The year 1976 marked a major juncture in FAO’s history with the election of a new director-general, Edouard Saouma, a Maronite Christian from the Lebanon with a distinctly different personality, and sharply different views, from his predecessor. An agricultural engineer, who had been director-general of Lebanon’s National Agricultural Research Institute and Minister of Agriculture, Saouma joined FAO in 1962, fourteen years before becoming executive head of the organization, first as regional representative for Southwest Asia in New Delhi, India (1962–65), and then for ten years as director of FAO’s Land and Water Development Division in Rome (1965–75). He was to be elected three consecutive times (in 1975, 1981 and 1987) and to serve for eighteen years as FAO’s director-general. Saouma immediately displayed a very different personality and character from that of his amiable and co-operative predecessor (Murray, 1989). His style of leadership was ‘perceived by many as self-perpetuating by whatever means, preoccupied with personal prestige, and egocentric toward authority’ (Abbott, 1992, p. ix). He established an unrivalled position, creating enemies in donor countries and support in the developing world, that ensured his election as director-general on three occasions (Pilon, 1988).

Saouma witnessed what he, and others in FAO, regarded as misguided leadership by his predecessor, and humiliation for his organization, at the 1974 World Food Conference (Saouma, 1993). Boerma completed the Indicative World Plan for Agricultural Developed that had been begun by B. R. Sen in 1969. It estimated that to meet the world’s food requirements, production in the developing countries would need to increase by 4 per cent a year. Boerma shared the optimistic view of many analysts that hunger was liable to threaten only a fairly limited number of people in the future. Technical progress and the ‘green revolution’ would make it possible to cover all needs and avoid any negative effects on the environment and social fabric. Emphasis was therefore placed on research and the dissemination of new technologies, and on consolidating FAO’s work in technical studies and surveys.

In Saouma’s view, priority was accorded to work, such as master plans and econometric studies, which, however sound and well-documented, ‘were liable to be of more use to university researchers than to practitioners’. In the meantime, FAO’s regional offices gradually lost their role as an effective FAO presence in
the developing world. They tended to conduct their own autonomous policy, with the result that, in Saouma’s view: ‘Instead of decentralization we now have feudalism’. At the World Food Conference, Saouma watched as, from a position of weakness, ‘the FAO Secretariat was unable to oppose the establishment of bodies whose mandate impinged on its own. In the face of this, my predecessor preferred compromise to confrontation’. He noted that Boerma had even offered to place premises at FAO headquarters at the disposal of the World Food Council free of charge, and entered a $240,000 subsidy in favour of the WFC in his draft budget for 1976–77.

Saouma soon revealed his hand. The FAO Conference had adopted the programme of work and budget prepared by Boerma for the 1976–77 biennium shortly before Saouma took office. As Saouma described it, ‘anxious to restore to FAO the importance it was in danger of losing, following the World Food Conference’, Boerma had requested a ‘massive increase’ in FAO’s budget, which he planned to allocate to strengthen FAO’s regional offices, creating over 500 posts (some 300 at FAO headquarters), and assigning additional resources to studies, publications, meetings and travel. Saouma describes how ‘a careful reading of the Constitution gave me inspiration’. His view was that the text ‘clearly expresses the primacy of the Member Nations’. FAO ‘before anything else’ was a place where they could meet, enter into dialogue, and agree on joint action, ‘with the assistance of the body of specialists they have established to help them’. It also called for FAO to be aware of the needs of each country, for which ‘FAO should be by their side, in their homeland, and not only exercising vigilance from far away in Rome’.

With this vision of what his organization stood for, Saouma called for an extraordinary session on FAO’s Council in July 1976 to amend Boerma’s FAO budget for 1976–77 and begin to repair the damage that he considered his predecessor had done. He reduced the number of proposed new posts by 330, dispensed with 155 proposed meetings, and reduced the number of FAO publications and documents. These amendments resulted in savings of over $20 million out of a total budget of $167 million. Saouma allocated these newly released resources mainly in three areas. First, he strengthened FAO’s Investment Centre, which worked in conjunction with the World Bank, regional banks and other financial sources to identify, design and appraise agricultural investment project, which some saw as a counterweight to the newly established International Fund for Agricultural Development. Second, he set up a Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) to respond quickly to the requests of countries in case of need in addition to funds provided by UNDP and other donors. This innovation was the one to which Saouma attached the greatest value. But, as he recognized, it was also the most controversial. Opponents accused him of creating a ‘slush fund’ for his own personal use to curry favour in developing countries. The third innovation was hardly less controversial. He established 78 FAO country offices with FAO country representatives serving some 106 developing countries. With these three components, Saouma planned ‘to give FAO new impetus and a new dimension’, and, some would add, to give him political control. They were also to put him on