to fund projects that do not have a large need for the procurement of Canadian goods and services, it can be argued that the limited support Canada provides for agricultural development is the result more of operational than of political considerations. I would not dispute this interpretation; I would point out, however, that the operational rules are set politically.

For the present, the developing nations pose little threat to the rural economies of the developed world, certainly a much smaller threat than they do to some of the industrial sectors such as textiles, ready-made clothing, consumer electronics, toys, luggage, shoes, to name but a few.

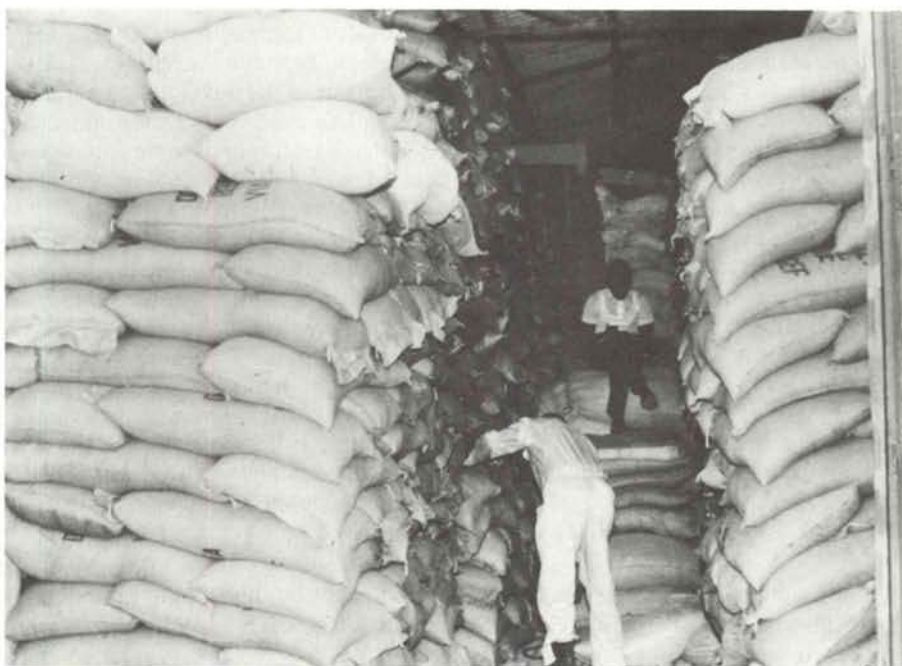
In a critically important sense, however, the political attitudes in rich nations toward world agricultural development will determine the course of that development. The investment costs of a green revolution are small. A few millions of dollars for research spent on genetic collections, plant breeding, agronomy, pest and pathogen control, even some farm management economics, was enough to discover and demonstrate new high-yield practices for tropical farmers. Seed production to support the introduction of these new varietal materials was more expensive, but not very much more. Fertilizer and irrigation supplies were reckoned in the hundreds of millions of dollars. But that was all. The returns in higher food output to these investments were extraordinarily high.

The total transformation of traditional agricultures will be another story. Tropical climates generally have long dry seasons that can be made biologically productive only if supplementary water is available for irrigation. Developmental infrastructures for water are very expensive, as are the infrastructures for roads, agricultural-factor supply industries, markets, storage and processing plants, et cetera. These will require billions of dollars of investment. The amounts needed are far beyond the ability of developing nations to generate from their own income and resources unless they have oil. There are estimates that about \$30 billion would be needed over the next 25 years to rehabilitate the grazing lands of the sub-Saharan, Sahelian nations of West and Central Africa, and to harness their five rivers and the Lake Chad basin for irrigation. The Gangetic basin would require perhaps as much as \$60 billion to unlock its full agricultural potential — a potential that could add 70 or 80 percent more to present world grain output. There are no estimates of the cost of making the 200 million hectares of south Sudan available for farming, but \$1000 per hectare would not be an unrealistic figure.

In contrast to these amounts, the gross national product of all six Sahelian nations is less than \$4.0 billion; for India it is about \$80 billion; and of the Sudan it is approximately \$3.5 billion. Without massive external help from the wealthy nations, significant rural development in most Third World countries is a dream.

The amounts of external aid available from the rich nations, including those of OPEC (the Arab OPEC nations are and will be the major contributors to the realization of the Sudanese potential), are based on decisions reached by the interplay of domestic and international political considerations. Already these considerations have established a new billion-dollar International Fund for Agricultural Development with contributions from both the Western industrial states and OPEC members. If operated properly, this fund could make a large contribution to future food security.

At the present time, and before the operation of IFAD, approximately \$5 billion of assistance per year is flowing from rich nations to Third World rural development. This annual transfer of resources has been increasing and shows every sign of continuing to grow. Unfortunately, these transfers take place without an overall grand strategy for a worldwide attack on the food deficit problem. Until the world's instrument for food, the FAO, is forced to take its mandate seriously, there will be no strategic plan. The result will likely be more waste and duplication from projects out of phase and works unused because complementary activities were not undertaken. The usual chaos of ad hoc, unplanned, and uncontrolled investment activities is compounded by the fact that resources are flowing from many sources, each with its own set of interests, procedures, and priorities. I see no way of avoiding this result because I do not think the politicians who could insist that FAO function properly, or create some other agency that will so function, will force reforms on that all but moribund institution. Because there is no strategy, the amounts of money politicians will be willing to commit to an obviously unstructured endeavour will be severely limited. At present we have little vision of what might be, and even less understanding of the best means of its accomplishment. Hardly a program to generate political enthusiasm or even much political interest.



The International Politics of Food

In beginning any discussion on the international politics of food, I want to make quite clear that I do not see the major food-exporting countries of the USA, Canada, Australia, and Argentina ever using food as a significant political weapon in their relations with other countries. I do not believe that the governments of any of these countries could long survive the public revulsion that would surely arise if, by their actions, food was withheld from starving people regardless of the provocation, short of a state of war. This is not to say that food cannot be used, or will not be used, or has not been used as a bargaining counter to secure national interest or to support and implement negotiated international agreements. But to bargain with food as one of the chips is different from using food as a weapon of retaliation. I stress this because I do not wish remarks I may make to be misconstrued, and I wish, even more, to avoid further participation in a food weaponry discussion that I find unworthy of men of good will.

Food has played a part, a relatively minor part, in the dialogues and sometimes heated confrontations between rich and poor nations that have been so much a feature of recent international political exchanges. The food deficits of 1972 and the subsequent rise in grain prices are seen by some as the opening shot of world inflation. The very rapid rise in world grain prices may have been a factor in reversing Saudi Arabia's older policy of limiting its active participation in OPEC and of refusing to use its oil as a potential weapon in the mid-East conflict. With Saudi Arabia, OPEC is a powerful cartel; without Saudi Arabia it was just another producer group.

Whatever the root reasons of OPEC's post-1973 strength, its energy price policies are today the greatest single source of global economic instability. The oil price increases have had their greatest relative impact on the developing countries. Energy costs to these nations have increased as have the costs of the industrial products they must import to maintain the standards of living of their populations and to support their development aspirations. Trading account deficits of Third World nations have grown from about \$9 billion a year in the first years of this decade to over \$40 billion at present. Bilateral and multilateral official development assistance from the industrial countries transferred more than enough money in the early seventies to cover trading deficits, but in recent years such assistance has virtually stagnated, and it now falls far short of the deficit level. Although some OPEC members are actively providing development assistance to friendly countries, the economies of most developing nations are losing growth momentum or, in the case of a few countries, international borrowings to maintain growth are adding large sums to their debt burdens. It is estimated that the total debt owed by developing countries to wealthy nations now stands at over \$170 billion. Debt service charges all but wipe out the amount rich nations transfer to the Third World through official development aid.

It is this situation that has given rise to the call by developing nations for a New International Economic Order and new forms of international economic cooperation. The call has two aspects.

The first is for practical measures to increase the flow of resources from wealthier nations to poorer ones. There are five major planks in the Third World demands: stabilized, higher prices for Third World raw materials (both agricultural and mineral) sold to wealthy-nation importers; access to developed-country markets for the manufactured goods of the Third World; increased aid transfers; altered arrangements including moratoriums on debt and debt service charges; and enhanced access to, and the transfer of, proprietary and other forms of advanced product and manufacturing technologies. Using their majority voting power in the fora of the UN and in other international bodies, the Third World countries, including OPEC members, have formed a united bloc to press their demands. In most instances, they are supported by the Socialist nations whose stinginess on all these points is notable. Some demands have been partially met. Developed countries are reviewing their aid allocations, particularly their efforts to raise official development assistance transfers to a target of 0.7 of one percent of GNP (Canada's present level is about 0.54 of one percent). Canada and a few other nations have announced the cancellation of public debts for the poorest countries. Negotiations on buffer stock techniques of stabilizing, if not artificially supporting, some raw material prices in international trade are proceeding with due deliberate speed. Limited concessions have been made on increasing access to domestic markets for the industrial products of developing countries. (Although Canada's restrictions on ready-made garments are probably an indication of a more general attitude in the wealthy nations, that if poorer countries become too aggressive or are too successful in their market penetration, open access will be constrained.) And in 1979 the UN Conference on Science and Technology will focus significant attention on the issues of technology transfer to accelerate development activities.

The picture is mixed. For most developing countries, there has been little real gain yet from the rhetoric of new economic cooperation. For the developed countries, who are most anxious to tie economic concessions to the Third World with some form of agreement that consumer representatives will be made party to OPEC price negotiations, the concessions demanded have not carried the reciprocal gain necessary to striking a full bargain. These issues will be prominent on the agendas of international meetings for a long time to come.

The second aspect of Third World demands is less specific and more controversial. It centres on the institutional restructuring of the major world economic bodies to better embrace their particular problems. The 1944 Bretton Woods Conference established the main features of the postwar international economy. Arrangements made at that conference gave a preeminent position to the industrial Allied Western Powers, then at war with Germany and Japan. Even today, such economic giants as Japan and West Germany are underrepresented in the voting structure of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, two major institutions established at Bretton Woods, where voting power is roughly related to economic strength, but where also the allocation of votes to each country is slow to modify with changing economic fortunes. The IMF is the agency charged with an overall responsibility for the orderly management of international economic relations among countries. The developing countries, accounting for less than one-fifth of global gross economic product, are demanding a larger voice in how their currencies are to relate to those of the rest of the world, and how their economies and trading relations are internationally managed. They accuse the IMF of being operated to preserve the economic

dominance of the rich nations, a dominance maintained at the expense and exploitation of the poor.

At its heart, the dialogue between rich and poor nations is only superficially economic. It is really a struggle by the Third World for greater international political power. As they cannot claim this power on the basis of their economic strength, they are demanding it on the basis of a numerical majority in world agencies where the voting structure is one vote for each country. This is the voting procedure, or some slight modification of it, that they would insist on having in a set of new international financial and economic institutions that would comprise the core of an altered world economic order. The purpose is political, the results are to be economic with the rich countries (including OPEC?) bearing the major cost.

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. The OPEC cartel is a political body wherein nations play out their interests. The control over the operation of buffer stocks of Third World raw material exports would be responsive to a political forum. Just as farmers and other business interests in Canada have long sought refuge in some form of government control of, or intervention in, the free play of market forces, so the developing countries urge the establishment of structures that would give them final power over the operations of international transactions affecting the products they produce and export, and the foreign currency operations that influence the growth of their economies. 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. And we even hear a Canadian Minister and a US Secretary proposing a wheat agreement that, in truth, would be a cartel although the label is carefully denied.

Politicians are in favour of monopoly and monopoly agreements providing they control them according to their sense of the "public" interest, an interest they equate with their own political concerns. The new international arrangements pressed upon the industrial nations by the Third World raw material exporters are designed to substitute political monopolies for present world market systems. Preferably, raw material monopolies would permit the outright political dictation of prices and supply by producers. OPEC is the model. Second best would be bilateral bargaining between representatives of producer and consumer blocs, with the final vote hopefully resting with the producers.

Should the developing countries succeed in negotiating these arrangements, they would face formidable problems of supply control. Third World nations have a poor history of controlling their own production, or of preventing other countries from launching or expanding domestic output of a particular commodity and entering world markets to sell their surplus at high prices below the monopoly level agreed upon by older producers. India and Ceylon tried to monopolize the Indian tea market after the Second World War. The success of their efforts put East Africa firmly in the tea business as a formidable competitor. Bootleg sugar, some of it from countries supposedly constraining the flow of international supplies, has long frustrated efforts by sugar producers to enforce supply quotas at agreed prices. Thus, in the view of many in the Third World, if the global markets are to be replaced by the political control of economic forces, it will not suffice

merely to agree among producer nations or even between producers and consumers on how a particular commodity is to be priced and made available in international trade. These observers argue that the whole apparatus of international economics must be made responsive to the political demands and the economic needs of low-income producers in a way that automatically enforces agreements and punishes those who would break ranks to buy or sell outside the common position.

I do not envisage any significant shift in the equation of political power and economic strength that now underlies the control of the world's international monetary and economic institutions. Therefore, I do not anticipate that Third World nations will have much of their way with attempts to control the major instruments of international economic activity. There will be agreements to manage better short-term market movements for the benefit of both producers and consumers, but until there are clear gains for the industrial powers (such as an agreement to convert present OPEC discussions on price and supply from monopoly dictation to bilateral monopoly negotiations between oil exporters and importers), they are unlikely to agree to any significant alteration in the rules governing world economic relations.

The noise and clamour for change will continue and will likely grow louder, just as will the demands of the industrial powers to be given a voice in how oil is priced and handled. The food wealth of the Western nations, particularly of the USA, can be used as one of the counters in the negotiations with OPEC and with the Third World nations. I am not sure how powerful a counter it is, however. The major OPEC suppliers are not large food importers and many countries can meet their limited needs. I do not believe that OPEC would succumb to indirect blackmail threats of a Western denial of food supplies to third parties in an effort to force the oil exporters to bargain differently. Indeed, I do not think any Western power would deny a needy people food to accomplish this purpose.

While food wealth carries its own blessing, it carries also a unique responsibility. In the ethics of Western civilizations, at least, food is a commodity apart from other commodities, and it carries its own political connotations. If OPEC is to be cracked open for consumer representation, the crowbar will have to be other than food.

Food assistance from the industrial surplus countries will continue to be an international lever in foreign policy. Despite my earlier statements about food aid, I do not doubt that donor and recipient countries will continue to use food assistance in nonemergency situations if considerations of the interacting foreign policies dictate such use. Food assistance on giveaway terms will be provided to countries that bargain particular policies for such help, and food will be denied to countries that hold policies opposed to those the surplus nations wish to foster. In widespread emergency conditions, the quantity of food to be provided will be used as a device to harmonize the foreign and domestic policies of recipient nations with those of the donor countries; or it may be used as a threat or even to encourage subversion against unliked regimes.

It is significant that since the Bengal famine of 1942-43, there has not been a truly catastrophic famine anywhere in the world, a record of 35 years unparalleled in human history. And it will be an unbroken record as long as the capacity to produce large surplus food supplies exists in the Western world. Indeed, the concerns expressed by the surplus countries at the world conferences on food have



been how freedom from famine can be extended to freedom from malnutrition — hardly a reflection of policies that embrace the denial of food in conditions of desperate need.

The availability of food aid for the emergency needs of poor countries can likely only be threatened by a strong market demand for available supplies from those with the hard currency power to purchase their needs. This was the situation in 1972 when South Asian and African nations found themselves in competition with the treasuries of the Soviet Union and China. The unusual circumstances of worldwide drought and general crop shortages pitted humanitarian considerations against those of high returns to the farmers in the exporting countries.

It is the inherent conflict between these two interests that led nations to agree at the 1974 World Food Conference to the establishment of an international food emergency reserve to protect low-income countries in case of crop failure. As yet the reserve has not been built, although many countries including Canada and the USA are committed to contribute to it. Uncertainty over how the reserve will be managed has retarded its establishment. The poorer countries want some measure of control over the use of the reserve stocks. The contributing countries are reluctant to give food to a reserve and not hold control over its disposition. To the Third World, such arrangements are inherently imperialistic. Among the donors, however, there are two fears: first, that the reserve stocks will be allocated politically by Third World interest blocs for their own purposes; second, that the reserves may be quickly squandered in a vain effort to prevent short-term upward movements in food prices in recipient nations either in response to domestic inflationary policies or to small transient food shortages that are not emergency famine threats.

The politics of the control of wealth is always an unseemly affair. Food stocks of tens of millions of tons of grain, worth billions of dollars, will generate a

particularly inelegant diplomacy. But I have little doubt that some sort of global reserve will be created, and that it will serve humanitarian ends freeing other stocks for market use as demands arise. It is well to remember, however, that for all the debate about food assistance, the long-term food security for poor countries rests on the development of their domestic agricultural potential and upon the success of their population control policies. It may be valid to use food surpluses as a short-term foreign policy tool, but as surplus producers, Canadians must be careful that in giving food away we are not undermining a long-term imperative.

I have said little about food distribution within countries and between rich and poor nations. Like the distribution of nearly every material good, food is subject to the economic and political rules of the national game. One can criticize the rules in any country, but in doing so one must recognize that the rules are sovereign matters for the state concerned.

It is a little easier to throw bricks at one's own society. And I take it that is what many are doing when they argue that Canadians (and all rich-nation consumers for that matter) should reduce grain equivalent consumption in order to make more food available for those who are presently malnourished. Although I applaud this sense of self-sacrifice, even if it is sometimes linked to antiobesity self-interest, I cannot but feel the whole argument is at best naive and at worst dangerous — it could be detrimental to the development of poor nations.

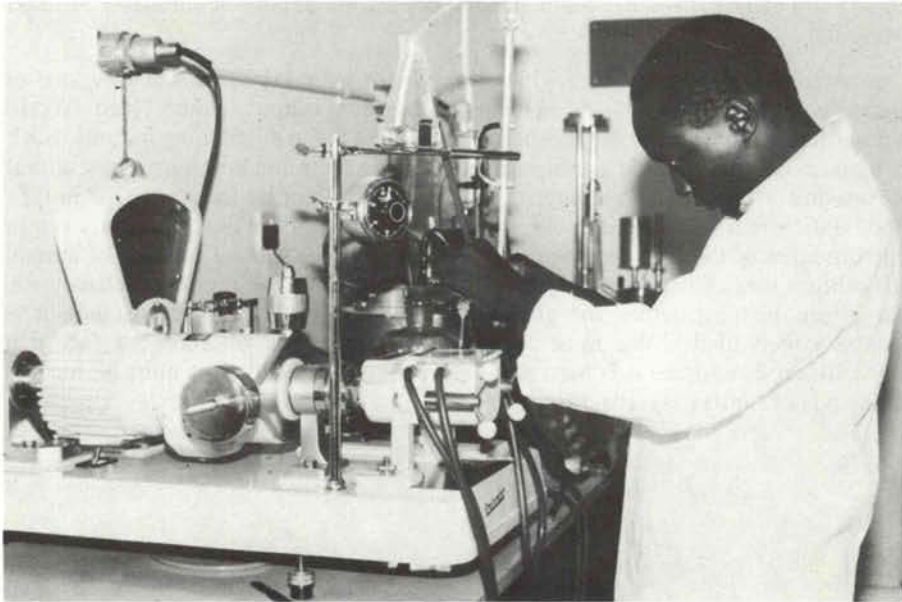
It is naive because it is not clear how food saved can be transferred to the world's needy. Is it to be sent as official aid? Nor is it clear how a reduction in domestic demand will not depress future supplies from the farms of the rich countries. Is the taxpayer to pick up the slack in demand? If so, how? And will reductions in demand, however well-intentioned the motivations, not result in more political pressure for supply-restrictive devices that would only frustrate the overall purpose of reducing consumption? And besides, even if North Americans cut their food consumption to a half of what it is now, that is, to slightly under the present level of the Soviet Union, the food saved would only feed the 600 million or so extra people that will be added to the population of poor nations over the next 10 years.

At worst is the spectre of what a transfer of over 110 million metric tons of grain equivalent, about 15 percent of current output from Third World agricultures, would do to the prosperity of farmers in the developing nations. Such a transfer certainly would greatly impair the prospects for long-term agricultural development in most developing societies. It should not be forgotten that India's food deficit in a normal crop year is only about five million tons of grain; even in the droughts of the mid-sixties, famine was averted by annual imports of around 10 million tons. Charity is only a virtue if it ennobles the recipient; charity too large can be destructive for giver and recipient alike. Food assistance is a double-edged blade. We must not let good intentions obscure the fact that agricultural development is hard won, and, if help be needed, it must be for that task and not for its easy avoidance.

The Politics of Agricultural Scientific Progress

The implications for public policy of modern food production technologies have a particular impact on developing countries. The spectres of surplus, unneeded farm labour flowing from rural areas to urban centres where there are no jobs awaiting, of differential economic advance among various geographic parts of the rural hinterland, of the need to provide expensive, often imported, factors of production such as fertilizer, of the requirements for roads, et cetera, make a forbidding set of demands on the treasuries of poor countries. In the face of this bill, many countries have turned to their scientific community with the demand that they find "appropriate" technologies to foster modernization that will not be so costly of resources and that will be easier to absorb within the framework of national economies. The political demands made of the scientist are for plant varieties that will yield well without the use of fertilizer and with the lower water needs, or for simple machines to make local resources more effective, or for technologies that will make poor soils as productive as rich soils, or for ways of enhancing productivity per farm worker, while simultaneously increasing labour absorption in agriculture. The political call to science is to be more "relevant."

There are many things scientific research can provide in response to these demands. The formulation of fertilizer, particularly its physical properties when applied to a crop, can be improved for tropical use. Small-power machinery, under some circumstances and for some soils, can be developed, manufactured (if it is not already), and used to enhance the productivity of labour. Because such machines hasten tillage, they may open opportunities for producing several crops a year, thus increasing the absorption of farm labour over the amounts required by



the use of primitive tools and animal power. There are even means for redressing some of the different regional impacts of farm modernization through the development of technologies for specialized industries, such as poultry, livestock grazing, and so on.

For the greatest part, however, the unwanted problems associated with modernization are not escapable or soluble by recourse to science. High crop yields per unit of land are attained because the surface area of the soil is densely covered with plant material that can use all the intercepted sunlight. To permit the close spacing of high plant populations, there must be an adequate nutrient supply or plants will die leaving bare ground and a consequent low yield. To support the plant mass, additional water is needed. If the water supply is deficient, or the soils poor so that nutrients become locked in forms unusable to the roots of the crop, or the cloud cover too heavy, or . . . , there may be little any scientist can do to make the region productive.

It is difficult to bring the politician and the scientist, in the course of their dialogue, to some common understanding. Each deals with limits: the politician with the outer edge of permissible action consistent with maintaining social stability and future policy options; the scientist with the frontiers of knowledge and the unyielding laws of science. 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 defined boundaries of thermodynamics and energy conservation, and practical boundaries on knowledge that set tight limits on what can be accomplished and that are just as real as those of politics. For the scientist, basic research holds hopes of breaking the knowledge boundary and he appeals to the politician for the money to undertake such activities; for the politician, research seems a slow, never-ending process of uncertain outcome and most often focused on topics far removed from any discernible relation to the nagging issues that demand political decisions. The dialogue is unsatisfactory even in advanced scientific societies; it is virtually nonexistent in developing countries where the fact of underdevelopment is the lack of a widespread use of science-based technologies in meeting the material needs of their citizens. 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 could do much to focus the work of each on those matters that will yield to a complementary attack by both. Should such attack be mounted, the processes of change and of their political and scientific implications should prove a little more manageable.

A Final Comment

The politics of food is the politics of economic development and economic growth, and it is the politics of interaction between rich and poor nations. But the politics of food is more, for food is fundamentally different from the other material goods used by man.

In the prayers of men in all the great religions, the quest for one's daily bread embodies all of man's material needs. Because it is a commodity charged with

emotional symbolism as well as material substance, it has a special politics. It cannot be used as easily or as readily, as can oil or cotton or uranium or shoes or electronic parts, to give effect to foreign or domestic policy. Because it is so commonplace, the struggle necessary to assure its continued supply is often overlooked in the glamour surrounding other artifacts of ancient and modern cultures. But it is man's need for a secure food supply that is the pervading note in a society's evolution, and for rich and poor nation alike the entwining of food and politics is the most persistent of recurrent themes. All I have done today is illumine a part of the contemporary interplay. Five years ago, five years from now, the particulars of my comments would be different, but the underlying refrain would be the same. One's daily bread in all but the most primitive communities of man is obtained by tilling the soil, nurturing the crop, and harvesting God's bounty. It is the political structures controlling the rights and obligations of the members of a society that determine one of the two interacting sets of limits to these simple acts. It is the structures of science — the physical and the biological — that determine the other set. In this interaction, progress or stagnation, feast or famine is to be found. And because the interaction and the nature of the two limiting sets are subject to the play of domestic and world politics and science, the study of each and of both can never be static or final.

