

FOOD AID FIASCO

BY COMBINING Oxfam's files, and from close observations on field trips, Tony Jackson has pieced together a devastating indictment of food aid.

On the face of it, the charitable aid delivered by rich countries to the Third World is a commendable act of humanitarianism. *The reality is different.*

Jackson does not dwell on the motives of donor countries that are happy to dump the surplus food they produce as a result of policies that distort their agricultural sectors.

The EEC's Common Agricultural Policy, for example, wastes resources in a vain attempt to boost rural incomes. The net result is inflated food prices, consumer dissatisfaction, food mountains and queues of angry French farmers charging around Paris on their tractors.

Who in the Third World benefits from the donation of this food?

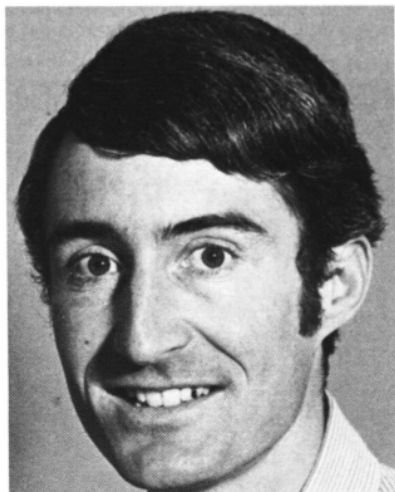
IN THEORY, the food is supposed to assist in economic development and/or fill the bellies of landless peasants and their starving families.

In reality, as Jackson shows, the main beneficiaries are those people who are least in need – principally the landowners.

The Food For Work (FFW) programme is supposed to generate infrastructural works through the provision of labour-intensive schemes. Unemployed people build roads or irrigation networks, and are paid with a meal at midday.

The primary benefits, however, go mainly to landowners. This happens in a variety of ways. FFW is a way of subsidising the landowner's wage bill. The works result in an increase in the value of adjoining land. FFW projects may even deprive people of their land, as happened in Tunisia, or push up the rents of tenant farmers (Haiti), or increase the patronage of the landowning oligarchy (Bangladesh).

- **It's the landlords who profit**
- **Farmers pay a high price**
- **The poor make do with handouts**
- **Long-term reforms are postponed**



● **Tony Jackson**

The income effect of food aid is devastating. First, the flow of food into a country can damage the domestic rural sector – local farmers find that the demand for their produce has dropped.

And within a country, national income is redistributed in favour of the rentiers, as a result of a drop in the demand for wage labour.

Report by

PAUL KNIGHT

LESS QUANTITATIVE, but no less devastating, are the political and psycho-social consequences.

Food aid, by offering a short-term solution to the nutritional needs of a poor country, successfully defers the need to consider radical reforms.

Not only are the poor people bought off, but the power of elites is also enhanced. The potential changes in the socio-economic structure, then, are not effected.

At the same time, there is plenty of evidence that food aid has a socially debilitating effect. There is a loss of individual and collective esteem. People find that they do not want to work on public projects unless they are given food. Or the quality of their work deteriorates, because it appears to be executed for others rather than themselves.

In the end, the food aid projects become an end in themselves. In Haiti, for example, 300km of jeep roads have been constructed even though there is no vehicular traffic – people transport themselves and their goods either by walking, or by boats and beasts of burden.

People, once hooked on handouts, are apparently content to accept the food rather than consider the possibility of changing a system that rendered them hungry in the first place.

THE DONOR countries, of course, did not intend this to happen. But it suited – and continues to suit – them to pour their surplus produce into the Third World.

Jackson says that food aid should be curtailed and only deployed according to stringent criteria, particularly when it is supposed to assist economic development.

He does not challenge the need for food aid to relieve short-term crises such as famines, although even here it is not always clear that a country is indeed suffering from general food shortage because of some natural calamity.

But he concludes: "Since the really malnourished are not being reached by existing programmes in any significant way, closure will have no negative effects on them. Indeed it may have a positive benefit by enabling people to concentrate on more effective means of development."

It is now to be hoped that Oxfam will encourage Tony Jackson to probe into the reforms that would facilitate that development. Feeding people's minds is just as important as filling their bellies and Oxfam, with a fine record of humanitarian achievement behind it, has earned the right to be heard in the world's political councils.

*Tony Jackson, *Against the Grain: The Dilemma of Project Food Aid*, Oxford: Oxfam, £4.50.

LABOUR PLANS NEW LAND GRAB POLICY

BRITAIN'S Labour Party has once again started to redefine its attitude to land ownership, writes P. E. Poole.

It is considering a new policy which, if adopted at its annual conference in Blackpool at the end of September would strip the country's major property owners of many of their assets.

One proposal is to take into public ownership all freehold land other than

that belonging to residential owner-occupiers.

The alternative approach would involve only certain categories of land, including urban development land.

Labour's policy on agricultural land stresses two points:

- "State farming" is opposed; and
- Only tenanted land should be nationalised.