No World Food Problem

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"It is not a question of a country or region having to produce more food to feed hungry citizens. For there is no world food shortage; we are dealing with a distributional problem, which could be solved to everyone's satisfaction through the ancient practice of exchange."

THERE is no world food problem. Repeat: there is no world food problem.

Well, that would seem a controversial statement to most people. After all, don't we all have imprinted on our minds the skeleton frame of the Oxfam boy—staring at us from the newspaper adverts through eyeballs sunken into deep cavities?

Yet, to drive home the point: there is no world food problem.

Today, we produce more than the world's population needs. The scope for increasing the yields from land already under cultivation is enormous, to say nothing of the fact that under half of the potentially arable land is actually being used. Furthermore, many millions of acres have been deliberately taken out of production by Western governments, who pay subsidies to farmers to keep land idle (over 40m. hectares in 1970).

Now we come to the other side of the picture. Well over 460 million people suffer from malnutrition. Millions of children are dying—and those who survive will endure miserable existences in bodies tortured by stunted growth.

This human tragedy—of progress with poverty—is summarised in the table, collated from statistics published in yet another review of the evidence.*

WORLD ARABLE LAND (hectares, millions)		
Under cultivation		1,406
Potentially arable		3,190
	POPULATION GROWTH	FOOD OUTPUT GROWTH
	(per cent per annum)	
1952/62	2.0	3.1
1962/72	1.9	2.7
	SUBSIDISED IDLE LAND	MALNUTRITION CASES
1970	40m hectares	
1973/4		460m-plus

So we can take it that the problem is not a technical one—of producing enough food for all—but a distributional one: making sure that those who need it, get it. People starve simply because they do not have the income to buy what they need. The solution, then, has to be sought not in the scientist's laboratory but in the moralist's conscience. And since it is a characteristic of being human that we should have a conscience which can be exercised morally, that means we *all* have an obligation to search for answers to the terrible problems facing large groups of people on earth.

Sinha's attempt at formulating a strategy for rescuing the suffering fails, for the same reason that so many other well-intentioned commentators fail: proposals are advanced without the aid of a coherent theory which combines both moral concepts and an effective action strategy.

It is not enough to say that income inequality is "unjust": why is it? What degree of inequality is acceptable? Even in Red China, on the communes —which are deeply imbued with egalitarian values— the peasants now receive differential rewards for harder and/or more creative work: Sinha records that fact. The pseudo-moralising works against the interests of those who need help: unless our anger and moral virtues are fitted into a system which both (a) stimulates the necessary action, and (b) gets the right results, nothing is accomplished except an uninterrupted night's sleep.

Gearing up a country to wipe out poverty necessitates development in two sectors: the agrarian and the "modern" industrial. If farmland is being used inefficiently, that becomes a target. But in "overpopulated" areas like Asia, where there is little virgin land left to provide new jobs, extra stress has to be placed on the employment-creating prospects of new industries.

Sinha argues that "in the last resort it is farming (and therefore land) which has to bear the main burden of an increasing population and labour force." If the agricultural sectors of the Third World countries are imperfect, what are the alternatives. He discusses only two:

(1) Redistribution of land to peasants, who become land-owning proprietors.

(2) Collective farms modelled on the Chinese communes.

This is a false prospectus, and enables Sinha to stress the alleged virtues of the second strategy as against the first.

Redistributing land to peasant proprietors in Asia, he says, would create tiny non-viable holdings. Experience, he records, has shown that such a strategy has not wiped out poverty in rural Mexico; and it

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has done little for those who remain landless labourers.

All of which is true. For in most countries, it would be impossible to provide everyone with land which was a viable economic unit. But even if it were possible, and some people chose not to work on the land, why should they give up their direct interest in their community's natural resources? Absent from Sinha's account is consideration of why it is wrong to own large tracts of land ("socially unjust", he calls it), but acceptable (in low-density continents like Africa) to own small tracts. Are there really no general moral and economic principles to guide us? If not, the jet-set academics will continue churning out discussion papers at their international conferences, but little action will be taken.

Sinha's preference for the collective farm is an unhappy one. He concedes that the Chinese found that such farms did not provide personal incentives; that yields are greater on family farms; and that communes effectively disguise unemployment by absorbing unneeded labour. "Even a casual visit to the countryside in China will suggest that there is overmanning on farms, in rural transport and in the retail trade. This virtually amounts to relieving the problem of unemployment by creating more disguised unemployment. Traditional social institutions, such as the family, or tribal and communal villages have always done this whenever the need has arisen. This lesson from China should be taken seriously by other developing countries."

Should it? The social security provided by traditional institutions is only relevant if no alternatives are available. At least one does exist, which combines the virtues of the two systems referred to above, but excludes their defects. I have in mind the model of peasant farmers who possess their individual lands—so they have the incentives to work: the more they produce, the more they keep; but who do not *own* the land, as its rental value is annually taxed by the community. If land values rise, it is not the idle landlord who benefits: the community finds itself able to finance new irrigation and water conservation systems, better transportation and communication networks—things which boost output, living standards and employment. The Exchequer revenue ensures that the landless (be they urban labourers, teachers, architects, factory managers or housewives) retain their traditional share in the natural resources of their community, without having to actually work on the land.

Remember: it is not a question of a country or region having to produce more food to feed hungry citizens. For there is no world food shortage; we are dealing with a distributional problem, which could be solved to everyone's satisfaction through the ancient practice of exchange. But to achieve that happy state of global well-being, we need more careful consideration of all the options for change.