

CURRENT SCIENCE

Vol. XII]

AUGUST 1943

[No. 8

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THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

THE Conference sat in Hot Springs, Virginia, U.S.A., from May 18th to June 4th, 1943, and was attended by the delegates of forty-four nations. The Chairman of the delegation from India was Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai, Agent-General for India in the United States; the other members were Sir Pheroze Kharegat, Vice-Chairman, Imperial Council of Agricultural Research, Sir David Meek, Trade Commissioner, London, Mr. H. S. Malik, Trade Commissioner, New York, and the writer of this article.

THE AGENDA

By its terms of reference, the Conference was mainly concerned with post-war problems and with general principles. It was exploratory, fact-finding and technical rather than political. At the outset the objectives of the Conference were not fully understood by the American press and there was a general impression that immediate and urgent food problems arising out of the war were the main subject for discussion. The question of food supplies to meet the needs of occupied countries after their liberation is, however, being dealt with by another United Nations organisation directly concerned with relief. The supply of food under Lease-Lend is also a separate question. The Food Conference was essentially an attempt to consider basic problems of nutrition, food and agriculture in a world freed from aggression and ready to set out once more on the path of progress.

The main items on the agenda were as follows:—

- (1) Consumption levels and requirements:
 - (a) Food.
 - (b) Other essential agricultural products.

- (2) Expansion of production and adaptation to consumption needs.
- (3) Facilitation and improvement of distribution.
- (4) Recommendations for continuing and carrying forward the work of the Conference.

CONSUMPTION

The first task was to study existing consumption levels in various parts of the world and to ascertain how far these conform to a reasonable standard of living. It was from the start recognised that in the great majority of countries the consumption of food is inadequate in the sense that the diets of large sections of the population fall below the standards recommended by nutrition workers. As the Conference Report puts it: "Each country is faced with problems of under-consumption and malnutrition, problems which differ in severity in different regions but which, in general, are everywhere the same." From this conception it follows that any accumulations of unmarketable food products which have occurred in the past were not real "surpluses" in relation to world needs; they were in fact the result of mal-distribution and went hand in hand with gross under-consumption. "There has never been", the Conference declared, "enough food for the health of all people. This is justified neither by ignorance nor by the harshness of nature".

More food, then, is needed, and it can be produced. The Conference made a detailed study of measures for increasing agricultural production and for organising it on a world basis. It considered the relation of national and international economic policies to agricultural problems with special reference to the

distribution of agricultural products. The question of buffer stocks and commodity arrangements to ensure equitable prices and adequate supplies was discussed. It would be impossible, within the scope of this article, to give even a brief resumé of the findings and recommendations on questions of this nature and numerous other subjects of equal importance. Those interested should study the report itself, a document of some 61 pages. Here it is proposed to consider in greater detail the sections of the report which deal specifically with problems of nutrition.

THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND NUTRITION

In this particular sphere the Food Conference was building on foundations already laid by the League of Nations. It will be recalled that the League Assembly in 1935 was impressed by the slogan "Marry health and agriculture". From that year until the outbreak of the war the League carried out valuable work on nutrition on an international scale. The Final Report of the Mixed Committee of the League of Nations on "The Relation of Nutrition to Health, Agriculture and Economic Policy" is an admirable document including many ideas which influenced the United Nations Food Conference. The League's work was, however, largely confined to Europe, North America and the British Dominions. A beginning was made to develop work in the East at the Bandoeng Conference in 1937, but the war intervened before much progress could be made. The Conference had at its disposal the Report "Nutrition in the Colonial Empire", which contains much detailed information about the extent of malnutrition in various parts of the world, notably tropical Africa. Reports on nutrition in China, India, the Netherlands East Indies, the Philippines, Egypt, Mexico and various South American countries were presented by delegates. The Conference was, therefore, in a position to make a wider survey than had been possible to the League. It had plenty of data on which to base its conclusion that "in the world as a whole, the picture is one of world-wide under-consumption, leading to malnutrition and its attendant evils".

FOOD AND HEALTH

Strong statements were made on the subject of nutrition and health. "Malnutrition ... is the close and constant companion of poverty, both national and individual. Poverty almost invariably means a poor and insufficient diet and the latter is the main cause of the disadvantage of the poor in respect of health, so clearly shown by statistics of disease and mortality". It was suggested that the high infant and childhood mortality in many countries, including India, has its roots in malnutrition. Diet deficiency reduces resistance to various kinds of disease, e.g., tuberculosis, and makes convalescence more difficult and prolonged. "There is a close relation between such diseases as hookworm and malaria and malnutrition. In the first place, the economic efficiency of a population in which they are rife is reduced and with it their capacity to produce or purchase an adequate supply of

food. Secondly, malnutrition decreases the power of the individual to carry the burden of blood-destroying diseases and impedes his recovery when the burden is decreased or removed by medical treatment. A vicious circle is thus created."

Reference was made to the widespread existence of food deficiency diseases which cause much unnecessary suffering since they are preventable but not prevented. The Conference recommended that a vigorous attack on deficiency diseases should be undertaken. The first step, in many countries, is to ascertain the prevalence of such diseases. The recommendations on this subject are of interest and importance to public health authorities in India.

"On the positive side, there is much evidence of the general improvement of health and physique which can be produced by the improvement of diets and there are also striking examples of the prevention of food deficiency diseases by appropriate measures. Successes already achieved provide abundant hope for the future, but what has already been done is little in comparison with the tasks that lie ahead. ... Good food means good health. It enhances the capacity of human beings to contribute to civilisation and progress and adds to human happiness."

INTERMEDIATE OBJECTIVES

The goal of "a vastly different world fed in full accordance with the nutritional requirements of its population" is a remote one. Visions of a distant and happy future are pleasing, but they must not obscure our view of immediate reality. Various standards of adequate nutrition have been approved by nutrition workers; these recommend the amounts of nutrients or food constituents necessary to ensure for human beings a high level of health and vitality, in so far as this can be ensured by diet. One of these—that put forward by the National Research Council, U.S.A., in 1943—is quoted in the Conference Report and translated from terms of calories, proteins, vitamins, etc., into foods *per capita* per year. The National Research Council standard means essentially a rich and varied diet containing an abundance of milk, meat, eggs, vegetables and fruits and a relatively low proportion of cereals—it is a standard closely resembling that drawn up in 1936 by the Technical Commission on Nutrition of the League of Nations. Now if such a standard be adopted as the immediate goal in a poor and ill-fed country, the gulf between the standard and the existing level of diet is so great that the value of the standard as a guide to national food, agricultural and economic policy is lost. It becomes necessary, therefore, to set up more easily attainable goals for purposes of practical nutrition work. Recommendations for improvement must be so adjusted as to raise the existing level of diets to a degree which is not beyond the bounds of practical possibility and which, at all events, makes it less remote from the "optimum" standard. "With the continued and expanding application of science to the development of the world's food resources, local intermediate goals can be gradually raised in the direction of the ultimate objective."

The first step, in planning nutritional policies, is to estimate the average consumption of the various foods by the population concerned, preferably on a *per capita* basis. The rough data about food intake so obtained should be checked by family diet surveys. The state of nutrition of the population should be investigated by medical and public health workers. In this way the defects in the national diet will be made manifest. The adjustment of agricultural and economic policy to correct the defects follows. When the existing level of diet is a low one, an "intermediate objective" as defined above must be aimed at. Often the first necessity is *enough* food, without much regard for variety and quality. If, however, enough food can be made available, and there is at the same time some degree of variety, qualitative defects in the diet, e.g., in intake of protein, vitamins, etc., will be very considerably reduced.

Typical Eastern and tropical diets are largely composed of vegetable foods and do not contain milk, meat and eggs except in small or negligible quantities. The increased production of the latter may present a problem of formidable difficulty, but there are other foods such as pulses, leafy vegetables, fish and fruit, which may already be familiar and valuable ingredients in the diet. The production of these should materially and rapidly be increased. Food policy should not run counter to the habits and tastes of the population. There are many condiments and beverages consumed by various peoples which are not in themselves of high nutritive value but which may be of importance in that they increase the attractiveness of monotonous diets. Various traditional methods of preparing food may have more virtue than modern nutrition workers suspect. "Nutritional and agricultural policies which ignore traditional methods of 'enlivening' monotonous diets may defeat their own ends. Such methods should usually be regarded with respect. . . . The aim of those whose task it is to secure the improvement of nutrition should be to frame their policies so that they are in tune with and can become part of the social tradition."

The Conference recommended that special attention should be given to improving the diet of "vulnerable" groups, e.g., infants, children, and expectant and nursing mothers. It stressed the importance of education. Various other problems, such as the fraudulent advertising of food preparations and the place of synthetic vitamins in nutrition policy, were also briefly considered.

NATIONAL NUTRITION ORGANISATIONS

One of the formal recommendations was concerned with the establishment in each country of nutrition committees or organisations which should include authorities on health, nutrition, economics and agriculture, together with administrators and consumers' representatives. In making this recommendation the Conference followed the lead of the League of Nations, which before the war had succeeded in bringing into being national nutrition committees in a number of countries. Some of

these did sound and useful work. It was further advocated that the national committees should exchange information and experience and that representatives of the committees should meet regularly "to exchange views and to make proposals for any national and international action necessary to facilitate the progress of their work". It will be one of the tasks of the permanent organisation created by the Conference to arrange such meetings and in general to act as a link between national nutrition committees.

THE IMMEDIATE POST-WAR PERIOD

After the war the world will be faced with a general shortage of food, accompanied by and interrelated with shortage of transport, including shipping, and of fertilisers, seeds, agricultural machinery and farming implements. The magnitude of the food shortage will depend on the course of the war and the size of harvests. It is clear that the shortage of animal products will be more serious than that of grain and other vegetable products. In occupied Europe there has been widespread destruction of livestock and it must take some years to restore dairy herds and other food-producing animals. During this period emphasis must be laid on the production of energy-producing foods. This will mean, at any rate, in certain countries, an increase in the acreage under crops for direct human consumption and a delay in the rebuilding of depleted livestock herds—essential though this rebuilding will ultimately be. There must, therefore, be an interval before agriculture can be adjusted so as to ensure the feeding of populations in accordance with the principles of nutrition. During the difficult period of food shortage after the war the necessity of developing long-term agricultural policies designed to raise standards of diet and health must not be overlooked and forgotten.

THE CREATION OF A NEW INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION

One concrete result of the Conference will be the establishment of an international "Food and Agriculture Organisation", which will presumably replace the existing International Institute of Agriculture in Rome, never a very active or successful institution. The new organisation cannot come into being until after the war; meanwhile an "Interim Commission", meeting in Washington, will plan its duties and functions. Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai has been appointed Chairman. The main task of the permanent organisation will be to implement the recommendations of the Conference, some thirty in number. Ultimately the organisation must play a prominent part in directing world policy in the fields of nutrition and agriculture. Its relation to other international organisations (e.g., an international health organisation) which will presumably come into being after the war is a question of great importance requiring careful consideration by the Interim Commission.

RESULTS OF THE CONFERENCE

What exactly did the Food Conference achieve, apart from the creation of a new

international organisation? On the political side, the Conference was of considerable significance. It was the first United Nations Conference dealing with the basic problems of the post-war world. The facts that it was convened by the United States, held on American soil and attended by a delegation from Russia were duly noted by political commentators as indicating the intention of these countries to collaborate with other countries in the international sphere after the war.

The report will be found disappointing by those who expected dramatic results in the shape of trade agreements and commodity arrangements and still more disappointing by those who hoped that immediate steps would be taken at Hot Springs to relieve the present food situation in India. It deals largely with principles and not with the specific problems of any particular country. It is concerned with the future and not with the present. It is in the main a sober and technical document, varying in its subject-matter from dietary standards and deficiency diseases to co-operative movements, agricultural credit and the conservation of water resources. Various aspects of the problem of increasing the production and improving the distribution of food and other commodities were carefully considered and the principles which should guide national and international action were defined. These must carry weight when the war has been won and the opportunity arises for reconstructing world economy on a sound basis. The responsibility of individual governments in raising the nutritional standards of their peoples by following appropriate agricultural and economic policies is stressed throughout the Report. At the same time, there is equally strong emphasis on collective responsibility and international collaboration. Governments which accept the Conference Declaration accept "the obligation to their respective peoples and to one another, henceforth to collaborate in raising levels of nutrition and standards of living of their peoples and to report to one another on the progress achieved".

In the author's opinion, perhaps the main significance of the Conference, apart from the political side, lies in the *attitude of mind* which inspired its deliberations and findings. The extent of poverty and under-consumption throughout the world was fully recognised and the magnitude of the problems to be faced was not minimised. The war has reduced the world's food supply, affected consumption in almost every country, and led to scarcity and famine in countries occupied by the enemy. Nevertheless the whole tone of the report is one of hope in the scientific and orderly development of the world's food resources for the benefit of its population. Scientific research has defined the food requirements of human beings and has shown that most people in the world are under-fed or badly fed. On the other hand, the Report says in effect, the application of science makes abundance of food for all possible, and the economic and political obstacles which impede the enormous potential expansion of production can in the long run be overcome by resolute and concerted action. It is these facts and possibilities which should

guide and inspire governmental action, both national and international, and not the political, economic and financial expediencies of the moment. Such ideas are not new; they are familiar enough as the pious reflections of individual writers. What is new is their recognition by a conference of forty-four nations. It is the way that people, and particularly those in authority, *think* about such matters that ultimately decides how the life of the world shall be organised. The battle of the future must be fought out in the realm of thought. It is surely significant that at the first international conference dealing with the world after the war, an essentially scientific approach to the fundamental problem of "freedom from want" was adopted.

In conclusion, some passages from the speech made by President Roosevelt to the delegates after the meeting may be quoted:

"You have been dealing with agriculture, the most basic of all human activities, and with food, the most basic of all human needs. Twice as many people are employed in work on food and agriculture as in work in all other fields combined. And all people have, in the literal sense of the word, a vital interest in food. That a child or adult should get the nourishment necessary for full health is too important a thing to be left to mere chance. You have recognised that society must accept this responsibility. As you stated in your declaration, 'The primary responsibility lies with each nation for seeing that its own people have the food needed for health and life. Steps to this end are for national determination. But each nation can fully achieve its goal only if all work together'. On behalf of the United States I accept this declaration.

"..... You have examined the needs of all countries for food and other agricultural products, both as they will exist in the short-run period of recovery from the devastation of war, and as they will exist over the longer run, when our efforts can be fully devoted to expanding the production of food so that it will be adequate for health the world over. You have surveyed with courage and with realism the magnitude of these problems and have reached unanimous agreement that they can, and must—and will—be solved.

* * *

"..... You have pooled our knowledge of the means of expanding our output, of increasing our agricultural efficiency, and of adjusting agricultural production to consumption needs. In the fields of both production and consumption you have recognized the need for better utilization of the knowledge we now have and for extending still further the boundaries of our knowledge through education and research.

* * *

"... A sound world agricultural programme will depend upon world political security while that security will in turn be greatly strengthened if each country can be assured of the food it needs. Freedom from want and freedom from fear go hand in hand."

W. R. AYKROYD.

August 1943,
Coonoor, S. India.