

27 March, 1982

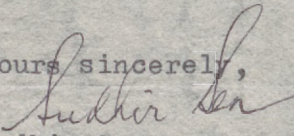
Dear Dr. Swaminathan,

I thought the attached piece would interest you. At long last things have begun to move to our way of thinking. As you know very well, I have long been pleading for a food-first approach to development. For, we shall stand or fall by our ability to feed the people--in India and in the Third World. And add to this the fact that we have a real treasure house in the Tropics. How sad it is--and how foolish--for us to have overlooked this fact so long, to have allowed the food crisis to have reached today's formidable dimensions.

Better late than never. I think at last people are waking^u and commonsense is breaking out! The tide is^h turning in our favour, and we must do all we can to make the best of it.

You must be ready now for your move to Los Baños. All my good wishes will go with you.

Yours sincerely,



Sudhir Sen

Sudhir Sen

Dr. M. S. Swaminathan

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Back to Food Basics

By Flora Lewis

BELLAGIO, Italy, March 24 — A new series of studies sounds more alarm bells about world food supplies. Their main import is that even meeting the current standards of the three-quarters of a billion people now underfed, let alone improving their lot, cannot be assured just with money, good will and current development methods. It is literally a matter of trial and error, and a World Food Council report on Africa reveals a staggering amount of error beneath its cautiously polite words.

Not only has food production per mouth declined in a period when Africa's population growth is the highest any continent has ever known; but also, actual output went down in 15 countries. "The outlook is grim," said the United Nations-sponsored council, and represents "a failure of the international system as a whole."

The independent Worldwatch Institute in Washington has come to the same conclusions on a larger scale. It says the world's self-renewing resources themselves are being consumed, with the effect of "biological deficit financing" as land, forests and fisheries are destroyed.

The value of these reports is not only as scare signals to ears already deafening to repeated cries of wolf and positively blocked by world recession and the temporary oil glut. It is the indication that a lot has been learned in a generation of development efforts, and the reminder that theories and projects still have to be checked against results if they aren't to prove counterproductive.

The World Food Council is one of the rare U.N. agencies that dares to look at its own records and admit mistakes. It had already come to the conclusion that direct food aid, while essential in emergencies, must not become a habit because it makes countries dependent on imports when they should be increasing production.

Now it has found that even well-intentioned development projects can be counterproductive, for example when spurring cash crops for export constricts the growth of food or when projects overwhelm new nations' capacity to absorb and administer assistance. Then priorities are skewed, or world prices drop, so more sales of coffee and peanut oil buy less foreign food.

Black Africa has had a higher increase in development aid than other areas in the last four years, now about 20 percent of the total. But it is losing ground, not gaining, on the first problem of providing the food without which no other progress is possible. The main failures have been bad policies by the African governments that don't provide needed incentives for farmers, inadequate infrastructure

for transport and trade, and above all lack of management capacity to use available help to best effect.

Partly this is because most countries just don't have the people to handle the aid, and the international agencies aren't doing enough to train them. Partly it is because the donors are uncoordinated, often rivals, failing to see how their bit fits into the picture. New projects are launched at great expense while completed ones run down for lack of supervision.

Upper Volta, a country of 6.6 million, received 340 foreign aid missions last year, almost one a day. Some 40 governments provide aid to Africa, directly and through international agencies, and there are a lot more independent charities and commercial outfits involved with development.

A.I.D., the official American channel, has 570 projects in Africa, but only 22 representing 7 percent of total cost are directly aimed at food production.

Burma, studied as a contrasting example, is suddenly making real progress after almost a generation of stagnancy in a repressive attempt to create an isolated "Asian Socialism." Burma still rejects private investment, but in the last five years it has accepted public loans and advice on the Green Revolution, which it has applied with its "self-help" principles. There is a real turnaround.

Though the formal report lacks the candor to say so, the international studies show the opposite trend in African countries still on the Socialist path. Madagascar is a prime example. It was in relatively good shape a decade ago but has sunk to the disaster level after stubborn misguidance.

The lesson is that there is no substitute for encouraging farmers to grow food and sell it. That requires conscious government policy. And that requires administrative structure and grassroots agricultural services that most young countries can't create. So that requires foreign donors to reach a clear, coordinated focus on where their money and techniques should be applied.

Africa is the "critically urgent" area, as the council's report notes. But worldwide deterioration of land resources is also serious. "Each year the land in forest shrinks by an area the size of Hungary," the Worldwatch study said.

The good news is that after a lot of fancy fiddling with notions about the "economic order," the experts are coming back to basics. With a lot more people in the world, no other problem can be solved until they grow a lot more food. Those who know how can best help by enabling them to help themselves.