

World grain production can no longer feed the human race

by Rosa Tennenbaum

The world food situation stands at a turning point. At the World Food Conference in 1974, it was still formulated as a goal that “within 10 years no human being should go to bed hungry,” and agricultural policy was to be oriented toward achieving that. Today, 15 years later, we are further than ever from that goal. World agriculture has been destroyed to such an extent that it is now threatened with losing the ability over the long term to feed a growing world population. Step by step, agriculture in the important producer nations of the world has been driven into bankruptcy, and its productivity deliberately lowered, while hunger and misery have constantly increased, especially in the developing countries.

Between 35,000 and 50,000 human beings die of hunger each day, among them 14,000 children under age five, according to information from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Hunger alone killed more human beings in the past two years than both World Wars combined, and yet politicians and bureaucrats continue to talk about agricultural overproduction and the necessity to “clean up” the world agricultural market with measures to reduce production. The FAO has been demanding since the middle of last year that grain cultivation must be drastically expanded if we want to prevent a “food catastrophe.” Nevertheless, agricultural land lies fallow, and the supply of food is artificially made scarce.

Of the 5 billion human beings that now constitute the world population, not even one-third, only 1.5 billion, are well fed, according to FAO figures. Approximately 1.8 billion humans are “sufficiently” nourished, that is, there are sufficient calories available each day for them so that they can perform regular work, but their dinner tables are anything but luxuriously supplied. One-third of the world population, 1.7 billion human beings, are ill-fed or undernourished. Their number is growing daily, thanks to the agricultural policy of the developed sector (see **Figures 1 and 2**).

In the book *World Agriculture to the Year 2000*, the FAO projects what the world food situation will look like in the year 2000, extrapolating the growth and development data from the years 1965-85 for the different countries and cultivation areas. Although the best years ever for world agriculture fall within that time period, the food situation before the turn of the millennium will hardly improve under the present circumstances.

The human beings in the world’s hunger belt, to a large

extent, have no opportunity to shape their own lives, to work productively, and keep themselves physically well. Chronic undernourishment devastatingly determines the course of daily life for one in every three citizens of the Earth. Approximately 500 million human beings are condemned to make do with the so-called minimum level of existence, that is, between 1,400 and 1,700 calories per day. They find themselves in a state of perpetual fasting in a very warm climate, in which they can maintain sheer survival only through complete idleness. They are condemned to total inactivity—they have too little food to live, but too much to die.

Genocide and the food cartels

In light of such conditions, the agricultural policy of the major producer countries can only be characterized as a means of genocide. It is designed to drastically reduce the production of food and consciously increase the rate of hunger and starvation in the world. Simultaneously, the policy forces concentration of production, processing, and distribution of food into a few interconnected firms, and additionally serves to develop and deploy the supply of food as a weapon against countries and peoples. Present agricultural policy is conscious genocide.

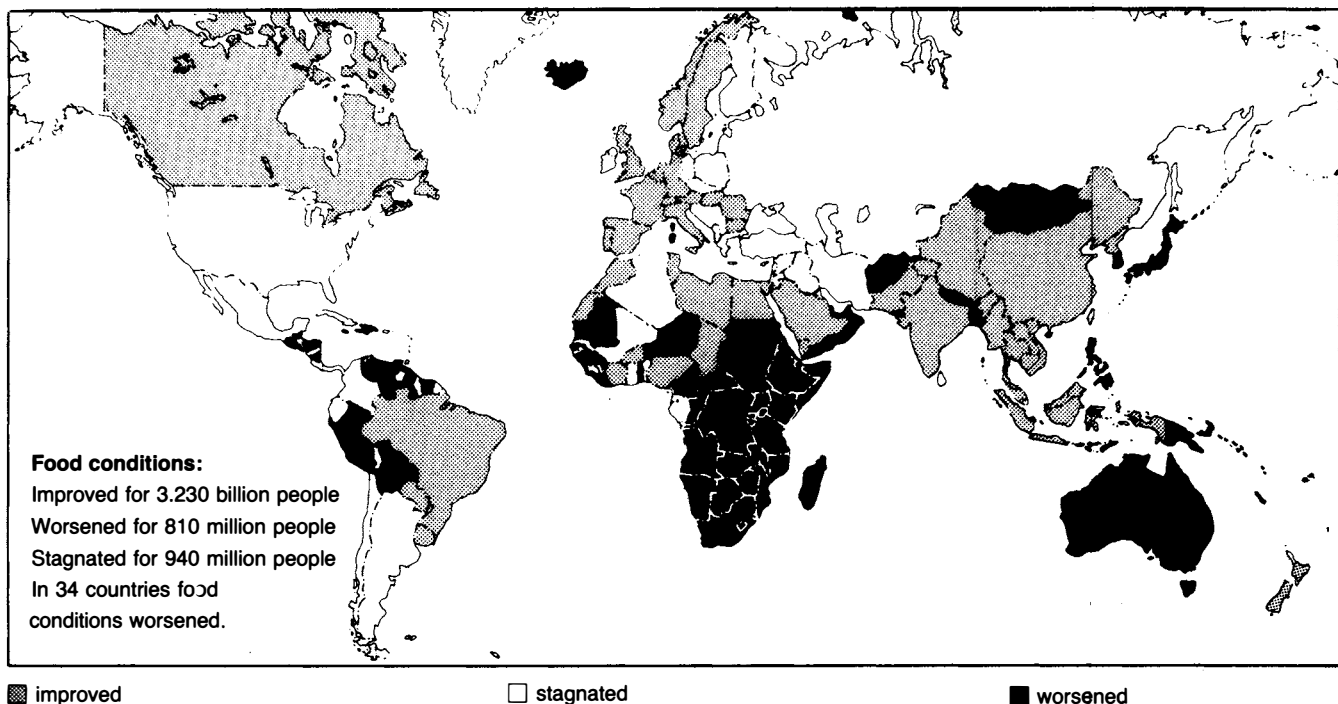
In the present report, we attempt to portray how present agricultural policy affects harvest yield and what its effects are on world nutrition. In so doing, we will restrict ourselves to grain, the central factor in human and animal nourishment. Grain is still “our daily bread,” even if less bread is eaten in the developed countries and the need for grain has decreased since the days of our forefathers, and although this is not the case in the developing countries today. However, our indirect consumption of grain—that is, the grain that we eat in the improved forms of meat, milk, and milk products—has increased many times over. An individual in the developed part of the world easily consumes, on average, 1,500 pounds of grain per year. An individual from the developing countries has available, in contrast, only approximately 660 pounds per year, and that is decreasing.

Grain production must double now

The highest grain harvest in world agriculture, 1.862 billion tons, was recorded in 1986. In both of the following years, the grain harvest decreased, and predictions for this year give rise to the fear that this trend will continue. It is

FIGURE 1

The per capita production of world food between 1976-78 and 1985-87



already absolutely certain that, even with optimal weather in the important cultivation areas of the world, the new harvest will not suffice to refill the gaping hole that resulted from the drought last year, which destroyed important parts of the soya and grain harvest in North America.

To sufficiently feed 5 billion human beings, we need approximately 3.5 billion tons of grain (including rice) per year (see **Figure 3**). World agriculture cannot produce even half that much, and the productivity of agriculture is sinking as the result of the compulsory measures decreed by politicians and bureaucrats, while the rate of those who die from hunger and malnutrition is further increasing. To keep fertile acreage fallow for no reason, other than that a few jaded city dwellers long for the wild flowers and birds of open fields, is, under the circumstances, worse than irresponsible. Taking a hectare of land out of production has deadly consequences. For every hectare of land cultivated under grain which by policy is mandated to lie fallow, there will be no food for 14 human beings. For every hectare that is no longer cultivated in North America, approximately 8 human beings in the Third World must go hungry.

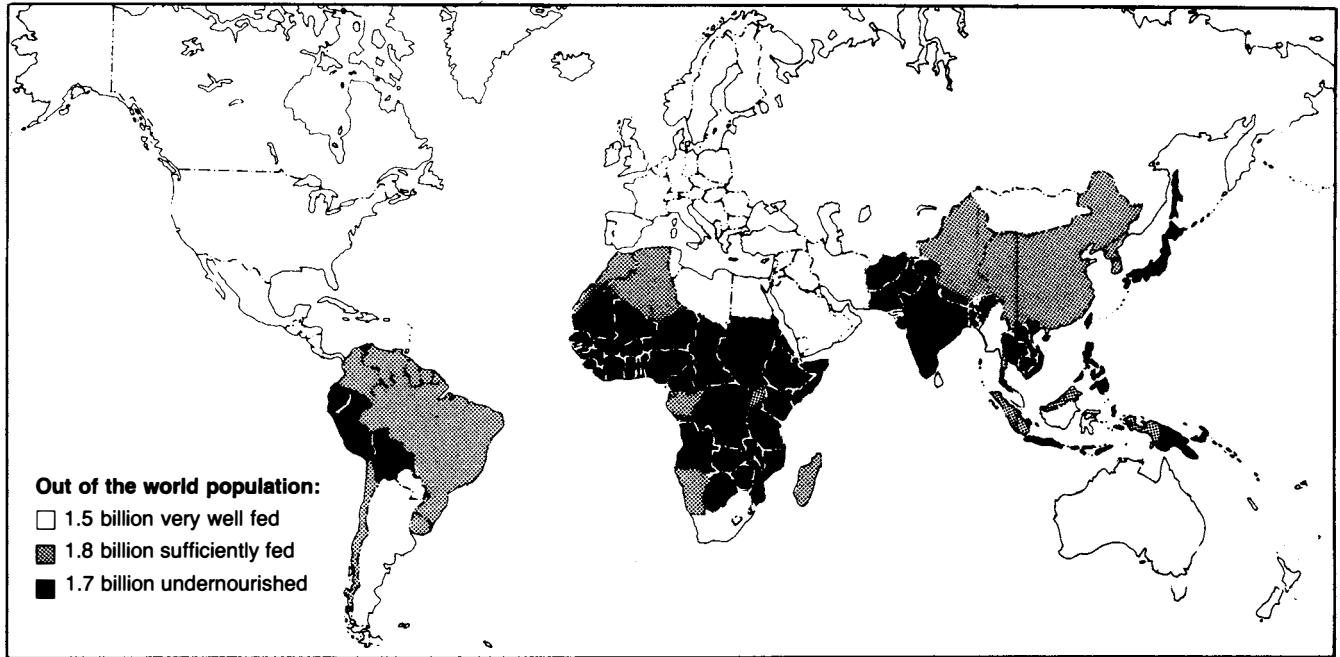
The FAO assumes in its calculations that the level of food intake is sufficient in each country, if only at survival minimum. They do not establish an absolute bottom limit. The grain figures above thus reveal how great undernourishment is for the poor countries.

The expansion of grain trade globally is striking. The yearly average between 1983 and 1985 for net trade was 4.8 million tons of grain, while for 1969-71, it was only 1.7 million tons. In the first half of the 1980s, the average yearly growth of agricultural production in the industrialized countries fell back to 1.2% from the yearly 2.2% average for the previous 25 years. The world agricultural crisis at the end of the 1970s and the debt crisis of the Third World clearly slowed growth, demand dropped, and producer prices fell. As a result, there were fundamental changes in the worldwide flow of trade. In 1961-63, only approximately 10% of agricultural produce was imported; in 1983-85, the amount had increased to 14% (**Figure 4**). Developed and underdeveloped countries were affected. The imports of developing countries of food for human and animal consumption remained relatively stable in the 1960s, doubled during the 1970s, and then increased only slowly at the beginning of the 1980s. During this time period, the Third World went from being net exporters of grain to being net importers. The growth of the grain trade is accompanied by the growing importance of trading firms, whose power has sharply increased in the course of this development.

The same is true for the Soviet Union and the East bloc. On average during the years 1969-71, the Soviet Union was still among the grain-exporting countries, with a net export of 5 million tons; in the past year, it had to import 40 million

FIGURE 2

The world of the hungry



tons of grain. With a consumption of 245 million tons of grain, Soviet agriculture produces only 195 million tons. This leads to an acute lack of supply, which has grown into a dangerous political uncertainty—not only for the Soviet rulers, but because of the Soviets’ military strength, also for the West (Figure 4).

If the grain harvest is to increase, grain acreage must be expanded since increases in production on equal acreage necessitates significantly greater expenditures and time. But the amount of cultivated acreage has decreased rather than increased. In 1984, the cultivated acreage for grain globally was 726 million hectares; last year, it was only 692 million. During the same period, there was an increase in the world population by 340 million. If we calculate approximately 3 tons of grain per hectare produced worldwide and if the population growth was principally in the developing sector, then an increase in grain acreage by 38 million hectares would have been necessary. In fact, however, it decreased by 34 million.

If nutrition in industrial countries is to be kept at the relatively high standard already attained and if a modest increase in food is to be guaranteed for the human beings in the developing sector, so that, at the very least, no one has to die of hunger, we need annually at least 2.4 billion tons of grain, including rice. World agriculture, however, is a long way from this goal, and the gap increases year by year.

The devastating role of set-aside programs

The collapse of grain cultivation reflects primarily the massive decay of world market prices and the decreasing price to producers. In the United States, additionally, millions of hectares are being set aside with the help of government programs at the cost of billions of tax dollars. Grain production was reduced by 29 million hectares by both these two mechanisms; screams about overproduction served here as the ideological pretext. Although the remaining regions of cultivation increased their grain producing acreage by 7 million hectares, the net amount of cultivated acreage collapsed worldwide by 21.9 million hectares—with the expected consequences for harvest results.

Last year’s drought at least brought the government agriculture offices in Ottawa and Washington half-way to their senses, and the acreage set-aside programs were largely withdrawn. However, it is expected that the continuing drought will not allow the harvests in North America to climb above the yields of last year. Additionally, the European Community Commission this year has been financing a set-aside program. Over a half-million hectares of agricultural land lie fallow this year precisely where yields are highest.

The environmentalist argument

Environmental zoning measures in the next few years will be even more important than the land set-aside program.

Under the catchword of "environmentalism," new laws and a flood of injunctions have been and will be passed, all pursuing the same goal of reducing the production of agriculture. Thus the EC Commission intends to set aside one-third of the agricultural land of the European Community, that is, 43 million hectares, as wetland preserves, with very harsh restrictions concerning the use of fertilizer and insecticides. Every region in Europe with the most fertile soils is incorporated in this plan.

The most convenient and effective way to decrease production is through organic farming, and it is exactly this method that politicians and bureaucrats intend to adopt. Organic farming has already been promoted by the government of West Germany and in Great Britain, and the EC Commission intends to extend the program to the rest of its members next year. With so-called organic cultivation, the farmer must completely do without fertilization and insecticides, thereby decreasing production over the long term by two-thirds. There are also similar plans in the United States, where forceful efforts are being made for organic farming to be incorporated into the new agricultural law. At the head of these efforts stand the large cartels. The American Farm Land Trust is directing the call for legal encouragement of organic farming. The Trust's chairman is Dwayne Andreas, the chairman of the board of Archer Daniels Midland/Töpfer, the fourth largest firm in the international grain trade.

These plans are greatly welcomed by the cartels, and serve their interests equally in two ways: First, the pressure

on farmers' incomes is increased by environmental zoning, and operating costs are increased for farmers; second, the policy of deliberately limiting food makes control over the total field of agriculture easier for the cartels.

Conservation kills

Nothing underlines the decadence of Western society more clearly than the debate over environmental protection. Neither the inexpressible poverty in the developing sector nor the despair among farm families that are ruined by this kind of agricultural policy moves anyone—only the supposed threat to the existence of insects and wild grasses excites any feelings. Yet environmental zoning kills just as much as does setting aside agricultural land. If the intensity of farming is reduced in the industrial countries, not only will hundreds of thousands of farmers and their families be plunged into economic ruin and social misery, but further millions of human beings in the developing countries will lose their lives.

The growth rate of food production in the Third World during the period of 1980-85 was 3.8%, in comparison to 1.4% in the developed countries. Domestic production by the Third World must be further increased, for which it is

FIGURE 3
Worldwide undersupply of grain
billion tons

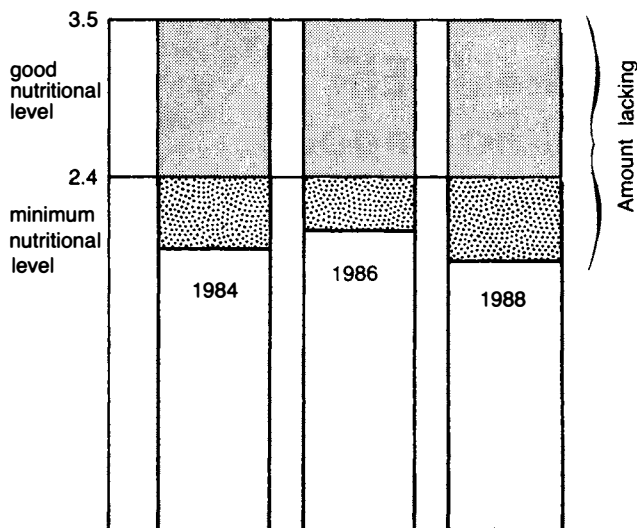


FIGURE 4
Share of food supply which is imported

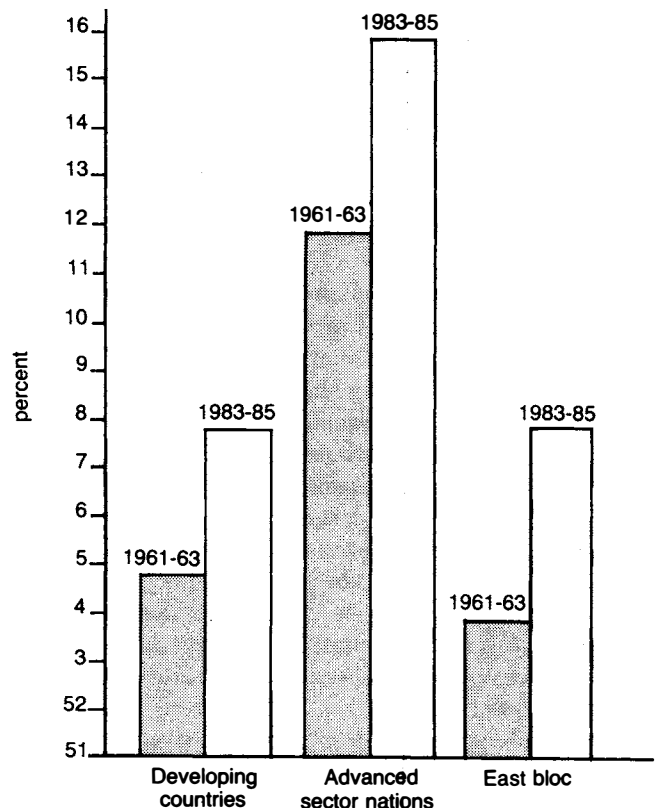
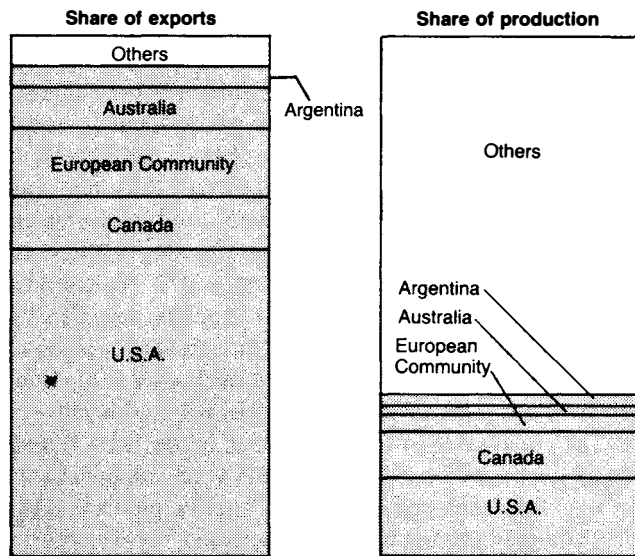


FIGURE 5

Share of the 'Big Five' world grain exporters and producers



necessary to finally come up with a solution to the heavy burden of debt on these countries. The contribution of the developed countries is, nevertheless, crucial to feeding the world. In 1987, the five largest grain producers in the world produced approximately 530 million tons, which is almost exactly one-third (29.7%) of the world yield, while their share of cultivated land for grain worldwide is one-fifth (20.3%). The share of the "big five" of grain exports is actually more than 85% (Figure 5).

Growth urgently necessary

It is totally nonsensical to think that less agricultural production in the industrial countries will increase domestic production in the developing sector. World production will only increase if certain preconditions are guaranteed:

- 1) The major producer countries of the world return to the parity price system that guarantees the farmer in industrial nations a price covering his cost of production;
- 2) The industrial countries commit themselves not to export any agricultural goods below this price threshold, since any agricultural decision in the major producer countries immediately has effects on the world market, the farmers in the developing countries also would automatically be guaranteed a higher price.

If food aid and agricultural exports were developed strictly under the control of each country's government and long-term contracts concluded, this would be a decisive and indispensable aid in building-up the agriculture and industry of

the developing sector. The present policy of deliberate reduction of food, however, punishes the developing countries in many respects. Since world market prices are increasing, those countries must spend considerably more in order to be able to satisfy their needs. Since the financial resources of the Third World are extremely limited, however, they will be able to import considerably less food. The death rate in the poor countries will quickly climb.

Production must triple over 10 years

The real challenge to world agriculture only becomes clear if we consider not only the present situation, but also take future development into account. Farmers are responsible for feeding an *increasing* world population. To feed the present 5 billion citizens of the world, the grain harvest must be increased by 122%. In the year 2000, we will number, however, between 6.2 and 6.5 billion humans, for which we will need 4.5 billion tons of grain. World agriculture must therefore triple its production within 10 years, a tremendous task! Against this background, the true crimes of present agricultural policy become clear, the consequences of which threaten us all.

If policy is not quickly turned away from the deliberate destruction of agricultural productive capacities and the exactly opposite direction of a promotion of food production chosen, the world food situation will soon be hopeless. If agriculture is further destroyed by environmentalist measures and price pressures, there will be no prospect of being able to successfully combat world hunger in the medium term. On the contrary, even in the so-called fat parts of the world, we will have to fight hunger. Time is running out: The decision on the future feeding of humanity will come in the next months.

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