ATTACKING THE MALNUTRITION PROBLEM

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THE ROOT CAUSES

Lurking behind this conference's all encompassing theme of Food, Society, and Man is the stark reality of over 500 million human beings suffering from the erosive effects of malnutrition. It is our collective responsibility as concerned social scientists to explore means of alleviating the malnutrition problem. However, before examining solutions one should diagnose the causal factors underlying the problem.

POVERTY

Fundamentally malnutrition is a problem of poverty; its roots are economic. The biological need to consume more is clear; the desire to eat more is present; but the money to buy the additional food is absent. It is a problem of insufficient effective demand: people are too poor to eat more. Malnutrition is simply a reflection of inequitable income distribution. World malnutrition is not basically a result of producing too little food; rather it stems from the skewed distribution pattern of the food produced. The rich eat more. This is true among nations as well as within nations. The average world daily per capita calorie intake was 2,386, only slightly below the recommended daily allowance of 2,450. However, the average is deceiving: the more developed nations consumed on the average 3,043 calories per capita per day while the less developed consumed only 2,097.
ATTACKING THE MALNUTRITION PROBLEM

The national averages cloak similar skewing of food distribution within each country. For example, Brazil shows an average intake of 2,541, which exceeds the recommended allowance of 2,450. When one examines intakes by economic strata within Brazil, a strikingly different picture emerges, 43.5% of the population is calorie deficient.

Taking the income factor into account is critical in estimating the true magnitude of the global malnutrition problem. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimated that as of 1970, 57 out of 97 developing countries had deficits of food energy supplies and that 462 million people were malnourished. This means that one out of every six people in the world is undernourished. If one takes cognizance of the uneven income distribution and skewed food consumption, the figures almost double. Reutlinger and Selowsky, using extrapolated income distribution data for 28 countries and estimated calorie-income elasticity functions, calculated that 670 million people have calorie deficits greater than 200 calories per day and another 447 million have daily deficits of less than 200 calories. These figures reveal that approximately one billion people - three quarters of the population in developing countries - are calorie deficient. The problem is accentuated by the fact that a large proportion of these people are also protein deficient.

It is clear that we are dealing with a major world affliction and that malnutrition is inextricably entwined with the problems of poverty and insufficient effective demand. However, this is not to say that problems do not exist on the food production and supply side.

FOOD SUPPLY AND POPULATION GROWTH

Over the past decades total world food production has shown an upward trend, rising from an index of 77 in 1945 to 133 in 1973 (1963 = 100). Total output increased at approximately the same rate in both the developed and developing nations. In spite of these production gains the rapid growth in world population has put us on a treadmill; we have made only miniscule progress in raising per capita food availability. Global population is growing at