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NUTRITION: A SOCIAL PROBLEM

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This article is based on a presentation by Dr Béhar - Chief of the Nutrition Unit at WHO Headquarters in Geneva - at the 13th Pacific Science Congress 1975, Vancouver, Canada.

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Ever since the eras of hunting and collecting in the history of mankind, one of the main reasons why man organized himself into a society was to ensure an adequate food supply for all its members. The need for an effective social order was even greater when man learned to domesticate animals and cultivate plants to obtain food. Progressively, as he was able to produce, preserve and distribute food more efficiently, larger and more complex societies developed. Originally, most of the time and energy of the working members of these societies was devoted to producing food.

As food production became more efficient, leaving more free time and allowing occupational specialization, the arts and sciences developed -- leading to still more complex societies. The small groups of hunters evolved into clans, tribes, villages and states and from these into the large nations with the multinational organizations we know today. In the process, however, one of the original reasons for organized community life -- to ensure an adequate food supply for all -- seems to have been forgotten.

If it is accepted that the fundamental role of any society is to ensure the well-being of all its members, including their adequate nutrition, then the presence of malnutrition to any significant extent must be interpreted as a failure of that society. This is really the problem we are facing today: that it is the structure of society itself that limits the capabilities of many of its members to obtain their basic needs, including enough and adequate food, because power and the utilization of resources is concentrated in the hands of a minority.

This inequality is well known: it can be illustrated by analyzing land ownership or income distribution among different sectors of the population and is reflected, among other things, in the pattern of food consumption. For instance, it has been estimated that in many developing countries the 20% of the population which has the lowest income has also only one half the per capita energy intake of the top 10%. Obviously, both groups suffer from such a disparity: the former group has less than the minimum required for a healthy life, and the latter has too much and suffers from the consequences of over-nutrition.

These disparities in the nutritional status of different socio-economic classes constitute one of the mechanisms which perpetuates social injustice. Low income groups inevitably consist of uneducated people with low social status. Many of their children die at an early age from disease and malnutrition, resulting in the need to compensate by bearing a larger number of children. Surviving children, living in poor environmental conditions, will suffer from chronic malnutrition and frequent, severe attacks of infectious diseases; they will have inadequate psycho-social stimulation, including mother-child interaction, and as a result their growth and development will be retarded. They will therefore have reduced learning capacity during childhood, and will grow into uneducated adults with very limited opportunities of overcoming their poverty and improving their social status. From then on, their work performance, and therefore their earning capacity, will be still further reduced by their chronic state of malnutrition, particularly energy deficiency and nutritional anaemias and they will become the parents of children destined to the same fate. This unfortunate situation is recognized in an old Japanese saying: "If you are poor you will be stupid".

Studies carried out at the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP) have shown that children of malnourished mothers are already handicapped from birth, as seen by their low birth weight. The problem could not be completely solved by correcting malnutrition in pregnancy because their low birth weight is related not only to the malnutrition of their mothers during pregnancy, but also to the small size of these mothers, which is in itself a manifestation of their childhood malnutrition. At least two generations may therefore be needed to break this vicious circle of parents living in poverty, having children in poverty, who will themselves become parents living in poverty.

On the other hand, in the affluent sections of society, well nourished and educated parents have well nourished and healthier children, who not only have greater opportunities for education but also derive more benefit from it. This situation tends to maintain the existing power structure at the expense of the poorer classes and thus perpetuate social injustice. Seen in this light, malnutrition is not only a consequence of gross inequalities in society, but also a mechanism for maintaining them. The situation can be compared with the way bees organize their society: an individual larva is selected and specially nurtured to become a queen. In the insect world, however, this is an instinctive means of maintaining a pre-established order: in human beings it is an artificial system created and maintained by a distorted development of society which negates the equal rights of all its members. The "ruling classes" have an interest, consciously or unconsciously, in maintaining a system that works so well in their favour, while ignoring the interests and desires of society as a whole.

On the occasions when the privileged members of society have become aware of and concerned by this injustice, their attempts to alleviate it have usually been through welfare based on charity. Where malnutrition is concerned, this has taken the form of establishing programmes for treatment and rehabilitation of malnourished children or supplementary feeding programmes for those in greatest need. In isolation -- and with the relief orientation usually given to them -- these programmes are, at best, only palliative measures which do not deal with the basic causes of the problem and therefore have no lasting effect. In most cases, on the contrary, they help to maintain the status quo while giving a false impression that the problem is being taken care of.

These great disparities in the resources available to different population groups within countries also exist at the international level between countries, and the same type of social injustice is involved. Some rich and powerful nations enjoy a large share of the earth's resources at the expense of poorer countries, and in dealing with this situation have taken the same paternalistic attitude as the powerful groups within countries. The type of aid provided by the rich nations is most frequently also of a charitable nature, palliative and not directed to correcting the fundamental causes of inequality -- on the contrary, helping to perpetuate them. In these dealings between rich and poor nations, the privileged minorities of the poor countries frequently work as allies of the dominating countries, acting as their representatives or instruments to exploit local resources for foreign utilization; of course they also benefit from this exploitation.

"Development Decade" Example

Even when honest international efforts are made to overcome the problems of poverty, malnutrition and all their associated conditions, mistakes are made because not enough consideration is given to the basic principles involved. Two recent examples will serve to illustrate this point -- the results of the first "Development Decade" and of the "Green Revolution".

During the 1960s great international efforts were made to accelerate socio-economic development in the poor nations of the world. The main orientation, however, was towards speeding up economic growth, on the assumption that poor social conditions, including malnutrition, are merely consequences of the low economic capacity of the affected countries. These problems, it was believed, would be automatically resolved by an improvement in the national economy as a whole. The gross national product was therefore considered as the main criterion of progress, and inadequate thought was given to ensuring a redistribution of the increased wealth in order to overcome the existing social problems. Experience has shown that the desired economic growth was achieved in many countries, some even surpassing the targets set. Unfortunately, most of the additional national income went to the already rich and dominating groups, making them even wealthier than before, and thereby compounding the existing disparities without bringing significant improvements in the living conditions of

the majority of the people -- indeed, sometimes there was a deterioration. The same thing was observed at the international level: the rich nations became richer and the poor nations became comparatively poorer. As a result of the growing recognition of the failures of this earlier approach, efforts are now being made to pay more attention in development programmes at the national level to a better distribution of resources, services and opportunities. Similarly, at the international level, a new economic order is being planned.

As for the Green Revolution, no one can deny the extraordinary and well-intentioned achievements in agricultural technology which resulted in bigger and better crops of the most important cereals. But again, no consideration was given to the fact that the new techniques could only be applied efficiently by farmers with adequate capabilities, knowledge and resources. The majority of poor small farmers living on subsistence agriculture could not benefit from this new technology. Thus, although the Green Revolution was a help to some countries with an insufficient grain production, it did not produce any significant improvement of the economic capacity, food availability or living conditions of the mass of poor and malnourished people.

It has become increasingly evident, therefore, that national economic growth and technology will have a very limited effect, if any, in improving the living conditions of the majority of the population if they do not operate within an adequate social structure. On the other hand, even without great economic capacity and advanced technology, better living conditions are clearly possible for the mass of the people if society is organized to this end.

The Mayans of Guatemala

Even more precise examples can be found in the story of the American Indians after the Spanish conquest, the Mayans of Guatemala, for instance. These people had developed a great civilization, and as far as we can tell from available information they had no serious nutritional problems. Their staple foods, as is still the case today, were corn and beans, supplemented by fruit, vegetables and meat from wild animals, which were abundant. Their agricultural practices would now be considered primitive, but since they had all the land they wanted they were able to develop an effective system of land rotation, clearing areas of the forest to be used for cultivation for a few years and then moving to another area, thereby maintaining an ecological balance without damaging the land and obtaining all the food they needed. Children were breast fed up to about three years of age or even longer, until they were able to consume the regular family diet without any problem.

Then the Spaniards came, conquered the land, subjugated the people, and used all the best land for cash crops, mainly for export. This agricultural pattern has been maintained to the present day, and is indeed increasing in proportion: what were previously large forest areas in the plains are now producing cotton, sugar, coffee and beef for the rich privileged class and for rich countries. The Indians were left with the marginal mountainous land, and this is all they possess today -- if they have any land at all. With the practice of subdividing the family property in each generation as it is handed from father to children, each family now has a very small plot which is insufficient to produce even minimum needs. They are compelled to exploit it to the maximum, even cultivating slopes too steep to maintain agriculture after clearing the forest covering them, since the wood is also needed as fuel for cooking. This has resulted in a rapid erosion of the land: many communities have practically no more usable land and thus have insufficient food. The whole country is suffering from the damage: the erosion in the mountains is resulting in flooding of the rivers in the low-land plains, where intensive commercial agriculture is seriously damaged. But these people are not to blame for the poor agricultural practices -- they have to eat. Their diet is still based on corn and beans, but now in insufficient amounts and with very little to supplement it. Fruit and vegetables find their way to markets in the towns, and there are no more wild animals for meat. Poultry, eggs, milk and milk products are too expensive, particularly for those who have

practically no cash and are living on subsistence agriculture. Even if they produce some of these foods themselves they will send them to market to bring in badly needed cash. Beef is one of the most important products of the country; it is produced in the rich low-land plains, but only for export, and for the limited internal market of those who can afford it. The influence and social pressures of the dominating western culture is forcing mothers to wean their children at an increasingly early age, and since no milk or other adequate substitute for breast milk is available, severe malnutrition is highly prevalent in small children and the majority of the population lives in a state of chronic under-nutrition which tends to perpetuate the situation.

It can, of course, be argued that the world situation has changed considerably over the centuries, and that there are many new complicating factors present today, among them increasing population pressures in many countries. This does not invalidate the basic principle that malnutrition is primarily a manifestation of social injustice. It is a good sign that these situations are now recognized: the so-called "food crisis" we have been facing during the past years is indeed a recrudescence of a long standing chronic problem which has been with us for centuries. It is an unfortunate commentary on our social and political systems that it apparently required current widespread famines to awaken national and international consciousness to the problems of insufficient and inadequate food for large segments of the world's population. Acute hunger, as experienced now by millions of people, is obviously intolerable; chronic hunger, or subclinical forms of malnutrition, affecting a much larger proportion of the world's population, should not be underestimated nor should measures to correct it be neglected. It can only be hoped that today's food crisis, together with the energy crisis and the economic crisis, will have positive effects in the long run. They may force the world to reappraise its political, social and economic structure, and national governments to reassess their purposes and goals. Investments in health, education, nutrition and housing, long considered by conventional economists as giving low or long-term returns are now being considered for higher priority in many countries. It can confidently be expressed that this change in strategy, taking account of people as human beings and not simply as machines or statistics, will lead to improved development policies.

If the presently under-developed countries, where malnutrition and poverty -- with all their social consequences -- are now widespread, were to redirect and strengthen their efforts to create better living conditions for all their populations, and if the efforts of the international community were oriented to supporting these programmes, a better future for mankind could be foreseen. A well nourished population, biologically healthier, as shown by the secular changes observed in many population groups, will be more active socially and better able to contribute effectively to the progress of a country and the well-being of all its people. At the international level, this should result in a more harmonious understanding and cooperation between all the nations of our small planet. A reduction of the great disparities now existing within and between nations should therefore be of benefit to all peoples.

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Photographs available on request. Please write to the Photo Editor, WHO, Division of Public Information, Avenue Appia, 1211 Geneva 27.

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