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THE PROBLEM IS POVERTY

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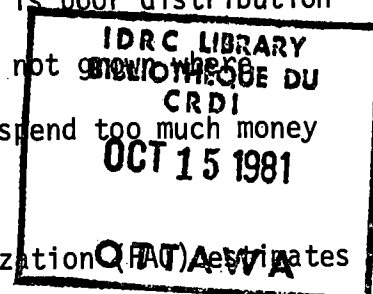
The population of our planet is about 4.5 billion. As near as anyone can tell, about 500 million of those people are malnourished -- 200 million of the hungry are children under the age of five.

The demography experts predict that the world's population will eventually level off at about 10.5 billion. At which point surely everyone will be malnourished. Not so say the food experts: the earth can easily feed that number of people.

Indeed, some estimates suggest that four times that number could be fed, even using existing technology and land already in use. A study from the Netherlands suggest that the world is actually capable of producing 25 times as much grain as at present.

Given such abundance, why must anyone go hungry? The answer is complex, but undoubtedly the biggest single factor is poor distribution -- both of food and resources. Most of the food is not grown where most of the people live. And too many governments spend too much money on armaments and not enough on agriculture.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that present world supplies of "dietary energy" actually exceed requirements by about 10 percent. Even in the developing countries, says FAO, the



supplies would be nearly sufficient to meet domestic needs -- if they were distributed evenly.

So while some countries -- even some regions within some countries -- have huge food surpluses, others face periodic food shortages. Increasing production and transportation costs make food imports expensive, sometimes prohibitively so. The World Bank's statistics show that food imports by the 80 poorest countries are dropping, while "middle income" countries are buying more.

Thus, for countries as well as for families, it is poverty rather than food shortage that is the real cause of malnutrition. And as always it is the poorest who are hardest hit; who "go to the wall first" in times of hardship, as one FAO worker bluntly puts it.

Leaving aside emergency food aid in times of drought or other natural or manmade disaster, the long term solution according to FAO is more equitable distribution, improved marketing, food subsidies or supplements, selective price controls, and so on.

But redistribution on a scale to eliminate hunger and malnutrition would be such an enormous undertaking that for many countries it is simply not feasible. Far better in the long run to increase food production in areas where it is needed. This would mean opening up new farmlands, developing new crop varieties to withstand tougher conditions, and widespread extension programmes to encourage more productive farming techniques.

Increasing food production will also mean some tough decisions. In many developing countries the best agricultural land is allocated to cash crops for export -- Egyptian cotton, Kenyan coffee and Sri Lankan tea, for example. Switching to production for local consumption

also means reducing the amount of foreign exchange the country can earn. Such shifts in priorities require a careful balancing act in order not to upset already precarious economies.

Equally important, however, is the need to prevent food losses. Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) estimates that between one-quarter and one-third of the total crop may be wasted in the developing countries as a whole as a result of inefficient harvesting and drying, poor processing, inadequate storage and distribution, and even poor food preparation in the home. In some countries it may run as high as 75 percent!

The solution, say IDRC's research managers, is a systems approach that regards every step in the journey from the field to the kitchen as part of a continuous post-harvest process. Eliminating food losses says IDRC, could immediately make available millions of tonnes more food, and save billions of dollars. And it must be given top priority, otherwise the pressures of increased food production on an already inadequate system will simply result in even greater food losses.

The FAO agrees. In 1977 it established an Action Programme for the Prevention of Food Losses, which concentrates on basic foodstuffs in the farm and the village. The aim is to reduce post-harvest losses by at least half within a decade.

All these programmes will cost money: one World Bank estimate puts the figure at \$600 billion in the next decade simply to prevent the number of hungry people from increasing.

If that seems like a lot, consider that world military expenditures, according to the Brandt Commission's report now total \$450 billion -- every year. It is a question of priorities.

In the words of Edouard Saouma, Director-General of FAO,
"Since it is the farmers, individually and collectively, who can
actually develop a greater self-reliance in food production, it
behooves governments, especially of the poor, food-deficit countries,
to pay close attention to their needs and to assign a higher
priority to the agricultural sector and to rural development."

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