The world food problem
National and international aspects

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At the recent inaugural meeting of the World Food Council, Dr Boerma, Director-General of the FAO, announced that in his view the Council's target, to eliminate world hunger within a decade, was unrealistic. The remark caused some consternation. But however appropriate the timing of Boerma's statement, the prediction underlying it has the ring of truth. The nature and magnitude of the problem may change but for as long ahead as we care to look the world is likely to have a food problem.

The nature of the problem
The nature of the problem is difficult to tie down. Hunger and malnutrition are visible in an acute form when some natural disaster interrupts the food supply to a part of the world's population. Such tragedies are familiar through the coverage of press and television; indeed, awareness in the rest of the world of the frequency of these problems has been heightened by the general improvement of communications. But the speedy relief of hunger in emergencies is not in itself at the heart of the world food problem. The more fundamental issue is whether the present system of food production and distribution is adequate to meet the basic nutritional demands of a growing population. After a period of relative complacency, this issue came again into public concern with the apparent shortages of grain following the 1972 harvest. Countries, rich and poor, have been forced to reconsider their food supply policies, and the international organisations have responded with a flurry of diplomatic activity centred on but not restricted to the World Food Conference of November 1974. This article attempts to discuss the choices open to governments at a national and an international level to ensure adequacy of food supplies.

Among students of the food situation there is no complete agreement as to the nature of the problem. Two major lines of thought compete for attention. To many, the problem is one of insufficient production of food. Investment in agriculture must be increased and population growth restrained. Food consumption in affluent countries may have to be cut back, and any policies which increase output in those areas are of positive benefit to the world in its struggle to feed itself. But the main plank of the 'production' approach to the food problem is the need for an increase in output in developing countries themselves. The other main line of argument holds that the food problem is one of the distribution of foodstuffs which are of themselves adequate in supply but unevenly available. People who hold this view propose a number of remedies ranging from increasing
international food transfers through aid or trade to radical changes in the structure of the ownership of land and other assets and in the control of food marketing. The 'distribution' approach implies that the indiscriminate push for more food production will not solve the problem and may even make it worse.

Those who take a production-centred view of world food problems have relied heavily on aggregative projections of future output and demand. It is relatively straightforward to take the balance between the growth in world production of food and the increase in population over the past few years and hence to calculate what additional output will be needed to maintain or increase per capita availability of basic foodstuffs in the light of the expected demographic trends. Such an exercise was carried out for the intergovernmental meetings preparatory to the World Food Conference in 1974 by the FAO Secretariat in Rome. Per capita production of food was found to have risen by about 1.1% per year over the period 1952-62, and by about 0.8% per year from 1962 to 1972. The document comments that 'the fact that for so long a period food production has kept ahead of a rate of population growth that is unprecedented in world history is a tremendous achievement'. This favourable trend was broken in 1972 and again in 1974 as a series of misfortunes hit the world's agricultural economy. But the FAO found the outlook not too daunting. Population pressure was expected to raise demand for foodstuffs by 2.0% per year over the period to 1985, with perhaps another 0.4% annual increase due to a rising standard of living. Alternatively, if it followed the trend of the period 1961-73, would increase annually by 2.7% and be more than adequate to meet the demand growth of 2.4% per year.

Global projections of aggregate food output and demand based on past trends are by their nature somewhat undramatic. The types of projections that introduce novelty do so by placing some physical constraint on the food system. It is easy to find a food shortage by introducing a limit to the availability of fertiliser or by postulating a ceiling to the yield of grain. Economists and planners are, of course, in need of advice from agricultural scientists as to the extent to which we are approaching biological constraints on plant and animal production, and we must monitor any changes in world climatic conditions which might make recent growth more difficult to sustain. But there does not appear to be sufficient evidence at the moment to suggest that the next few years will bring problems of a different order of magnitude to those that we have faced in the past.

Food production will increase to meet both population pressure and the improvement of diets, but the case for exceptional production-increasing measures over the next few years is hard to support with historical statistics.

To those who emphasise the distributional aspects, the anatomy of the world food problem is not to be found in such global forecasts of food production and demand, nor in demographic trends, raw material scarcity, technological slow-down, and climatic shifts. The problem is much more straightforward. A large proportion of the world's population are born into poverty. And though by no means all the poor are undernourished, it is among them that malnutrition and hunger is found. The poor are, almost by definition, outside the mainstream of economic activity. This fact alone presents a major difficulty in finding solutions. The magnitude of the problem is itself
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quite manageable. A recent estimate has suggested that as little as 25 million tons of cereals, distributed to those in need, would close the basic nutritional gap. Even if the true figure were five times that amount, the target could be met within a decade with no material effect on the living standards of the rest of us. The difficulty arises because there is no effective way of ensuring that those who need the food would have access to it.

The distribution thesis is not easy to assess in quantitative terms. By definition, any aggregative approach is unsatisfactory: within each country, region, village, or even household there may be cases of malnutrition which go unrecorded in the aggregated data. But both case study and intuition would suggest that maldistribution of available foodstuffs is widespread under a range of economic and social systems. The characteristic of those that argue that distribution is the key to the food problem is that they see the solution in a modification to the system itself, in contrast to the more conservative production-centred approach. The problem becomes as much political as technological. Few would be sanguine about the elimination of these types of problems over the next decade.

What emerges from the debate between these two approaches is a synthesis which recognises the relationship between production and distribution and which allows for the variety of situations in which each individual country might find itself. The following set of statements represents an attempt at such a synthesis in the light of which it is possible to discuss the range of options open to individual governments and to international institutions.

- Within a global framework of food production and anticipated demand, there is no evidence that supply will, of itself, be limiting over the next few years, though significant investment will be necessary to meet demand.
- Underlying the aggregate figures is a problem of uneven distribution of foodstuffs which shows up as widespread malnutrition and undernourishment in areas where incomes are chronically low and among disadvantaged groups even when average incomes are more satisfactory.
- The poor and economically vulnerable groups are at present faced with the additional hazard of bearing the brunt of fluctuations in food prices and food availability arising from natural and contrived conditions.
- In some countries the improvement of the position of these individuals is within the competence of national administrations — international action may be helpful but in some cases it can be thwarted by political rigidities within those countries.
- In other countries, solutions to the problem may depend on international action as a precondition or as a catalyst — even where the will exists within the country concerned.
- Where deprived groups are in rural areas, increases in their own production may be the most effective way of reducing poverty and its associated problems, whereas the urban poor may require different programmes.
- The international community has the responsibility for ensuring that the institutions influencing food distribution make it possible for countries to solve their food problems in the light of their own conditions.

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National strategies

Sovereign states have ultimate responsibility for ensuring their own food supplies and for the distribution of those supplies within their borders. But the possibilities open to individual governments are circumscribed by the conditions in world markets and by their own limitations, such as their stage of economic development, and their ability to earn foreign exchange by exporting other products. Their own strategies are likely then to be a combination of domestic policy initiatives and diplomatic approaches of a bilateral or multilateral character. The final section discusses below some of the multilateral discussions of the past eighteen months: the bilateral or regional developments will not be discussed here though they are in themselves of significance. The first task is to sketch some of the national options that are open to countries to deal with the various facets of the food problem.

Countries naturally differ with respect to their ability to produce food, and, in line with their general level of economic development, in their present level of food consumption. A diagram may help to distinguish various situations. In Figure 1, a range of possibilities with regard to production and consumption levels is illustrated. Superimposed on the axes representing the level of food consumption and food production per person in the population is a line representing self-sufficiency, implying no net trade in foodstuffs, and a line depicting an 'adequate' diet, itself difficult to define, below which a country has a serious problem of malnutrition – even though some people in that country might be adequately fed. This suggests four different situations in which a country may find itself. A country in area A, for instance, is a net importer of food but still falls short of providing adequate diets, on average, for its population. A very few countries may be permanently in this situation, and others may fall into this category at times of food crisis. A country in area B, however, although a net importer, has an adequate average diet: food security problems take on a different guise. Countries in the segment labelled C are in a position of exporting some foodstuffs and at the same time have no immediate dietary problems. If any country were in the sector D on Figure 1, it would be in the somewhat anomalous situation of being self-sufficient yet importing food.

Figure 1. Range of food balance situations for individual countries.
position of exporting food whilst at the same time having inadequate supplies for domestic requirements. This could indeed arise where the nutritional difficulties were due to a very uneven income distribution, but since most countries face the political as well as humanitarian priority of achieving adequate nutrition even before other desirable development goals, such situations are likely to be temporary and the solution is within their own hands.

Countries that find themselves in sector C have an important role to play in the international solution to the food problem, but will in general face internal difficulties of a different sort – the political implications of high food prices or the social pressures to keep a balance between rural and urban economic development, rather than the risk of supply shortages – and will have open to them other weapons such as export controls or supply limitation. Canada, Australia, Argentina, New Zealand, and the USA are obvious examples of such countries. Their chief interest is likely to be in price stabilisation and access to importers’ markets and they will tend to favour international financed aid programmes and perhaps reserve stocks. They are also likely to be to the forefront in the transmission of technology with regard to food production, and will have a direct interest in the maintenance of adequate capacity in supply industries such as fertiliser and pesticide production. By the sheer geometry of Figure 1, production in these countries must be maintained to keep the world at a particular position: in practical terms, the harvest in major agricultural exporters such as the USA is of vital importance in maintaining the balance of the world’s food economy.

A range of countries will find themselves in situation B, from rich industrial nations such as in western Europe and Japan, to countries with a resource base adequate in terms of their population to allow regular imports of foodstuffs. Many of the developing countries in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East would fall into this category. For the rich countries, domestic food policy is typically a compromise between a desire to maintain capacity in their own agricultural sectors for food security reasons and an attempt at keeping down food costs for the predominantly urban electorate. In the past, such food policies have been dominated by farm support measures aimed at presiding over an orderly adjustment in rural areas to new technology. More recently, however, countries have swung towards measures which hold down farm prices to assist in internal economic stability. In international discourse, these countries emphasise market stability measures, such as commodity agreements, but resist attempts to submit their own agricultural programmes to the discipline of either the free market or the international agreement.

The poorer of the B countries face the traditional dilemma of economic development of choosing between agricultural expansion and more rapid industrialisation. Their choice is likely to be materially influenced by the nature of the trading system – the international monetary and commercial arrangements – and their own development objectives. To these countries, the food problem is an integral part of their development plans. Over time, the result of such influences as population growth, technical change, and development priorities will be a shift in their food balance position. In terms of Figure 1, population growth will move a country towards the south-west: economic growth to the north; technical change in agriculture, east; agricultural expansion, north of east; industrial expansion, north.
of west. The further from the self-sufficiency line, the more a country will be interested in the international dimensions of food trade: the further above the 'adequate diet' line, the easier will be the problem of avoiding nutritional deficiencies within the country.

The problems facing a country in A are more serious. Basically, both production increases and an expansion of non-food production are likely to raise consumption by increases in incomes. But the amount of extra consumption may be much less than that of extra production and may still not achieve the nutritional target. If production substitutes for imports then there could be a saving in foreign exchange, but it is unlikely that both the net import displacement is going to be reflected in a true balance of payments advantage of anything like the same magnitude, and that the extra foreign exchange released is going to be spent on food imports. In this situation, a country might have to concentrate on increasing production of food at home that will directly add to domestic availability - rather than substitute for imports - and might feel that food aid or some equivalent direct balance of payments assistance is the most important way that the international community can help them to raise nutritional standards. The heavily populated Asian countries and the resource poor African nations are likely to find themselves in this position either in the long term or from time to time.

Figure 1 also illustrates another facet of food security - the ability to withstand domestic production uncertainties. From a national point of view, a country is in a satisfactory position if it can maintain an adequate level of consumption even when its own production fails. If, for instance, a country in B suffers a drought then its food balance position moves westwards with the reduction in production. With adequate foreign exchange reserves, it could avoid a decrease in consumption per head: if no further foreign exchange were available it would tend to move south-west - reducing consumption along with production - and could possibly fall below the adequate nutrition level.

This sketch needs to be amplified in two directions. First, the 'average' consumption level in each country hides a considerable variation among families within that country. In most situations this variation will be a direct reflection of the inequality of incomes in those countries, though in circumstances where the government is directly involved in distributing food the actual purchasing power of the family may be less important. The policies associated with the improvement of income distribution will have to be tailored in the light of the social and political conditions in individual countries. They range from the radical reallocation of productive assets to the development of education, and from an extension of social services to the introduction of progressive taxation measures. Though there are often international aspects to internal income distribution the division of the world into sovereign states carries with it the implication that the responsibility for the division of national income within a country lies with the government concerned.

The second amplification of the sketch of national food-policy options is of more direct international concern. Countries differ in the extent to which the non-food sector has the ability to earn foreign exchange to buy food imports, and, in the case of food-exporting economies, the extent to which the other sectors require the earnings from foreign sales of food.
Countries in sector A in Figure 1 in particular can find themselves in a situation where non-food exports do not regularly cover the cost of buying food from abroad. For these countries, the food problem takes on its most serious aspect since any diversion of resources towards export industries (which may be agricultural cash crops) will tend to exacerbate food shortages — not because such a diversion may not be a profitable use of resources, but because those resources are devoted to reducing foreign debts rather than increasing food consumption. The dilemma of the choice between rice and jute production in Bangladesh is a prominent example of this situation. It is in these conditions in particular that national attention will tend to be devoted to food production and that the international community will be able to contribute most by providing balance of payments facilities, production requisites, and if necessary concessional imports of food and other basic supplies. For those countries which have adequate diets, the balance of payments position will be an additional determinant of their food-balance strategy: in particular, the level of self-sufficiency will reflect as much the foreign exchange needs and surpluses of the non-food economy as the desired balance in the food sector itself.

This discussion has demonstrated the impossibility of proclaiming any one general solution to the various aspects of the food problem. Since countries which face this problem most acutely have themselves a variety of development needs, the desirable reaction is likely to be a complex one with many elements not all related to agriculture. Food issues are in fact becoming more closely related to general economic and social concerns in most countries of the world. It is the vital but elusive ingredient of 'political will' that sets the pace for a resolution of these issues.

International reactions

The variety of situations in which individual countries find themselves suggests that international action on the food problem is likely to be on a number of fronts. Perhaps the most significant result of the reawakening of concern about the world's food system has been the elevation of what had for some time been predominantly agricultural issues to a higher political plane. Together with other commodity problems, international aspects of the food situation regularly appear on the agenda for meetings of trade, finance, and foreign ministers as well as for discussions between heads of governments. In particular, the United Nations has through its various manifestations devoted more time to food and commodity issues than for many years. The central, but by no means the only, focus of this concern was the World Food Conference of November 1974 — together with the intergovernmental meetings which took place in preparation for the Conference itself and the deliberations subsequent to the Conference in pursuance of its resolutions. Since most of the major food issues emerged during these discussions they provide a convenient framework within which to assess the reaction of the international community. The Conference itself demonstrated both the difficulty of treating problems of food outside the web of political relationships in general, and also the extent to which ideas, once they have graduated from being gleams in the eyes of international organisations to become political commitments of powerful governments, can be put into commission with commendable speed.

6 It seems likely that most food importing countries with inadequate diets will also have balance of payments problems: just as food exporters can raise nutritional standards by keeping food at home, so importers with adequate foreign exchange can buy a satisfactory diet for their population. The area for international action in these cases is limited.
The deliberations at the Food Conference centred around three main issues: the first was that of increasing agricultural investment and production, the second was the problem of food security, and the third was the area of agricultural trade. The treatment of the first issue illustrated that officials, largely from within ministries of agriculture, have no difficulty in adopting resolutions urging greater emphasis on agriculture in developing (and indeed in developed) countries. They resolved to devise more effective policies to deal with nutritional problems, to increase spending on research and technical development, and to encourage an expanded programme of investment by international agencies. Without the discipline of a budget, no clear sense of priority emerged. Not that these resolutions or the discussions which preceded them were unhelpful — the meetings of the donors and the recipients of technical assistance were particularly fruitful — but the problems that were being tackled were essentially those that lay within the competence of individual countries in the light of their own situations.

Discussion of the third issue, that of international trade, illustrated the difficulty of pursuing a meaningful debate when a number of countries did not feel that the Conference was the appropriate place for any discussion at all. The Western countries in general, took the view that the most that the Food Conference could do was to endorse on-going work within the GATT, UNCTAD, and the FAO; the developing nations saw the possibility of a further reaffirmation and definition of the concept of the 'new international economic order' first debated at the UN special session on commodities and raw materials. The outcome was a set of compromise resolutions which essentially held the line on agreements already reached in New York, without tackling the substantive issues of trade policy.

It was in the discussions on the question of world food security, that the international community rose somewhat reluctantly to the occasion. ‘World food security’ is the essence of the international aspect of the food problems of individual countries. It relates in part to the monitoring of global trends to give countries advance warning of problems which are likely to arise from shortages of raw materials and inputs into agriculture and to watch investment patterns in these supply industries as well as in agricultural output. Should fears of a slow-down in technology or shift in climate prove well-founded, this monitoring process would enable countries to anticipate the impact on their own investment priorities. And in the shorter term, advance warning of particular production problems gives an opportunity for co-ordinated international action. The Food Conference recommended the establishment of a food information system, located within the FAO secretariat, to deal with the short-term problems, and the ongoing work in Rome on global projections is designed to handle the longer-term questions. Not that even a topic like improved information is without its political problems. Many countries either do not have or will not reveal information on crop prospects and carryover stocks. The Soviet Union, in particular, has always argued that detailed information on its production levels gives a commercial advantage to Western grain companies, though events of 1972 suggest that inadequate information rebounds most heavily on those who enter the market late only to find the cupboard bare. But the prospects are reasonable for a general improvement in the standard of information on world food supplies.
Another aspect of world food security is the provision of adequate quantities of food aid in those situations where a country lacks the foreign exchange to purchase food imports on commercial terms. The place of food aid in the world's food economy has always been controversial. To some it is an inefficient and potentially harmful way of giving aid, with inappropriate products accumulated as a by-product of overgenerous farm-support policies in developed countries being off-loaded onto developing country markets. This has the effect of either depressing the incomes of local farmers and hence inhibiting agricultural development or enriching a class of merchants in recipient countries who capture for themselves the major benefit of the cheap food supply. To those who take this view, food aid has a limited place in clearly specified disaster relief and perhaps in food-for-wages programmes such as those run by the World Food Programme; direct development assistance would be a more satisfactory alternative to food aid. Others see advantages in a form of aid which takes advantage of the coincidence of surpluses in developed countries and food shortages in developing nations to bypass the regular trade channels. Direct balance of payments assistance might be conceptually better, but would be less politically acceptable in donor countries and less direct in its impact on food availability in recipient countries. The discussion on food aid at the World Food Conference led to a moderate view that such aid was useful primarily to those countries with severe balance of payments problems but that it should be made available by donors on a more secure basis. Countries would indicate their willingness to provide food aid over a period of perhaps three years specifying the quantities available, rather than making decisions on an appropriations basis. A paradox of food aid at present is that at times when it is most needed, when supplies are short and prices high, accumulated surpluses in exporting countries are either sold on foreign commercial markets or placed on domestic markets to keep consumer prices stable. A forward quantity commitment for food aid ensures that it is available when most useful.

A related implication of the agreement to fix food aid targets in advance is that donor countries undertake implicitly to hold such stocks as may be necessary to cover food aid shipments. This removes much of the need for an international grain reserve which several people have suggested as an integral part of the food security system for developing countries. The same reasoning was partially behind the rejection of the idea put forward at the Conference for a special emergency food reserve, for if countries have in mind when setting their own food aid targets the occasional need for emergency relief, it becomes unnecessary and somewhat cumbersome to isolate a special grain bank to be kept against emergency. Some strengthening of the World Food Programme, which has a facility for disaster relief, was all that was felt desirable.

The question of reserves raises its head in another context. An important aspect of food security is the ability of countries to use the possibilities afforded by international trade to offset fluctuations in their own production. This aspect of trade has tended to be neglected in favour of the more obvious role of enabling countries to attain a higher standard of living by specialisation. But it effectively means that so long as trade channels are reliable a country does not have to engage in expensive reserve policies of its own. Trade is made less
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reliable by the actions of governments who see control of imports and exports as a convenient way of modifying economic pressures on their own farmers and consumers. This unreliability is progressively worsened as other governments feel obliged to retaliate with restrictions of their own. The resulting chaotic state of trading relationships has two implications which detract from the security of the world's food system. First, it makes trade prices less stable than otherwise would be the case. Clearly prices will change to reflect scarcity and abundance relative to demand. In agricultural goods, notorious for supply fluctuations and subject to little flexibility in demand, these price changes might be quite pronounced. But the price fluctuations we observe are the result of putting excessive burdens on a small part of the market rather than spreading the adjustment over the major part of the world's economy. Much of this leverage is simply due to the fragmented nature of the market itself — in many parts of the world geographical and other barriers preclude effective interaction with other areas — but an important element is due to conscious trading policies of countries which set out to cut themselves off from the year to year price adjustments which natural events require. These policies are predominantly related to domestic price stability whether in the context of free market, mixed, or centrally-planned economic systems, and are implemented both by employing policy instruments which automatically lead to price stability and by making modifications in policy at different stages in the price cycle. Internal price stability is accomplished at the expense of making the rest of the world less secure.

The second undesirable effect of the present state of chaos in world agricultural markets is that it tends to preclude or at least make less attractive those developments and food policies which rely on fuller participation in international trade. In part such policies are unattractive because of the price instability that prevails in world markets. But in addition to this there is also the inherent doubt facing governments, which might otherwise base their development strategy or food supply policy on imports, that the supply of foodstuffs is dependent on the actions of foreign governments, and countries in a position to exploit export markets feel similarly insecure if their foreign exchange earnings depend on benign behaviour abroad. The unreliability of an open trading strategy has led and is likely to continue to lead developing countries into expensive programmes aimed at a degree of self-sufficiency inappropriate to their resource base. Moreover, such self-sufficiency is often achieved only by the importation of inputs such as fertiliser which are subject to other, somewhat different, uncertainties.

The question of reserves is pertinent to both aspects of the unreliability of trade in agricultural goods. To put the matter briefly, the holding of reserve stocks is unlikely to appeal to individual countries acting on their own to stabilise their domestic markets: manipulation of trade flows is in general a more attractive alternative. On the other hand, if a number of important countries co-ordinate their stock policies then this becomes not only a more feasible stabilisation policy for the participants but it avoids the difficulties that each country creates for its trading partners by its 'isolation' policies. But this process of co-ordination brings with it another benefit. Developing nations would themselves be in a much better position to utilise the trade option as part of their agricultural
development strategy not only because the economic power of the major producing countries would be directed towards stabilising rather than destabilising markets, but because the cushion of reserves accumulated in periods of oversupply by the participants would act as a form of guarantee that individual exporters could not effectively withhold supplies for political reasons nor importers close their markets in an arbitrary fashion.

The Food Conference moved tentatively towards such a concept of reserves. It had before it a proposal initiated in 1973 by the FAO for an ‘Undertaking on World Food Security’ which comprised an agreement by governments to hold minimum reserves, in particular of cereals, that together would constitute a minimum ‘safe’ level of stocks for the world as a whole. The Undertaking made no attempt to impose on governments the level of stocks that they should hold, nor did it try to provide any rules for building up or running down these reserves. On the positive side, it encouraged governments to consider their own particular approach to stocks and promised some improvement of information on reserve levels. But against this it tended to reinforce a negative approach to stock management — that one can fix a target level for stocks rather than allow the level to be the consequence of a set of decisions relating availability to expectations. The Conference endorsed this set of proposals but added to them a recommendation that major grain trading countries should cooperate on formulating a more flexible and ambitious strategy for managing reserves in such a way as to even out major fluctuations in the world price for cereals.

The final act of the World Food Conference was to set up a body which could follow through the various recommendations into effective action. Two schools of thought emerged: one stressing that the politics of food had become such that a new high level co-ordinating institution with direct UN authority was needed to enable the various agencies and governments to operate in harmony to tackle the food problem, the other school arguing that the FAO Council already had such a mandate and that no further institution was needed. The World Food Council was born of a compromise between these views. It was to be a high level coordinating body responsible to the United Nations but with a Secretariat located in Rome enjoying strong links with the FAO. The Council met for the first time in June 1975 and reaffirmed its objective to implement the resolutions of the Conference.

One might distinguish three types of international response to a problem: that which arises from a desire to employ diplomacy to further national objectives, that which seeks to use international mechanisms to solve common problems, and that which stems from an altruistic response to the difficulties of other countries. All three are apparent in the reaction to the food problems. Discussions on agricultural trade issues tend to be of the first type, as are negotiations on such topics as private overseas investment, and market power. International organisations provide a forum wherein governments can strike bargains favourable to their economic and political aspirations. As was suggested in the discussion of national strategies, success at the negotiating table for countries or groups of countries is an important way in which individual food supply problems can be alleviated. But progress is likely to be slow and limited by the political constraints of a few major countries. Similarly, international

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discussions which rely on altruism, such as those dealing with development assistance, food aid, and the provision of balance of payments facilities, are condemned to proceed at the pace of the donor. In these two aspects, the prospect for food-short developing countries is not altogether encouraging. Where some progress has been made is in the exploration of joint responses to common problems, in particular that of instability of agricultural output. Developing countries can take some encouragement from the fact that the repercussions of the 1972 grain shortage were of sufficient embarrassment to the major trading countries that risk of a recurrence over the next few years is relatively small. It is a crumb of comfort from the diplomatic activity of the last two years.