

CONFERENCE ON THE ROLE OF
WOMEN IN MEETING BASIC FOOD
AND WATER NEEDS IN LDCs
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DISCUSSION SUMMARY

I. Introductory Statement:

In response to the task assigned me on the elements of the food production-distribution system, I prepared an overview paper on the technical aspects of a food chain. The technical aspects are; however, but one side of the equation. Since the paper prepared is available for distribution, in these opening remarks on food chains I will take up the food situation and the human factor side - together with major national and international policy considerations referring to the paper prepared as appropriate.

II. Demand and Supply Aspects of LDC Food and Agricultural Systems

- Crises in the world food system have focused attention on the central role of food and energy and on the need to better monitor the agricultural and food distribution system, improve its operation, and anticipate its future behavior. However, and perhaps even contrary to popular belief, the narrowing food margins in the developing countries are not entirely due to the lack of dynamics in food production, or to production short-falls because the weather took a bad turn - people production threatens to out-run the rates at which food supplies can be made available.

- The world's concerns about the nutritional needs of all people likewise raises a number of important agricultural production and food distribution issues. It is quite possible, for example, that with sufficient and appropriate efforts world food problems are soluable in the sense that the world has the capacity to achieve an improvement in per capita food supplies for all people during the remainder of this century. Commensurately, how large the increase in per capita food availability to the poor will be depends, to a very significant degree, upon achieving a reduction in the rate of population growth.

- The idea of an international grain reserve and the concepts of food aid also have considerable merit, emphasised as rather limited and possible objectives, but in doing so making it clear that the developing countries must seek to supply almost all of their food from their own resources. While the position that the developing countries must produce most of the additional food that will be required in the years ahead is a sound one, it does not follow that it is in the interest of each country to produce all the food for which there will be demand. They should have the opportunity to choose between production of food and acquiring food by trade.

III. Elements of a Food Production-Distribution System.

A. Assumptions and Considerations

- What one must emphasize in dealing with the fundamentals of the question on integrating women into the food chain and the national economic system is not to deal with the question in terms of traditional short-term projects, but look to relieving the causes of their economic under-utilization.

- The fact that women have been used on a social strata basis in traditional ways on assigned tasks in food production and trade is not a sufficient measure of effective utilization of a resource. Likewise, citing statistics on the labor contribution of women in agriculture, and writing reports on how they contribute to the food distribution and marketing process merely provides an indication of how they have contributed, and should not be accepted as a sufficient indication of how they can ultimately contribute.

- This is because such indicators seldom stand up under the inspection of cost effectiveness and utilization efficiency criteria. Not until we quit viewing women strictly as socio-cultural beings and shift utilization, that is how they can contribute, to fulfilling the requirements criteria of a technical resource input in economic development can we expect to make headway.

- The reasons this is true are because technical resource input is neutral with respect to gender, and the fact that the product to be produced or the task to be done determines the selection criteria, socio-cultural bias, or historical precedent, notwithstanding.

B. Human Needs and Integrating Mechanisms.

- The paper prepared for distribution at this conference stressed the need to develop effective integrating mechanisms for women, the relation of integrating mechanisms and needs, and a complimentary undertaking called relief from "undue stress or burden", as follows:

a. Meeting basic human needs directly or and germane to the technical coefficient criteria requirements for utilization in the food chain. Needs to be met include literacy, training, higher education, minimum health standards and services, and adequate diets.

b. Relief from undue or unnecessary burdens or stress in the way of food production, water and firewood gathering, and the like; with particular emphasis upon relief from socio-political bias or prejudice with respect to job or educational opportunity.

c. The creation of effective integrating mechanisms into the food production-distribution system, with further linkage into other sectors of the national economy. With appropriate social and political sanction, such mechanisms may be legal, institutional, or technical.

C. Technical and Economic Considerations:

- The requirement on agriculture is that: 1) it provide a domestic food surplus and contribute to export earnings and 2) it provide human and investment capital to other sectors so as to contribute to overall economic development. Ideally, agriculture forms a food basis for national security, while at the same time providing as great as possible human employment opportunity.

- A consequent characteristic of a developed or modern agriculture is an emphasis upon increasing yields by means of technological processes, and the substitution of production factors on the basis of cost effectiveness. The underlying tendency of this set of relationships is to reduce employment per unit of production, with total employment depending upon total land in production and the labor demand of particular commodity mixes and production patterns.

- It must be kept in mind, however, that population in the rural areas is two-thirds or more of a developing country's total population. Given current population growth rates on a population this size, combined with the seasonal nature of agricultural production, and the tendency of modernization of production to substitute technical for human factors, the long term employment market in agriculture may be even more restricted than at present in terms of growth rates relative to population.

2. Integrating Mechanisms

- "How women can contribute" to the operation, improvement or expansion of the food production-distribution system cannot be determined until both their capabilities and the systems requirements are assessed and matched. This means developing capability profiles on women, where they are, how many there are, and what the deficiencies are in capabilities with respect to the tasks needed to be performed in the system, presently and over the longer run.

- A systems assessment also needs to be made comparative to food supply-demand projections to derive the skill, training, and number requirements of labor, management, administration, and other utilization inputs as the system changes and evolves. All of this information must be compiled and fed back into the "human needs" programs which should be developed to facilitate the economic integration of women.

- Thus, education and training is an integrating mechanism, information development and feedback is an integrating mechanism, and job classification and job rating are integrating mechanisms. These mechanisms, of course, cannot operate effectively unless the employment constraints on women are mitigated or removed: socio-political bias, assignment traditional roles, and social structure inferiority.

- Women, by constructively rational criteria, are a vital economic development resource. It does not make much sense to continue to re-argue this point. What needs to be done, however, is to, for once, present the argument in relevant economic terms, as outlined in the paper submitted.

- Moreover, since each food system is site specific in makeup and development stage characteristics, while the discussion here can catalogue in broad category terms the

various tasks and assignment to which women could meaningfully contribute, it is not possible without the specific knowledge indicated to go on to indicate numbers and qualities. Nor is it possible to concretely address the nature of in-country socio-economic constraints on the utilization of women in the various assignments without a sufficient working knowledge of the cultures.

- Therefore, in the absence of an adequate data base, and given the task the leadership of this conference has assigned itself to come up with "an integrating strategy", I have confined my contribution to outlining the elements and relationships of the components of a food system for the purposes of relating: 1) employment to human needs requirements, 2) system modernization to skills advancement and impact assessment on total employment, 3) need for integrating mechanisms with respect to women, and 4) the linkage necessary to other economic sectors.

- The extent to which women will be considered, or even utilized, in the development picture depends upon the extent to which they are available to be employed in the development process, the extent to which they can achieve a skill and mobility status to meet the employment requirement, and the extent to which social equality is a condition of employment.

- A difficulty I find with conferences of this kind is that they all tend to be primarily concerned with self expression. There is also a tendency to assume that the audience outside is composed of people enough like the conferees to have a vital interest in what is said. The truth is that there exists rigid and inflexible attitudes out there on the role and purposes of women. The real danger in this, as far as women's socio-economic progress is concerned is that women, in facing the conditions of reality, became pessimistic and tend to accept conferences held, legislation passed, or logical arguments presented, as substitutes for the concerted and forceful actions and efforts they must undertake to help create and implement the long term remedial measures required.

IV. Policy Implications:

A. A need for a policy resolution of the critically important human welfare and economic utilization questions regarding women preceded by studies to develop detailed information on:

a. The economic status of the food chain, and that of the integrated functions of the related sectors, to obtain a sufficient indication of the tasks for which women might be considered.

b. The detailed information outlined on human needs with respect to nutritional status, cost-benefits of relief from undue or unnecessary burdens, training, education, and technical know-how on food production and distribution, and mechanisms necessary to utilization in other sectors.

c. The underlying reasons for bias in economic utilization in the national development process as it may be related to economic performance reasons, or reasons related to technical preparation.

B. A policy determination should be made whether the economic/utilization of women should be left to the processes of the labor market, or whether guidelines should be provided by a special organization or planning unit of the national development planning system.

a. Such a unit or organization would have as a primary responsibility the development of domestic and internationally linked programs to deal directly with the human needs requirements.

b. It would work with the national planning system to develop effective integrating mechanisms to bring women into overall economic

C. The implications of internationally based country development assistance policy includes:

a. People oriented assistance activities and national development planning support directed to the human needs requirements of women.

b. Assisting to specify effective processes and mechanisms to integrate women at all echelons of the food chain, or into other economic sectors.

V. A Supporting Argument from an Actual Developmental Experience.

- Given that women can contribute to economic development in other than traditional roles, dependence must be placed upon economic theory for the logical arguments for economic justification and upon the concepts of "induced" development innovation and to indicate the practical routes to effective overall economic development.

- In real terms, the Republic of China, Taiwan agricultural and rural development experience amply demonstrates the practicality of a total rural development approach and a forward looking concept of integration of labor and capital surpluses into the other national economic sectors. In this instance, it also helped to have in place a strong leadership and authoritative mechanism, the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction.

- An outline of the Taiwan rural development experience from the period 1945-50 to the present, covering development of food system, rural development, and utilization of the rural labor force is contained in pages 16-23 of the submitted paper.