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THE PROTEIN PROBLEM

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Comments of the Advisory Committee on the
Application of Science and Technology to
Development

68-20663

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COMMENTS OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE
APPLICATION OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
TO DEVELOPMENT

General

In its resolution 2319 (XXII) the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to prepare a report on the protein problem and invited the comments thereon of the Advisory Committee on the Application of Science and Technology to Development (ACST). At its ninth session, the ACST established a Functional Group on Protein and authorized the Functional Group to formulate its comments on behalf of the ACST. For this purpose, the ACST Functional Group met in Rome at the kind invitation of FAO on 17 and 18 September 1968. The comments of the ACST are set forth below.

The ACST commends the Secretary-General for his report. It serves a most useful purpose of bringing together in a cohesive form the information provided by Governments and by organizations of the United Nations system, and presents a timely and needed opportunity of seeing the protein problem from a broad point of view.

The ACST is pleased by the large number of responses received from Governments to the Secretary-General's questions and the favourable and supporting comments on its report Feeding the Expanding World Population: International Action to Avert the Impending Protein Crisis.^{1/} It also appreciates the strong WHO/FAO/UNICEF Protein Advisory Group (PAG) endorsement of the priorities and specific proposals of this publication, which were included in its comments on the Secretary-General's report and its commendation of the concept represented by the present consolidated report by the Secretary-General concerning actions taken by countries to implement the ACST recommendations. The ACST is particularly gratified that the momentum of interest aroused by the ACST report has been sustained by the Secretary-General's questionnaire and the present report of the Secretary-General. It agrees that a more complete report should be developed with more ample time for the preparation of country replies and their analysis. It

^{1/} United Nations publication, Sales No.: E.68.XIII.2.

urges that the General Assembly review biennially progress made in the solution of the protein problem.

Broad role for the WHO/FAO/UNICEF Protein
Advisory Group (PAG)

The ACST expressed satisfaction with the enlargement and broadening of PAG. It looks forward to an increasingly important role for PAG in providing advice and influencing the activities of the United Nations family of organizations and in promoting co-operation among scientists concerned with the protein problem. The ACST believes that the new terms of reference, broadly interpreted, provide ample scope for PAG to function in this manner.

Need for information for action at all levels

The original focus of the ACST concern with the protein problem was the application of science and technology to its solution. A major difficulty confronting international and bilateral agencies as well as the Governments of developing countries is the inadequate dissemination of existing knowledge, techniques and experiences in such a way as to facilitate their application at the various levels where action is possible. Effective distribution of pertinent information will help to prevent unnecessary and costly repetition of experimental programmes. Since language barriers often interfere with the understanding and use of such information, it should be made available in the major working languages of the United Nations. The expanded PAG, through its secretariat, bulletin and other publications, can play an important rôle in the collection and wide and prompt dissemination of information relating to edible protein. Through its consultants, committees and working groups, it can prepare and distribute valuable reports on special problems. The financial requirements for such PAG activities are very modest compared with the benefits which can be realized.

The ACST regards the methodology of communication as a most important aspect of the application of science and technology to the needs of developing countries and intends to examine the problems of communication in the protein field as a case study illustrating the general problem. The ACST recommends that the Secretary-General study this matter.

Special attention to the vulnerable group of population

Concerted attention to the vulnerable population group consisting of expectant and nursing mothers, infants and young children is one of the important conclusions to be drawn from the Secretary-General's report and is a matter to which the ACST gives high priority. The PAG statement contains a series of additional comments and recommendations which the ACST finds exceedingly helpful and timely. Families unassisted are often unable for reasons of food availability or limited income to solve the problem of adequate diet for the vulnerable population group. Therefore, Governments need to give special attention and support for the nutrition of this segment of the population and to take necessary measures to ensure that appropriate foods are accessible, properly distributed and in fact consumed. The future economic and social development of all countries depends on the physical and mental development and health of today's infants and young children.

Protein quality in the diet of infants and
pre-school children

The recent increase in the yields of cereal grains in a number of the developing countries as a result of the introduction on a large scale of improved varieties and the increased use of irrigation, fertilizers and pesticides are highly encouraging and offer hope that the food needs of adult populations can be met from conventional sources. These developments do not, however, meet the special protein needs of infants and pre-school children. Cereals are not in themselves adequate sources of protein for this age group. Protein of animal origin, especially milk or from appropriate mixtures, including proteins from unconventional sources, must be part of the diet of infants and pre-school children to support satisfactorily their growth and development of resistance to infectious disease.

Systems approach

The need for a systems approach in solving the protein problem is repeatedly emphasized in the ACST report, in the Secretary-General's report and in the

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PAG comments. In order to achieve real gains in the diet of the vulnerable population group a series of interrelated actions must be taken involving political, economic, educational and social factors. A systems approach is a methodology for systematic analysis and planning of complex programmes using a feed-back mechanism permitting continuous evaluation of progress and failure and thus allowing prompt revision of plans. The purpose of insisting on a systems approach is to improve the effectiveness of the multiple and co-ordinated actions which must be taken in order to bring about genuine improvement in the quality of the diet of infants and young children.

The ACST encourages the wide use of systems methodology and will periodically review the progress achieved by using such methods in the application of science and technology to development.

The ACST recommends that the Secretary-General investigate the means and methodology for applying a systems approach to the protein problem, and the ACST wishes to review the subject at a future meeting.

Reducing waste of proteins

The widespread losses of protein foods reported by many countries in their replies to the Secretary-General's questionnaire underscores the importance of vigorous national and international measures to reduce such wastage as recommended in the ACST report. The protein content of foods is sensitive to damage under the usual conditions of storage in many countries.

Need for more financial support for edible protein activities

Significant progress in meeting the protein problem requires action of commensurate magnitude. The foremost requirement is action by national Governments to make the solution of the protein problem a high priority national objective as a part of a broad programme of economic and social development, to allocate necessary financial resources and to establish the necessary organization for this purpose. Financial support for national, bilateral and international protein programmes is needed and must be obtained at least partly by a revision of priorities to give protein activities a more important place and thereby lead to some reallocation of existing resources.

While FAO, WHO and UNICEF have been the organizations most concerned with the protein problem and have long sponsored PAG, UNDP has provided significant financial support for activities in this field and other United Nations bodies, such as UNIDO, UNESCO and IAEA, are also concerned with specific aspects. It is hoped that additional funds will be forthcoming for protein activities of the United Nations family of organizations in addition to enlarged national and bilateral expenditures. Greater selectivity in project evaluation and increased assistance to Governments of developing countries in preparing UNDP proposals should lead to increased effectiveness in the use of existing resources. A rise in the number of soundly conceived proposals brought to UNDP should result in greater support from UNDP for projects which will add to protein supplies or their more effective utilization.

Maintaining increasing effort and progress

The interest in the protein problem stimulated by the General Assembly debate and resolution and by the activity in more than sixty countries in preparing replies to the Secretary-General's questionnaire should be maintained and strengthened. The presentation of the Secretary-General's report to the Economic and Social Council and to the General Assembly and the ensuing debate in the General Assembly will contribute towards this end. Furthermore, the ACST notes that the need to reply to the Secretary-General's questionnaire appears in some countries to have stimulated various arms of Governments and institutions to get together to prepare their country's response to the questions posed, and it is hoped that at the national level such co-operation among departments and institutions will be strengthened.

The ACST urges that the Secretary-General investigate means for sustaining this momentum and consider the feasibility of promoting an international co-operative effort on protein which would link the activities of member countries and scientists everywhere. It fully supports as timely and necessary the suggestion in the Secretary-General's report for a concerted international effort on the protein problem. The ACST is of the opinion that a means must be found to marshal the capability and resources of the developed countries that are interested in and concerned with the protein problem.
