Food and Nutrition Strategies in National Development

Ninth Report of the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Nutrition

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584

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This report contains the collective views of an international group of experts and does not necessarily represent the decisions or the stated policy of the World Health Organization or of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

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Ninth Report of the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Nutrition

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Ninth Session of the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Nutrition met in Rome from 11 to 20 December 1974. The special topic for discussion was food and nutrition strategies in national development. This topic was particularly timely in view of a resolution passed by the World Food Conference, held in Rome a few weeks earlier, "that all governments and the international community as a whole ... formulate and integrate concerted food and nutrition policies in their socio-economic and agricultural planning ...". Owing to the interdisciplinary nature of the problem, the Joint Expert Committee included not only nutritionists but also economists, public health specialists and development planners. The objectives of the meeting were:

(*a*) to review the scope and objectives of a national food and nutrition policy;

(*b*) to review methodologic approaches in food and nutrition planning and provide guidance on a scientifically sound yet practical method, particularly for developing countries;

(*c*) to recommend a workable mechanism for integrating nutrition into national development plans; and

(*d*) to identify areas of training and research, particularly those calling for action by FAO and WHO for the improvement of the methodology of national food and nutrition policy formulation.

This report gives the Committee's views on these difficult matters. There was not always complete agreement on all issues raised and the report perhaps poses more questions than it answers. On the other hand, the areas of consensus were substantial. The Committee concluded that much too little is known about the state of malnutrition and a need was indicated to include, in both national and international economic reports, information relevant to an understanding of the evolution and magnitude of nutritional problems.[a]

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[a] *Recommendation for a regular review of the state of malnutrition*

The Committee stated that FAO and WHO would perform an invaluable service in issuing a regular review of the state of malnutrition. This review would focus concern upon the evolution and magnitude of the problem of malnutrition and make the very important point that the "state of malnutrition" is different from, albeit related to, the "state of food and agriculture". The review should highlight the most significant causal factors. The heart of the work would be a demographic classification of "at risk" groups and a report on key indicators, such as food supply, demand and prices,

It is hoped that this report will promote a better understanding of the task of formulating food and nutrition strategies as an integral part of national development. At the least, it has laid the foundation for a continuing dialogue between nutritionists, public health administrators, economists and development specialists.

1. THE PRESENT FOOD AND NUTRITION SITUATION

The world has recently experienced a state of acute food crisis more serious and widespread than it has known since the 1940s. There have been grave food shortages, due to crop failures occurring simultaneously in a number of countries since 1972. Prices of food, fertilizers, energy and other commodities have sky-rocketed. Those developing countries which needed to import food and fertilizer experienced a tremendous strain on their balance of payments, as prices soared and reduced the availability of foreign exchange for imports of equipment and raw materials. To avoid dependence on imports and to meet the needs of growing populations, the developing countries will need to sustain high rates of increase in food production. To ensure the ability to meet possible future crises, world cereal stocks will need to be rebuilt to safer levels.

The fears and anxieties aroused during the past two years have reminded the world of the existence of a more profound and persistent problem. This is nothing less than the continuing deprivation and suffering of the hundreds of millions of people who are permanently hungry and whose capacity for living a normal life cannot be realized. The numbers of people in this condition appear to be growing alarmingly.

The declining infant mortality rates observed during the last three decades in the developing countries have frequently been cited as evidence of improvement in the nutritional situation. In fact, however, those reduced mortality rates are due mainly to other factors, notably the implementation of public health measures and maternal and child-care services. It is clearly a significant gain that families do not experience the tragic loss of children as frequently as in the past. But it needs to be recognized that, in many situations, those gains are illusory, because there is no corresponding improvement in the health of the children who survive. Indeed, as a consequence of their inadequate growth and development and high rates of morbidity, the health and well-being of many of the survivors is at an appallingly low level, with no improvement in the quality of life.

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employment, infant mortality, etc. and the implications for changes in nutrition status. Such an enterprise would be dependent on continued cooperation by countries in the supply of the required data.

1.1 Extent and nature of the malnutrition problem

According to the "Assessment of the World Food Situation – present and future", a working paper prepared for the United Nations World Food Conference held in November 1974, close to 500 million people are underfed.(*1*) Much too little is known, however, about the "state of malnutrition". There is clearly a need to give explicit attention to the evolution and magnitude of nutritional problems in both national and international economic reports, in order to focus attention on their importance. Such analyses should, of course, report on indicators such as food supply, demand, prices and trends in the overall situation but, insofar as possible, attention should be given to identifying the particular groups experiencing serious nutritional deprivation, and to analysing the causal factors. Such an enterprise would depend on co-operation by countries in supplying the required data, but indications by international agencies of the relevance and need for such information might of themselves have value in encouraging countries to obtain better and more disaggregated data essential to an adequate understanding of the nutrition situation.

Despite the lack of precise quantitative information, it is all too apparent from the evidence that is available that under- and malnutrition are extremely serious problems in the developing regions of Asia and the Far East, the Near East, Africa and Latin America. Malnutrition is an especially important, though often hidden, cause of mortality among children. There is a high incidence of infectious diseases among young children in most developing countries and the resultant high morbidity and mortality is largely due to lowered body resistance because of malnutrition. A deterioration of nutrional status is reported from many countries. The existence of malnutrition on any scale should be cause for concern. The present and projected magnitude of the problem calls for the most urgent consideration of the means for its elimination.

Protein-energy (calorie) malnutrition (PCM) is the most widespread nutrional disease among children in all of the developing countries of the world. It is not only an important cause of child mortality and morbidity, but leads also to permanent impairment of physical and, possibly, of mental growth of those who survive. An analysis of 101 community surveys conducted in 59 developing countries during the years 1961 to 1971 indicates that not less than 100 million children under 5 years of age are affected by moderate to severe PCM. The inter-relationships of various dietary factors in the etiology of PCM have been described by the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Nutrition in its Eighth Report.(*2*) It needs to be emphasized that the primary cause of PCM can be overcome only by significant changes in the socio-economic characteristics of the communities.

On a global basis, other deficiency diseases that deserve high priority action are xerophthalmia, nutrition anaemias and endemic goitre. In certain

geographical areas, notably in North Africa, rickets continues to be a serious nutritional problem, as are pellagra and zinc deficiency.

A basic feature of the present situation is the extreme inequality in the distribution of food among different socio-economic groups. Thus, in such widely dispersed countries as Brazil, India and Tunisia, it has been estimated that the 20 percent of the population with the lowest income has half the *per capita* energy intake of the top 10 percent. Moreover, within families, it is the children and women who receive the lesser share of what food is available.

Inadequate diets that result from insufficient purchasing power are a common problem among the desperately poor in the slums of the major cities. Even more widespread are diet deficiencies among the rural population, where small farmers, tenants and landless labourers are often unable to produce or to buy sufficient food to meet their nutritional requirement. Those problems are particularly pronounced in areas characterized by scarcity of arable land and also in regions where rainfall is erratic and only marginally adequate for farming in a normal year.

Most developing countries are faced with overwhelming problems of poverty, with increasing numbers displaced from the land and unable to obtain adequate employment. These problems of poverty – under- and unemployment, heavy pressure of population on the land, low productivity of agriculture, uneven distribution of income and consumption, poor environmental sanitation, illiteracy and cultural deprivation – are difficult to overcome, because of resource constraints, industrial backwardness, and a low level of application of modern science and technology. There is a growing awareness that malnutrition is largely a result of poverty arising from this complex of interrelated factors, often aggravated by glaring socio-economic inequalities. The remaining chapters of this Report analyse those complex problems and attempt to offer some practical guidelines for an approach to their solution.

2. PAST APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM

As far back as the 1930s, the League of Nations advocated that attempts to solve food and nutrition problems should be directed to their root causes. In the past, development strategies have not generally succeeded in reducing poverty, even where they have been successful in raising average incomes.

During the past twenty years, many governments have undertaken nutrition programmes to assist vulnerable groups, aimed particularly at the eradication of protein-energy malnutrition. Past efforts to improve nutrition have, however, often been piece-meal and in the nature of therapeutic approaches to manifestly chronic nutritional disorders.

More recently, supplementary feeding programmes for vulnerable groups, food fortification, nutrition rehabilitation programmes, nutrition activities through Mother and Child Health services or "under-five" clinics, nutrition education and many other interventions have had an appreciable impact in a number of countries. However, the magnitude of the problem remains enormous, because insufficient efforts have been made to alleviate the underlying causes and thus prevent the problem.

2.1 Experience with Applied Nutrition Programmes

In the late 1950s, Applied Nutrition Programmes (ANP) were initiated in many countries, with FAO, WHO and UNICEF assistance. These village-level programmes include nutrition education, efforts to improve school and community food production and preservation, and supplementary feeding for vulnerable groups. In all of these projects, there has been an attempt to mobilize action on the part of the people, to supplement government efforts, particularly at the community level.

Although the ANPs represented a first serious approach to the involvement and coordination of agriculture, health and education, many of the programmes have not come up to expectations. In part, this is because they have been formulated as isolated programmes outside the general development plans of the country; as a result, they have not had adequate financing and support and many of them could not even expand beyond the pilot stage. More importantly, however, it now seems clear that, wherever possible, such programmes should be complementary to more fundamental measures aimed at the reduction of poverty.

2.2 Modification of the food supply

A major element – perhaps *the* major element – of nutrition policies in the past has been the concern to ensure adequate supplies of nutritious foods. Planning approaches have been based on attempts to assess the levels of supplies that would be adequate to meet nutrition needs and to pursue programmes to achieve production targets derived in this way. However, it is increasingly appreciated that simply increasing food supplies does not of itself solve the problem. More especially, attempts to increase existing supplies by the amount by which the intakes of the malnourished are estimated to be, in aggregate, deficient may do little to raise the intakes of the malnourished.

With the exception of a few small countries in a favoured position to finance enlarged food imports out of increases in foreign exchange earnings, an annual rate of growth of food output of something like 3 percent is, of course, needed simply to prevent deterioration in an already precarious food situation, and this is no easy task. In the six years preceding the Green Revolution, some countries were failing to expand food production in pace with the growth of effective demand and, even with large and expanding

imports of food grains which were satisfying a substantial part of the increase in demand, there was a marked tendency for the level of food prices to rise. The Green Revolution has made a notable contribution in accelerating the rate of growth of food production and, in some countries, the trend toward growing dependence upon imported supplies has been reversed. The new seed and fertilizer technologies offer promise for continued expansion of food production at a rate sufficient to support the achievement of national goals of economic and social development.[a] However, the Green Revolution has had some undesirable effects, particularly as regards the extent to which benefits have been concentrated within particular areas and among larger farmers. This concentration of resources within a large-scale and capital-intensive sub-sector has meant that the spread of improved income-earning opportunities has been restricted and some sectors of the population have been adversely affected by it. However the trend toward growing dependence upon imported supplies was reversed in a number of countries and the new seed and fertilizer technologies offer promise for continued expansion of food production at a rate sufficient to support the achievement of national goals of economic and social development.[a]

What is now seen to be of prime importance is that all should have the means to produce or to purchase their food requirements. For those who produce food for their own existence, programmes may be needed which aim at raising their productivity. To some extent, this must also aim at encouraging the use of improved farm inputs and thus also at encouraging them to produce a surplus for sale. For those who purchase their food, it is important that food prices are not so high as to make subsistence beyond their means. Thus, the objective of food supply planning must not be to achieve requirements targets, but, rather, to meet demand at desired price levels.

2.3 Present trends

The 1970s were ushered in with a growing concern for the limited success of nutrition programmes in many countries. There was also increased awareness that malnutrition, although a health problem, affects and is affected by all efforts to promote national development. Economists and policy-makers started to look afresh at the persistent and widespread

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[a] Unfortunately, the rate of progress has faltered during the past three years, as a result of unfavourable weather conditions and the abrupt shift from a situation of abundant and cheap fertilizers to a world-wide shortage and sharply increased prices. There has been a common tendency to attribute the sharp rise in fertilizer prices to the even sharper rise in petroleum prices. However, because of the dominant and growing importance of natural gas as a feedstock for nitrogen fertilizers and widespread availability at low opportunity cost, there is a great potential for relatively low-cost expansion of nitrogen fertilizers, which account for some 60 percent of total fertilizer consumption in the developing countries.