

Twin War: Hunger and Population

Food production must be doubled
to feed five billion within 33 years

The millions of lives saved by advances in medicine and public health in the last two decades are now threatened by the imminent danger of a world food shortage.

The war on hunger is one that can and must be won, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Dorothy H. Jacobson told the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting. The war, however, will have to be waged and won by the hungry nations themselves.

The most important ingredient in raising any developing country's standard of living is "the determination to gear national policy toward increasing food production," Mrs. Jacobson said. The two government agencies in the United States most concerned with the agricultural level in developing nations are the Department of Agriculture and the State Department's Agency for International Development.

AID's Assistant Administrator, Herbert J. Waters, told the AAAS meeting that AID is giving "highest priority" in its overall program to the problem of helping other nations provide themselves with sufficient food to feed their burgeoning populations. Waters noted that although malnutrition and starvation used to be termed silent killers, this was no longer true. Now, he said, people know that it is not necessary to die for lack of food and this knowledge means that violence can erupt when they are hungry while more affluent countries are well fed.

The crisis of food shortages for such a large part of earth's people is hopelessly interwoven with that of the world's population explosion. The "precarious state" of the world food supply is increasingly a subject of concern, both for the have and have-not nations. The problem is complicated by the fact that the chronically food-deficient areas are also the regions with the greatest population growth rates.

Specialists have found 80 percent of the population increase in the next 35 years will probably occur in the countries where food is most needed, Dr. Frederic R. Senti of the U.S. Department of Agriculture told a AAAS symposium concerned with the world's food supply.

Dr. Senti noted that even though a new food product may appear attrac-

tive from the viewpoint of availability, cost and nutritive value, it serves no purpose if it is not accepted and eaten by the population for whom it is intended. The emphasis of researchers has been on protein requirements, especially for the 350 million children in the one to five age group.

The AAAS symposium was particularly timely because the Food for Peace Act of 1966, passed by the 89th Congress, became effective on Jan. 1. This act amended Public Law 480, passed in 1954, under which the United States has conducted food aid activities for the past 12 years.

The amendments stress three factors, Mrs. Jacobson said. These are the recognition by the U.S. that there is a world food crisis, that this crisis is of "major concern" to peace in the world, and that the war on hunger can be won.

The population explosion, she said, is a product of the 1960s. During the 1950s, the increase in agricultural output ran ahead of the increase in population. Research at the Department of Agriculture has shown that this is no longer true. Specialists looked at production records and the world's need for food in the next 20 years, to find a basis for charting new U.S. policy.

Although it is difficult to estimate population growth or agricultural production, it was nevertheless clear from the studies that the only way to solve the world's food shortage was to help the developing nations help themselves. There are now two billion hungry people whose income is too low to buy the food necessary for adequate nutrition, Mrs. Jacobson said. No matter how much grain or other food is shipped to these countries, distribution problems will prevent most of the life-sustaining products from reaching the tiny villages far from urban centers in which the food is so urgently needed. The USDA studies showed that the best way to feed these people was by improving local agricultural practices to the point where the community could not only take care of its own nutritional needs but have sufficient surplus to sell in neighboring cities.

For most of the past 20 centuries, the world population has increased by only one-tenth to two-tenths of a percent each year. Not until 1920 did the growth rate reach one percent a year,

and this increase fell during the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s and World War II. In the 1960s however, the world population growth rate has jumped to two percent a year, and it is still climbing.

If this rate continues, earth will have a population of some five billion by the year 2000—double what it is now. Babies born this year will be only 33 years old when that time arrives.

The problems of doubling food supply just to keep up in such a short time are formidable, the AAAS panel members agreed. The solution, many believe, will have to be found in effective methods of birth control as well as in increasing food production.

A different kind of attack on the crisis of "undernourishment, malnutrition, hunger, want, starvation and famine" was urged by Dr. G. C. Szego of the Institute for Defense Analyses, Arlington, Va.

This crisis, he charged, will catch up with all nations, whether they are underdeveloped, developing, have-not, have, industrialized, socialized or communist, eastern or western. All countries, he said, "will experience a catastrophe" that will shake our civilization to its very foundations.

Dr. Szego believes that the only way out of the crisis is to use the world's present resources, both potential and existing, with maximum effectiveness. He has found organizational techniques that can be employed effectively, but only on a regional or worldwide basis.

The resources available in making the best use of efforts to combat the problems of overpopulation and malnutrition, Dr. Szego said, are "few in number and very modest in strength." They are trained people to spread technology, innovation and know-how, and money and material.

The many useful programs now underway to alleviate the imbalance between mouths and food are a "luxury" that can no longer be afforded as individual and unrelated projects. The problem is "whole problem and attacking it on a piecemeal basis is doomed to failure," Dr. Szego stressed. He said the three fundamental issues underlying the problem as a whole are the production of food, the limitation of population growth, and the best possible use of natural resources.