

U.S. shouldn't be expected to feed the world

This is the last in a series of 15 articles exploring "Food and People." In this article, Dudley Kirk of Stanford University's Food Research Institute argues that we can solve the problem of feeding the world's population if we are willing to make the necessary effort. This series was written for *Courses by Newspapers*, a program of University Extension, University of California, San Diego, with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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By Dudley Kirk
special writer

It is easy for Americans, the well-fed — in fact, often overfed — to forget that obtaining enough to eat is still the first preoccupation of much of humankind. This fact is changing, but not fast enough.

Especially in the poorer countries, where hundreds of millions face the constant threat of hunger, the outcome of the race between population and food is uncertain. Any permanent victory for food will require both an increase in agricultural productivity and a reduction in birth rates.

Everyone has heard doomsday projections of the fearful escalation of world population. However, the proper description of future world population growth is not the usually presented rising curve headed for infinity, but one that is approaching a ceiling of a more or less stationary world population as growth slows down.

The decline in growth rate will be imposed by a rising death rate if not by a lower birth rate. Fortunately, the latter has begun to occur.

DECLINING BIRTH RATES

World birth rates declined in the 1970s in both developed and less developed areas, including the giants in each China, India, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, rates of population growth, as distinct from birth rates, are also falling in many less developed countries (LDCs), despite major reductions in death rates.

Birth rates are falling in part because birth control information is spreading rapidly. So, too, is the motivation for birth control. As social and economic advancements such as education and improved health make possible a better life, the people in poorer countries are choosing to devote their resources to the quality rather than the quantity of children.

The most widespread reductions in the birth rate are occurring in Latin America, the most important in Asia (because it includes well over half the world's people), and the least in Africa.

These declines in birth rate hardly mean that the world is approaching Zero Population Growth (ZPG). Only a few countries, such as the two Germanys, have reached ZPG. In a few LDCs, the two-child family is becoming the norm, and China, with the world's largest population, has set a goal of one child per family. But in most LDCs, such low birth rates are still far off.

Furthermore, although birth rates are declining, absolute numbers are still growing by over 70 million persons a year. Even with slowing growth, the world will probably have to make room at dinner table for 1.5 to 2 billion more people by the year 2050, for a total of at least 6 billion, with many more to come in the 21st century.

The solution of the world's population problems can now be seen at the end of the tunnel, but it is a very long tunnel one from which the world may not finally emerge for 50 years or more, and then only if progress continues.

That's the demographic scenario. What about food?

FOOD: PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

Our view is much too colored by the events of the day. In times of good crops, the "experts" talk of the Green revolution and other wonders when there is a series of poor harvests, as in the early 1970s, we hear prophecies of endless doom.

In fact, world wheat production by 1987 was 20 percent higher than in 1973-74; rice production was 10 percent high-

er. Crops since then have permitted modest gains in food availability.

Food production is rising at about the same pace in both the richer and the poorer countries. In the richer countries this means more food per capita (including surplus), but in the poorer countries much of the increased production is eaten up by rapid population growth. And there are still many countries including a majority in Africa, a few in Latin America, and some war-torn countries in Asia where per-capita food production actually declined during the 1970s.

Food is thus really a series of national problems in which disadvantaged people in disadvantaged countries are hungry in a world that often has what is called a "market surplus."

Is there, then, enough food to go around? Theoretically there is. In a literal sense, enough food is produced to feed every person at least 2,600 calories a day, if no one ate more and if no land were used to grow feed for animals. This is enough for a 70-kilogram (155 lb.) adult man doing active labor, and more than enough for a 60-kilogram (133 lb.) Indian or Chinese man, or for women and children.

According to the 1980 Presidential Commission on World Hunger, people are not hungry just because of scarcity, but because of inequality — inequality of the poor and the rich nations, of the poor and the rich within each nation, and of men, women and children within the family.

In this humanitarian view, hunger can be overcome only by building a more sharing economic system in the world and in each country. Furthermore, the landless and others without money to buy food will be hungry regardless and others without money to buy food will be hungry regardless of agricultural production, so abolition of hunger is part of the larger problem of providing jobs and reducing poverty.

INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY

This is true up to a point. But realistically there is no solution without having agriculture in the LDCs employ more labor and become more productive to provide both more food and more jobs. The great problem in the LDCs is to adapt technology to the needs of the peasants and then get them to use it.

For example, in India, with traditional agriculture, the wheat yield per acre was only one-half that in the United States with its modern technology. This is changing. In the last 15 years, India's wheat production has almost tripled, and India is no longer a net importer of food grain.

In fact, among a majority of the poorer peoples of the world, the plow is gaining on the stork, but, alas, all too slowly.

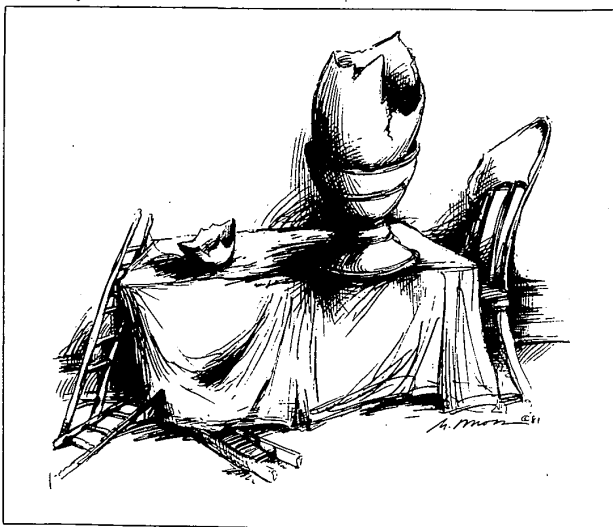
It does look as though the world population on the average is better fed than before. Not adequately, but marginally better. Except where war or special catastrophes hit, it seems that food production can keep up with population growth in most places.

But this isn't good enough. Now, the world has the potential to feed all of humanity adequately. What has changed is not hunger and famine; these have always been a constant danger to humankind. What has changed is that for the first time we can afford a collective conscience about hunger; the world now has the technology, properly used, to solve the problem.

We Americans are activists; we want action now — the "quick fix." But the population food dilemma is not a short-run problem. It will take many years of sustained effort to resolve it.

The role of the United States is on occasion to meet crises, but in no way should we expect to feed the world permanently or to substitute for increased local production to meet local problems of hunger. The latter must come on its own as population growth slows, as the farmers adopt better technologies, and as economic development creates jobs.

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Learn to be a flan fan

Often the most difficult part of menu planning is choosing a dessert to complement the main course. The perfect ending to an evening's meal is a dessert that is neither too rich nor too light.

Flan may be the ideal choice if your main course is spicy. A cousin to American custard and French creme caramel, flan is a light Mexican dessert traditionally served after a hot, spicy meal. It is a delicious way to cook off the taste buds while providing a smooth, creamy change of texture from the main course.

This flan can also be served at a coffee klatch instead of a heavy cake or pie. Since the recipe serves 12 people, it is suitable for many kinds of informal entertaining.

A successful flan requires careful baking. If undercooked, it will fall apart when taken out of the mold. If overcooked, the egg will toughen and the mixture will separate. To test whether the flan has been baked long enough, insert a knife one inch from the center of the mold. Your flan is ready if the knife is clean when pulled out.

FLAN (Makes 12 servings)

1 ½ cups sugar
8 eggs
1 tsp. salt
2 cups Carnation instant nonfat dry milk plus water to make 3 ¾ cups
2 tsp. vanilla

Melt ½ cup sugar in 6-cup mold over low heat, stirring constantly, until sugar turns to a golden brown syrup. Tip the mold and turn to coat inside with syrup. Set aside to cool 15 to 20 minutes. Beat eggs until well-blended, in large mixer bowl. Add 1 cup sugar and salt. Beat just until blended. Combine nonfat dry milk and water to make 3 ¾ cups. Blend thoroughly. Add liquid instant milk and vanilla to egg mixture; blend. Skin foam from top of mixture. (Foam will brown quicker than custard and appearance will be unattractive.) Pour into caramel-coated mold. Place in pan about 2 ¼ inches deep. Pour hot water around mold to 1-inch depth. Bake in moderate oven (350 degrees) 40 to 50 minutes or until knife inserted 1 inch from center of custard comes out clean. Remove from pan. Cool on wire rack. Chill several hours before serving. To unmold, run knife around edge of mold. Dip mold in hot water for a few seconds. Place serving plate on top of mold; invert. Shake gently until custard slips out of mold. Cut into 12 serving pieces.

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