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NUTRITION PROGRAM IN THE AMERICAS

Malnutrition today remains a widespread problem of public health and welfare and represents a serious obstacle to social and economic development in Latin America. Even more important is the potential for the present situation to deteriorate in the coming decades as population growth rates outstrip food production increases. At the same time, there exists little doubt in the mind of the economist, the agricultural planner or the health authority that the sub-continent has the resources for a greatly increased rate of economic development and consequent improved standard of living.

Despite intensive efforts to increase food production levels in many areas of Latin America, per capita production is either declining or remains static at levels similar to those of three decades ago. Of the food produced, losses through crop destruction and inadequate storage represent a significant reduction in available supplies and problems of distribution give rise to further inconsistencies in availability at the community level. Severely restricted purchasing power of large sectors of the population put even the limited food available out of the reach on many and ignorance of basic domestic economy further diminishes the supply at the household level. Unskilled food preparation and conservation, coupled with poor dietary practices further reduce the available calories and nutrients at the level of the family. Finally, the widespread occurrence of parasitic and infectious diseases leads to inefficient utilization of calories and nutrients at the level of the human organism.

... The end-result of the prolonged deficient dietary intake produced by these circumstances is a health problem of malnutrition in one form or another. The causes, however, are found in a broad range of social phenomena, common to many areas of the Continent.

In the majority of cases, these adverse phenomena do not occur in isolation. On the contrary, they tend to occur simultaneously in such a manner that the deficiency in food and nutrient availability is progressively compounded with each link of the food chain. It is thus evident that the responsibility for resolving and preventing these problems is a broad one and cannot be assigned to any one sector of government, at least in terms of prevalent administrative and structural organization. It must, therefore, be distributed to various sectors in terms of the particular functions each can apply to specific segments of the problem. This type of multidisciplinary action requires the definition of a common goal, the clear identification of areas of responsibility and close inter-agency coordination.

The expression of such concepts may suitably take the form of a food and nutrition policy developed at the level of the national planning body. It is important to recognize that this does not imply a separate plan, but rather a statement of policy which would identify those areas within the national development plan (NDP) that will or should produce the necessary changes to improve population nutrition. If these areas have not been included in the NDP or are not adequately developed, then the policy must identify these deficiencies and achieve their correction. Once a comprehensive policy has been elaborated and any necessary modifications in the national development plan have been introduced, its implementation should take place logically with the application of the NDP through sectoral plans. The authority of the national planning body and the responsibility of government agencies to carry out the NDP will assure that a nutrition policy will be followed.

The content of such a policy must cover all the identified components contributing to the problem of population malnutrition. In addition to being comprehensive, the nutrition policy must also indicate a logical sequence of events in terms of action. It is important to realize that the failure to resolve a component cause at one level in the food chain may invalidate any efforts made at other levels. It is pointless to attempt improvement of dietary intake patterns and household storage practices, for example, if there is not an adequate food supply available. The policy should also describe a final goal in terms of optimal population nutrition status and define the existing situation, from which progress can be measured. It is, therefore, not an isolated statement but rather a continuing process of evaluation and measurement of progress towards a stated goal, providing a constant stimulus to action and coordination. Finally, the policy must be cohesive, expressing clearly how the various components relate to each other and providing built-in mechanisms for coordination and continuity of action.

The content of any given policy will of course vary with each country, however, certain basic information and fundamental decisions will be common to all situations in developing areas. Data must be available on such indicators as: trends in food production at the national

level, both in terms of quantity and basic components; trends in food availability at the national level (food balance sheets); demographic trends in terms of population size and composition, growth rate and geographic distribution. Secondary information on per capita supplies of calories and nutrients will be available from the foregoing information. Calculations of per capita calorie and nutrient (especially protein) requirements are also essential and thus any deficit or excess of supply at the national level can be identified. This data indicates national averages, however, and does not provide information on regional and local conditions. Household dietary intake surveys are essential for providing such information and sufficient resources should be identified so that these can be carried out regularly on representative population samples.

Data concerning actual population nutrition status is also required to define the health problem resulting from inadequate food intake. Such indices as mortality and morbidity from nutritional disease and indicative infectious diseases, should be assembled. Prevalence rates of malnutrition obtained from local health services and hospitals help to identify problem areas geographically and regional anthropometric patterns also provide useful supporting information. Any other relevant information collected through reporting systems of local agencies that will help to define the actual magnitude and structure of the problem should also be utilized.

On the basis of this information, food needs can be defined, at least on a national scale, as well as assessment of available supply and the effect of nutrition deficiency on population health. These defined needs will, in turn, suggest a range of potential solutions for decision. In the event of food deficits, an adequate food supply must be generated through appropriate government action. The selection of optimal foodstuffs to meet nutritional needs must be made with care taking into account national and regional dietary patterns, potential for rapid (5-year) increase in supply, production incentives, and demand from both private and public sectors. On the basis of these considerations specific crops and/or livestock can be selected for expanded production. In small populations with limited agricultural resources, the ability to increase local production may be very small and the careful selection of appropriate imports may have to be made instead. In other situations, policy will determine the selection of priorities for imports as an immediate measure, and specify import replacement plans through local food production.

By these means a rational decision can be reached as to the optimal foods for increasing calorie and nutrient supply. By the application of suitable government measures, it can be expected that priority foodstuffs would become available at the national and local level at reasonable and stable prices. At this stage, it is important that the consumption of these foods be developed to a maximum for two reasons: first, they will, by design, tend to improve the nutrition status of the consumer and secondly, by maximizing consumption of priority foods, production can be further expanded thus reducing unit cost or alternately reducing the cost of government subsidy to the producer once an established market exists.

Maximization of consumption of priority foods implies active orientation of demand. Traditional methods of nutrition education will support such trends, however, they are time consuming and too broad in scope to generate large scale demand rapidly. Deliberate efforts must be made to popularize the selected food items by means of carefully planned national campaigns using all available media and techniques that will carry a simple message to a large number of people. The approach utilized will vary with the social conditions and the resources of each country. Though this refers principally to the area of effective demand, it is also important in orienting the consumer choice of the indigent groups when, and if, they achieve adequate purchasing power. Furthermore, as the provision of staple foods for indigent groups is also a basic element in a nutrition policy, this type of activity will also prepare these groups for the consumption of the selected staples that will be available to them through assistance programs.

The role of the food industry in population nutrition must also be considered in any policy. Today, in Latin America the food processing industry is relatively underdeveloped. The lack of an extensive internal market greatly limits the volume of output from industry and consequently the unit price of processed foods remains relatively high. The products of the food industry are consumed by the higher socio-economic groups within the country or exported. It may be expected, however, that this situation will change in the coming years. Food technology has developed rapidly in the industrial areas of the Continent. Every day simpler, more effective and cheaper methods of food processing and conservation are available. The development of a food industry tends to stabilize prices by providing a guaranteed market for raw materials and by absorbing these efficiently at time of maximum availability, converting them into stable products of uniform quality. This can do much to reduce market prices and avoid periodic waste resulting from inadequate storage facilities. Though today the greater part of the population of the developing areas, especially the poorer classes, consume unprocessed foods, it is important to realize that this situation will change rapidly especially with present rates of urbanization.

In Latin America today a major segment of the population of developing areas has an income level below that required to purchase sufficient food in quantity and quality to provide for optimal or even basic nutritional requirements. To a certain extent this sector is found in the rural areas, where subsistence farming does at least provide a direct source of food. Even in this case, however, quantitative needs in terms of caloric requirements are often achieved at the cost of quality. High quality protein foods produced by the smallholder such as eggs, poultry and other domestic animals are rarely consumed by the producer. Instead they are marketed in exchange for larger quantities of cereal foods to fulfill bulk and calorie requirements of the family. In urban areas the problem is more serious as the indigent sector does not have a direct food source and suffers correspondingly. The little purchasing power available to the urban poor is often wastefully dissipated

in the wide range of non-nutritious products that are actively promoted through mass media and ubiquitous display.

The social and nutritional problem of indigent groups is not a static one. It is this sector that is increasing most rapidly and forms the major part of the "biological" demand in many countries. Furthermore, the constant and high rate of migration of these groups from the rural areas to the urban centers further compounds the problem of food supply. This segment of the population and its nutrition needs cannot be ignored, nor can it continue to be dealt with through food aid programs from bilateral and voluntary agencies. Any national policy for food and nutrition must take into account realistic approaches for resolving or containing this problem. Rationing systems have been successfully utilized in times of national emergency, however, these do not provide purchasing power. Food stamp programs, by which families below the poverty level receive a specific cash allowance to purchase foods through normal commercial channels or special distribution centers have also been utilized. Other countries have set up government food purchasing programs which supply special outlets with basic foods at minimal or subsidized prices for those in need. Direct distribution of food to indigent families is a time-honored system but presents serious administrative and technical problems and often has unacceptable connotation of charity. It is not the purpose of this statement to explore all possible methods, however, it is important that a specific decision be reached on how to meet these needs and that corresponding responsibility be assigned to a suitable agency.

It is evident that a food and nutrition policy must be flexible expression of intent that is constantly reviewed and, where necessary, modified in accordance with changing conditions. Alterations in world markets and changes in internal consumption patterns may require fundamental changes in food and nutrition policy. Changes in the composition, size, growth rate and geographic distribution of the population will affect biological needs in terms of calories and nutrients. The rise and fall of income levels are also important indicators of changing effective demand. Policy formulation is therefore an ongoing activity and must be carried out by a suitably qualified group of senior technical personnel representing the various agencies that will be involved in implementing it. This group should be appointed at the level of the national planning body as a technical sub-committee to present a coherent orientation on this subject. It should be composed of a senior technical staff from health, agriculture, education, welfare or community development and other relevant agencies. In the interests of working efficiency the membership of the sub-committee should be kept to a minimum consistent with adequate representation of disciplines and agencies.

Today in Latin America relatively few countries have yet established such an organizational unit for this purpose and set up specific procedures for the formulation of a national food and nutrition policy. All countries have some type of economic planning unit and most

have technical staff well qualified in the planning aspects of health, agriculture, education, industry and other fields. The quality of data required for policy formulation may not be optimal in many areas, however, it is available and should be utilized for initial approximation. In due course steps can be taken to improve the quality of data reporting as additional resources become available. Perhaps what is most important in this context is that governments realize that problems of large scale malnutrition in Latin America can be resolved and prevented with relatively limited resources provided that a rational, planned approach is undertaken. The resolution of this important social and economic problem does not necessarily imply competition with the goals of national economic development plans. On the contrary, it is logical to suppose that improvement of the nutritional status of the population may produce substantial economic advantages in terms of reduction in costs of health care and increased productive capacity. (See Annex I.)

The Pan American Sanitary Bureau, in collaboration with other technical assistance agencies, is giving increasing priority to this important subject. A multidisciplinary group including economic, agricultural and health planners was convened earlier this year to discuss this matter and to prepare practical guidelines for governments in the preparation of food and nutrition policies. The report of this meeting is in the final stages of preparation and will be available to Member Governments in the immediate future. (See Annex II.)

The Pan American Program for Health Planning has taken active steps to incorporate the subject in its teaching and advisory program, with the objective of promoting an awareness of the importance of food and nutrition policies and to define the role of the health sector in their development.

The Inter-American Study of Mortality in Childhood has placed special emphasis on the contribution of malnutrition to the cause of death in children under five years of age. Preliminary results indicate malnutrition to be an important component in pre-school mortality and this study should serve to quantify its magnitude and to demonstrate the need for including the evaluation of nutrition status in health statistics reporting.

The proposed Center for the Collection and Analysis of Data in Nutrition for Latin America is in the planning stage and, when it becomes operative, should be able to provide Member Governments with additional technical support for the formulation of policies, and the training of planning staff in this field.

In conclusion, a review of present demographic and agricultural trends in Latin America and the Caribbean indicates that a clearly formulated food and nutrition policy at the national level is no longer a theoretical exercise in planning, but rather an essential tool for

achieving improved health and welfare of the populations of this Continent. As such, all possible efforts should be made on the national and international level to establish policies of this kind and to apply them effectively through existing sectoral programs.

Annexes

SOCIAL CHANGE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY
IN LATIN AMERICA*

Food and nutrition policy. Food consumption constitutes the most basic and clearly defined of all human needs, and is also the most important single determinant of the level of health. It is well-known that the diet of most of the population of Latin America is inadequate in quality if not in quantity. Available calculations of national average per capita calory and protein intake do not justify any confident generalizations on recent changes, but national food balances in recent years (production plus imports minus exports) indicate that the consumption levels of the majority of the population cannot have improved very much, while the consumption of low income strata in a good many countries must have declined. Research now in progress pointing to irreversible brain damage caused by malnutrition among children of pre-school age suggests that the long-term consequences of present food consumption deficiencies may be even more crippling to the development effort than was previously realized.

Food consumption and nutrition might be expected to constitute a sector of public action susceptible to unified policy and programming, comparable in importance to the sectors of education, health, housing and social security. The central objective is straightforward. Highly defined techniques for the quantification of nutrition levels and for measurement of progress toward nutrition objectives have been worked out. Food consumption targets have been included in a certain number of national development plans.

In practice, however, public action plays a less important part in relation to food consumption and nutrition than in relation to several other components of the level of living, and the many public measures relevant to food consumption are nowhere integrated into a comprehensive and coherent policy. This situation is reflected in the weakness and dispersion of efforts made up to the present to assemble the basic informations needed for policy. Data on food production, imports and exports - themselves incomplete - cannot throw light on the nutritional situation of the different population strata under the widely varying local conditions within each country; while many small-scale nutritional investigations have been made, coherent policy would require more systematic and costly surveys.

*United Nations Economic and Social Council: Economic Commission for Latin America

Even in the most highly planned societies public action is justifiably supplementary to the continuing responsibility of the family to find the resources to pay for its food (or to grow it), to choose the foods it prefers within the limits of its resources and to decide what proportion of its income should be spent on food. Meanwhile, the State and to some extent private organizations influence food supplies and consumption through measures as diverse both in content and in purpose as the following:

Nutrition education and consumer information (which may have as objectives not only improvement of the diet but also improvement of the markets of domestic producers of certain foodstuffs).

Legislation setting standards for food quality, handling, labelling additives, etc.; agencies for inspection and enforcement of such legislation.

Subsidized production and processing of certain foods intended to improve the diet of children and nursing mothers.

Public purchase of surplus foods and distribution to low-income families, school children, etc.

Financial and technical aid to food-processing industries.

Price controls (whether to favour producer or consumer).

General subsidies for food production (likewise).

Differential tariff rates for food imports.

Purchases and sales by co-operative or State-managed shops in order to narrow the price gap between producer and consumer.

Technical and material aid to farmers, including agricultural extension; supply of seed, fertilizer and tools; low-interest credits, etc.

Construction and regulation of markets and slaughterhouses.

Promotion of fisheries and fish-product industries.

Land tenure reforms.

Colonization and opening of new lands to cultivation.

Public investment in rural infrastructure promoting the production and marketing of foodstuffs (including irrigation systems, rural roads, electrification, extension of telephone and telegraph networks).

It is enough to list these measures to make it evident that in no country up to the present do they constitute parts of a unified strategy focussed upon the attainment by the whole population of nutritional levels consonant with human well-being and productivity. Many of them are economic in purposes and ways of operating. Others respond to pressures from separate groups of producers or consumers. To their proponents, the impact of many of them on food consumption is incidental. It is likely that in most countries different measures adopted for such diverse purposes as improvement of the balance of payments through import substitution, protection or redistribution of farm incomes, protection of urban low-income strata from rising costs of living, disposal of crop surpluses, protection of organized marketing interests, have directly contradictory or mutually cancelling effects not only on food consumption but also on over-all development.

In particular, most of the Latin American countries have thus far been unable to resolve the contradictions between pressures to raise agricultural prices, pressures to keep food prices low, and pressures to reform agrarian structures through measures likely to have temporarily inhibiting effects on the amount of foodstuffs brought to the urban market.

A partial solution to this apparent impasse might well be sought in the marketing systems, with their typical very wide price gaps between producer and consumer and their wastefulness in terms of the high proportions of foodstuffs spoiled before reaching the consumer. The enormous cities of the region depend on systems for the transport, storage and selling of perishable foods that have evolved haphazardly and insufficiently from the systems appropriate to small centres where needs could be met by produce brought from the immediate hinterland by the producers themselves. A few countries have set up agencies for direct purchases of food crops and direct sales to consumers, and more initiatives of this kind, along with more vigorous support of producers' and consumers' co-operatives, can be expected if the agrarian reform programmes acquire more dynamism. Resistances from the present marketing interests have naturally been strong, and administrative weaknesses have brought some of the new agencies under severe criticism. Whatever the difficulties, however, the State can hardly avoid taking an active role in food marketing.

Within the wider range of policies bearing on food consumption, there is a well-defined area of measures bearing on the use by families of the resources they devote to food. Some low-income groups spend enough on food to obtain an adequate diet, but they distribute these expenditures according to ill-advised traditional consumption patterns. Inquiries among low-income families indicate also that food is often very unevenly distributed within the family; the father gets plenty to eat while the

children are malnourished. ...moreover, the consumer conditioning associated with the present character of urbanization exerts a powerful influence to divert family expenditures to items other than food. The family diet is thus likely to deteriorate even if the family income rises. Nutritional research directed toward means of placing an adequate diet within the reach of low-income families through use of inexpensive domestically produced foods has made a good deal of progress in recent years. Programmes of family education or propaganda through the schools and the mass media for changes in food consumption patterns, however, seem either to have remained on a token scale or to have been too intermittent for effectiveness. In a few instances, publicity campaigns for cheap and wholesome diets have been rendered suspect by their connexion with anti-inflationary measures intended to discourage consumption of more expensive foods that would have to be imported. In general, commercial advertising seems to have played a much more important role than public measures in changing low-income dietary patterns, and the changes have been in the direction of higher consumption of bottled beverages, which have little or no nutritional value, and canned foods, which generally cost more than unprocessed foods of equivalent nutritional value. In some countries, also, it is well-known that consumption of alcoholic beverages diverts an excessive proportion of the resources that could be devoted to food, and at the same time gives rise to a wide range of health and other problems that bear with particular severity on the urban low-income strata.

Allocations of domestic resources for support of nutritional levels through direct food distribution to low-income families have been small in most countries. External aid in the form of food for distribution in this way has attained considerable dimensions, however, and the prospect that the diet of low-income strata will come to depend increasingly on food grants from abroad seems to justify concern, although such dependence is much less marked in Latin America than in other low-income regions of the world. A number of international and bilateral programmes have tried to meet the objections to generalized free distribution of food - as likely to disrupt marketing of domestic foods and induce permanent dependency among the recipients - by using food grants to stimulate the use of underemployed labour on projects that would eventually increase production and consumption of local foodstuffs. In general, however, the practical difficulties of integrating these projects with national policies and adapting them to national administrative limitations do not seem to have been solved very satisfactorily.

To sum up, the wide range of measures relevant to food production, food consumption and nutrition can be brought into a reasonable degree of coherence only within the context of co-ordinated policies for inter alia agriculture, trade, income distribution, and consumer prices; that is, within over-all development policy and planning.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TECHNICAL GROUP
ON FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICY

PAHO/FAO, May 1969, Washington, D. C.

1. Considering the impact produced by malnutrition on the health sector in regard to both its care and its preventive services,

it is recommended that the Pan American Health Organization stimulate the mobilization of the Ministries of Health of the countries of the Region, in order that they may contribute to the promotion of overall solutions in this field, and to the setting-up of a multi-disciplinary technical group, functioning at the highest levels of the public administration in national planning offices, to assume responsibility for establishing a clearly defined food and nutrition policy. This group should consist of technical representatives of the planning units of the various sectoral agencies involved.

2. Considering that it is necessary to define more clearly, through the existing systems of health data reporting, the impact of nutritional status on general mortality and morbidity in each country,

it is recommended that the national statistical and health planning units give special attention to improving their system of data collection with a view to accurately determining the size and structure of the malnutrition problem, particularly in the population under five years old.

3. Considering that, though food balance sheets represent important indicators of the nutritional situation, most of the countries of the Region do not prepare them regularly or prepare them with inaccurate and/or incomplete data,

it is recommended that all the countries of Latin America make a special effort to prepare each year food balance sheets based on reliable data and publish them promptly. The specialized agencies of the United Nations should assist national statistical units in accomplishing this task.

4. Considering that the carrying-out of food consumption surveys, at the regional level, on representative samples of the population is indispensable for clearly determining the levels of consumption in the different socioeconomic strata, and for relating them to their nutritional status,

it is recommended that the countries entrust a specialist agency or unit with the task of conducting such surveys regularly every three to five years; and at the same time that the specialized agencies of the United Nations establish simple procedures for conducting these surveys rapidly and inexpensively, utilizing the modern systems of data processing which are available.

5. Considering that the formulation and implementation of a food and nutrition policy requires the active and coordinated participation of specialists in various disciplines, particularly from the health, economic and agricultural sectors, and that for this it is necessary to establish the highest possible degree of understanding between the professional staff concerned,

it is recommended that at the school of medicine and public health of Latin American universities elementary courses in general economics be instituted as a part of the study program on food and nutrition; and also that at the schools of agronomy and economics of these universities instruction on human food and nutrition be introduced.

6. Considering that the formulation of a national food and nutrition policy is an essential step in planning measures for preventing malnutrition and improving the nutritional status of the population, and that hitherto few countries have taken this essential step, owing either to lack of conviction or to ignorance of how to carry it out,

it is recommended that the United Nations specialized agencies which have sponsored this meeting (PAHO and FAO), in cooperation with other interested agencies, sponsor a multidisciplinary Latin American conference on food and nutrition policy in the Region, so that the specialists in development planning, together with the specialists in health, agriculture and other related fields, may consider and determine the most suitable procedures for implementing a food and nutrition policy in their respective countries.