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FOOD PROBLEMS

Institutional arrangements relating to nutrition

Statement of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination

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INTRODUCTION

1. The World Food Conference in paragraph 11 of resolution XXII, requested the Economic and Social Council "to consider on an urgent basis, and make recommendations on whether or not rearrangements in the United Nations system or new institutional bodies may be justified in order to ensure effective follow-up on Conference resolution V on nutrition, examining nutritional activities within bodies such as the United Nations, the specialized agencies, in particular the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), and also giving appropriate attention to nutritional programmes being conducted on a bilateral basis".

2. At its fifty-ninth session, the Economic and Social Council accepted a suggestion from ACC that it defer consideration of the question so that it might take it up in the light of prior examination by ACC of the issues and interagency implications involved. The present report is intended to assist the Council in its deliberations.

I. OBJECTIVES

3. The objectives of the present review are to:

(a) Examine the existing and projected activities of the United Nations system with reference to the implementation of the resolutions of the World Food Conference related to nutritional improvement, taking account of the relevant decisions of the governing bodies of the agencies concerned;

(b) Determine whether the efforts of the system are fully mobilized and integrated, in co-operation with the Governments, at all levels in order to achieve maximum impact at the country level, taking into account programmes being undertaken on a bilateral basis;

(c) Consider whether the existing arrangements and resources can respond effectively to the major nutritional problems of the developing world.

4. The basic purpose should be to ensure that:

(a) Interagency co-operation works smoothly and rationally in each of the specific fields of activity;

(b) The activities in the various fields are mutually supporting and complementary, at the country level in particular, within a common framework of approach to the solution of the nutrition problem; and

(c) This comprehensive approach is itself directed towards nutrition objectives that are compatible with other developmental goals.

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II. THE NUTRITION PROBLEM

5. The existence of widespread hunger and malnutrition is perhaps the most obvious - and the most disturbing - symptom of under-development. According to the assessment prepared for the World Food Conference, almost half a billion people are affected by malnutrition in the developing world - and this is thought to be a conservative estimate. Malnutrition is believed to be responsible, as an underlying or associated cause, for a high proportion of the deaths of children under five years of age in developing countries.

6. And yet, despite the overwhelming moral imperative for all-out efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate malnutrition, neither national Governments nor the United Nations system have satisfactorily laid out a strategy for doing so. Three reasons may be put forward for this failure.

7. The first reason is that, although malnutrition is a consequence of poverty and under-development, the nutritional programmes of national Governments, the United Nations system and bilateral agencies have been largely focused on combating the symptoms. While specific measures to feed hungry people have their rightful place and must be pursued, it is now realized that the basic remedy is development. But it is not enough to achieve this only in aggregate national terms; what is required is to ensure that development improves the lot of the poorest strata of the population, where hunger and malnutrition are most prevalent. Even substantial national increases in food supplies will not solve the problem if the additional food is not produced by or cannot be purchased by those in need. It is clear that, by and large, development is not reaching adequately the rural and urban poor who need it most, especially if malnutrition is to be eliminated.

8. The second reason is the complexity of the approach that is needed, calling for the contribution of different disciplines: health specialists, statisticians, nutritionists, agriculturalists, teachers, economists and planners must all join forces if the problem is to be properly defined and tackled effectively. In other words, nutrition improvement (probably more than other aspects of development) can only be achieved through a national integrated interdisciplinary interministerial approach, with all the difficulties of organization and management that it entails. This has been recognized in principle but, while progress has been made, there is still much that remains to be done in defining how to proceed in practice. It is only in recent years that a view has emerged of how to formulate nutritional objectives and programmes in different country situations, as a component of national development plans.

9. Thirdly, and no doubt partly because of the considerations mentioned above, not many Governments have so far set national nutritional targets. The establishment of such a target would represent a political decision of the first importance and might have a significant impact on the entire national development strategy. All the evidence suggests that, for most countries, the achievement of acceptable nutritional targets would require a reassessment and redirection of both social and economic development efforts and could entail basic structural reforms.

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III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORLD FOOD CONFERENCE RESOLUTIONS

10. The World Food Conference introduced some important new elements, to which both national and international action in the future is called upon to respond. In its resolution I, the Conference resolved that all Governments should accept the goal of eradicating hunger and malnutrition within a decade - that is, by 1985. The implications of this goal have not yet been fully assessed. But certainly it cannot be achieved without a major change in the direction and pace of the over-all development effort, including food production and distribution. Unless this goal, or a feasible modification of it based on local study, is taken seriously as a political commitment at the national level, there is no chance of national and international resources being used with maximum effectiveness to eliminate malnutrition.

11. Moreover, resolution V of the World Food Conference crystallized the thinking of both nutrition specialists and administrators, and provided an over-all framework for action in priority areas, which added together constitute a valid basis for coherent action by all concerned, to promote a durable solution to the nutrition problem. Thus the resolution emphasized that the formulation of adequate nutrition policies by Governments, as part of their long-term development plans, is the essential line of approach towards ensuring that all people have the capability and the knowledge to feed themselves properly. To this end the Conference recommended that all Governments formulate such national food and nutrition strategies, with assistance from the United Nations system as required. In the same resolution the Conference recommended a series of actions in the nutrition field which should receive immediate attention and should be seen as part of and contributing to a lasting solution. These include special feeding programmes for hungry and vulnerable groups, particularly pregnant and nursing women, children and workers; specific measures against nutritional deficiencies; measures to improve the rural environment, and food legislation and food control measures. The resolution also recognized the need for the development of both national and global nutrition surveillance systems to improve knowledge of the dimensions, nature and locations of malnutrition, so that the formulation of long-term policies and short-term measures can be properly oriented. It also called for the identification of the major areas in which additional research is needed to enable nutrition policies and action to become progressively more effective.

12. At the international level, the way has thus been prepared for more integrated and intensive national efforts, with more effective support from the United Nations system.

IV. CURRENT INTERAGENCY ACTIVITIES FOR IMPLEMENTING RESOLUTION V OF THE WORLD FOOD CONFERENCE

13. While all agencies have or are reporting to their governing bodies on their current activities in the field of nutrition, special reports are being prepared by the agencies individually and collectively for the forthcoming session of the

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World Food Council with respect to resolution V. It is the intention of the following section to provide highlights of interagency action so far initiated, taking into account, however, that the initial intentions agreed upon after the World Food Conference had to be somewhat toned down because of the lack of immediately available resources and of special financial difficulties in assisting projects at the country level. The relatively short period of time to reach consensus on the approach and the need to obtain the interest of Governments and to negotiate action and programmes - not only in the field of nutrition planning but in other fields as well - should also be taken into account when evaluating progress so far achieved.

A. Intersectoral food and nutrition planning

14. The FAO, WHO, World Bank and UNICEF are concerned with various aspects of intersectoral food and nutrition planning. The FAO is serving as the lead agency in the implementation of the relevant provision of resolution V (para. 2). Steps have been taken by FAO and the agencies concerned to develop a consensus in their approach to assisting countries to build up their national planning capacity for formulating and implementing nutrition objectives as part of over-all development planning. In October 1975 FAO convened a workshop in which the following organizations participated: the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, WFP, WHO, the World Bank, FAO, the Protein-Calorie Advisory Group (PAG) and several bilateral agencies - the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the Bank of New Zealand, the Ministry of Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States Agency for International Development - with observers from UNESCO, the World Food Council and the University of Oslo. Specific action has been initiated by FAO in several countries, including Algeria, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Senegal, Sri Lanka and Tunisia. Preliminary data collection and analysis are under way in eight more countries. Some other countries have shown interest in this approach and more official requests for assistance are expected. The organizations and agencies are reviewing their programmes in the light of the agreed approach to food and nutrition policies and will further elaborate the consensus, both in policy and in field work, in the course of joint collaboration with Governments. Bilateral agencies have participated and will be encouraged to participate in these reviews and further consultations on the effectiveness of the approach.

B. Feeding programmes

15. The World Food Programme, besides providing emergency aid, devotes almost a quarter of its total assistance to projects designed to improve the nutritional status of particular groups, and it is expected that this assistance will increase. The three main categories of projects are supplementary feeding programmes for mothers and pre-school children; primary and secondary school feeding programmes; and institutional feeding. UNICEF assists Governments in dealing with nutrition programmes and promotes special feeding programmes with emphasis on meeting the

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needs of children. Both UNICEF and WFP are at present negotiating a co-operative agreement for joint action in providing food aid to vulnerable groups, with particular reference to emergency situations and special assistance programmes. The FAO and WHO also co-operate closely with UNICEF and WFP and provide assistance with technical advice in the elaboration, implementation and appraisal/evaluation of projects. The FAO in particular will assist WFP in integrating self-contained nutrition elements into WFP projects to maximize food aid.

16. In paragraphs 7 and 8 of resolution V the World Food Conference called for an intensified effort in feeding programmes. It is essential that such programmes be geared to genuine development and that priority attention be given to the population groups in greatest need and at greatest risk. In order to promote these objectives, the agencies and non-governmental organizations concerned (FAO, WFP, UNICEF, WHO, Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Internationale, the League of Red Cross Societies, the Lutheran World Federation, the Swedish Red Cross, the Nutrition Institute of the University of Oslo) were brought together in March 1975, on the initiative of WHO, and broad guidelines were agreed on concerning supplementary feeding programmes with nutrition, education and training components, and arrangements made for co-ordination at the national level. Since that time, co-ordination committees have been established in three countries with major feeding programmes (Bangladesh, India and Pakistan), and plans are under way for similar integrated feeding programmes in 10 other countries in the near future. In addition, plans are under way for an intensified training programme in group feeding in the region of South-East Asia and subsequently in other regions.

C. Nutrition education and training

17. The prime target group for education (in a special sense) on nutrition problems consists of governmental planners and policy makers. Attempts to reach them in one way or another are being made by FAO, WHO, the World Bank and UNICEF. Plans and proposals for setting up regional training centres are under discussion by FAO with bilateral donors. Nutrition education and training in a more conventional sense is being provided or promoted by FAO, UNESCO, WHO and UNICEF. UNESCO has given particular attention to the promotion and improvement of the quality of nutrition education.

D. Action against specific nutrient deficiencies

18. The WHO, the World Bank and UNICEF are actively promoting supplementation programmes or food enrichment to tackle specific nutrient deficiencies which can cause major health problems, primarily endemic goitre, vitamin A deficiency and nutritional anaemias. Major programmes are under way in Bangladesh, Central America, India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

E. Nutrition surveillance

19. In paragraph 13 of resolution V the Conference called for the establishment of a global nutrition surveillance system. What is required is a system of continuous monitoring of the nutritional situation of a population, through the use of simple indicators, to identify the main factors responsible; to show changes over time; and to predict serious deteriorations. Nutrition surveillance should be designed for use in planning action programmes at the national and international levels and in evaluating results. Under the leadership of WHO, work has begun on the development of such a system, in close liaison with FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System on food and agriculture.

20. Early action was taken by FAO, UNICEF and WHO to develop in the first instance an agreed methodology which would be practical and have a wide applicability. To this end, a Joint Expert Committee was convened by WHO in October 1975, consisting of experts in the field of agriculture, economics, health, nutrition and statistics. The group prepared a series of recommendations on the initial assessment of a nutrition situation, the selection of indicators, the planning and development of surveillance systems, and needs for further research. The Expert Committee recommended that the international agencies concerned should:

- (a) Assist countries in the setting up of national surveillance systems, including training of senior personnel;
- (b) Prepare reference manuals and training materials;
- (c) Promote research for improving surveillance methodology;
- (d) Set up machinery for co-ordination of their efforts towards the establishment of a global surveillance system and for interchange of information between national systems.

Three critical regions from the food and nutrition point of view were suggested for the initiation of field work: South Asia; East Africa and the Sahel; and Central and South America. The three agencies concerned have nominated individual experts to constitute a joint working group for the furtherance of this effort, which has already started in four Sahelian countries, and to exploring the interest and possibilities in the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Central America.

F. Research

21. Among the various agencies concerned with research programmes, it has been agreed that FAO should take a lead in co-ordinating the programme of applied nutrition research called for in paragraph 14 of World Food Conference resolution V. The WHO has become closely associated and active in this field by supporting and co-ordinating research on more practical and effective measures for the control of nutritional anaemias and vitamin A deficiency; joint research work is being carried out by FAO and WHO on how to satisfy nutritional requirements

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under different ecological and dietary conditions; on the role of other factors, in addition to the diet, in producing malnutrition; on factors responsible for the decline of breast-feeding and measures to counteract them; on practical methods for the assessment of the nutritional situation of population groups; on delivery services for nutrition-related activities in currently under-served populations; and on other aspects of interrelation between health and nutrition. UNICEF also has co-operated and has some specific studies related to child nutrition under way. The World Bank plans to include a research component in its nutrition programme. The Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is considering a programme which includes elements that would be relevant.

22. Representatives of the agencies concerned were brought together with FAO in October 1975. It was recognized that the priority given by the World Food Conference to specific areas - for example, intersectoral food and nutrition planning, supplementary and emergency feeding programmes, and nutrition surveillance, in addition to others mentioned in resolution V - had determined to a large extent the subject-matter to be considered. Taking account of previous work, the group made a selection of priority areas for applied nutrition research.

23. The group proposed that an interagency consultative committee should be set up to co-ordinate nutrition research as a whole. However, ACC considers it will be preferable to integrate the research component into the other types of action needed to implement the wishes of the Conference in each of the specific subject-matter areas under the different paragraphs of resolution V. Research and action should be closely interrelated, with research supporting action and action stimulating research. It is therefore felt that applied research in each subarea - for example, nutrition policy, surveillance and the like - should be co-ordinated by the lead agency concerned, along with the other agencies associated with action in the same area. The overview of multidisciplinary and all applied nutrition research for purposes of consistency and perhaps funding, could be made at times when it was necessary for the agencies to review the implementation of resolution V as a whole. The mobilization of resources for research, as well as for the programmes of action, could be done through existing mechanisms, such as groups of interested agencies and Governments.

24. To provide the technical guidance needed for nutrition research programmes, it is suggested below that lists or panels of specialists be drawn up, including the present membership of PAG and of the Expert Advisory Panel of WHO on Nutrition.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS OF ACC

25. In developing its recommendations to the Economic and Social Council on whether or not rearrangements in the United Nations system or new institutional bodies may be justified in order to ensure follow-up on World Food Conference resolution V on nutrition, ACC took account of the new perceptions of the nutritional problem, the activities of the various United Nations agencies and bilateral agencies with regard to nutrition, and the working arrangements already initiated by the agencies in co-operation during 1975 in proceeding with the implementation of resolution V.

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26. The ACC emphasized that the recommendations of the World Food Conference and various resolutions of the governing bodies of the institutions of the United Nations system had developed a new momentum for action to banish hunger and ensure adequate nutrition for all. That momentum, in order to be maintained and increased, has to be reflected in the work of the organizations of the system concerned. The ACC considered that the existing arrangements for ensuring appropriate planning, implementation and assessment of nutrition-related activities were not adequate for the new situation. The system required an action-orientation based on common policies and approaches to nutrition improvement. However, ACC felt that the rearrangements required were more in the nature of new mechanisms for co-operation and common action than new institutions or bodies.

A. At the country level

27. The ACC urged strongly that the starting point for all arrangements must be an intensified co-ordination of action at the country level on the part of agencies concerned with nutrition, in support of government initiatives. Of key importance would be the development by the Governments themselves of machinery for co-ordinating the efforts of international and bilateral assistance. The formulation by Governments of national policies for food and nutrition, as recommended in paragraph 1 of resolution V, and the establishment or strengthening of interministerial co-ordinating mechanisms for implementing such policies, would be the most effective form of co-ordination of the international input at the country level.

28. All organizations would undertake to provide every possible support to such national efforts, which in view of the multisectoral character of the nutrition approach require also the full understanding and support from the resident representatives of UNDP, who would play a key catalytic role. Towards this end, he should co-ordinate, with the assistance of the agency representatives, the negotiations, programming, formulation and financing of nutrition programmes for which Governments will request assistance. In addition, during implementation, suitable arrangements could be made at the country level, with the representatives of the organizations most involved, to assess progress achieved along with the objectives and to consider what further development or expansion may be needed. He will ensure, depending upon local circumstances, the maximum impact of the external inputs into the national development plan.

B. At the interagency level

29. To ensure that the technical and financial assistance of the various agencies are mutually supporting at the country level, some interagency co-ordinating arrangements will be necessary at Headquarters level. From experience prior to the World Food Conference and particularly since the Conference, it would seem preferable to organize co-ordinated multidisciplinary activities with a nutritional focus around specific objectives and in specific areas rather than attempt interagency co-ordination over the whole complex field in a single mechanism.

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30. This is the pattern of action-oriented arrangements that has been developing among the agencies so far, in their response to the various parts of resolution V, as described in the preceding section. For each field of activity, described in paragraphs 14-24 above, the agencies with a role to play have been identified, among which one has been recognized as the leading or convening agency. In each area of work, the agencies concerned have initiated arrangements and working procedures which can ensure a consensus in approach and provide for collaborative programming and implementation in the particular field, with a special focus on country action. Such joint working arrangements have been initiated in areas such as food and nutrition planning support, global nutrition surveillance, feeding programmes and applied nutrition research. In each case, interested bilateral agencies have participated and will be encouraged to participate. It is the intention of the executive heads to support and implement these arrangements.

31. The ACC attached particular importance to the collaborative activities proposed by the agencies for the support of food and nutrition planning, which should progressively harmonize the policy approach of agencies and Governments to raising the nutritional status of needy populations. Speedy progress in harmonizing interagency policies will make it possible for agencies to assist countries with small missions of the best qualified people, irrespective of institutional boundaries.

32. The ACC recognized the interest of Governments, governing bodies and the agency heads in the implementation of resolution V as a whole. With this in mind, ACC proposed to establish a sub-committee on nutrition, which should have a strong representation from the agencies most concerned in order to harmonize assistance policies and help to ensure that actions are taken in line with the needs expressed by the Member Governments. The sub-committee would thus be the point of convergence, at the secretariat level, of activities in all of the areas of work defined above. Its reports would, subject to review by ACC itself, be submitted to the Economic and Social Council, to the World Food Council and to the governing bodies of all the agencies concerned. These reports would provide a common basis for consideration by the respective governing bodies of the aspects of nutritional improvement in which they are involved and would thus help to promote compatible decisions in different forums. Special arrangements could be made for the ACC nutrition sub-committee to meet as required with bilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations active in nutrition-oriented projects.

33. Although the sub-committee would leave the co-ordination of action to the working-level groups, as described above, it would be expected to lay down guidelines for mutually supporting action at the country level.

34. The ACC envisaged that in order to foster an interdisciplinary approach not merely between but also within organizations, the seat of the ACC sub-committee would rotate among the agencies primarily concerned, being moved at intervals of three to five years. The obligations involved in acting as host to the sub-committee, while not large in budgetary terms, would nevertheless be significant from a substantive point of view, since the organization in question would be the focal point for a complex series of interlocking actions by the United Nations

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system as a whole. A small continuing secretariat for the sub-committee would be established in order to strengthen interagency co-ordination and action as well as serving as a focal point for the nutrition advisory panel suggested in paragraph 38 below.

C. At the intergovernmental level

35. As regards co-ordination at the intergovernmental level, ACC considered that new intergovernmental machinery, specifically for co-ordination of nutrition activities, would not be necessary. What was essential at this level was to facilitate the taking of compatible and co-ordinated decisions by the governing bodies of the various organizations and programmes. Joint reporting to the governing bodies by the proposed ACC nutrition sub-committee, as suggested above, would work in this direction. In addition, the World Food Council would be keeping under review the system's over-all response to the World Food Conference resolution on nutrition. Finally, the Economic and Social Council would ensure that nutritional goals were co-ordinated with other developmental goals.

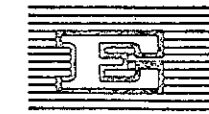
36. The ACC draws the attention of the Council to the fact that the FAO Conference, at its session in November 1975, had decided that the Ad Hoc Committee of the FAO Council on Food and Nutrition Policies, open to all member States, should continue to play its role as a catalyst and co-ordinator of nutrition activities within FAO. The next session of the Committee is scheduled for December 1976. Other agencies of the United Nations system are always invited to attend these sessions.

D. The need for outside expertise

37. The approach outlined in the present paper will, if accepted by the Council, accentuate the already well recognized need for the United Nations system to benefit from outside expertise in the technical guidance of its work on nutrition. For a considerable time the prime source of such expertise has been the Protein-Calorie Advisory Group of the United Nations system (PAG), which is sponsored and financed jointly by the United Nations, UNICEF, FAO, WHO and the World Bank. The PAG consists of 15 eminent individuals, drawn from widely differing technical backgrounds. The sponsoring agencies wish to pay tribute to the dedicated manner in which the successive members of PAG have served the United Nations system over the years and to place on record their appreciation of the Group's contribution to the advancement of an understanding of nutritional problems. This very understanding, however, has led to a new and complex, multifaceted approach which, in the opinion of the sponsoring agencies, calls for a re-examination of the concepts underlying PAG.

38. It is the considered view of the sponsoring agencies and ACC that a much broader-based arrangement is now needed for canalizing outside expertise to the system. Panels or groups of experts will be needed in most of the distinct fields of activity which make up a composite approach to the nutrition problem. Applied nutrition research is an area in which such expertise will be of fundamental

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importance. Intersectoral planning and nutrition surveillance will require different types of experts, as will action against specific nutritional deficiencies. The experts dealing with all the various aspects of the problem should together constitute a successor body to PAG, which might be called the Nutrition Advisory Panel of the United Nations system.

39. In order to ensure that the totality of the system's efforts can benefit from expert guidance, ACC suggests that every two or three years there be an independent assessment of the "state of the art". The objective should be a review of the evolution of the nutrition problem, of the understanding of its causes and cures, and of the need for any reorientation in the work of the United Nations system. To carry out this review, the full Nutrition Advisory Panel would probably be too large and unwieldy a body. It would, however, be feasible to make a selection from the panel of individual experts covering all the main disciplines involved. The results of this assessment should be made known not only to Governments and organizations but also to the public at large, in order to stimulate support for action to resolve this fundamental problem of our time.

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PROBLEMES ALIMENTAIRES

Arrangements institutionnels concernant la nutrition

Exposé du Comité administratif de coordination (CAC)

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