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# The World Food Council: The Rise and Fall of a United Nations Body<sup>1</sup>

D. John Shaw

**ABSTRACT** At the recommendation of the 1974 World Food Conference, the UN World Food Council (WFC) was established by the UN General Assembly at the ministerial or plenipotentiary level following the worst world food crisis in modern history at the beginning of the 1970s. The WFC was charged with overseeing the follow-up of the conference's resolutions and coordinating the work of the concerned UN agencies relating to food production, nutrition, food security, food trade, and food aid. This is the first summarized and selective account of the work of the WFC until its demise in 1993. The reasons for the fall of this UN body are given as well as proposals for another body to fulfil its roles.

**RÉSUMÉ** Suivant la recommandation de la Conférence mondiale l'alimentation de 1974, l'Assemblée générale de l'ONU a établi le Conseil mondial de l'alimentation (CMA) au niveau ministériel ou plénipotentiaire, après la pire crise alimentaire de l'histoire moderne au début des années 1970. Le CMA devait surveiller la mise en œuvre des résolutions de la Conférence et coordonner le travail des organismes de l'ONU chargés des questions relatives à la nutrition, à la production, à la sécurité et à l'aide alimentaires ainsi qu'au commerce des aliments. L'article présente le premier résumé sélectif du mandat du CMA jusqu'à sa dissolution en 1993. Il expose les raisons de l'échec de cet organe et formule des propositions afin qu'un autre puisse remplir son rôle.

1. I am particularly grateful to the WFC secretariat for giving me a complete set of the Council's papers and documents when the decision to close its operations was made in 1993. I would like to thank Sartaj Aziz—one of the deputy secretaries-general of the 1974 World Food Conference who played a prominent part in its preparations and deliberation and the first WFC deputy executive director, as well as former director of FAO's Commodities and Trade Division—for providing me with his personal papers and proposals for the conference and his views on its outcomes. I would also like to express my appreciation to Uwe Kracht, senior economist (1976–86) and chief, Policy Development and Analysis (1986–93) in the WFC secretariat, for commenting on a draft of an extended version of this account. I attended a number of the Council's annual ministerial sessions as the representative of the UN World Food Programme.

## Introduction: Mandate and Modus Operandi

The world food crisis of the early 1970s, the worst in modern history, led to a World Food Conference in 1974 at which 18 substantive resolutions were adopted to tackle the problem.<sup>2</sup> Among them, the UN General Assembly approved the World Food Conference resolution, establishing

a World Food Council [WFC], at the ministerial or plenipotentiary level, to function as an organ of the United Nations reporting to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC], and to serve as a co-ordinating mechanism to provide over-all, integrated and continuing attention for the successful co-ordination and follow-up of policies concerning food production, nutrition, food security, food trade and food aid, as well as other related matters, by all the agencies of the United Nations system. (UN 1975, 18)

In taking this step, the complex nature of the world food problem, which can only be solved through an integrated multi-disciplinary approach within the framework of economic and social development as a whole, was recognized. The main functions of the Council, which were laid out in the conference resolution, included

- periodic review of major problems and policy issues affecting the world food situation;
- periodic review of steps being proposed or taken to implement the World Food Conference resolutions and to resolve the problems by governments, the UN system, and its regional organizations;
- recommendation of remedial action to resolve these problems;
- co-ordination of relevant UN bodies and agencies dealing with food production, nutrition, food security, and food aid, giving special attention to the problems of the least-developed and most seriously affected countries; and
- maintaining contact with, receiving reports from, and giving advice and making recommendations to UN bodies and agencies for the formulation and follow-up of world food policies, and co-operation with regional bodies to formulate and follow-up policies approved by the council.

In essence, the WFC was to be a political overview body and was to serve as the eyes, ears, and conscience of the UN system regarding world food security issues. It was to act as advocate, catalyst, and co-ordinator, stimulating governments and the international

2. For details of the world food crisis and proposals for national and international action, see UN (1974a; 1974b). For a report on the World Food Conference, see UN (1975). A complete set of the documents and papers of the World Food Council has been deposited in the British Library of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK.

community as a whole to adopt mutually beneficial policies and programs to alleviate hunger and malnutrition in the world. The heads of the UN agencies concerned were to be invited to attend Council sessions. The establishment of the WFC promised a new beginning in the quest for world food security. However, from the outset, the Council represented a compromise between those who did not want any new UN machinery to address the problems of world food security and the proposals made at the conference for a World Food Authority or a World Food Security Council. Significantly, it was the only UN body to be specifically set up at the ministerial or plenipotentiary level, reporting directly to the UN General Assembly through ECOSOC. Nominated by ECOSOC and elected by the UN General Assembly, members were to serve for three years, taking into consideration balanced geographical representation.<sup>3</sup>

At the Council's first session, held in June 1975 in Rome, Italy, where its headquarters was located, its Rules of Procedure, drafted by the secretariat of ECOSOC after consultation with the UN Office of Legal Affairs, were considered (UN 1977). A bureau consisting of a president, three (later four) vice-presidents, and a rapporteur was elected by Council members for a biennium. In electing the WFC bureau, due respect was paid to the principle of rotation and equitable geographical representation. An executive director was appointed by the UN secretary-general in consultation with WFC members and the director-general of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for a period of four years, again with due regard to the principle of geographical rotation. The UN secretary-general, in consultation with the executive director, also appointed an adequate number of staff to the WFC secretariat, taking into account the need for equitable geographical distribution in addition to professional competence and avoiding the appointment of persons who simultaneously perform functions in other agencies or institutions.<sup>4</sup>

In preparing the documentation and providing administrative, operational, and other services for the Council, the secretariat was required to the maximum extent to co-operate with and rely on existing international bodies in the field of food and agriculture, especially the FAO, in whose headquarters it was located. Funding of WFC activities was to be met out of the UN administrative budget and was to be closely controlled. While sessions of the Council would normally be held at WFC's headquarters in Rome and preceded by preparatory meetings, provision was made to hold sessions elsewhere at the invitation of governments that agreed to defray the costs involved, after consultation with the UN secretary-general.<sup>5</sup>

3. The number of WFC members was agreed upon by the UN General Assembly in its resolution XXIX of 17 December 1974. Of the 36 members, 9 were to come from African states, 8 from Asian states, 7 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 4 from the socialist states of Eastern Europe, and 8 from Western Europe and other states.

4. The insistence on geographical balance came mainly from the G77 group of non-aligned countries who felt that the UN agencies had been inclined to a Western view of development due to the heavy weighting of staff in favour of the major contributing donor countries.

5. Of the 18 annual WFC ministerial sessions that were held, 3 were held at WFC headquarters in Rome, 1 at the UN headquarters in New York, 9 in developing countries, and 5 in developed countries.

Sayed Ahmed Marei, assistant president of Egypt, who was secretary-general of the 1974 World Food Conference and a strong proponent of the proposal for some form of world food authority, was elected the first president of the WFC. John A. Hannah from the United States, former president of Michigan State University in the United States, head of the US Administration for International Development during the Nixon administration, president of the American Freedom from Hunger Foundation set up at the beginning of the Kennedy administration, and chairman of the World Hunger Action Coalition, who had been chosen by Marei as one of his deputy secretaries-general for the World Food Conference, was appointed the WFC's first executive director. Sartaj Aziz, another deputy secretary-general of the World Food Conference and formerly director of FAO's Commodities and Trade Division, and who played a major role in preparations for and at the World Food Conference, was appointed as Hannah's deputy.

At the outset, the WFC faced a formidable array of issues relating to the world food situation and world food security. Where should it begin, what should be its priorities, and what should be its program of work? In a note to the Council at its first session, in 1975, Hannah observed that the functions assigned to the WFC were wide-ranging, important, and complex and that it might not be practicable to deal with the whole range of subjects and issues simultaneously (WFC 1975a). He expected that the relative priority of various issues would change over time and that some program or policy issues may be ready for decision earlier than others. The Council might therefore wish to consider the best manner in which it could fulfil its mandate by selecting specific issues or program for special attention at each ministerial session, while maintaining an overall view of the food problem and of progress made in implementing the 1974 World Food Conference resolution.

At its first session, members gave their revealing first views of the conduct of the Council's work. They agreed that as the world's highest political body dealing exclusively with food, the WFC's main functions would be to monitor the world food situation in all its aspects, including what international agencies and governments were doing to develop short and long-term solutions to food problems; to determine, in its co-ordinating role, whether the world food strategy as a whole makes sense; to identify malfunctions, gaps and problem areas; and to exert its influence, through moral persuasion, to get any necessary improvements made. Ominously, in the face of this formidable array of tasks, it was agreed that the WFC secretariat should be small and of high professional competence and should draw fully on the expertise of other agencies, especially the FAO (WFC 1975b).

The Council was required to report annually to the UN General Assembly through ECOSOC. Members agreed that WFC reports should be different from the usual official style. They needed to convey the pulse of happenings on the world food scene and command international attention. They stipulated that while the Council's reports should be of a high evaluative and analytical nature, the secretariat should not undertake major research efforts of its own but should rely on the agencies responsible for the subject, while exercising its own objectivity with respect to the conclusions it drew from them. To accomplish this, the secretariat should feel free to call on all agencies for the infor-

mation it required in a spirit of cooperation and shared concern. The secretariat should maintain a close watch over the efforts of international agencies and governments to increase food production and to improve world food security. And it should scrutinize, review and comment, frankly and impartially, on situations as it found them and suggest improvements as and when necessary.

In addition, the executive director was to bring the Council's reports to the attention of all relevant international and national authorities. It was agreed that only a few problems should be put on the agenda of any session, that ample time for preparation should be allowed, that the dates of each sessions should be fixed with due regard to other relevant meetings, and that the secretariat should not duplicate documents that were readily available from other expert sources. At each session, the Council would need a report that concisely identified the major problems and evaluated the progress or impediments to their solutions at a worldwide level as well as the progress or needed improvement in programs of agencies or nations.

This paper will now provide a comprehensive summary of the main work carried out by the Council for the first time, before turning to the reasons for its demise in 1993.

## Major Food and Hunger Issues

As standing items on its agenda, the Council reviewed the world food situation and progress in the implementation of the World Food Conference resolutions.

### The World Food Situation

At its first session, in June 1975, it was agreed that the WFC's review of the world food situation should be "deep, objective and penetrating" (WFC 1975b, 13). Its reviews were based on reports submitted by FAO's Committee on World Food Security, which gave implicit political support to FAO's work. In its 1975 review, the Council called for special attention to be given to the food needs of countries most seriously affected by the world food crisis by ensuring the physical availability of 6–7 million tons of food aid in cereals by the end of the year.

By 1984, 10 years after the World Food Conference, the Council noted that the global food situation had become "more complex, interrelated and in some ways more precarious" (WFC 1984f, 2). The world was feeding nearly 1 billion more people in 1984 than it had been 10 years before, and there was ample food produced globally for all the world's people. Yet there remained hundreds of millions of hungry and malnourished people. The World Food Conference's goal of eliminating hunger and malnutrition within a decade had proved unattainable. But the Council reaffirmed that hunger and malnutrition could be eradicated in our time. At its last session, in 1992, the Council noted that most developing regions had made some headway during the decade of the 1980s in reducing the proportion (not number) of hungry and malnourished people. But sub-Saharan Africa remained a special concern. The WFC appealed to the international community to help reverse Africa's deteriorating food and hunger situation and reiterated the need for a Green Revolution.

## World Food Conference Resolutions

As mentioned earlier, the WFC was required to report to the UN General Assembly through ECOSOC on the implementation of the World Food Conference resolutions. In carrying out this responsibility, the WFC had an impact particularly on the resolutions relating to food aid, the setting up of an international fund for agricultural development, and international agricultural trade.

The Council's influence on food aid was seen in a number of dimensions. It pressed not only for an increase in food aid toward the target set by the World Food Conference of 10 million tons of cereals annually but also for the establishment of an international emergency food reserve. In particular, it called on the governing body of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to set guidelines and criteria for all food aid as a framework for implementing the resolution of the conference on an improved policy for food aid (WFP 1979) and to draw up modalities for the operation of the international emergency food reserve (WFP 1978). The Council also kept up pressure on the developed and oil producing and exporting countries (OPEC) countries to reach agreement on their contributions to the international fund for agricultural development. The director-general of the OPEC Special Fund addressed the WFC's second session in Rome in 1976 and announced that \$400 million, half the resources of OPEC's fund, would be committed to the international fund's target of \$1,000 million, subject to developed countries contributing the balance of convertible initial resources. After protracted discussion, an agreement was reached in 1977 and the international fund began operations. International agricultural trade was a standing item on the Council's agenda from inception as an integral part of its program to eradicate hunger and malnutrition.

## Strategic Perspectives

To fulfil its mandate and keep the objective of eliminating hunger and poverty in front of the international community, the WFC also made projections of progress, or the lack of it, at appropriate times and recommended concrete actions to stimulate positive trends. At the fifth Council session, in 1979, the prospects for world food security in the 1980s were reviewed in light of three substantial reports (WFC 1979a; 1979b; 1979c). The first contained a detailed assessment by the WFC's executive of the prospects for achieving world food security during the decade, and proposals for action. The second contained FAO's Plan of Action on World Food Security. And the third concerned international trade issues. The UN General Assembly had recommended that the WFC "consider the impact of trade including the protectionist measures harming the exports of developing countries on the solution of the food problems of developing countries and put forward specific recommendations thereon" (UN General Assembly Resolution 33/90, 1976).

In submitting his assessment, the executive director took the opportunity to clarify the concept of world food security, which, in his view, was not a uniformly understood concept, and was used with a variety of meanings. To him, in a broad sense it meant

food security at the village or family level among the poorest people so that their food consumption could at least be maintained at current levels and progressively improved over time. In a narrower, more specialized, sense, it meant the stability of the international wheat market, the most widely traded food. Proposed solutions varied according to the scope of the definition of world food security: there were many different conceptions and views. The executive director considered that the broad concept should serve as the basis for assessing proposed policy measures. Given the complexity of the problems of food security, he felt that it was analytically useful to recognize three different but related aspects: the adequacy of food production and consumption systems within countries, including the distribution of income; the adequacy of infrastructure for food distribution and information concerning crop and market conditions; and international trade and adjustment, aid flows, and the stability of international food markets.

On the basis of his assessment, the executive director made five recommendations for the Council's approval: (1) country and regional assessments of the food security infrastructure needs of developing countries, with a request to the World Bank and FAO to expand their activities in this area; (2) agreement on a world food-grain stabilization reserve of 20–30 million tons under internationally agreed and binding rules; (3) agreement on a 10 million-ton Food Aid Convention to be reached in 1979; (4) immediate achievement of the 500,000-ton target for the international emergency food reserve, and endorsement of a “relatively modest” enlargement to 750,000 tons by 1981; (5) support for the establishment of a financial food facility within the IMF.

The adoption by the UN General Assembly of the International Development Strategy (IDS) for the Third United Nations Development Decade of the 1980s presented another occasion for the Council to carry out a strategic perspective of future prospects for the elimination of hunger and malnutrition (WFC 1981). Some satisfaction could be gained from the fact that the IDS had taken note of the WFC's work and recommendations and had included the target of eradicating hunger by the end of the century. However, it regretted the fact that its elimination within a decade, the goal set at the 1974 World Food Conference, was no longer feasible. The situation of growing mass hunger and malnutrition was an affront to humanity. The Council called on all governments and agencies to redouble their efforts to eliminate hunger and lead the world to co-operative development for all people. It was convinced that progress toward peace and disarmament, including the reduction in military expenditure called for in the IDS, was crucial for the international community to be able to develop its full capacity to feed a growing population. The general feeling was that food for all might be difficult to achieve without peace, as much as peace would not be possible in the long run without food and development for all.

Ten years after the World Food Conference, the WFC asked for a special assessment on progress in meeting food objectives and the priority tasks that had yet to be achieved. The WFC president decided that at least part of the assessment should be carried out by an independent panel of highly qualified individuals with wide-ranging development experience who were not associated formally with either governments or international



organizations and who would be capable of rigorously independent judgement.<sup>6</sup> The panel's report was presented to the Council at its tenth session, in 1984 (WFC 1984c). Its assessment concluded that many of the dire forecasts made in 1974 had not been borne out. Aggregate food and agricultural production had reached record levels, with corresponding low real prices for most internationally traded cereals and agricultural commodities. The threat of global food scarcity seemed far off, although the possibility of major production shortfalls was still in evidence. Identifying the hungry and formulating effective programs required a change in emphasis and thinking, since chronic under-nutrition had proved to be a much more intractable and deep-seated problem. Between 400 and 600 million people, especially in the low-income countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, still went without adequate food. The paradox of growing output and starving millions was the dilemma of the world food situation dealt with in the panel's assessment.

The assessment implicitly sought to distinguish between the world *hunger* problem and the world *food* problem, although it was acknowledged that the two were related. In the panel's opinion, hunger would not be conquered until the undernourished had access to significant employment and income-generating opportunities. In the meantime, direct measures would be needed to provide the poor and undernourished with access to the food they required. The panel stressed that the problem of hunger must be tackled primarily at the national level, where short-term and long-run policy decisions were required to provide immediate needs without hindering long-term solutions. At the global level, the panel identified the food problem as the inability to reconcile the increasing commercialization of domestic and international agricultural trade with divergent national agricultural policies and expanding food surpluses. Without some measure of adjustment, the low-income countries would continue to face the greatest burden. Changes in agricultural and trade policies were necessary in the industrially advanced countries, although the process of change could only be gradual. Developed countries needed to shape national agricultural policies by understanding their implications on international prices and their impact on low-income countries. This was the nexus where the global food and hunger problems came together.

The WFC ministers concluded that to meet the objectives of the World Food Conference, the major tasks ahead included

- sustained efforts by the developing countries to increase food production and improve access to increased food supplies;
- a renewed commitment to an accelerated reduction of chronic hunger and malnutrition, integrating more effective direct hunger-reducing measures into the process of economic and social development;

6. The members of the panel were Walter P. Falcon, Food Research Institute, Stanford University, USA; C.T. Kurien, Madras Institute of Development Studies, India; Fernando Mönckeberg, Institute of Nutrition and Food Technology, University of Chile; Achola P. Okeyo, University of Nairobi, Kenya; S.O. Olbyide, University of Ibadan, Nigeria; Ferenc Rabar, Institute of Planning Economy, Hungary; and Wouter Tims, Centre for World Food Studies, the Netherlands. The cost of the study was met by grants from the governments of Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands.

- a major concentrated effort by African countries and the international community to resolve the African food and development crisis, and the concomitant need for increased resources and for further improvements in the utilization of resources;
- further identification and negotiation of measures for strengthening the access of developing countries to food supplies in the event of global food shortages;
- real efforts by developed countries to reduce trade protectionism and international market instability, in support of food security and development objectives of all countries;
- efforts to resolve the serious financial problems in general and liquidity problems in particular, confronting developing countries, which are caused to a large degree by the impact of increases in interest rates; and
- a commitment to sustained and increased development assistance, with a strengthened role for multilateral agencies, and improved coordination of international assistance.. (WFC 1984f)

## WFC Declarations

The Council issued five resounding declarations as acts of solidarity and in order to get its messages across to ECOSOC, the UN General Assembly, and the international community.<sup>7</sup>

### **Manila Communiqué of the World Food Council: A Programme of Action to Eradicate Hunger and Malnutrition (WFC 1977b)**

The communiqué was adopted at the third session of the Council in Manila, the Philippines, in 1977. The Council stated that it was encouraged by recent improvements in the world food supply situation. Increases in production had permitted the rebuilding of grain stocks in some countries. It also expressed satisfaction that, with the help of the Council, pledges for the \$1 billion International Fund for Agricultural Development had been achieved and the fund was expected to be in operation soon. However, the Council expressed concern that there was no assurance that improvement in the world food situation would continue. It called for urgent action to accelerate food production, especially in food-deficit countries, create an adequate food reserve, expand and improve food aid, improve human nutrition, and liberalize and improve food trade, in line with the resolutions of the 1974 World Food Conference. Its greatest concern was the absence of systematic and concerted action to implement the World Food Conference's *Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition*, with its proclamation that every man, woman, and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition. Achievement of that goal was critical to the welfare and human development of over 500 million of the world's population.

7. The content of these declarations is presented here in highly summarized form. The full details can be found in each statement separately.

Several measures were recommended as basic components of an integrated program of action to eradicate hunger and malnutrition. Governments and international agencies were called upon to act on six high priority recommendations.

1. Food production should be increased, with special treatment given to food priority countries. Official development assistance to food and agricultural production should be increased to achieve at least a 4% sustained rate of growth in food production in developing countries, and a package of specific inputs should be provided to reach that goal.
2. World food security could be improved and ensured if countries with grain stocks converted a portion of their stocks into national reserves.
3. Food aid could be increased and improved by reaching the minimum annual level of 10 tons of food aid in cereals in 1977–78, adopting the forward planning of food aid supplies, and developing and implementing an improved policy framework for food aid.
4. Human nutrition could be improved if all governments gave high priority to reducing hunger and improving nutrition in accordance with the appropriate resolution of the World Food Conference, and bilateral and multilateral agencies assisted developing countries in developing and implementing nutrition plans, policies and programs, and measures to monitor and evaluate their results.
5. The contribution of trade to the solution of food problems could be improved if all countries, and particularly developed nations, made serious efforts to stabilize, liberalize, and expand world trade, and if they concluded negotiation of the UNCTAD Integrated Programme for Commodities in a timely fashion.
6. Donors were requested to increase their ODA to reach the target of 0.7% of GDP established at the seventh special session by the UN General Assembly by the end of the decade. Governments and international agencies were encouraged to give major support toward the implementation of the “basic needs approach” endorsed by the 1976 ILO World Employment Conference (ILO 1976).

The communiqué was unanimously endorsed by ECOSOC in its resolution 2114 (LXII) of 4 August 1977 and adopted in full by the UN General Assembly in its resolution 32/52 of 8 December 1977.

### **Mexico Declaration of the World Food Council (WFC 1978)**

In his statement to the Second Committee of the UN General Assembly on 20 October 1978, Maurice Williams stressed that the eradication of hunger and malnutrition “must be the key element in the [UN] Third Development Strategy – indeed, it may well be our central preoccupation until the year 2000” (Williams 1978, 10). He noted that there was a general understanding of the measures that had to be taken to achieve that objective, but an agreement was needed on the precise measures required to translate willingness in principle into action in practice. The Mexico Declaration, adopted by the Council at its fourth session, in 1978, laid out a practical program to achieve that result. Williams sought the strong endorsement of the UN General Assembly in order to provide a firm basis for the WFC’s continuing work.

The Mexico Declaration was in the form of an international wake-up call. The declaration listed the positive achievements of the Council. However, on closer examination of the world food situation, the rate of progress in solving fundamental food problems was far too slow. The Council called for this dangerous situation to be corrected, warning that otherwise that progress would continue to fall short of the objectives of the World Food Conference and the Manila Communiqué. Two urgent concerns were identified: (1) reallocating a share of resources that would be freed as a result of the reduction of military expenditure to finance measures directed to advancing the development of developing countries, especially their food situation; and (2) bearing in mind the serious situation caused by climatic conditions that again confronted countries in the Sahelian zone of West Africa, governments and multilateral agencies were expressly requested to supply or increase the necessary emergency food aid and to support the efforts of the governments of the region to ensure long-term development of their food production.

The Mexico Declaration then listed in detail the Council's recommendations concerning the implementation of the Manila Communiqué. It was to take almost a decade before the Council issued another declaration.

### **Beijing Declaration of the World Food Council (WFC 1987a)**

The Beijing Declaration was another clarion call for concerted international action to eliminate hunger and malnutrition. Coming toward the end of a decade of world recession and non-development, it stated that 13 years after the World Food Conference, although total food production had increased, the number of undernourished people had risen. This untenable situation had deep historical root causes and complex social and economic factors. In the face of this disorder, the Council

- once again proclaimed that access to food constituted a human right that must be defended by governments, peoples, and the international community;
- affirmed, in light of the experience of a number of developing countries, that humanity can feed itself if it adopts the proper means;
- proclaimed that those means depend on the political will of governments and the international community to win the common battle against hunger; and
- acknowledged that the development of agricultural production required a favourable international climate, and was contingent upon the convergence of financial, economic, and social policies implemented by each country within the framework of the concept of national food strategies.

The declaration addressed four major issues. First was the global state of hunger and malnutrition and the impact of economic adjustment on food and hunger problems. The second was the impact of international agricultural trade and related national policies on food and development. The third was regional and South-South co-operation in food and agriculture. Finally, the declaration expressed the Council's "general appreciation and encouragement" for the work of the multilateral agencies.

## **The Cyprus Initiative Against Hunger in the World (WFC 1988d)**

At its fourteenth session, in Nicosia, Cyprus, in 1988, the Council decided to launch the Cyprus Initiative Against Hunger in the World. The initiative called for an urgent review and assessment of the efforts made to date in reducing hunger and for the identification of ways for improving current policies and programs and of pragmatic, feasible, and potentially effective new initiatives towards meeting the Council's fundamental objective: the elimination of hunger and malnutrition. The WFC president was requested to present a full action-oriented report to the Council at its next session, in 1989. In order to assist the president, an informal ad hoc consultative group was established, composed of representatives of states members of the United Nations convened by the Council's regional vice-presidents, relevant international organizations, and the WFC president. The group's mandate was to review and assess the policies and instruments available to combat chronic hunger and malnutrition in developing countries, particularly in low-income, food-deficit countries, and identify the reasons and obstacles that may have hindered their greater impact; consider concrete and realistic measures that could make existing policies and instruments more effective; identify workable initiatives; and recommend a course of action to combat hunger more effectively. The proposals of the group were to be first examined at a meeting of the WFC bureau by the end of 1988 before being presented to the Council at its session in 1989.

## **The Cairo Declaration (WFC 1989f)**

The WFC president's comprehensive report in response to the Cyprus Initiative was discussed by the Council at its fifteenth session, in Cairo, Egypt, in 1989. The three-part report comprised a review of global hunger 15 years after the World Food Conference, an assessment of the effectiveness of current policies and programs in reducing hunger, and a proposed program of co-operative action (WFC 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1989d, 1989e). Deliberations focused on urgently needed action, out of which emerged the Cairo Declaration. The Council showed signs of frustration and impatience with an international community that was insufficiently focused on a problem that morally had to be solved and could be overcome. In its view, hunger continued to grow because even though the resources were available to eradicate it, insufficient work was being done to do so.

The declaration pointed out that hunger had many manifestations: the starvation caused by famine, often associated with violent conflict or war, and natural disasters; the silent suffering of the growing number of undernourished; the millions of malnourished children, women, and elderly who are unable to meet their special food and health needs; and the many lives lost to or ruined by disorders caused by deficiencies of micro-nutrients, such as vitamin A and iodine. While different forms of hunger had specific causes requiring appropriate responses, they were generally rooted in poverty and a failure to share food and wealth adequately within and between countries, as demonstrated with the growth in the number of hungry people despite record-level

global food stocks. The problem of access by the poor to adequate food had been made worse by the economic difficulties of the 1980s.

The Cairo Declaration contained a specific call to action. Council members agreed that they could serve as an example to the rest of the world if they strengthened their own political determination to eradicate hunger, commensurate with the magnitude and urgency of the problem. They recognized that each country must take its own initiatives in the fight against hunger and poverty but achievements would be greater when WFC members and non-members worked together and co-ordinated their efforts. In this spirit, the Council accepted the steps articulated in the "Programme of Co-operative Action" proposed by the WFC president (which was annexed to the Cairo Declaration) as a framework for its individual and collective action to combat hunger. Specifically, WFC members undertook to

- review their policies and programs to provide food security for all people, and devise a package of corrective measures to address inadequacies, and report to the next session of the council;
- make all efforts to achieve, during the next decade, the elimination of starvation and death caused by famine, a substantial reduction of malnutrition and mortality among young children, a tangible reduction in chronic hunger, and the elimination of major nutritional deficiency diseases;
- adopt, evaluate, and improve food strategies as an important instrument to fight hunger within broader developmental efforts focused on the improvement of the human condition; and
- co-operate with each other and with other countries in the fight against hunger and malnutrition.

To raise the level of political support nationally and internationally, the declaration proposed that the eradication of hunger and malnutrition be a major theme on the agenda of the special session of the UN General Assembly on international economic co-operation in 1990, and a central objective for the international development strategy for the 1990s. The Council decided that its future program of work would be in line with the Cairo Declaration.

### **Beijing Proposal on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development**

The final act of the Council was to co-sponsor an international symposium on sustainable agriculture and rural development in Beijing, China, in May 1993. The WFC paper presented at the symposium argued that in many developing countries a new Green Revolution was needed to meet the growing demand for food but it needed to be significantly different from the first Green Revolution (WFC 1993). It should be green in an ecologically sustainable sense, and also socially sustainable. The paper called for new strategic directions in technology development and application for sustainable food security, guided by the three basic objectives of productivity, sustainability, and equity.

Five major new directions were identified: (1) a focus on agro-ecological zones to achieve sustainable food security; (2) the development of a farming systems approach

and livelihood research; (3) the integration of conventional research with modern biotechnology; (4) participatory research and extension by farmers; (5) and improving the links between research and policy. The paper also addressed the trade-offs—many of which should be understood as long-term inter-generational trade-offs—between sustainability, food production growth, and hunger and poverty alleviation.

The Beijing Proposal contained four major recommendations: (1) the establishment of a regional association for world sustainable agriculture and rural development; (2) the foundation of an Institute of International Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in China; (3) the setting up of a key research and development project on international sustainable agriculture and rural development; and (4) the holding of annual international workshops in different regions of China or countries in the Asia and Pacific region on sustainable agriculture and rural development.

## A Co-ordinating Mechanism

An important function of the WFC was to serve as a co-ordinating mechanism to provide over-all integrated and continuing attention for the successful co-ordination and follow-up of policies concerning food production, nutrition, food security, food trade and food aid, and related matters by all the agencies of the UN system (UN 1975). A number of ways were approved for carrying out that role. The WFC president, or his representative, was permitted to attend meetings of the governing bodies of the relevant UN agencies. The WFC president and the executive director also met with the executive heads of UN bodies individually and collectively. And they also organized consultations with relevant UN organizations on specific subjects within the Council's mandate.

The scale and complexity of the Council's co-ordinating function was revealed when it requested the WFC secretariat to review co-ordination among the UN agencies toward meeting the common objective of eliminating hunger and malnutrition (WFC 1990b). The review found that well over 30 multilateral institutions were involved in hunger and malnutrition issues in important ways. But only a few of them were found to be focused on hunger and poverty alleviation. Agency priorities were generally widely set, reflecting different interests within their governing bodies. Hunger alleviation and food security objectives were not well integrated into agencies' overall activities. And there was need for more effective internal co-ordination within agencies, particularly the larger ones. Given the dispersion of priorities, many institutions spread their limited resources over a wide range of activities, generating large numbers of small-scale projects, endangering the quality of the agencies' work and their impact on hunger and poverty reduction.

Efforts had been made to ensure co-ordination among the UN system's institutions. Yet co-ordination remained deficient. The UN agencies were perceived to be excessively competing, and joint programming of their operational activities remained mostly inadequate (UN 1987). From its overview, the WFC secretariat drew two general conclusions. First, with so many multilateral institutions involved in hunger and malnutrition issues, the need for a central focus on hunger in the UN system remained

as important as it was when the WFC had been established 16 years earlier. To meet the challenges ahead, the secretariat concluded that the Council would need to further strengthen its monitoring, assessment, and promotional roles. Second, improved co-ordination was most critically needed at the country level.

From these two conclusions, the WFC secretariat made three recommendations: (1) to improve the capacity of developing countries to plan, manage, and co-ordinate national hunger-focused action and external aid; (2) to strengthen existing co-ordination mechanisms in the UN system; and (3) to explore opportunities for informal co-ordination arrangements. In light of the growing complexity of hunger and poverty problems, the Council felt that its role in providing a central, undivided focus on hunger within the UN system was now more important than at the time of its establishment. It agreed to encourage an enhanced hunger focus and improved co-ordination among all relevant international agencies and governing bodies.

## **Remedial Action and Global Policy Direction: WFC Initiatives**

The Council also recommended remedial action, and pointed to the direction global policy should take in the fight against hunger and malnutrition. It considered a wide range of initiatives on the basis of documents and reports submitted to it by the WFC secretariat. The main initiatives are described below.

### **Food Priority Countries**

One of the Council's first initiatives was to establish what were called "food priority countries" (FPCs) that required special attention because of the seriousness of their food problems, their economic and other resource limitations, and their potential for increasing food production (WFC 1976b, 11–12). The FPCs were described as "the heart of the food problem" (WFC 1977a). The objective in selecting FPCs was, in the words of the Council, to lend a "sharper sense of direction to the overall efforts to increase food production in the developing countries."

On the basis of criteria established by the Council, 43 FPCs were identified. The situation of 8 was considered extremely severe; of 23, very severe; and of 12, severe. These FPCs accounted for more than half the population of developing countries (excluding China) and for over half their projected food deficits by 1985. It was agreed that special consideration should be given to the need to support the intent of these countries to implement policies and programs specifically designed to ensure that productive efforts fully utilized the human and other resources of rural areas. They should also contain practical measures to implement social and other reforms consistent with these objectives and with an equitable distribution of the food and income benefits of production programs undertaken. It was also agreed that care should be taken not to interfere with the sovereign rights of each country to decide its own priorities and policies. The list of FPCs would be reviewed and further work carried out to refine and complement the criteria.



International agencies, including the regional banks, were asked to co-operate with FPCs in determining specific measures and programs to accelerate food production by at least 4% per annum. They might also help in indicating other measures, such as food aid and nutrition programs, that would be required to improve food supply while production was increased.

The Council noted that the FPCs overlapped with other groups of countries classified by the United Nations as deserving special attention. This underscored the commonality of problems among poor countries. But the other classifications did not focus on the specific need to increase food production that was characteristic of the FPCs. The Council called on the international community to effectively and substantially increase its official development assistance to food and agricultural production in order to achieve, as soon as possible, at least a 4% sustained rate of growth of food production. Their aid was to take into account the estimate, provided by the WFC secretariat, of \$8.3 billion in external resources on an annual basis, of which it was recommended that about \$6.5 billion be on concessional terms (WFC 1977b).<sup>8</sup>

### **An International System of Food Security**

At its second session, in Rome in June 1976, the WFC secretariat submitted a document called "An International System of Food Security." The main components of a proposed global stock policy to implement such a system were:

- an international reserve for emergencies with an initial target of 500,000 tons, as proposed by the UN General Assembly at its seventh special session, in September 1975;
- national reserves for providing emergency relief and, in special cases, the uncovered commercial import requirements of most seriously affected developing countries, which could be covered by countries earmarking a part of their national stocks. The normal size of such reserves at the beginning of each year would preferably be 25% above the annual food aid program of the country concerned; and
- a food security reserve of 15–20 million tons to protect against well-defined commercial exigencies and to prevent abnormal fluctuations in grain prices. Governments would be urged to intensify their efforts in the appropriate forums to work out operational and other arrangements for such a reserve taking into account the interests of both exporting and importing countries. Such a reserve would be used to avert serious fluctuations in prices in the commercial markets.

### **Africa's Food Problems**

The Council gave attention to the acute food problems of Africa, and discussed ways of overcoming them, at 8 of its 18 annual sessions. At its second session, in 1976, a report was received from the African Inter-Ministerial Committee for Food and its

8. \$8.3 billion was a WFC secretariat re-evaluation of 1975 prices of the \$5 billion for which there was board support at the World Food Conference. The concessional element was based on at least 86% being provided as grants (WFC 1977a).

recommendations submitted to ECOSOC. In March 1982, the Council sponsored a regional consultation of African ministers for food and agriculture in Nairobi, Kenya. The Council recommended urgently accelerated efforts by African countries and international agencies, taking into account the conclusions and recommendations of the consultation, which were included in the report of its eighth session (WFC 1982b, annex III; WFC 1982c). African ministers acknowledged that the causes of the deterioration of agriculture in the region were complex, exacerbated by natural and man-made disasters. They also recognized that to resolve their food problems effectively, African governments had to disengage from the colonial legacies of urban-biased development, deeply embedded trade dependence, and unrealistic terms of trade.

Progress and critical issues in food strategies in Africa were discussed at the Council's tenth session, in 1984, on the basis of a report by the executive director (WFC 1984a). The pivotal role of women in Africa's food systems was discussed at its eleventh session, in 1985 (WFC 1985a). In 1986, the Council met in Rome for its twelfth session, immediately after a special session of the UN General Assembly on the critical economic situation in Africa, the first on a single region of the world, which adopted the United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development 1986–90 (UN General Assembly resolution S-13/2, 1986). In the framework of the UN African action program, the WFC executive director outlined what he called the "imperative of food-centred development" for Africa's economic recovery (WFC 1986a, 4–6).

WFC continued its food policy dialogue with donor countries, international aid agencies, and African countries and institutions. A ministers' round table on food security in Africa, organized by the Development Policy Forum of the German Foundation for International Development (DSE) in co-operation with the WFC president, was held in Berlin, Germany, in 1987 (DSE 1987). The Council continued to promote the proposal for the establishment of food policy management training programs in Africa in support of national and regional food strategies. This was done through a series of visits to 20 African government and training institutions. A high-level workshop was held in 1988 by the WFC and the European Centre for Development Policy Management with senior experts from African and international institutions. And a consultation on food policy management training programs in Africa was held in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in 1989, organized jointly by WFC and the African Development Bank, with representatives of African governments, regional and training institutions, and interested bilateral and multilateral agencies. The consultation reaffirmed the need for strengthening African expertise in food policy management and proposed several types of training programs that could be carried out in existing African institutions.

### National Food Strategies

The WFC invested more time and effort in promoting the concept of national food strategies as a planning tool for countries to deal with their particular food problems than perhaps any other single subject it promoted. This was largely initiated by Maurice J. Williams of the United States, previously chairman of OECD's Development Assistance Committee. Williams took over from John Hannah as the WFC executive

director in 1978 and served for eight years until 1986, with Salahuddin Ahmed, previously the Bangladesh permanent representative to the FAO, as his deputy. The Council endorsed the concept of national food strategies at its fifth session, in Ottawa, in 1979 (WFC 1979d).

What motivated the WFC executive director to take this initiative? Many developing countries continued to have increasing food deficits in the years immediately following the 1974 World Food Conference. This suggested that their approaches to resolving their food problems were proving inadequate. Production shortfalls and high import bills indicated that special attention should be given to the food sector. It should not simply "tag along" with the rest of a country's economy and development objectives. Specific and concerted attention was required. Apart from expanding food production, equal attention would be required for the demand side concerns of ensuring acceptable consumption levels for the poor and undernourished and promoting their income-generating potential (Williams 1984).

The concept of national food strategies emerged from seven consultations organized by the WFC during 1979 among representatives of developing and developed countries and assistance agencies (WFC 1982a). The Council also called for policy adjustments in a framework of priorities that kept a country's perceptions of its food needs at the centre of the development process, and enabled development agencies to direct and project their assistance programmes. Critically, a national food strategy was country-specific in two senses. It was formulated and adapted to the particular circumstances of each country. And its thrust and content were entirely matters for each country's policy-makers to determine. It was said to differ from other approaches in several important ways: it linked more directly consumption needs to production objectives as a basis for meeting those needs; it emphasized the integration of policies and project activities and avoided fragmentation of efforts; it included provisions for strengthening the institutions necessary for its implementation as a continuing process designed to sustain adequate priority for the food sector; it facilitated national decisions over time covering the whole range of activities affecting food; it equally facilitated the increased and co-ordinated international assistance needed for its implementation; and it was ultimately directed toward a paramount aim of development—a world without hunger.

Williams saw what was termed the food policy dilemma as perhaps the most fundamental issue to be tackled. This involved the policy choices of how to raise prices as an incentive to increase domestic food production while simultaneously safeguarding the nutrition of the poor. Resolving this issue required a clear understanding of the short- and long-term trade-offs involved in the pursuit of both production and consumption objectives. In turn, this widened the focus to include such concerns as employment and income generation and consumer food subsidy programs. The national food strategy concept caught the attention of both developing and developed countries. By 1982, some 50 developing countries were said to be engaged in food strategy reviews, 32 of them with WFC-arranged assistance. Other countries initiated food strategy reviews without specific external assistance. A number of bilateral development agencies and UN bodies and development banks offered support. National food strategies were en-

dorsed by the UN General Assembly and at the conferences of UN and other organizations.

Subsequently, the Council, in co-operation with other bodies, carried out seven reviews of the experience of countries, particularly in Africa, in implementing national food strategies, and over 30 papers and reports were produced between 1984 and 1992. The Council also drew up detailed guidelines for the preparation and implementation of national food strategies, including institutional considerations, and addressed some important issues such as the co-ordination of international support. A number of lessons were learned. Because a number of sectors of a country's economy were involved in planning and implementing food strategies, leadership from the highest political level and inter-ministerial support and co-ordination were of paramount importance. Adequate institutions and trained manpower were necessary; hence the need for training, public management, and sustained institutional support.

Policy change and program innovation involved political and economic risks and required special efforts to overcome organizational inertia and resistance to change. Similarly, adjustments were required in the assistance policies and programs of development agencies. There were no quick fixes and a long-term and sustained effort was required by national governments and the international community to resolve the national and global food problems and end the scourge of hunger. And the replication of successful experience among developing countries and regions was not easy. One criticism was that national food strategies involved so many aspects of a country's development that it was difficult to distinguish the concept from that of general economic development. With so many government and international agencies involved, co-ordination among them proved particularly frustrating, making their implementation difficult. The concept was later abandoned.

### **Eradicating Hunger and Malnutrition**

Encouraged by its executive directors and supported by its secretariat, the Council never lost sight of its mission of seeking ways and means of eradicating hunger and malnutrition. Various approaches were taken by the Council to address the issue. Improving nutrition was the message at the WFC's third session, in 1977 (WFC 1977b). A broad approach to nutritional problems in their social and economic context was strongly supported. It was also recognized that increased food production and economic development, while important elements in eradicating hunger and improving nutrition, were by themselves insufficient to achieve those objectives while people were unable to afford an adequate diet because of unemployment or poverty. The importance of introducing nutrition improvement as a major objective in national development was emphasized.

Mobilizing greater effort in the struggle to overcome hunger was the theme at its eighth session, in 1982 (WFC 1982a). The executive director emphasized that food and hunger issues must remain at the centre of the global development agenda until hunger was completely eradicated. A number of direct measures were proposed to reduce hunger on the basis of a report prepared by its secretariat (WFC 1982e). With inputs from international consultants, the WFC secretariat developed the idea of an interna-

tional food entitlement scheme, focused on international support for direct measures at the national level to eradicate hunger and malnutrition, including various types of consumer subsidy and related programs. This idea was not pursued.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, a WFC secretariat report identified a number of ways to improve the poor's access to food, including the prospects for the hungry to grow more food; labour-intensive investment programs; productive credits for low-income people; subsidizing supplementary food; and food aid to meet food import requirements. Maurice Williams, WFC's executive director, pointed out that the costs of an accelerated program of direct measures to reduce hunger as part of a campaign to raise productivity and generate incomes and assets lay "within the capacity of world economic resources" (Williams 1982, 657). However, he recognized that the political, social, and administrative constraints were real and should not be underestimated. But if such an effort were launched, there were prospects that the objective of food and jobs for all could still be achieved by the turn of the century.

The Council called for a renewal of the commitment to eradicate hunger at its tenth session, in 1984 (WFC 1984f). ECOSOC had requested the WFC carry out an assessment of resources provided through the UN system for the food and agricultural sector toward meeting the objectives of the World Food Conference (WFC 1984b). On the basis of that assessment, the executive director made a proposal to increase external assistance by \$5 billion over the next five-year period to reverse the trend of declining assistance to the sector. He regarded this as a minimum amount, which would be additional to existing commitments in support of food policy adjustments in developing countries and would be channelled through existing aid mechanisms and institutions. Half could be in the form of food aid to support consumption and nutrition objectives, and half in capital and technical assistance directed to related food production efforts as part of food policy support packages. A number of Council delegates (but not all) supported the executive director's proposal. In addition, there was consensus that peace and disarmament were requisites to the elimination of poverty and eradication of hunger.

Improving access to food for the undernourished was the focus of the Council's discussions at its eleventh session, in 1985 (WFC 1985b). The Council once again strongly urged governments to take determined and more sharply focused action that made the elimination of hunger and malnutrition a truly central objective in national development. Specifically, it recommended that political determination should be focused on four objectives:

1. Prevention of loss of life and human suffering caused by famine through both immediate action to improve disaster preparedness and management and longer-term efforts to remove the root causes of famine.
2. Drastic reduction of infant deaths from malnutrition and disease and protection of the gains achieved, especially in times of economic crisis.

9. I am grateful to Uwe Kracht for this information. Personal correspondence, 14 and 26 June 2006.

3. Efforts to alleviate the factors that led to growing world hunger in the immediate period ahead. International financial institutions, especially the IMF, were requested to take food security and poverty issues into account in the design of adjustment programs to assist developing countries in restoring their financial and economic health. And development agencies were requested to assist governments in identifying economic policy alternatives and implementing programs to protect and improve the food security of the poor.
4. Redirected programs for a substantial reduction of chronic hunger in the 1990s. Council ministers strongly emphasized that this would require some reorientation of development priorities and policies to meet the multiple objectives of growth, equity, self-reliance, improved efficiency, and productivity, with a view to bringing about a more equitable participation of all people in development.

The paradox of growing hunger amid record food surpluses caused the Council to address the potential for hunger reduction through food-surplus-based development assistance at its fourteenth session, in 1988. The WFC secretariat report on this subject contained a proposal for an International Hunger Initiative, a combination of concessional food transfers from food-surplus countries, financial assistance from non-food-surplus developed countries, and the efforts of developing countries to alleviate hunger and poverty (WFC 1988b). The proposed initiative was supported in principle but many WFC ministers felt that it did not go far enough, that it dealt more with food aid and the utilization of food surpluses than with the eradication of hunger, and that it did not take adequate account of the problems inherent in increased food aid. Instead, a much broader initiative, called the Cyprus Initiative Against Hunger in the World (see above), was articulated and supported. The initiative focused more directly on the possibility of hunger eradication in the foreseeable future and how to go about it, which, in the Council's view, could make a significant contribution to food security in the long term.

At its fifteenth session, in 1989, the Council adopted the Cairo Declaration, which, among other things, significantly committed WFC ministers to set an example to the rest of the world by putting into place policies and programs to reduce hunger and malnutrition in their own countries as well as at the global level. They undertook to review the actions taken to provide food security for all at its sixteenth session, in 1990. To assist them, the executive director produced a review on a range of national policies and programs to reduce hunger and poverty. The review drew on four regional consultations that the WFC secretariat had organized to identify additional and more effective measures and to draw attention to the constraints and problems that countries faced in their implementation (WFC 1990a).

In response to the executive director's review, the Council unanimously agreed that the development process must increasingly take into account the needs of the poor, and called for multi-level, equitable, human-centred development policies to be implemented in order to counter earlier neglect and distribute benefits more fairly. Many delegates stressed that agricultural policies and programs that focused on the small

farmer were doubly effective because they simultaneously raised incomes of the poor and increasing agricultural output. Special attention to the creation of employment and income-earning opportunities in both rural and urban areas was emphasized. The important role food subsidies and direct interventions could play in alleviating hunger and malnutrition was also recognized. Ministers from developing countries recognized that sound economic policies and measures to fight hunger and poverty were primarily a domestic responsibility. Developed-country ministers noted that hunger and poverty were already being given greater attention in development co-operation.

At its seventeenth session, in 1991, on the last occasion it addressed issues of hunger and poverty, the WFC stressed the need to focus development assistance specifically on the objective of their alleviation, encouraged by a report by the WFC secretariat on the subject (WFC 1991a). Council ministers from developed countries recognized the need for a constant re-examination of the focus on hunger and poverty alleviation in the development co-operation programs, which WFC ministers from developing countries supported (WFC 1991b).

### **Food Crisis Contingency Planning**

It was generally predicted that the 1980s would be a food-crisis-prone decade. The Council therefore agreed to consider specific contingency measures to counteract problems as they occurred. In 1980, at the sixth session, the WFC executive director presented a two-part proposal for strengthening food crisis contingency planning (WFC 1980). The first part was the constitution of a food security contingency reserve of 12 million tons of food grains to be held in advance or as part of a new International Wheat Agreement. Developing countries might hold up to 5 million tons, financed through OPEC and developed countries assistance. Multilateral agencies and bilateral donors would provide additional technical and financial assistance and food aid to increase storage capacity and meet the costs of holding the reserves.

The second part was a world food crisis pledge to avoid the catastrophe of the world food crisis of the early 1970s. The pledge's elements included an undertaking on the part of countries to act, in periods of tight international food grain markets, to minimize unilateral or destabilizing action, and to establish specific logistical standby procedures. The proposal also included special provisions for assistance to developing countries during an eventual world food crisis. It reiterated the need for the establishment of a food financing facility in the IMF and an additional flow of food aid in case of global crisis. The executive director stressed that a true and reliable contingency arrangement could not be left to voluntary or unilateral commitments; it had to have the character of a binding international instrument. The actions that the proposed pledge would put into motion would concern the international community as a whole because its impact would affect the actions of all nations and their ability to deal with a world food crisis. The negotiation of the pledge and the monitoring of its provisions should therefore be the responsibility of the United Nations.

The Council shared the executive director's concern for the coming decade of the 1980s. All but three WFC members agreed that if an International Wheat Agreement could not be brought to a successful conclusion by mid-1981, serious consideration

needed to be given to alternative ways of establishing a contingency reserve of adequate size in advance of and for eventual incorporation into a new International Wheat Agreement. Regarding the proposed world food crisis contingency pledge, the Council considered that it could be a major help toward meeting a world food crisis like that of 1973–75. It requested the WFC secretariat to further explore the possible modalities of such an arrangement with the appropriate agencies.

### **A Developing Country-Owned Reserve**

At its eighth session, in 1982, the Council discussed the possibility of establishing developing country-owned food reserves within the overall objectives of achieving world food security and market stability and as part of a strategy to mobilize greater effort in the struggle to overcome hunger (WFC 1982b). The executive director reported on consultations he had held on the possible establishment of such reserves (WFC 1982a). In the view of the experts he had met, grain markets were likely to be as volatile in the future as they had been in the past, with increasing food security risks for developing countries. There was therefore a strong case for developing countries to build up reserves as part of their national food policies as well as for protection against external uncertainty. Making adequate financing available to assist them when international prices were low therefore seemed very reasonable. If enough countries, both exporters and importers, showed interest, a good case could be made for the use of the IMF buffer stock facility that had been relatively idle since its establishment in 1969.

Experts estimated that the sum of individual reserves needed to satisfy the commercial cereal annual requirements for the 72 low-income countries that at the time qualified for soft loans through the World Bank's International Development Association would amount to 7 million tons of wheat, 3 million tons of coarse grains, and 1.3 million tons of rice. These estimates limited the reserves of any one country to a maximum of 500,000 tons of wheat, 500,000 tons of coarse grains, and 50,000 tons of rice, but it was considered that only a few of the eligible countries would have annual commercial requirements above those limits.

Many Council members, particularly those from developing countries, suggested that the proposal move forward toward intergovernmental discussion. They stressed the need for speedy action so that advantage could be taken of the favourable global grain supply situation to build reserves at minimum cost and to assist farmers in the process. Representatives of socialist countries also generally supported the proposal and suggested that although many problems remained they could be solved by an intergovernmental working group. While expressing interest, members from food-exporting developed countries called for more study of the technical and financial modalities of the proposal. The Council requested that the WFC president and executive director continue the process of consultations on the proposal with the help of other interested agencies. It also stressed that if global negotiations were launched at the United Nations, the proposal could become part of a wider effort in food security and international co-operation.



## Denouement

This highly summarized and selective account shows the considerable work and initiatives the World Food Council undertook during its existence. As a report of the UN Joint Inspection Unit (the “watchdog” of the UN system’s performance) stated, “The World Food Council is the only body which each year brings together ministers and whose deliberations have a real effect on the shape of operations. Meetings of the United Nations at ministerial level are thus the exception and have little impact on the day-to-day life of the Organization” (Bertrand 1985, 21). It was this ministerial character, and the political weight it carried, that made the Council a unique policy forum. The WFC president, and especially the Council’s executive director, backed by a small, dedicated secretariat, played important roles in formulating and advocating policy proposals and consensus building. Despite their Herculean efforts, they were given neither the authority nor the means to carry out the Council’s formidable mandate.<sup>10</sup>

Although much was achieved, there was disquiet both within and outside the Council about the way in which it functioned. This was discussed at its fifth session, in 1979 (WFC 1979d) and again at its eleventh session, in 1985, when it was considered timely to conduct a review of the Council’s *modus operandi*, ideally by the UN Secretary-General’s Office with a small committee of member states (WFC 1985b). UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar appointed a small advisory group to evaluate the effectiveness of the WFC and recommend ways in which the Council might more effectively accomplish its objectives.<sup>11</sup> Conscious of the tight financial situation of the UN and that substantial additional resources could not be expected, the group recommended strengthening the Council through improvements in its organization, *modus operandi*, and programs and methods of work, but with very modest additions to its resources and staff. The Council discussed measures to strengthen its role in the light of the advisory group’s report at its twelfth session, in 1986 (WFC 1986c). It agreed that its mandate approved by the UN General Assembly should not be amended, but every effort should be made to strengthen its work through improvements in its organization, program, and method of work, within the framework of its terms of reference, keeping in view the current budgetary constraints.

The thirteenth session of the Council, in 1987, which was held in Beijing, China, marked an important juncture in its attempts to strengthen its role, the first to be at-

10. To give some idea of the workload carried by the WFC executive director, according to WFC records, Maurice Williams made 85 statements outside those he made at WFC meetings, and wrote 47 progress reports, papers, and articles, during his eight years as WFC executive director.

11. The group was chaired by Margaret Joan Anstee, an assistant director-general with a long and distinguished career in the UN. The other members of the group were Sartaj Aziz, Minister of Agriculture of Pakistan at the time, who, as deputy secretary-general of the 1974 World Food Conference, was closely involved in the creation of the WFC and who became a former WFC deputy executive director, and Abdellatif Ghissassi of Morocco. In her autobiography *Never Learn to Type: A Woman at the United Nations* (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2003), Dame Anstee wrote, “Our report was well received but with the financial situation of the UN worsening, no follow-up action was taken by the governments that had mandated the review” (394).

tended by a new executive director, Gerald I. Trant, formerly deputy agriculture minister of Canada. ECOSOC had established a special commission to conduct an in-depth study of the UN intergovernmental structure and functions in the economic and social fields on which the views of the Council were requested. The terms of reference of the commission included simplifying the intergovernmental structure, avoiding duplication, precisely defining the areas of responsibility of the UN bodies, and strengthening the co-ordination of UN activities.

Ministers recommended to the special commission that account be taken of the fact that the Council was the highest political body in the United Nations system dealing with food and that Council reviewed and recommended remedial action on major problems or policy issues affecting all aspects of the world food situation. The Council was an overall ministerial level policy body, not an operational one. The other UN bodies concerned with food were all operational in character. Consequently, their activities did not duplicate those of the Council. Ministers were unanimous in their support of the Council retaining its own independent identity as a political body for addressing food and hunger issues. They emphasized that its mandate could not be fulfilled if the Council was merged with or its functions were taken over by another UN body.

At the beginning of the 1990s, disquiet concerning the need to strengthen and improve the Council's effectiveness resurfaced against the background of attempts to revitalize the UN system in the economic and social sectors, initiated by the UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. At its eighteenth session, in 1992, the last time the Council met, the need for greater leadership and co-ordination in the fight against hunger was discussed (WFC 1992b). It was observed that increased resources would strengthen the work of the Council. The WFC president at the time, Issa Kalantari, Iranian minister of agriculture, informed the Council that he had received an indication from UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar of possible increased resources to strengthen the work of the Council. He wrote to his successor, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, expressing the view that it was now time to improve the Council's role.

The Council addressed new ways of approaching the preparation, conduct, and follow-up of ministerial sessions, with implications for the functioning of the WFC bureau and secretariat. The ministerial composition of the Council was also reconsidered. Since the perception of world hunger had shifted over the years from a food production problem, within the responsibility of ministers of agriculture, to a multifaceted development problem, participation in the Council could be broadened to include economic and development co-operation ministers, which in turn could lead to a world development council, as had been suggested in the report of the advisory group on the WFC. As long as a broader development council did not exist, a strengthened WFC, as the UN system's highest policy-making and co-ordinating body on food, hunger, and poverty issues, was essential.

The minister agreed that the Council had fallen short of achieving the political leadership and co-ordination role expected from its founders at the 1974 World Food Conference (WFC 1992a). Council members conceded that the objectives of the conference were as important in 1992 as they were in 1974 and that food and hunger issues needed to remain at the centre of national and international development efforts. There was

also broadly based agreement that in a rapidly changing world there could be no continuation of the status quo for the World Food Council or for the United Nations as a whole. Therefore, there was general agreement on the need for review of the role and functioning of the Council in the wider context of global food security management and the overall restructuring of the social and economic activities of the UN system. For this purpose, the Council agreed to establish an ad hoc committee to develop further specific proposals, which would be open to all member states at the level of minister or his delegate.

In early September 1992, Council members held a two-day meeting in New York at which they gave their views on the WFC's future (WFC 1992c). The meeting took place at a time when reform and revitalization of the UN system was under active consideration. ECOSOC had established an open-ended ad hoc working group on the role of the UN system in enhancing international development co-operation. Restructuring of the UN system was on the agenda of the forty-seventh session of the UN General Assembly that was to start on 15 September. There was therefore considerable pressure on the ad hoc committee to complete its work and submit its report.

Issa Kalantari, the WFC president, added to the tension by drawing attention to the fact that the document that had been prepared for the meeting by the WFC secretariat fell short of what Council members had requested the secretariat to do. Kalantari felt that a majority of Council members believed that with adequate reform the Council could fulfil its mandate more effectively. He gave his own observations on the options expressed in the document and expressed doubt that ECOSOC could provide a central policy-leadership role in food and hunger issues since it already had the considerable task of addressing the full range of economic and social development issues. Kalantari also took issue with the proposal to integrate the Council's mandate and functions into the FAO. In his opinion, the FAO did not stand above the sectoral lines along which the UN system was organized. It was therefore not well placed to provide policy guidance to multilateral agencies or to monitor their policies. Kalantari instead supported the proposal for a reformed Council with a substantially new approach its functions. In his view, the work of the Council needed to be understood as a continuum in which ministerial sessions constituted the high point in an ongoing process rather than being an end in themselves. It was his strong personal belief that a WFC reformed in accordance with the proposals of Council members and the additional considerations he had to offer could more than adequately fulfil its mandate.

The statement by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, which was delivered by UN Under-Secretary-General Ji Chaozhu, put the future of the Council in a different perspective. The UN secretary-general recognized that the functions entrusted to the WFC were indeed far reaching. It seemed evident that the Council had not been able to accomplish their ambitious mandate, even though members had explored the possibilities for improving its functioning on several occasions. Meanwhile, the UN system had established or strengthened structures and made advances in directing the world's attention to the problem of hunger and enhancing understanding of issues relating to food security. The functions of the Council were being reviewed within the

overall framework of the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations.

According to the UN secretary-general, the best course would be to centre the co-ordination of food issues more closely on a newly restructured ECOSOC, which would include procedures for regular reporting from the FAO, WFP, and the international fund for agricultural development. Drawing on the demonstrated capabilities of those agencies would ensure coherent management of the policy and operational aspects of the world food problem. In Boutros-Ghali's view, a primary objective would be to distribute responsibilities more effectively within the UN system, based on a clear understanding of its priorities. Boutros-Ghali was also seeking to enhance interagency co-ordination.

Eighteen Council members made interventions at the meeting. Fourteen were in favour of retaining the WFC but with various proposals for its reform. Four members (Canada, Denmark, Japan, and the United States) supported the dissolution of the Council and a distribution of its functions and responsibilities along the lines indicated by the UN secretary-general.

But the die was already cast. Ominously, no successor had been appointed in place of Gerald Trant, whose term of office as WFC executive director had expired on 30 June 1992. In the ensuing debate in the UN General Assembly, with no fanfare or ceremony, the almost two decades of the Council came to an end, one of the few UN bodies to be disbanded after their creation. For some, the Council was seen as the victim of a restructuring process in the UN system that had to demonstrate to the major developed countries, particularly the United States, that the UN secretary-general meant business in cost-cutting and streamlining UN decision-making. For others, the Council had served its time and demonstrated its ineffectiveness, and interest had moved on to other priorities.

## Conclusions

In many ways, the Council and its work served as a microcosm of the complexities and difficulties of achieving world food security. A number of reasons have been put forward for its demise (Talbot 1990; Maxwell and Shaw 1995; Shaw and Clay 1998; Shaw 1999). Some point to the compromise that led to the establishment of the Council at the 1974 World Food Conference, and the fact that delegates were as much influenced by what they did not want to create as what they intended to do. As a result, the Council was given many of the far-reaching roles and responsibilities of the World Food Authority, which was proposed at the 1974 World Food Conference, without the required authority and resources.<sup>12</sup> The Council was therefore never able to command

12. As an illustration of the Council's limited resources, it approved a budget of the order of \$20,000 "to promote more effective dissemination of information about the World Food Council's effort" in 1980. The preparatory meetings before ministerial sessions were discontinued in 1986

the leadership and co-ordinating roles expected of it or the respect and attention that was required for it to fulfil its functions.

Born out of a world food crisis that quickly passed, the Council's utility for developing and developed countries also waned. Crucially, the Council was never really able to distinguish between the world food problem and the world food security problem. Members consisted mainly of agriculture ministers who had neither the mandate nor experience to cover the range of food security issues outside the agricultural sector, nor legally binding control over the activities of the large number of UN agencies whose work related to food security. The WFC's work became a confused mixture of general advocacy and action plans. Its four-to-five day sessions, which took place once a year, preceded by a brief preparatory meeting, covered too many agenda items, were often too broad in scope, and insufficiently focused on monitoring key action programs. Insufficient attention was given to inter-sessional activities to keep the focus and maintain momentum. Its secretariat and resources were far too limited to effectively perform its wide-ranging functions.

Co-operation from key UN agencies was also essential for the WFC executive director and secretariat to carry out their work. Yet there was resentment toward the Council's establishment, which was seen by some UN agencies as unnecessary, adding to the institutional inconsistency that already existed among the numerous bodies concerned with world food security issues. And its location, as a UN agency, at the FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy, away from UN headquarters in New York, was a major impediment, particularly as the FAO saw itself as playing a significant and co-ordinating role in the UN system for policies and activities related to food security and nutrition. FAO Director-General Boerma had offered to place premises at the FAO headquarters at the disposal of the WFC free of charge, and even entered a \$240,000 subsidy in favour of the Council in his draft budget for 1976–77. His successor, Edouard Saouma, withdrew the subsidy and asked the WFC to pay rent for use of FAO premises, just as the FAO was required to pay rent for the offices it occupied at UN headquarters in New York. In Saouma's view, the Council had been born out of a crisis of confidence in the FAO, and apparently conceived as a war machine against the FAO. According to Saouma, the Council did not succeed in destroying the FAO but seriously undermined its credibility. On the other hand, he acknowledged that the WFC had the merit of placing the debate on world food security in its proper context, by going beyond the technical and scientific vision of development, and stressing the importance of the social aspects and the need to focus on the poor. In this sense, he conceded that the WFC represented an opportunity for FAO's own renewal (Saouma 1993).

Yet, as the Council agreed in 1992 at its last session, the need for a central, undivided focus within the UN system on the achievement of food security for all remained as important as when the Council was established in 1974. The experience of the WFC showed that the solution did not lie in the establishment of a separate body without executing authority and with a mandate that cut across that of other UN agencies. Nor

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because of the tight budgetary situation. The WFC secretariat had about a dozen professional officers and an annual budget of \$2 million.

did it lie in giving co-ordinating responsibility to a single agency with restricted sectoral membership and a limited sectoral mandate. No single agency or institution has the resources, capacity, or competence to address food insecurity issues alone. And it should not be left to NGOs and the private sector, important as their contributions can be.

Proposals have been made to overcome these problems. Many commentators have detailed the problems of bureaucratic fragmentation in the UN system and the need for centralized co-ordination on all economic and social affairs (e.g., Jackson 1969; Bertrand 1985). In 1997, under the reform measures proposed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, a UN development group was established, composed of the concerned UN funds and programs, but not the UN specialized agencies, to co-ordinate their development activities (Annan 1997). With a strengthened service staff drawing heavily on the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs, these co-ordinating bodies might become a kind of policy planning forum at the global level. But changes in structure, procedures, and attitudes will be needed to create a central and permanent co-ordinating mechanism for all UN bodies, including the UN specialized agencies.

A UN Economic Security Council has been advocated as a decision-making forum at the highest level to review threats to global human security and agree on required action (UNDP 1994; ul Haq 1995). The creation of a UN Economic and Social Security Council has been proposed to provide a structure to deal with issues of world governance and world action toward poverty and social needs in a systematic and politically realistic way (Stewart and Daws 1998). Achieving world food security would be one of the primary tasks. The Group of Seven leading industrialized countries and the Group of Fifteen developing countries have been called upon to establish a joint high-level steering committee for sustainable food security. And because of the difficulties of establishing a new UN body, a proposal has been made to add responsibility for world food security to the extended tasks of the UN Security Council (Singer 1995).

Whatever decisions are made on UN reform, it remains necessary to have a focal point at the highest political level that would ensure that food security is advocated and managed as a central issue embedded in world and national action for achieving equitable and sustainable economic and social development and peace, with cohesive and coordinated programs of international development assistance.

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