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Food and Population: Priorities in Decision Making

Report of a Meeting
of the International
Conference of Agricultural
Economists, Nairobi, August 1976.

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J.P. Bhattacharjee in reply

I must express surprise at the lack of intervention in this discussion by the authors of the case studies. The main conclusions of these studies have not been challenged except in one case, but they will, I hope, be discussed in detail and critically in the Special Sessions.

Ram Saran, citing the record level of food grain production attainedin 1975–76 in India, has rightly questioned, indeed challenged, the validity of Dandekar's rather gloomy projection about the likelihood of shortfall below the 1981 target. In support of his argument, Saran has mentioned the improved availability of critical inputs. I agree with his optimistic note as far as the supply and prices of fertilisers are concerned. It is also true that the 1975–76 performance has placed the growth of food grain production back on the trend of the sixties, and this has happened not only in India but also in the developing regions except Africa. It is too early to say whether this improvement will be sustained and whether the second half of this decade will be like the late sixties. However, there is evidence of a likely improvement in the cereals situation as compared to the 1972–74 period. How far the weather will co-operate is, of course, a critical question, especially in view of its unpredictable vagaries in this decade.

Valdés has made the point, which is widely recognised, that the assessment of the food problem, to be meaningful, should take into account the balance of payments situation of the countries, apart from their food deficit. Attempts to develop a typology for this purpose and classify countries are being made by WFC (the World Food Council) and FAO. In fact, WFC at the last meeting agreed in principle to the concept of 'Food Priority Countries' and recommended that the criteria for classifying such countries be further developed. Judging from the criteria and classification presented by the WFC secretariat, it is clear that the number of such countries will be large, the tentative number being forty-three out of more than a hundred developing countries. We should also keep in mind that the balance of payments deficit plagues all non-oil producing developing countries and there is arbitrariness in categorising its gravity.

The need for fundamental changes in government policies on mechanisation, research, prices and credit has been emphasised by a number of speakers and I have stressed these in my paper. I fully agree with Valdés about the desirability of a balanced approach to the analysis and formulation of price policy for output and input and of clearly spelling out options for decision makers. This is fully in line with my view about the inadequacy and inappropriateness of a limited, partial analysis of price policy and about the need for a systems approach, using simulation

and other techniques to indicate the implications of different policies.

Schultz's point about the importance of better opportunities and higher level of living for farm households in contributing to family planning corresponds fully with the findings of the case studies. I would, in particular, emphasise the role and status of women and their integration in the programmes for farm and commodity development.

Joy's plea for a disaggregated, target group approach in the interests of effective nutrition planning is shared by me and has been covered in my observations on this point in the paper. However, one should keep one's balance and recognise that the food problem has a global dimension and a national dimension.

Johnston has sounded a very timely note of warning about the difficult choices involved in setting priorities among policies and design options for rural development. Indeed, unless choices are faced and decision-making proceeds quickly to the programme level, integrated rural development will face the danger of remaining merely as a slogan.