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**FOOD CRISIS IN THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES\*****1. RECENT DATA ON FOOD SUPPLY AND DEMAND**

Agricultural and food production is one of the most critical areas in development of the least developed countries. The catastrophic deterioration of the agricultural output in this group of countries has been continuing over the past two decades into the second half of the 1980s. Their agricultural production increased at an annual average rate of only 1.4 per cent in the first half of the present decade as compared to 2.2 and 1.9 per cent in the 1960s and 1970s respectively. In per capita terms it also implies an increasing decline as a result of the steady population growth at the rate 2.6 per cent annum.

Under the circumstances of the least development countries their major target—greater food security—was even less fulfilled since food production recorded a still lower growth than overall production. The average annual growth rate declined from 2.2 per cent in the 1970s to only 1.2 per cent in 1980—1984, attaining an absolute decline in 1984. (Table 1) The growth of production of cereals, roots tubers and pulses declined sharply between the seventies and eighties. In that period only 7 of the 36 least developed countries observed positive growth rates of food production per capita and only two of them recorded rates above 1 per cent (Rwanda and Niger) and for a period 1980—1984 only three countries (Guinea Bissau, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Uganda) showed a relatively good performance in this respect. At the same time, one can observe that production of export crops developed rather well and attained an average annual rate of growth of 4.8 per cent in the period 1980—84. Such a high general indicator was due to particularly sharp increases in the production of coffee, cotton and tobacco although it has to be realized that such a production increase reflected only a recovery to the early 1970s' level.

In the 1970s there were 13 least developed countries where food production grew less slowly than overall agricultural production as compared to 6 countries for which the opposite was true. In 15 countries there

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Table 1

Growth in the agricultural sector in the least developed countries  
(average annual growth rates in per cent)

Country	Agricultural production		Food production	
	1970—1980	1980—1984	1970—1980	1980—1984
Afghanistan	2.5	0.8	2.5	0.8
Bangladesh	2.5	1.7	2.6	1.7
Benin	2.3	3.3	2.7	2.8
Bhutan	2.9	2.5	2.9	2.6
Botswana	-2.8	2.6	-2.9	2.6
Burkina Faso	2.2	0.2	2.0	0.1
Burundi	1.7	0.4	1.8	-0.1
Cape Verde	2.6	-7.1	2.6	-7.3
Central African Republic	1.8	0.7	2.0	1.0
Chad	1.9	-0.6	2.1	-1.4
Comoros	1.8	1.5	2.2	1.4
Democratic Yemen	2.2	2.4	2.8	1.3
Djibouti				
Equatorial Guinea				
Ethiopia	1.4	0.3	1.4	-0.2
Gambia	-1.7	2.1	-1.8	2.1
Guinea	1.3	2.7	1.3	2.7
Guinea-Bissau	1.0	6.8	1.0	6.9
Haiti	1.1	1.6	1.4	1.3
Lao People's Dem Rep	1.7	5.3	1.7	5.3
Lesotho	0.2	-1.2	0.8	-1.5
Malawi	3.5	3.0	2.8	2.6
Maldives	2.5	3.2	2.5	3.2
Mali	3.0	0.7	2.6	0.7
Nepal	0.8	3.2	0.9	3.5
Niger	3.9	-2.3	3.9	-2.3
Rwanda	4.2	2.9	3.9	2.8
Samoa	1.2	-0.8	1.2	-0.8
Sao Tomé and Príncipe	-3.1	2.3	-3.1	2.3
Sierra Leone	1.1	0.0	1.1	0.3
Somalia	0.8	0.0	0.8	0.0
Sudan	1.6	0.3	3.1	-2.1
Togo	1.2	-0.7	1.2	-0.8
Uganda	0.7	4.8	2.1	4.4
United Rep. of Tanzania	1.1	-1.2	2.3	-0.3
Yemen	2.2	-0.9	2.2	-1.0
All Least Developed Countries	1.9	1.4	2.2	1.2

Source: *The Least Developed Countries, 1985 Report* UNCTAD 1D/B/AC.17/25/Ad.1/C/1

were practically no differences in growth rates. Most of the least developed countries in the 1980s have been experiencing higher growth rates for non-food production. However, the major problem remains the same, i.e. the overall agricultural production is growing too slowly.

In recent decades food production has become more and more linked

with livestock development. It has been severely curtailed, particularly in many least developed countries of arid zones of Africa, mostly as a consequence of the drought. It was reflected both in high mortality rate of animals and in decreasing quality of remaining animals in productive and value terms. As a result, national herds have been dramatically reduced.

The unfavourable climatic conditions of recent years have also substantially limited the possibilities for the regeneration of wooded areas and grasslands in the drought-affected countries and it has not allowed to meet even the basic minimum needs for fuel wood.

## 2. IN SEARCH OF CAUSES

The causes of the critical developments in food production in particular cannot be limited to unfavourable climatic conditions and cumulative environmental degradation, most dramatically, desertification, however important they are. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that the basic cause of environmental degradation in the least developed countries is a set of poverty-related needs. It is a consequence of rapidly rising rural population that has been settling in low quality, marginal areas that are vulnerable to weather fluctuations and reduced traditional rotational patterns. This leads in effect to tree and bush cutting, water table falls and finally erosion.

Under these circumstances, poor peasants are short of applicable knowledge how to increase output per household and per acre. This is the result of low allocations of finance and/or personnel to research and extension. The amount of agro-technical knowledge which has been field tested for local ecological conditions and for risk reducing and output raising effects is very limited (*Desertification...*, 1985; Lipton 1985). This becomes crucial factor in longer run in order to achieve a sustained agricultural growth.

The civil disturbances, local wars and conflicts form another part of the complex picture of agricultural output. However, to make it quite clear, both international economic setting and national government policies towards agriculture in their interaction have to be looked at critically in order to understand agricultural and food production weakness in the least developed countries, particularly in African countries most of which are designated by FAO as "worst affected". Since the second half of the 1970s, FAO has recorded food emergencies in as many as 20—30 African countries each year, out of which 10—15 countries have suffered acute food shortages. International food aid has been on an upward trend from around 9 million tons in 1983 to over 12 million in 1986. The least developed countries have received an increasing share of the total food aid from 27 per cent in 1979/80 to 48 per cent in 1984/85. At the same time, the food security position, especially in the least developed

Table 2

Shipment of food aid in cereals (thousand tons in grain equivalent)

Recipient	1979/80	1980/81	1981/82	1983/84	1984/85
World	8 887	8 942	9 140	9 827	11 800
Least developed ctrs	2 383	2 359	2 673	3 820	5 684
Least developed ctrs as a percentage of total	27	26	29	39	48

Source: FAO, *Food Aid Bulletin*, No 2, April 1985; FAO, *Food Situation in African Countries Affected by Emergencies*, Special Report, June 1985; FAO, *Current World Food Situation*, Rome 17-28 June, 1985.

countries of Africa, has worsened dramatically and net external resource inflows per capita have declined substantially. International food aid is attacked for its several weaknesses either real or potential and namely (*The Least Developed Countries*, 1985, pp. 17-18): it lowers prices and therefore reduces incentives to producers as well as to government paying less attention to food production programmes; it creates budgetary dependence by generating local currency through open market sale; it is non-developmental since it transfers foreign consumption patterns frequently to above-average income urban residents. The list might be longer but the dispute can only be solved on the basis of individual cases rather than in general discussion.

The negative impact on increasing or even sustaining agricultural output was also exerted by great deterioration in availability, quality and cost of rural transport as well as access to all the inputs such as water, fertilizers, seeds, pesticides and even implements.

The failure of food production in the least developed countries is also caused in many cases by the lack of adequate governmental agriculture-oriented strategy and lack of incentives for production increases mainly lack of reasonable and coherent price policy. This results in peasants insufficient real incomes and increasing emphasis on food imports. However, in order to put such objections in the proper perspective one has to remember that even production for household self-providing, especially by very poor households, has risen less rapidly than peasant population. At the same time, the decreasing trend of food production cannot be explained exclusively by declining resource allocation and less policy attention to agriculture "although, of course, this does not mean that a better, more coherent strategy and more resource allocations are not necessary for the reversal of this trend (*The Least...*, 1985, p. 8).

### 3. OUT OF THE CRISIS

National agricultural strategies supported by well-defined policies and allocation of resources are vital to achieve sustained food production

growth as a major economic and social target in the least developed countries. It seems that in the second half of the 1980s, a number of the countries of the group have demonstrated a new definite commitment and the increased priority which they are attaching to agriculture in order to step up and/or revitalize its production with particular reference to food production for domestic consumption.

The approaches to solve this problem are different in various least developed countries since they are quite heterogeneous in terms of economic structure, institutions, size, climate, ecology, and policies. Under the circumstances, it is impossible, unwise and unacceptable to work out one universal detailed master plan for all the least developed countries. Although there are common causal factors and problems of agricultural production and deteriorating food balance in practically all the least developed countries the food strategy can only be developed by national experts, well acquainted with local contexts of specific individual countries, since any special policy for the whole group seems to be superficial. One can only indicate major policy areas to be attacked.

Recently, the least developed countries have been allocating relatively greater share of the public expenditure to agriculture than the rest of the developing areas. However, this percentage is still smaller than agriculture's contribution to GDP in these countries. On the other hand, it is also characteristic that the actual spending is in reality much smaller from commitment, which might reflect difficulties in rural investment or a lower priority for agriculture when project cuts are introduced. The above-mentioned commitment "has not always been matched by deeds, even in those countries in Africa which have publicly announced the launching of national food strategies" (UN World Food Council, 1985). They are mainly aimed at a trial to increase producer incentives mainly through appropriate pricing marketing and if possible stock policies. They are to be co-ordinated with an international immediate food aid within the framework of the FAO Plan of Action on World Food Security. International assistance is a must for this group of countries at this stage of development, at least until their government policies become much more effective (see Table 2).

As a part of the new government policies towards agriculture almost half of the least developed countries have lifted ceiling on farm product prices and reduced the role of government agencies in regulating and marketing in agriculture. Some countries such as Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Mali and Niger also reformed ineffective ministerial and parastatal services. In some countries sharp increases in non-food production are observed after devaluation of the local currency. Sudan, for example, managed to reverse the drastic decline in cotton production and almost doubled its output as a result of stronger price incentives to tenants, devaluation of currency, improvement of water, fertilizers, seeds and pesticides supply,

as well as better management of irrigation system (OECD..., 1984). In the early 1980s similar action was taken by the Ugandan government.

In our analysis we still concentrate mostly on improvement of food production and only partly on general agricultural output as well as rural incomes. Achievement of increased food production and elimination of rural poverty are the basic tasks of any rural strategy in the least developed countries, dominated by the poor peasants.

If structural changes and improvements in agriculture of the least developed countries are expected then broad background for this sector must be taken into consideration. Any food production expansion requires special attention to be paid to rural physical infrastructure with particular reference to transport, storage and, in some cases, water control and distribution. The infrastructure should be first of all rehabilitated and if possible developed, taking into account the priority of the peasants' needs. Establishment of such a background should be accompanied by enhanced access to fuel, spare parts, tools and vehicles as well as the relevant field tested research and extension. Development of such an agricultural background, even in the minimum scale, is often unrealistic in conditions of the least developed countries mostly due to the overall scarcity of resources and other pressing economic and social needs facing these countries.

The next major task of the government is to raise or at least limit declines in effective prices to make peasants increase their incomes. Such a policy is almost unrealistic to be implemented without "substantial additional access to external finance on grant or near grant terms" (*The Least Developed Countries*, 1985, p. 12).

Food production and even increase of incomes by rural population in general is not a sufficient target for governments in the least developed countries in order to improve the standard of living in rural areas, since it cannot generate by itself an effective access to food for poor people or vulnerable groups. Such an access should mean for them, above all, the ability to produce more within their own households and to restore their productive capacity to the previous level.

#### 4. EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Improvement of living standards through food production increase in rural areas requires development of basic services, such as drinking water, health, education etc., which are critical to any structural changes. Development of extension service and transfer of knowledge from field tested research to practice are also of vital importance. In Africa, for example, inadequate attention is paid to drought-resistant staples such as millet, sorghum, cassava. On the basis of market or shadow price calculations, there is sometimes a conflict between food crops and non-food crops which could be solved by detailed research only. For example, cotton and tobacco are less

drought susceptible than maize; sisal and cashew grow best in environments which are marginal or submarginal for food crops; bananas/plantains and coffee are symbiotic co-products (East Africa) just as cocoa and turbes are in West Africa. Such a mix of crops is an insurance against disaster and bad harvest. It could be avoided if research and extension is better developed.

An appropriate technology used in rural areas outside agriculture in processing, building, storage, water and fuel procurement has also its vital impact on sustained increases in agricultural production. In most cases it saves time of women and increases output by reducing post-harvest losses and transport costs.

Basic services, environmental protection and rehabilitation, as well as associated technology, should be looked at as part of the complex rural development strategy and not seperately, as it often occurs.

In case of the least developed countries, any point of departure for the stratal solution is an integrated national agricultural and food plan supported by detailed programmes, policies and resource allocations. One of the shortcomings of the present approach is inadequate sectoral planning and testing for viability and applicability to local environment. The principal condition for recovery and permanent structural adjustment is "that both domestic food and export-crop sectors of agriculture grow faster than population" (*The Least...*, 1985, p. 13). Whatever strategy of rural restructuring is worked out, at least the following crucial points have to be taken into account: (a) present and potential overall agricultural production; (b) food crop versus export crop production; (c) food security and in particular greater food production by poor rural households; (d) rural development including basic services, technology, environmental protection, research and extension keyed to domestic food crops with particular reference to drought-resistant crops; (e) agricultural versus non-agricultural rural incomes and the pattern of income distribution in rural areas.

In the conditions of the least developed countries with poor agricultural export prospects and the uncertainty of food aid, the domestic food production is of the vital and central importance in order to achieve economic and social recovery and sustainable development as well as to provide a minimum socially acceptable standard of living for the majority of the poorer strata of the societies.

##### 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

At this stage, development in the discussed group of countries should be rather measured in terms of nutrition and raising the incomes and security of vulnerable groups, particularly in rural areas, and not in terms of production in general or maximization of agricultural profits or investment. Any national food strategy should first of all include rural poverty and

nutrition issues. Any national development plan should stack the questions of types of agricultural production (crops, fish, livestock), types of producers, production regions, systems and production goals (household provision, local or commercial market) as well as available resources. In the second place, an answer should be found how the nutritional and income gains of additional food production will be shared. Other policy measures e.g. in respect to credit and land reform are critical in some, although not in all, the least developed countries. However, the appropriate articulation varies so much from country to country that few generalizations can be made at policy level.

Even implementation of well-prepared food security programmes in the least developed countries does not seem very optimistic in final results. As the UN report indicates: "higher annual rates of total production (say 2.6 — 3 per cent in the 1980s as against 1.5 — 2 per cent in the early 1960s) and of production per farming household (say 4 to 5 per cent in the 1980s as against 2 to 2.5 per cent in the 1960s) would have been necessary to sustain per capita domestic food availability, security, rehabilitation and growth" (*The Least ...*, 1985, p. 10).

As it was proved by experience of the developed countries, one could expect that rural population growth will decline when absolute poverty declines and education, access to food and household security improve. This set of goals is unrealistic to be attained in foreseeable future and the perspectives for the majority of rural population are gloomy even when international food aid is included and reassessed in terms of size and duration.

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