



UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL COUNCIL



Distr.
GENERAL

E/4592/Add.4
15 November 1968

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Resumed forty-fifth session
Agenda item 4

THE PROTEIN PROBLEM

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Letter to the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and
Social Affairs from the Director-General of the Food
and Agriculture Organization

I have reviewed the draft report of the Secretary-General on the Protein Problem and the FAO/WHO/UNICEF Protein Advisory Group's comments on this report dated 13 September 1968.

The Secretary-General's action on resolution 2319 (XXII) of the twenty-second session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on the need for increasing the production and use of edible protein was very timely. His report based on replies received from Member nations to the questionnaire has served a most useful purpose in stimulating interest in this problem. Among the United Nations system of organizations FAO is probably the agency most actively engaged in efforts to alleviate the world protein problem and, as you know, I have made this a priority subject in FAO's programme of work and an interdisciplinary approach to the problem is being organized by my different departments. In so far as interdisciplinary projects relate to the various United Nations agencies it is my feeling that the PAG is an instrument well suited to advise on the promotion of a co-ordinated attack on various aspects of the protein problem by the United Nations system of organizations. FAO will certainly consider this aspect of the PAG's functions as very important and I feel confident that the view that an existing organ like the PAG should be put to the best possible use in this respect will get the Secretary-General's fullest support.

The report, based on the replies received from some sixty Member nations to the United Nations questionnaire, was on the whole well received by the members of the Protein Advisory Group whose comments will be reviewed below. It is, however, apparent from the report that the time allowed to countries to prepare their replies was too short for many of them to muster the resources of the several different government departments, institutions and individuals prominent in this field who must all work together if sound national policies oriented towards closing the protein gap are to be developed. Several members of the Protein Advisory Group reported that they had not been consulted in the preparation of their country's replies to the questionnaire. Thus it seems that the report does not give a complete account of world activities in the protein-food field.

In its conclusions and recommendations the report notes that the "heart of the matter is to ensure adequate consumption of protein by the very young and by pregnant and lactating women". When commenting to ECOSOC in July 1967 on the ACST report on "The impending protein crisis" (E/4343) FAO noted the ill-defined nature of the protein gap and suggested that it could not be closed until Governments were able to take well-judged steps to ensure a satisfactory distribution of the available protein food resources to those that need them most. Such steps can only be taken if they are based on a knowledge of present food distribution between the different age and socio-economic groups, implemented by sound policies for food production and utilization through adequate processing and marketing machinery. I hope that the development of FAO's Indicative World Plan may shed more light on this problem.

Therefore I welcome the Protein Advisory Group's view that "a more complete report of country activities relating to protein production, distribution and consumption be prepared in another two years". I consider that the views of Member nations on this proposal should be obtained at the current session of the General Assembly. I suggest that FAO, WHO and UNICEF, with the advice of the Protein Advisory Group and the assistance of its secretariat, are the agencies best suited to draw conclusions from those more complete reports and to orient the conclusions to active programmes. Such programmes would have to be supported by resources provided in the first instance by the countries themselves but more

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help is needed from the United Nations system of organizations. I welcome, also, the statement in the report that bilateral projects should be used towards solving the protein problem. The Protein Advisory Group should serve as a focal point for concerted action.

A catalytic effort at the international level is called for by the report. I believe that the expression "United Nations" used in this recommendation refers to the United Nations system and not merely to the United Nations Secretariat. As you know, at the international level the major effort for stimulating production and distribution of protein foods is the responsibility of FAO in collaboration with a few other agencies concerned, and the initiative for any "catalytic effort" to have real impact must come from the members of the United Nations system principally concerned with the total effort. I would, therefore, suggest that the expression "United Nations" wherever it occurs in these recommendations be substituted by the expression "United Nations system". With regard to the modest funds called for in the recommendations and considering the very large measures proposed by ACST in its original document, together with the increased financial support to the United Nations system urged by the Protein Advisory Group I insist that a major financial effort on the part of the United Nations family, as well as by Governments, is necessary for any substantial progress in this field.

The report suggests that industry in the developed countries be called upon to direct an increasing portion of its concern to the protein problem of the developing countries. I am happy to report that I have taken steps to have this matter discussed within the framework of the FAO/Industry Co-operative Programme.

I agree with the PAG that first priority must be given to the supply of proteins from conventional foods; this is already reflected in the FAO programme of work. I also agree, however, that in the not too distant future unconventional protein sources are likely to become of considerable importance. The activities of FAO, WHO and UNICEF, with the advice of the Protein Advisory Group, have demonstrated the feasibility of using those sources. However, more study is needed before such foods can be developed, marketed and consumed to best advantage. Therefore this aspect of the work of the PAG and its three supporting agencies should be strengthened.

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I also concur with the PAG in its endorsement of the targets and priorities proposed by the Advisory Committee on Science and Technology in its original report but would like to emphasize the following as of particular importance. Work on high-yielding varieties of cereals and legumes, particularly in respect of the quality and quantity of their protein content, is so important that I have made it a priority project within the FAO programme of work. The study of acceptability and marketing aspects of protein rich foods, especially those derived from oilseeds, has so far been promising but future action needs to be strengthened and expanded. The Protein Advisory Group is setting up a working group on foods derived from single-cell proteins in order that countries may be properly advised on the problems involved in the production and use of such products. Proteins may be substantially improved in nutritive value by fortification with amino acids but the value of such fortification on diets as eaten by needy groups in developing countries remains in doubt. Therefore the new working group of the PAG on amino acid fortification must receive full support in its activities. Regional centres for research and development in the field of protein-food production are already in existence in Asia, the Caribbean and Central America. Some have just begun their work but the work of others has already proved so successful that I feel that consideration should be given to the establishment of similar centres in the Near East and Africa.

I would like to lay most particular emphasis on the wastage in protein food-stuffs, be they fish, flesh or vegetables, which occurs between the harvest and the consumer in all developing countries. Both the Secretary-General's report and the comments on it by the PAG have stressed the need for interdisciplinary action in this field of action which I call "the War Against Waste" in FAO's programme of work, and which is one of my highest priorities in our future activities.

The Protein Advisory Group calls attention to the fact that the present rate of population growth requires an increase in protein-food production beyond the present achievements of many countries. I agree with the Protein Advisory Group that the problem of protein supplies cannot be separated from those of family size and I consider that education in this matter of family size in relation to the availability of family resources should be a part of international agency programmes.

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I fully agree with the Protein Advisory Group's concern that collaboration at national level is necessary between government departments, scientists and businessmen in solving food supply problems in general and in closing the protein gap in particular. I hope Member nations will consider the establishment of national advisory bodies of such an interdisciplinary nature.

To revert for a moment to the Secretary-General's report where it calls for the widespread and continuous dissemination of information in the protein field, I would point out that FAO, WHO and UNICEF are already actively engaged in such work and have every intention of supporting the Protein Advisory Group and its secretariat in making condensed and up-to-date information available in the field of non-conventional protein foods. It is my feeling that the reorganized Protein Advisory Group and its secretariat should be used as the continuing instrument for the dissemination of our increasing knowledge of the protein problem.

In the same context, the classification and retrieval of basic information concerning protein nutrition should be covered by the facilities provided by the documentation centres already provided by FAO and WHO.

I trust that these comments may be useful to you and to the deliberations of ECOSOC and the General Assembly.
