

A Rangeman's Critique of the World Food Conference

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Highlight: *The World Food Conference held in Rome, Italy, November 5 to 16, 1974 was considered an important first step to confront the most important issue facing mankind—world hunger. The principal focus on the need for increased production at any cost to meet the needs of present populations, and about 76 million additional people each year, will result in an all-out effort to expand the cultivated area and maximize production from areas already under cultivation. Emphasis was mainly on grain production with little positive attention given to the possibilities of animal production and the great potential role of rangelands in meeting world food requirements. In spite of these deficiencies, positive steps included 1) setting up a World Food Council; 2) agreeing to establish a grain reserve; 3) approving the establishment of an international fund for agricultural development; 4) instituting a world-wide system of food information; 5) developing a systematic approach to world-wide fertilizer production and distribution; and 6) intensifying agricultural and weather research.*

While much of the publicity resulting from the World Food Conference has been somewhat negative, it is my feeling that, on the positive side, an important "first step" was taken in Rome to confront the most important issue facing mankind—world hunger. This challenge—perhaps new to an apathetic majority of the world's people—is not a new issue for biological scientists, who for years have been warning of the impending food disaster associated with unlimited population growth. What is new, and one of the major accomplishments of the World Food Conference, is an "increased world-wide awareness"—a necessary first step to the solution. Perhaps peoples and governments will now follow up with the necessary action programs.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) prepared some excellent background materials for the 130 nation delegation to the Conference and proposed an

approach to the problem within two time frames:

(1) *Serious attention must be given to the immediate food crisis.* Conservative estimates indicate that 460 million people are now suffering from hunger and severe malnutrition.

(2) *Over the long term, the challenge is to increase food production for a rapidly expanding world population.* An annual gain of 70 to 80 million people poses the continuing threat of global famine far in excess of that previously experienced in the history of mankind.

The Immediate Food Crisis

The present food crisis is more serious and widespread than the world has experienced since the forties. In 1972, grain stocks declined sharply and adverse weather affected production in several parts of the world simultaneously—USSR, China, India, Australia, Sahelian Africa, and southeast Asia. Although the 1973 harvests were reasonably good, they were insufficient to meet trade and aid requirements, and 1974 has failed to bring about the needed replenishment of stocks. At the same time, fish yields have fallen in several ocean areas—probably because of

over-exploitation.

Recently, two other problems have complicated the situation—the energy crisis and inflation—causing shortages of fertilizers and petrochemicals and increasing the cost of food production. *The immediate need is for 8 to 10 million tons of grain for developing countries.* Unless production is increased dramatically, the United Nations estimates that the annual deficit could reach 85 to 100 millions tons of grain by 1985. Other food needs for balanced human nutrition, particularly proteins, will also be in short supply.

The only solution to the immediate hunger problem is increased food aid. Who will provide this food aid and how it will be provided was the subject of much debate. Those countries where people are presently starving (particularly the African Sahel and Bangladesh) do not have the purchasing power to obtain the food. Before the conclusion of the conference, commitments for additional food aid were made by several countries, including Canada, Sweden, Australia, and the United States. The member countries of the European Economic Community (EEC) will probably not increase immediate food aid, but will add funds to compensate for inflation. Perhaps altogether, both the direct donations and all forms of indirect help, may reach one-third of the estimated goal of 10 million metric tons of grain this year.

Food and International Politics

Secretary of State Kissinger, in an eloquent address to the plenary session, challenged the country delegates to "confront the problem and not each other." Secretary Kissinger was firm in his position that the responsibility for financing food imports to the hungry

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areas cannot rest solely with the food exporters alone. The new oil-rich countries of the world must bear part of the burden by assisting with investments and contributions, as well as by keeping the cost of energy within reasonable limits. He stated: "The continuing massive transfer of wealth and the resulting impetus of world-wide inflation have shattered the ability of the developing countries to purchase food, fertilizer, and other goods."

The concern over energy and inflationary costs was expressed by many delegates. However, Algerian President Boumedienne charged that the food problem resulted from "a policy of domination" of developed nations—along with "world inflation, caused and maintained by industrialized countries" rather than the price of oil. Iran placed "much blame on the West" because of its "past food policy" which "created the present food shortage." The Cuban representative stated that the world had a "satisfactory" and well-balanced agriculture "prior to the advent of colonialism and imperialism and that the US and not the new oil-rich countries caused the present inflationary spiral." Algeria proposed that the "concept of production for market purposes" must be replaced with "production for humanitarian purposes." The Minister of Agriculture for Libya labelled as "absolutely false allegations" any suggestions that oil was responsible for causing the food crisis. "The excessively luxurious life led by the USA and its allies," he said, "as well as its deliberation to raise the prices of agricultural production inputs such as machinery, fertilizers and chemical pesticides—all these combined have contributed to the shortage of foodstuffs now suffered by the countries of Asia and Africa."

The Chinese spokesman stated that China was "ready to join in common efforts to solve the world food problem," which was "due to the developed countries which practice

plunder, control, and ruthless enslavement." He urged the developing nations not to be misled by statements from the West "which place the blame on climate, prices, oil, or overpopulation" and said that "the emphasis on population control was being spread for ulterior motives." "China developed" he stated, "because we severed ties with the imperialist countries," and "established rural peoples in communes."

Many other countries supported the Chinese and Russian concepts of revolution and economic reform to insure adequate food supplies. Mexico's President Echeverria, facing a very sympathetic audience, proposed a "World Food and Agricultural Research Bank" and a "World Food Plan for Development." He declared: "The present chaotic condition of markets, prices, and raw materials has been brought about by the great industrialized nations." Dr. Philip Potter, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, stated: "... it is being said that what is needed is population control, and this will enable development aid and the transfer of grain to the needy to be more effective. But experience has shown that it is precisely socio-economic development which reduces income inequality, and this is a precondition for a decrease in the rate of population growth. Moreover, such evidence as we have indicates that where there is a determined effort to promote participatory self-reliance and an economic policy aimed at social justice, as in China, the most populous nation, the problems of hunger can be satisfactorily tackled." Dr. Lester Brown tried to set the record straight by citing that China had also been receiving substantial food imports and the claim of self-sufficiency was not valid.

The "population" problem was not confronted directly by most delegates. F. T. Sai, representing the International Planned Parenthood Federation, reaffirmed the belief that "family

planning is a human right" and "in today's marginal economies, satisfactory feeding of the people cannot be assured if fertility regulation programmes do not go hand-in-hand with programmes for nutritional improvement." Pope Paul VI invited the participants in the World Food Conference to the Vatican where he emphasized that, "the threat of hunger and the burden of malnutrition are not an inevitable destiny." He reaffirmed the stand of the Catholic Church on birth control, stating: "In times gone by, nations used to make war to seize their neighbors' riches. But, is it not a new form of warfare to impose a restrictive demographic control on nations to insure they will not claim Russian delegate indicated little concern for population control by stating that the world could easily support 40-50 billion people. This high estimate was shocking to most of us who have been worrying about 5-6 billion.

The preceding statements are cited only as examples of the interplay among nations and special interest groups. It was the actions of the US delegation, however, that attracted the most attention (and criticism), not only from country delegates, but from the large group of Non-governmental Organizations (NGO's) given credentials to the Conference. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz kept reminding the delegates that governments, bureaucracies, and even food conferences, do not produce food, "only farmers produce food, and they must have the incentive to produce." He cited with pride America's history of sending food to poorer lands. *The US has contributed 46% of all the food aid given to developing countries since 1962.* Butz emphasized that the top priority for the conference must be to "stimulate additional production in the developing countries."

This approach by Secretary Butz was not satisfactory for many conferees concerned with the immediate hunger problem. Due to this pressure and concern, part of the American Congressional delegation, including Senators Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern, and Richard Clark, insisted that the White House be contacted to obtain an immediate commitment to increase US food aid from 1 million to 2 million tons of grain this year. Dick Gregory flew into Rome to start a fast

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(joined by Rene Dumont, French environmentalist) to stimulate additional interest in doubling US food aid, and the NGO's passed a resolution to support the drive. President Ford turned down the request and Anne Armstrong, one of the ranking members of the US delegation, reported the reasons: "The American housewife is having a tough enough time meeting her own budget," and increased emergency food aid would add to the already inflated prices at home. Mrs. Armstrong cited the financial problems now confronting farmers and ranchers in the US. Most delegates had little sympathy for, or understanding of, the US position. (It should be noted that the US has budgeted \$675 million this year for nutritional programs and technical assistance, and Secretary Butz committed an additional \$50 million to food aid through Public Law 480 sales.)

The Long-Term Challenge to Increase Food Supplies

The major thrust of the conference was toward the medium-term objective to increase food production and to establish a world-wide system of food security. Discussions and action proposals for these topics were not as heavily involved in politics.

The principal focus on the need for *"increased production at any cost"* in both the developed and developing nations raises some questions. How can we meet the needs of about 76 million additional people each year without some sacrifice to the resource base? India alone will require an *additional* 2.5 million metric tons of grain each year to cope with their expanding population. And Bangladesh, as one reporter stated recently, is "... sliding irretrievably toward mass starvation and social breakdown." Bangladesh, equal in size to the State of Wisconsin, now has 75 million people, compared with the 4.4 million in Wisconsin, and the population of Bangladesh will

double in 23 years! Under these population pressures little attention will likely be given to resource conservation. It appears that an all-out effort will be made to expand the number of cultivated acres and to maximize the production on those areas now under the plow. This poses the threat of over-expansion into marginal lands and increased pressure on range areas.

While a few delegates and observers raised questions about environmental deterioration, most people in attendance had little understanding of natural ecosystems or the impact of more intensive agricultural technology or environmental stability. The heavy reliance of modern agriculture on petroleum products (depletable resources) was acknowledged, but no one talked about the possibility that fossil fuel will, someday, become exhausted. The time frame here was much too short-sighted, in my opinion, being aimed primarily at the next two decades. What happens beyond the year 2000 was only dimly visualized. Perhaps, the specter of hungry people today obscured the vision for the long-term future.

Animal agriculture came under constant attack from some participants with the simplistic assumption that all animals were produced at a cost of 4 to 10 pounds of grain that could go directly into human food channels. Certainly, much grain can go directly into human consumption. However, the important contribution of the ruminant animal as a converter of roughage, the

importance of range livestock production, the role of animals in the utilization of low-quality grains and grains bred specifically as "feed grains" and not "food grains" was neglected. The American livestock producers present at the conference were very concerned about this "misunderstanding." Also, several reporters noted that, while delegates on the floor were condemning livestock production and the excessive eating habits of affluent societies, most of these same persons consistently ordered beef steak or lamb for dinner in the evening.

Some background material on the role of rangelands in world food production and in balanced agricultural ecosystems was submitted to the conference planners but was not used in the final documents by FAO. Failure to recognize these values of uncultivated lands is not a new phenomenon for members of the Society for Range Management. Even in the US, we have difficulty obtaining recognition or adequate support for much-needed research on range vegetation and range livestock production. And, while world grain supplies is always cited as the most important single indicator of the world food situation, this statistic cannot be properly evaluated without looking at other food sources for balanced nutrition.

In spite of these deficiencies in the data base and in spite of the variability in backgrounds, ideologies, and political interests of delegates, *some positive and encouraging actions were taken:*

(1) *A World Food Council* is to be established under the United Nations to coordinate the global war on hunger. The new group will be based in Rome, sharing facilities with FAO. It will include various committees on food aid, food security, fertilizer, and research and technical assistance for agriculture.

(2) Major grain producers and governmental representatives agreed to

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establish a *grain reserve*. It remains to be seen whether this will be handled on an individual country basis or by the United Nations. The individual country approach was favored by most delegates. American farm interests at the Food Conference were insistent that such a reserve be established in a way that will not compete with the seasonal markets for farmers and livestock producers. The target for this reserve will be 10 million tons of grain to be used for emergency food aid only.

(3) The Conference approved the establishment of *an international fund for agricultural development* to help developing countries move toward self-sufficiency. The new oil-rich countries will help support this fund.

(4) *A world-wide system of food information—an early warning system to avoid food disasters—will be instituted.* At every turn, delegates were faced with inadequate information on which to make decisions. It was pointed

out repeatedly that no world-wide information system can work without free and open cooperation from Russia and China.

(5) *A systematic approach to world-wide fertilizer production and distribution will be developed.* Observers cited the fact that the Arab countries are flaring more natural gas than is now required annually for nitrogen production.

(6) *Agricultural and weather research will be intensified.* The present international centers, such as the rice institute in the Philippines and the cereal center in Mexico City, will be strengthened, and all countries will be encouraged to add support to their agricultural research efforts. (Note: At the recent annual meeting of the State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, a strong resolution was passed emphasizing the *important role the Land-Grant Colleges and State Universities can and must assume in*

fighting world hunger. Scientific manpower in these US universities represent the world's largest single source of expertise in agriculture and related fields.)

Many follow-up activities will take place as a result of the World Food Conference to keep the eyes of the world focused on the hunger problem. Perhaps increased awareness will force the affluent societies to re-examine their living habits and their wasteful use of resources. Perhaps increased awareness will alert leaders of all nations to the dangers of unlimited population growth. Perhaps increased awareness will lead to a better understanding of our planet earth, the role of mankind, and the limitations of our environment. I truly believe that an important "first step" was taken in Rome to confront the most important issue now facing the world society—the ominous threat of hunger.