

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE NUTRITION SOCIETY

*A discussion was held in the Morris Lecture Theatre, Robin Brook Centre, St Bartholomew's Hospital, West Smithfield, London on 20 May 1986 and formed part of the Four Hundred and Twenty-sixth Scientific Meeting of the Nutrition Society*

### DISCUSSION ON 'FAMINE'

#### INTRODUCTORY PAPERS

##### Introductory remarks

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The reason for holding this discussion meeting is to fulfil the wish of members, as shown by the questionnaire (Ashwell & Cole, 1986), that the Nutrition Society should involve itself more closely in subjects of current interest. That being so, it seemed impossible to ignore the recent famine in Africa. Moreover, in response to the questionnaire circulated by Dr O'Hara May at the XIIIth International Congress of Nutrition in Brighton, under the heading *The Nutritionists' View of Nutrition*, an overwhelming majority of the respondents believe that nutritionists 'could reasonably be expected to be more active in combating malnutrition' (J. O'Hara May, personal communication).

Most people would agree that the underlying cause of malnutrition in the Third World is poverty. Poverty can only be eliminated by political and economic changes. At the XIIth International Congress of Nutrition in San Diego, Mr Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF, exhorted us to exert political will. I did not much like that: Mr Grant was addressing a professional audience, and I am inclined to separate my activities as a professional in nutrition from my activities as a citizen. Perhaps, though, that is too simplistic an attitude. Dr Gopalan, at the World Health Assembly some years ago, said that the health sector should act as the conscience of politicians, constantly confronting them with the human problems that need to be solved. Therefore it is obviously our duty to ensure, as far as we can, that our professional knowledge has the greatest possible impact. That takes one very close to politics.

We are concerned here not so much with emergency relief as with long-term development aimed at preventing famines. This is certainly not an easy task. Here

are two opinions on what we may expect from development aid, taken from the same issue of the United Nations University's *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*: 'It is realistic to contemplate the elimination of hunger and malnutrition if and when governments adopt social, economic, agricultural, educational and health policies that have enabled countries with a wide range of political systems to achieve this goal in a surprisingly short time. . . . The encouragement and assistance that international, bilateral and voluntary agencies can provide will make a critical difference' (Scrimshaw, 1985). It is noteworthy that Scrimshaw (1985) does not include nutritional policies in his list. In contrast: 'On the use of external bilateral and multilateral instruments to build a global economic order of significantly greater equity (within as well as among countries) I am rather pessimistic, at least as far into the next 15 to 20 years as I can see' (Joseph, 1985).

Dr Keith Griffin, a development economist, in giving evidence on the African famine to the House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, said: 'Sub-Saharan Africa is the region which has received the largest amount of aid in relation to its GNP and it is also the region with the worst performance extending over 25 years' (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 1985; Waterlow, 1986a). I suppose that there are three factors determining whether development aid will be successful: the political and social structure of the country concerned; the resources that are made available to it; and the appropriateness of the technical interventions. On the first I again quote Dr Griffin, who emphasized that if local government policies are not oriented towards reducing poverty, there is very little that aid agencies can do alone. 'When the state oppresses the impoverished and malnourished, the *status quo* is strengthened by the intervention of the West' (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 1985). It is interesting that left-wing and right-wing economists seem to be agreed on this point, that aid politicizes the development process.

On the question of the resources that are put into development aid, I do not myself think that money is the limiting factor. In 1984 the British government, or rather we as taxpayers, spent approximately £230 million on aid to Africa (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 1985). Supposing that the taxpayers were prepared to double this amount, I have doubts about whether it could be spent effectively. When I worked as Nutrition Adviser to the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), the official policy was that laid down by Dame Judith Hart, of Aid to the Poorest. As far as I know it is still the policy. I learnt from my experience at ODA how hard it is to apply this policy, however hard we try, at least within the framework of arrangements between governments. Non-governmental agencies are often better able to reach the poor.

That brings me to the third component: do we as professionals have enough knowledge, enough experience and the right policies for applying that knowledge and experience? What have we to propose? That is what this meeting is about. I myself believe that we do need more knowledge, and that although action cannot wait, there are many problems on which continuing research is essential (Waterlow, 1981, 1986b). I believe also that in the long-run, the problems of the

Third World countries will only be solved by the people of those countries. Therefore our best contribution is to help to develop the capacity of people and institutions in developing countries.

The contributors at the discussion meeting represent quite a wide spectrum: Save the Children Fund, the Tropical Schools of London and Liverpool, the Institute of Development Studies and the Rowett Research Institute. If this had been a full Nutrition Society symposium we would certainly have invited speakers from Africa. Instead, it is an informal domestic discussion, for exchange of ideas and opinions among ourselves.

#### REFERENCES

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