FAO and the World Food Problem

G. SCOTT ROBERTSON

If we are to understand the World food picture as it presents itself today, it is essential that we look into the past, fix in our minds what has been happening during the past 150 years, learn if we can the principles of the lessons which it teaches, and try to apply those principles to the problems which face us now. If we succeed in doing so there will be freedom from want in the world, and therefore progress and a real prospect of peace and goodwill. If we fail either through lack of intelligence or for a reason much more likely narrow selfishness, then we must face in the years ahead something vaster and more horrible than World War II.

All our material progress, as we know progress, dates back 150 years, that is to the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. It is very difficult for us today to grasp the perils of life 150 years ago, in the time of our great grandparents. Up till then the world had gone through 10,000 years of want and famine and no material progress was possible. The human race was dependent upon hand labour and a man with hand tools can provide scant supplies for the feeding and clothing of himself and his family, let alone the soldiers, artisans and others not directly engaged in production. It was a world of constant want, almost constant war, and subject to great famines and pestilences. A conquering nation could support its people at the expense of what amounted to the extermination of the vanquished. There was no future for Europe than the life that could be seen in say India and China, and can be seen to this day where increasing pressure of population depending on supplies of hand labour led to increasing want and degradation.

That was the position of Europe at the end of the 18th century, and if you go back through the 1900 years which preceded, there was no ground for hope and no expectation of relief.

Nevertheless the miracle happened. The invention of machinery at the beginning of the 19th century, in which Great Britain played such a prominent part, the discovery and application of artificial fertilizers to the soils of Europe and the opening up of the great continent of North America, brought about for the next hundred years or so an abundance of food. It was a period of plenty: the fear of want and famine rapidly disappeared. In that short period of 100 to 150 years there was more material progress than in the 10,000 years which had preceded it.

What we are in very serious danger of forgetting today is that this period of regional prosperity and freedom from want—a period of 150 years—is a very short period compared with the 10,000 years which preceded it. Which is to be the normal future of the world, the 150 years of relative plenty or the famine and want of the previous 10,000

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2Director, Agriculture Division, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.