

Starved of solutions

BOOK REVIEW

Clive Robinson, *Hungry farmers: World Food Needs And Europe's Response*. Christian Aid, 1989, £4.95.

NOBODY would deny that a useful purpose is served by books that lay bare the mechanisms by means of which, as civilisation progresses, the wealth of a minority is consolidated and increased, while the number mounts of those whose livelihood and very existence are threatened.

Clive Robinson's book commissioned by Christian Aid, is in this category of usefulness: and he deserves our thanks. It does, however, share with the vast majority of such books the disadvantage that its proposed solutions are nebulous in the extreme.

Nowhere does it answer the question: "What actual measure should be the first to be entered in some national statute book, to point the way forward to a more just state of affairs?"

All the same, it is encouraging to see some hoary old fallacies destroyed. The baseless theory of Thomas Malthus, for example, that population tends to outrun subsistence, dissected and disproved more than a hundred years ago by Henry George, still crops up from time to time, even in supposedly well-informed circles.

There can be no doubt, now that this book is available, that world food production is increasing faster than population. The food is there: but millions cannot afford to buy enough of it, and lack the facilities to grow it themselves.

Another curious idea is still prevalent that the world is divided by the equator into rich northern nations and poor southern ones. On the contrary, says our author, "...the problem is one of the groups of hungry people within nations rather than one of hungry nations". World Bank figures, he goes on, show that "the re-allocation of only 5.6% of India's food supply would wipe out hunger in that country."

Abandoning his attack on the realms of fantasy, he treats of various matters that really do bear upon the problem in hand.

The Common Agricultural Policy (C.A.P.), with its variable support levy, threshold and intervention prices, export subsidies (all

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explained here for the uninitiated) and "setaside" - an eccentric scheme for paying farmers not to grow wheat - not only ruins small farmers within Europe, but does the same for those of the Third World by undercutting prices there, and closing, by means of tariff barriers, possible European markets for their products.

All this apart, readers will most appreciate understanding the overriding importance of rights to land. What the Third World needs, he writes, is for its own farmers to produce a surplus for its own requirements instead of for export; but they can do this only if they have enough land.

It is therefore disastrous that as many as one billion people living in rural areas in the Third World have no land, or hardly any, that they can call their own.

An outstanding example that he cites, and one that is notable for its topical interest, is that of Ethiopia. "At the height of the famine in 1984-5, British shoppers were shocked to see Ethiopian Melons on their market stalls. ... In the year ended September 1984, Ethiopia exported over £1½ million of linseed cake, cottonseed cake and rapeseed meal for livestock in the European Community."

Why does this kind of thing happen? Susan George provides an explicit answer in her *How the Other Half Dies: The Real Reasons For World Hunger* (Penguin, 1976). By 1970, HVA, a Dutch agribusi-

ness firm, had concessions to exploit over a fifth of all the cultivated land in the Awash Valley, on which the Afars had depended for at least 400 years; and rather smaller areas had been occupied by British, Israeli and Italian corporations.

The native population has to make do with inferior land. Mrs George mentions the 1973 famine, Mr Robinson that of 1984; and now it is all happening again, exacerbated by civil war.

It is conceded in Robinson's book that Food Aid is no long-term solution to this problem, though the further truth that it postpones a genuine one, in that it appears to relieve concessionaries of the responsibility for their actions, has so far eluded the author. Furthermore, although he advocates land reform, he seems to have no idea of what form it should take. Perhaps we can help him.

Redistribution of land, specifically in France and Ireland, has failed to achieve the desired effect; but redistribution of rent is a different matter. Where this has been done, by means of its collection for revenue, the result has been, not only to ensure that all usable land is in fact used, but also that it is used in the most productive way.

Clive Robinson knows what this is: it is small-scale mixed farming. In the Irrigation Districts of California, for example, such redistribution, otherwise known as the Taxation of Land Values, has been practised continuously since 1888 to finance the construction and maintenance of canals and dams.

Over 4m acres of semi-desert, once monopolised by a few cattle barons (just as the Awash Valley is now monopolised by European and other corporations), have been transformed into a multiplicity of fertile small holdings with an average area of 30 acres. Christian Aid needs to study this solution.