

FEEDING THE WHOLE WORLD

This Week's Conference In Canada

RECENT conferences in London and Washington have depressingly reminded us that this "New World After the War" of ours carries on much of the spirit and even some of the institutions against which the war was fought. However, the Conference that began in Canada this week is something completely new since Atlantic Charter days. The World Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) that was launched at Hot Springs in May, 1943, is holding its first meeting.

From New Zealand will go James Fawcett, Director-General of Agriculture, and George Duncan, Director of Export Marketing, both of whom represented us at Hot Springs. Some 20 other nations whose governments have to date accepted the constitution of FAO will also attend, together no doubt with unofficial representatives from another 20-odd States which have not so far ratified the Hot Springs decisions. For, although less spectacular than political conferences, this one is more fundamental than any. Its aim is to secure the order and liberty which men need if they are to live as human beings. It seeks to encourage the bread and rice that is needed if men are to exist at all.

Below the Rice Line

And the world of 1945, so marvelously supplied by nature, endowed by the labours of past generations, and served by applied science, still cannot adequately feed itself. Of the earth's 2,100 million inhabitants 1,400 million are always underfed. In Asia and the tropics nearly 850 million live permanently below the rice (or mealies) line.

Even in U.S.A. and Britain—which run second and third respectively to our own country for good nutrition—the lowest-paid 20 to 30 per cent. of families have not been able in normal times to afford sufficient for full health. In New Zealand itself, the best-fed community in the world, our wastage of work-hours, life-years, and daily happiness through inadequate or foolish feeding is still enormous.

Accordingly, the first thing the World Food and Agriculture Organisation has done in its two years of life is to assemble for the delegates now meeting precise information on these needs in place of previous guesswork. Perusing their data they will learn, for example, why one baby in four dies in Chile despite a climate and territory corresponding to our own across the South Pacific. The nursing mothers run short of milk—mainly because throughout their lives they drink so little themselves. They will learn—to give further examples—of the proved connection between poor protein and eye troubles in Egypt, between erosion and goitre in Java, between sea fishing and the comparative fitness of the Japanese.

"Fortifying" Foodstuffs

However, a survey of world needs and the precise delineation of problems is the least of the work that FAO has so far performed. Its technical reports go on to describe means for improving humanity's diets that have already been tried out in one place or another and to suggest where they can be extended.

"Fortifying" staple foods they report to be by far the most effective means, considering how fast it gets nation-wide results and how comparatively little it

Written for
"The Listener"
by A.M.R.

costs. Bread, the poor family's staff of life in Europe and North America, has in Britain been made 85 per cent extraction flour and in the U.S.A. has been shot with milk-solids, yeast, soyabean, flour, thiamin, riboflavin, niacin and iron. Rice, one-half the world's mainstay, contains no known Vitamin C and little Vitamin A or minerals. It cannot have such lacks added until economic conditions in most of the lands where it grows and is eaten are greatly changed. But to make the most of its great value in other respects, Madras has already forbidden rice-polishing, and other areas are extending the practice of par-boiling in advance. Maize, the Negro's basic "mealies," is poor in niacin. A simple mechanism has been worked out whereby the crudest mill can add it in the course of grinding. However, although much fortification is cheap, simple and painless—even liver oil can be made tasteless in ice-cream!—it fairly soon reaches limits where adding new ingredients spoils the "availability" of elements already present.

"Vulnerable Groups"

During the war Britain, particularly, but some other governments also to a less striking degree, not merely maintained but actually improved public health by giving special concessions to "vulnerable groups." All expectant and nursing mothers and pre-school children may (and 99 per cent do) draw a pint of milk daily, either free or at half price. Three quarters of British children get free school milk. One-third take cheap (or free) school meals. Apprentices and students get "national" (skim milk) cocoa. Pithead and factory canteens provide hot meals for heavy workers "outside the ration." As a result, nutritional disorders are fewer despite drastic rationing, children's

weights appear to be up, and maternal mortality has fallen from just over three per thousand in 1939 to just over two per thousand in 1944. The poorest 10 per cent. of Britons, whom Sir John Orr reported in 1936 to be living permanently undernourished, have now for the first time in history a bare sufficiency.

This care for the vulnerable group whose Achilles heel is the pocket will pay great dividends in increased national energy and intelligence (FOA reports) if it can be still further extended. "An expenditure of just over 6d per head per week (the present cost) if extended (to all the really poor) would almost certainly," the Report says, "have a greater nutritional effect than a children's allowance of 5/- per child per week—though it might be less acceptable."

Helping the Housewife

National school lunches, free lunches, are undoubtedly coming—conservative Canada is already toying with the idea—but the last words quoted indicate that there is a limit again to improving nutrition by community care for the needier and more vulnerable. The ordinary housewife's service to her family needs also to be improved. Our own Health Department's radio talks, articles, films and advertising, helped out by many energetic voluntary societies, show how she may be, and is being, helped. But the information that in U.S.A. two "Household Food Budgets" have been worked out and scattered broadcast, the "Satisfactory" one costing 40 per cent. more than the merely "Adequate" one,

(continued on next page)



A picture from France: Thousands and thousands of people are for the first time discovering what real hunger means.



"Food is the first essential of better life for mankind": our illustration shows a typical meal on a typical farm in Britain.