

STATEMENT FROM THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

presented by

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I want to express warmest thanks for the kind invitation which has been extended by the St. Augustine University of the West Indies, Trinidad to Dr. B. R. Sen, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, in whose name I would like to convey to this International Symposium on Tropical Root Crops sincerest wishes for a successful development.

I am, furthermore, particularly pleased as a staff member of the Plant Production and Protection Division to express our Director, Dr. Vallega's gratitude and enthusiasm for the institution of this International Symposium. To us all this seemed a long overdue necessity for placing more attention on a group of crops which will have to play a far more important role than we can possibly imagine in solving the enormous problem with the few means at our disposal of how to feed the fast growing population of the world.

This is the present situation: something like one half of the world's peoples are underfed or illfed, or both. More than three million people die every year from protein malnutrition and many millions are believed to be psychologically retarded due to this fact. On the basis of the present projections of population increase of 2.5% to 3% per annum in Asia, Africa and Latin America, in 1985 there will be one milliard and a third more people than in 1965 sitting down to eat in developing regions. Even if the birth rate were to be lowered substantially, the effect of family planning would only show after more than a decade due to the enormous fertility potential in years to come caused by the present age structure in these countries where between 40 and 45% of the population is under 15 years of age.

The only solution to this problem in the next two decades is, therefore, to increase substantially the world's agricultural production.

Agricultural production is increasing now probably faster during any previous period. For the last few years, however, it has not kept pace with the growth of the world's population. What is particularly disturbing is that in developing countries the average increase in production has only been 1.1% against a population increase of around 2.5% per annum, and it is not difficult to imagine the consequences that this will have, both from a social and political point of view, unless a change can be brought about in the immediate future.

Dr. Sen recently stated that a minimum increase per annum in food production of 3% is considered necessary so as to be sure of keeping just ahead of population increase, and an increase of nearly 4% per annum has to be attained if we are to provide substantial progress towards an adequate level of nutrition and avoid a further drain of foreign exchange from developing countries by forcing them to import food stuffs from developed countries.

This task is overwhelming and can only be faced and solved by strengthening and concentrating all our efforts in each single agricultural commodity.

Despite the fact that both the area under root and tubers and the production of these crops is relatively small compared with the world production of other staple food crops such as cereals, in 1964/65 the area under cassava, sweet potatoes, yams and potatoes amount to around 50 million ha. against 684 million ha. under cereals. The dry matter production (on a basis of 4:1 root to cereals) reached only 125 million tons in roots as against 1022 million tons in cereals. This wide ratio of 1:9 of root to cereals narrows where root and tuber crops are the main source of energy in the daily diet namely in those countries where agroecological conditions are unfavourable for an economic cereal production.

Most of these countries lie in the tropics, 20° North and South of the Equator. Except for the Asia region of this belt where rice is the staple crop and successfully competes with the root crops, the ratio therefore remaining practically unchanged at 1:8, the ratio narrows substantially in the Central and South American region to 1:3, and in Africa even to 1:2.

(The figures are based on FAO statistics 1964/65 giving the amounts of production in the Belt for Asia (India excluded) for cereals to 45½ million tons, roots to 5.4 million tons, for Central and South America (Mexico excluded) for cereals 25 million tons, root 7.4 million tons and for Africa cereals 24 million tons, root 12.6 million tons)

But still more impressive is the superiority of the roots in carbohydrate production per ha, over that of cereals. In Central and South America 1.3 tons/ha from cereals against 2.9 tons/ha from roots; in Africa 0.9 tons/ha from cereals, 1.5 tons/ha from roots; and in Asia 1.5 tons/ha from cereals and 1.9 tons from roots.

These figures clearly show that in fact root crops as the highest yielding sources of carbohydrates can play a role in the world's fight against hunger through direct consumption by man and still more through indirect consumption as the energy basis of the feeding stuff for pigs, poultry and other animals.

We are, therefore, most impressed by the magnitude of leading papers to be discussed during this Symposium and are really enthusiastic that the long neglected crops with their great yield potential and by far not fully exploited possibilities for improving their nutritive value, are covered in all important aspects.

FAO is directly interested in assisting member countries in the implementation of projects aimed at the development of root crops production in various ways. The resources of FAO in this connection may be rather limited in comparison with what is required but by making use of various programmes, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA), the Freedom from Hunger Campaign (FFHC), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the Joint FAO/IBRID Co-operative Programme, it will be possible to offer useful assistance on countries' requests.