

NUTRITION AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Significance and Potential for the Tropics

Edited by

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**Table II. Fiscal Cost of a General Price Subsidy
Required to Induce a 20% Increase in
Cereal Consumption in the Urban Area
(as a Fraction of GNP of the Country)^a**

Per caput income of the country (in dollars)	World price of cereals (per ton)	
	\$200	\$300
100	5.4%	7.1%
300	1.8%	2.5%

^aSee reference 1.

The Availability of Programs under Increases in the Fiscal Budget

Several developing countries are undertaking changes in their tax structures that would yield substantially higher government revenues. In other countries these increases are sometimes a short-run phenomenon due to changes in the prices of their main exports. Has the nutrition sector always been ready to take advantage of some of these increases in government funds? Do nutritionists always have available a package of realistic programs—in terms of the financing required—that can be quickly submitted to the overall planner under such circumstances? Agility in project identification is crucial if the nutrition sector wants to be successful in competing for government financing under increases in the size of the fiscal budget.

Reference

1. Reutlinger, S., and Selowsky, M., 1975, *Undernutrition and Poverty: Magnitude and Target Group Oriented Policies*, Working Paper No. 202, World Bank. Revised version, January, 1976.

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Field and Levinson stressed that political commitment from government is necessary in order to implement nutrition programs. I have two comments that relate to proposed actions to bring about such commitments.

The first has to do with the alternative of "political survival," one of the proposed strategies to induce government action in the nutrition area. This approach may be purely opportunistic and may lead to actions exclusively oriented to mask the real problem and to dilute the pressure for progressive

social and economic change in the developing countries. Would it not be better to work actively to change the social structures that are the main factors in the causal complex of poverty and malnutrition?

The three alternatives, or options, proposed by the authors to produce such a political commitment from governments are based on the assumption that social and political structures will remain unchanged in the less developed countries. Given the changes that have already occurred in them during the last 20 years, this basic assumption does not necessarily hold. My inclination would be to take advantage of the lessons from recent history in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in order to develop a set of alternative approaches that would not only consider that present social structures must change, but would also be specifically oriented to produce these changes.

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The concern of Levinson and Field for children of developing countries is appreciated. It is, however, difficult to agree with their proposals for subsidized feeding programs as a short- and long-term measure, and for inclusion of such provisions in bilateral and international assistance. Developing countries face hard reality with regard to policy choices, and such proposals cannot be considered in isolation. It is well known that the developing countries' share of world income is only about 16%, while they have 71% of the world population. It would, therefore, be very difficult to give priority to any subsidized or charity feeding program over other important development activities that would have impact on the overall well-being of the people. Only those nutrition programs can receive priority that can be geared to economic development activities that would result in improved food supplies, provision of more employment, and greater self-sufficiency. Such programs must be clearly identified so that they receive priority in allocation of resources. The countries generally know best how to allocate their own resources as well as those received under bilateral and international assistance. It is not proper for aid-giving agencies to decide for a country how it should allocate priorities and resources except, perhaps, under emergency conditions.