Food to join shortage items?

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"Even as late as the 1930's or early 1940's, there was no popu- lation explosion problem in the developing countries. It was the importation of technology to reduce the death rate that caused the explosive growth."

Urban noted that past family planning efforts, whether they have been based on mere physical coercion, in the mass media, or even cash incentives, have been largely unsuccessful. Scrimshaw explained, "Family planning programs will have had little effect as long as there is a high death rate." Per- sons in the developing countries are often not married, so there are large families, and it seems that the public will be supported in their old age.

Urban then said, "The ques- tion, however, is whether population growth will be controlled, but how it will be con- trolling. It will now be that massive starvation will be the means."

To prevent such a situation, Urban suggested a huge increase in money spent on family planning programs, more research on contraceptive technology, and improvements in the man- age-ment of efforts to limit popula- tion growth. He added that, if the US is called upon to make large transfers of food to the developing nations, then "it might be self-defeating to make these transfers without requiring as a condition that more effort be devoted to birth control pro- grams."

More serious than energy

Scrimshaw noted that "the consequences of a food shortage are more serious than those of an energy shortage." In addition to the problem of outright starva- tion, there are the secondary impacts of malnutrition.

Poor nutrition, said Scrimshaw, "means a poor start to life. Malnutrition among young children now means the mental and physical impairment of the generation upon whom the development of nations must depend in the 1990's."

"When 80% of the income of people in developing countries is spent on food, what does that mean when the price of food doubles?" Scrimshaw asked.

Scrimshaw commented that there is a cyclical drought in North America every 20 years. There was a drought in the 1930's and the "dust bowl" drought in the 1930's. "With each of the world dependent upon North America for food," Scrimshaw continued, "what is going to happen when that drought occurs?"

Brown noted that the world's main "cushion" against a disas- ter in food was the US grain stockpiles and the idle US cropland. "The US has virtually no stockpile left," he said, "and most of the US reserves of idle cropland were put into use ei- ther by necessity or by choice."

Before 1950, most of the increase in food production came from the use of new land, according to Brown. "Now, however, most good land is al- ready in production, and in- creases in food output must come from more intensive use of the existing cropland."

Brown said that much of the land in other countries may soon be rendered useless for agricul- tural purposes. In Africa, "the Sahara is spreading southwest, causing massive hunger." In Asia, "the persisive deforma- tion of the Indian subcontinent will lead to serious problems in food control." Brown said that more needed to be done to "develop the unrealized poten- tial of cropland in developing countries."

The energy crisis has also aggravated the food problem. In addition to the problem of fuel shortages, said Brown, "fertilizer production has been significant- ly reduced, and the developing countries can't get the fertilizer they need. Because of this, their crop harvest this year will proba- bly be less than it was last year, regardless of the weather." Natu- ral gas is a main raw material used in the production of nitro- gen fertilizers.

Another problem, Brown noted, was the recent deep in the catch of fish from the oceans. "Overfishing has been a mate cause of the collapse of the anchovy fishing off the coast of South America," Brown re- marked. Fish near the anchovy catch had been one of the main sources of animal food. There are also problems with another main animal food, soy- bean. "We have not been able to increase the yield per acre very much," said Brown. Brown suggested that advances in this area could be made if the US which has advanced agricultural technology, and China, which has a great variety of soybean strains, pooled their resources.

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