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The Role of Food in Post-War
Reconstruction

by

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Each nation would have to set up an organisation for its own national needs, and, in addition, an international organisation would have to be set up to enable the nations to co-operate with each other in regulating food production and to develop their industries and trade on a world basis for their mutual advantage.

National Organisations:

The kind of organisation would vary in different countries according to their existing political and economic structure. It should evolve from the war food organisations so that there would be no sudden break at the end of the war, and it would be desirable to make the fullest use of existing organisations and channels of trade so that the end may be achieved with the minimum disturbance of business.

The following outline¹ is given as an illustration of the kind of organisation which might be devised for Britain. It utilises the agricultural marketing boards created before the war. It could be run on business lines without any bureaucratic interference, and in all its activities, except the central control, be subject to the stimulating effect of competition. Both producers and distributors could be free to run their businesses and make a success of them, and equally free to go bankrupt and be squeezed out by more successful competitors.

The proposal is that there should be a National Food Board, operating through a number of Commodity Boards, for example, for: milk and dairy products; beef and mutton; eggs and poultry; bacon and pork; fruit and vegetables; fish; cereals and feedingstuffs.

The National Food Board should be appointed by the Government after a free discussion in Parliament on the suitability of the men for the posts. The appointment should be made for a period of years so that the Board would not change with any change in Government. The members of the Board should be men financially independent of the food trade. The Commodity Boards might also consist either of independent men or of representatives of all interests, namely, producers, distributors, consumers and taxpayers.

The National Board should be responsible for bringing the national supplies of the main foodstuffs up to the level needed to provide sufficient for everybody, and for arranging that sufficient would be available within the purchasing power of everybody. The Board should be voted the necessary funds to carry out these functions, and the annual report of the Board would be discussed in Parliament at the time when the funds were voted.

It is recognised that there would be difficulty in estimating exactly the amount of money needed to enable the Board to get the necessary supplies and also to fix wholesale prices such that an adequate diet would fall within the purchasing power of every family. Data on which an estimate could be made are available in Government departments and from various social surveys. The amount would, of course, vary with the cost of other essentials, such as rent, and with changes in family income; for example, children's allowances would greatly simplify the problem and would decrease the amount needed. This need not be discussed further in this article, which deals more with policy than with method.

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1. Taken from the author's "Fighting for What?", op.cit., pp 49 et seq.
 - x. Taken from International Labour Review, pages 290 to 294. March, 1943.

The National Board would exercise its functions through the Commodity Boards. It would have complete executive powers and should appoint its own officials. The Commodity Boards would control and ultimately own the key-points of food distribution, that is, the processing centres, such as slaughterhouses, milk depots, and fruit and vegetable canning factories. Each of these processing centres would have store houses attached to it in which processed food could be kept for a time without deterioration. The Boards would obtain their supplies from the home producer or from the importer. They would be the main wholesalers for the foods they handle. The Commodity Boards would offer the producer a guaranteed market and also a guaranteed price calculated to call forth the total amount needed. They would in turn sell to the trade at a Wholesale price calculated to be such that the retailer, giving the minimum distributive service, for example, selling on the cash-and-carry basis, would be able to offer the foodstuffs at a price within the reach of the poorest. Each Commodity Board would be provided with funds to bridge the gulf between what it needs to pay the producer and what it gets from the traders. The amount given to each Board would be decided by the National Board.

Each Commodity Board would thus have a reservoir of money and, at its processing centres, a reservoir of foodstuffs. The rigid connection between the price paid to the producer and the selling price to the trade would be broken at the reservoir. The Board would therefore, be able to maintain prices to the consumer at a constant level all the year round, even though it had to pay the producer a higher price in some seasons than in others.

The reserve stocks of food at the reservoirs would accumulate in some seasons and be depleted in others, so that a regular supply for the public would be maintained in spite of the seasonal fluctuations in food production. Eggs and milk, for example, would be maintained at the same price throughout the year instead of being dearer in winter, when the need for them is greater.

With the knowledge we now have of the preservation of food, there would be no difficulty in keeping the surplus food of a season for use in a later season. Practically all foodstuffs can be preserved. Fish can be preserved for months and appear on the table as fresh as if newly caught and immediately distributed. The food reservoirs of these Boards would enable food such as fruit and vegetables, which is at present lost in season of glut, to be preserved and made available for winter use.

The Boards would not need powers of compulsion over the producer. The offer of a remunerative price would be sufficient to call forth the amounts needed. If too much were sold to the Board, the latter would, in the following years, have to reduce the price offered until it reached the level which called forth no more than the amount needed. In this way, the inefficient producer would ultimately be eliminated.

Farmers would know the guaranteed price offered for each of the commodities, and would know that any change would be gradual and that notice would be given some considerable time ahead. They would, therefore, be able to decide what type of agriculture was most suited to their farms and to arrange for a long-term organisation of production, instead of, as in pre-war days, chopping and changing in an attempt to catch fluctuating market prices.

There....

There is no need for the Boards to have a monopoly. If a farmer could find a special direct market for his product without passing it through the Board, there is no reason why he should not do so provided the food he produces and sells is up to the standard for health demanded by the Board. Any farmer who could produce and market his product without the assistance of the Board would be a public benefactor not only in saving the funds of the Board but also by competing to maintain a high level of efficiency on the part of the Boards.

In the same way, there would be no need for a uniform retail price, with all the inspection and prosecution needed to maintain uniformity. The service of distribution varies and the cost of it should vary. So long as the poorest people have the food they need with the cheapest service, there is no reason why retailers should not get as much as they can from the wealthier part of the community wishing an expensive service and willing to pay for it.

The Boards would sell the food at the same price to multiple shops, co-operative societies, and small retailers, and these different methods of distribution could be left to compete with each other; the method which gave the best public service would survive.

There would be no taint of pauperism in this scheme. The wealthiest person could, if he liked, buy the food at the same price as the poorest and there is no reason why he should not be allowed to do so, because people would be paying for the national food service in proportion to their income. There would be no need, therefore, for any means test.

The setting up of an organisation on these lines would not involve any very drastic change in the food trades. The existing Agricultural Marketing Boards, which deal with some of the foodstuffs, would be taken over as going concerns to form the corresponding Commodity Boards, but, instead of being producers' boards with a monopoly and the power to regulate production and fix prices in their own interests, they would be responsible through the National Board to the whole community - producers, distributors, consumers and taxpayers.

The above suggestions about the nature of the organisation needed to carry through a food policy based on human needs are not to be taken as a detailed scheme. The outline is given merely to illustrate the fact that an organisation could be built up which would meet the needs of the people and, at the same time, leave full initiative and free business enterprise to both producers and distributors and free choice of food to the people without any inquisition on family income.

International Organisations:

Nations could co-operate in setting up international agricultural and food commissions which, while having no power to interfere with national food organisations, could give information and guidance on the best method of ensuring that the national larders would have sufficient for the needs of the people. They could facilitate international trade in food and in the things needed for food production, and could arrange for the necessary long-term credits which would be needed for the first few years to enable the poorer countries to bring the diet of their people up to the health standard.

These international organisations would be necessary to carry out a world food policy which would move towards and fit in with the international schemes for economic and political organisation that are doubtless being prepared.

Nations....

It is of interest to note that the food policy suggested here is, in its essential features, the same as that which was beginning to be developed by the League of Nations in 1935. 1. Between that date and the outbreak of war twenty-two Governments had set up nutrition committees to consider the food position in their countries, and representatives of these committees had met at Geneva to consider the whole position in its health, agricultural and economic aspects. Had war not broken out, the probability is that the twenty-two nations would have evolved a definite scheme of co-operation, which would ultimately have included all nations.

1. League of Nations Mixed Committee on the Problem of Nutrition: Final Report on the Relation of Nutrition to Health, Agriculture and Economic Policy (Geneva, Series of League of Nations Publications, 1937, 11.A.10); see also International Labour Office, Studies and Reports, Series B (Social and Economic Conditions) No. 23: Workers' Nutrition and Social Policy (Geneva 1936).
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