SIGNIFICANT ROLES OF HOME ECONOMICS
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

by Dorothy H. Jacobson*

Home economists attending this conference face a great challenge. In examining your role in developing countries you touch upon one of the major problems, if not the major problem, in the world today. Your potential impact on this problem depends upon whether you do more than touch the subject, whether you face it squarely and contribute your utmost to its solution.

As I see the scope of your profession, it includes concern for the sources and uses of food. It certainly has demonstrated its effectiveness in elevating the role of homemaker and the status of women to one of recognition and of dignity. All that you do is directed toward making the most of human resources in families and in communities. Since all economic development efforts must be directed toward the development of human resources if the result is to be worth while, your profession is a most strategic one. Without the knowledge, the skill, and the ability of your profession, we will not be able to solve the major problem that the world faces today.

This problem involves the race between population and food supply. It has recently appeared in the headlines -- attracting more attention and arousing more concern than at any time since Malthus first predicted that population would outrun the world's supply of food.

Quite recently Raymond Ewell, the vice president of New York State University, declared that if present trends continue, the world will face within 10 years a famine of catastrophic proportions, a famine the like of which has not been known before. We have had famines in history when millions died, but never when billions were threatened. Recently Gunnar Myrdal, the well-known Swedish economist, forecast the same kind of dire consequences in a speech headlined throughout this country.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is very much concerned about making effective a freedom-from-hunger campaign that will forestall these dire threats. To this end it has published many facts available on the extent of hunger and malnutrition in the world. These show, for example, that two-thirds of the world's population lives in countries where hunger

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and malnutrition are prevalent; that in these countries perhaps 50 per cent of the pre-school children are suffering so badly from malnutrition that it seriously handicaps both their physical and mental development in ways that scientists now believe may be irreversible even if the children get better nutrition in later years. These are just some measures of the dimensions of the problem.

These facts seem paradoxical to us in the United States, who have lived for decades with agricultural surpluses. We are still plagued with the paradox of surplus and scarcity. We ask ourselves why this should be and how it can be remedied. But the reason, of course, is simple to state. The consumption of food depends on two things: first, on the need, and, second, on the ability either to produce or buy. The ability to produce or buy food needed in the developing countries -- the ones where hunger is common -- depends upon their over-all development.

I don't happen to be quite as pessimistic as those whom I cited earlier. I shall try to tell you why. But in saying that I am not quite so pessimistic, please do not conclude that I think the problem is not serious. We in the U.S. government agencies concerned with the problem have been studying intensively for many months what our policy ought to be in the face of this potential crisis in world food supply. Should we plan to produce more, now that we have 50 or 60 million acres taken out of production? And if we produce more, can we produce enough in the years ahead? And if we can, should we plan to supply this food in the form of aid? We hope to come up with some answers. Whether we can do this, or should do this, depends upon a number of things.

Whether we can supply the gap in the world needs for food 10 years from now depends in part upon whether we can finance the shipping of the vast quantities of food that will be needed. It also depends on whether countries that need this food have the facilities to receive it, to transport it, to store it, and to utilize it. Only a few months ago the intensity of the problem was dramatically illustrated to us in the Department of Agriculture. You may remember that we had a shipping strike. India is so dependent on the wheat constantly being shipped under our Food- for-Peace Program that if the ships fail to come in one week, food riots threaten and people hoard. I am not now talking about the speculator who hopes to make profits out of somebody's hunger; I am talking about the little guy who reads that ships are not being loaded in America and who tries to buy two week's rice instead of one week's rice, with the result that supplies are exhausted. Last spring the people in the Department of Agriculture who are concerned with these things worked late at night to try to find ships somewhere on the sea, loaded with wheat, ships that could be diverted to India. They promised to replace the wheat to the areas where the ships were originally going after the shipping strike was over. So you see the problem of facilities is serious.
Some Generalizations on the Food Situation

We hope to come up with the most helpful and constructive answers that we can find. However, certain things are clear:

1. In most of the less developed world, per capita production of food is not keeping up with the rapid increase in population.

2. Regardless of how great the U.S. food supply may be and how great our productive capacity is, food aid is not the final solution. Neither the United States nor the countries that receive our Food for Peace ($14,000,000,000 in the past 10 years) want the permanent solution to be a permanent dependence on some other country. While Food for Peace can help in the interim, it is not the final answer.

3. The demands for food will increase faster than the population -- and they should: as incomes increase in the developing parts of the world, the first new demand is for food. Now this wouldn't happen here. Most of us eat too much already; and if our incomes doubled, we might buy twice as many cars or clothes, or houses; heaven forbid that we should eat twice as much food! But this is not true in the countries where the majority of the people are hungry. When incomes rise a little in such countries, demand for food increases. Thus they need and should have more food per capita than they have now.

4. We need to be concerned with the quality as well as the quantity of food. There are millions of people in the world today whose diets furnish enough calories, but who are being physically and mentally harmed because such diets do not provide enough protein. In this connection, health authorities now say that most important for the health of the world -- more important than fighting disease -- is the raising of the level of nutrition of pre-school children in many areas. And yet, one of our best experts on protein foods commented the other day that the world is now wasting as much vegetable protein as the total protein consumed. Through modern science and technology vegetable protein can be fortified to make it nutritionally about equal to animal protein.

5. The real solution must lie in the ability of the developing countries themselves to increase their own agricultural productivity and to upgrade their own rural communities. However, during the time that we try to reach the goal, food aid of the kind we have in our Food-for-Peace Program will be absolutely essential.

This problem of providing enough food for the world's people is a problem that we must solve. To achieve victory for humanity we must win this race between population and food supply. We must do this -- if only because we can. For the first time in history, the revolution of science and technology has progressed so far that the door is open to an age of abundance. This has never been true before. Since civilization began, and before, men and women have tried hard to gain enough food to live. First families and then tribes and then nations have fought for fertile valleys, for places that could produce food. For the first time in history this is not necessary. Moreover, we can have abundance in many other fields; I am highlighting food because it is the most immediately urgent.
We have seen this abundance in the United States in agricultural commodi-
ties. We have seen the Secretary of Agriculture being cartooned as a little man
with his feet sticking out from under a big stockpile of grain. We have seen
and heard these surpluses regarded as evidences of something wrong. Few
of us realize that our surplus capacity in industry is increasing too. It hasn't
increased as fast as in agriculture and it manifests itself differently. Surplus
productive capacity in steel at times has been far greater than our surplus capacity
in agriculture. But this is not evidenced by stockpiles of steel; it only results in
unemployment. If industry doesn't find markets, it lays off workers. I would
suggest that if anything is more indicative of failure in an affluent society than
stockpiles of grain, it is a surplus of human beings, trying unsuccessfully
to find constructive work. We are fighting both of these problems here, and
they illustrate the possibility of abundance that scientists tell us could be
achieved.

Just think for a moment what the achievement of abundance would mean in a
rational society and in a rational world. The new discoveries, the great new
power that has come into the hands of men in the past few years, can be used for
good as well as for evil. The same power that can destroy cities can light a
million homes. If we knew how to organize ourselves so as to make the most of
this abundance we could have the kind of rational world in which machines would
perform all the monotonous tasks and the drudgery, and men and women would be
free to pursue those tasks and to try to achieve those things of which we can
never imagine a surplus -- education, recreation, the arts, and culture. That
would really be a Great Society.

The physical sciences have done their part. It's up to the social sciences
and education to catch up. And the biggest roadblock, of course, is ignorance.
The ignorance today is not of the physical sciences, but of how to use the new
knowledge. There is ignorance not only on the part of those in some countries
who don't know how to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before --
but ignorance on the part of the statesmen, politicians, educators, and leaders in this country and other countries. There is ignorance of how to go about
to achieve what is possible. This is our challenge!

The Role of Home Economics Leaders

Now let's consider your role as leaders in a profession deeply concerned
with human well-being, a role so essential that without it we cannot meet
the challenge that I have tried to picture. I can't give you a blueprint as to
how to fulfill this role; you know much more about it than I do. But I would
like to suggest several approaches that could help you draft your blueprints
for meeting the challenge.

Adapting to Rapid Change

First, I think we need to remind ourselves and recognize the demands that
are called for by the accelerated rate of change taking place in the world
today. When I say that the social scientists, the social engineers, haven't
caught up with the physical engineers, I am referring to that tremendous rate of change.

Let's try to picture how great this acceleration has been in our lifetime. If you are like me, you have difficulty visualizing thousands of years. But most of us (some of us too clearly) can recognize 50. Thus if you compress the 50 thousands years of which we know something about the development of man on this earth into 50 years, we can get a picture of the kind of progress made.

We know practically nothing about what happened in the first 40 years of this 50-year lifetime. But 10 years ago the most advanced men in a few parts of the world were beginning to come out of their caves, were building crude shelters, and, in cold climates, were beginning to use the skins of animals for clothing. About five years ago, 45 years having passed, the most advanced of men, in only a few parts of the world, were beginning to learn to write. We have records going back five years.

Only two years ago was the advent of Christianity. The industrial revolution, which we look at as having brought about our modern society, came six or seven months ago (49 1/2 years having passed.) Six or seven weeks ago we got the automobile and electricity. Last week we got atomic power.

Now you are economists enough to draw curves. A curve of this progress would go up very slowly for a very long way, and would shoot up abruptly at the end. It would clearly demonstrate that changes have never taken place so fast in the world before. One of these changes is the potential for abundance. The old rules of scarcity that have developed through the centuries may not be valid in an age of abundance.

Let's get a little more down to earth. Perhaps the old systems of extension education need not only to be adopted but adapted to the rapid changes that are taking place today. I would like to insert here how greatly I regard the extension kind of education that you have developed.

I will never forget the first trip I took into an underdeveloped country. I was talking to a leader in one of those countries who said, "We appreciate the money you send us (and it has been considerable); we appreciate the food you send (and that, no doubt, had prevented a lot of hunger); but the best thing you have sent us is the idea of your extension system. And we have appreciated this so much (he proudly told me) that we are now providing transportation for our extension workers -- half of them now have bicycles."

Reaching the Masses

A second approach to which I think attention should be called is the recognition that this problem of making abundance available to all, or more immediately of providing enough food to prevent dire consequences, will be
solved only if millions, yes, billions, of ordinary people are reached. Important
as it is, higher education is not enough. We must learn how to reach the people,
the billions of people in the barrios and in the villages, and most importantly,
how to reach into their homes. This is where I think your profession is needed
very greatly.

A home economist told me of a village where workers had tried very hard to
teach mothers to boil water. Fuel was somewhat scarce and you really had to
convince a mother that boiling water was worthwhile in order to get her to do
it. Some bright young person got an idea; she got a little glass marble, a little
agate, and gave it to one of the mothers. She said, "if you put that in your
pot and boil that little magic marble for 20 minutes, your babies won't get sick.
The mother boiled the magic marble for 20 minutes and the babies didn't get
sick. I thought when I heard this, "How clever!" But I was startled to learn
that somewhere higher up the person who had conceived this idea was severely
reprimanded. "You don't teach this way; you must not; they have enough myths
as it is; they have enough ideas that aren't so. Don't teach them any new
myths or magic!"

The question that faced those workers was: What do you do? Do you
Teach them another myth or do you let the children die? We need all kinds
of research to develop a good, all-purpose food that can be produced cheaply
enough to correct this protein malnutrition; we also need research, help, know­
ledge, and guidance as to how to adapt these foods to the tastes, customs, and	taboos of the people that need this help. Most of all, it seems to me, we
need to know more about how to reach the millions of mothers who care for the
children who need the food.

Influencing U.S. Policy and Public Opinion

Thirdly, and perhaps a little closer to home, I would like to suggest that
you recognize and accept a role which you can fill as leaders in influencing
policy and public opinion here in the United States. You are all leaders in your
communities. I think we seldom recognize how much public opinion is influenced
by the attitudes of the homemakers, and how much it can be influenced by you.
If the United States accepts the challenge to try to avert the crisis that could
come in the decade or so ahead government policies geared to that end will be
required. Sometimes people who are charged with drafting and formulating
the government policy come up with ideas that they believe would solve the
problem, only to find that the American public does not accept them, will
not support them and stand up for them. To get the United States to adopt
the right kind of policy, the most constructive kind of policy in circumstances
like this, demands the support of public opinion that only leadership like yours
can bring about.

I have often illustrated this need by recalling the days when I used to be
in the peaceful job of teaching political science. At registration we sat next
to the teachers of physics. This was shortly after the end of World War II,
and during the quiet moments between the rushes of registration the physics pro­
fessors would chide us political scientists. First they said, "You haven't
got a science (and I would certainly agree to that)." Secondly, they asked a question that has long been asked by thinking people: "Why is it that the physicists were able to develop an atomic bomb and the political scientists and the statesmen of the world have not been able to bring about a society in which that bomb is safe?" They suggested that it was probably because the physicists were smarter than the political scientists and the statesmen.

I wouldn't argue that point, but I did suggest that there was a much more important reason than that. It didn't matter to the people on whom that bomb dropped whether they understood nuclear physics; it doesn't matter to the millions of people who are saved today from malaria and other diseases whether they understand anything about the medical and scientific wonders that have been accomplished. But to create the kind of political, economic, and social conditions in government policies that will enable us to turn that nuclear power into good and instead of ill -- this requires the understanding and support of millions of people in a democratic country like ours. And this is why influencing public opinion is so urgent that it must, in my opinion, be considered by leaders in all fields. In your field you are specifically concerned.

In accepting this role of leadership and accepting this challenge you will be involving yourself in one of the most important, the most challenging, and the most exciting conquests of any new frontier ever encountered in this world's history.

It is probably true that the whole history of the next century will be determined by the way by which the developing countries can enter into an industrial age, into the age of abundance that science and technology have made possible. What can be done has been determined by the scientific and technological advance already achieved. What will be done in the years immediately ahead will be determined by the educators, the molders of public opinion, the people, the statesmen, and even the politicians--but particularly by the educators.

If we achieve what can be done, we can help to usher in an era of abundance that will make possible both peace and freedom. We can have in the United States, and in the world, a really Great Society.