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from : Johan Galtung

re : Report of the First United Nations University Expert Group on World Hunger, September 22-26, 1975.

Tokyo, 13 November 1975

Prefatory Remark

Nobody will disagree, it is assumed, with the goal of the UNU, as stated in its Charter, to help find solutions to the "pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare"; nor that hunger is, indeed, one of those pressing global problems. Nor would one necessarily disagree with the idea of "employing multidisciplinary approaches to specific major world problems", of stressing "excellence in bringing the benefits of advanced knowledge into the lives of millions of people whom circumstances deny humane conditions of existence", of bringing "together from East and West, North and South, the most knowledgeable experts, the most perceptive minds, and the most promising younger scholars for joint studies of maximum mutual value and world-wide applicability", focussing "the best thought throughout the world on the major problems of humanity", "operating at the highest level of world scholarship", "helping to create transnational knowledge; thoroughly accurate, unbiased, and freely available throughout the world" (from the pamphlet The United Nations University: Present Status Summer/Fall 1975). One might question the wisdom of advertising the goals and standards of the UNU in such terms before it has proven itself, but not the idea of bringing human intellect to bear on the solution of the major problems facing mankind, at least as long as one recognizes that the academic/scientific approach is only one out of many.

The UNU, however, will be judged by its own standards. The following are some reflections brought about by applying those standards to the first academic (not scientific) output from the UNU: the Report of the First UNU Expert Group on World Hunger. The reflections are critical, some of them very critical. They are presented in the spirit of co-operation in making this important endeavour, the UNU, live up to its own standards.

Tokyo, 13 November 1975
Johan Galtung

(1) Composition of the expert group.

Apart from the UNU staff there were 19 participants to the meeting. Of these ten were from the developed capitalist countries (US 3; Japan 2; Canada, Australia, England, Sweden, Denmark one each); six were working in developing capitalist countries (Guatemala, the Philippines (a Japanese), Pakistan, India, Nigeria and Thailand); one was from the socialist countries (Poland) and two from the UN Agencies (WHO and FAO). The number of women in the group was zero; the number of young scholars (tentatively defined as below 35)was zero.

The composition raises some questions. Leaving aside the sex and age distribution for a moment, there are serious problems in the geo-political composition. It is today generally acknowledged that there are four "developing" countries that seem to have solved the problem of hunger (and also of shelter, health and basic education; all four at a low, but sufficient level): the People's Republic of China, the People's Republic of Korea, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and Cuba. These are also the four socialist countries in the Third World. Before them, however, socialist countries in Eastern Europe were able to eradicate poverty, including hunger - like for the other four with the possible exception of some poverty pockets, particularly among national minorities. A remarkable factor in this connection is how quickly it could be done (spans of time ranging, roughly, from five to twenty-five years), and that one factor seemed to be (temporary) dissociation from the general world system of trade and other forms of interaction.

The significance of the socialist experience was fully recognized in the recent symposium on literacy organized jointly by the UNESCO and the Government of Iran (Persepolis, Iran, 3-9 September 1975) where all four countries were not only invited but participated fully with very important contributions.

They were capable of launching not only different perspectives, but also different, and highly practical, experiences into the debate. Needless to say, one person from a European socialist country cannot compensate for this, conditions were and are highly different even if some of the marxist idiom may be similar.

What was possible for UNESCO and Iran should also have been possible for the UNU. If it were tried and found impossible the reasons should be analyzed; if it were not tried, or only partly so, the reasons should also be analyzed. Having no knowledge of this let me only venture one type of reflection that may be totally misplaced in this context, yet be of some general significance for the UNU.

The great advantage of the UNU is its "academic freedom" and the absence of an inter-governmental bureaucracy, with the requirement that research reports, etc. should be acceptable to member states. The UNU can recruit "the most knowledgeable experts, the most perceptive minds ..."; meaning that it can pick individuals from around the world and ask them to plan and/or execute practicable research. The problem is that the criteria for picking these individuals, "academic excellence, universality of approach, and the highest standards" (from the UNU Institutional Guidelines, para 7) are likely to have an homogenizing influence. More particularly, they are likely to lead to an overrepresentation of Western scholars and people trained by them; and even more so if the ability to reflect critically on Western science and technology is low. (It has, incidentally, always been a Western assumption that "Westernness" and "universality" are close to synonymous as concepts). With all its clumsiness and built-in tendency to favour diplomatic and political elites the standard UN formulas of representativity (rather than, or in addition to, "excellence" and "universality") may guarantee more diversity of approach, possibly at the expense of "excellence". This diversity is important

for, as will be argued later, in all the fields of "pressing global problems" there simply is no universality of approach, but highly diverse, often antagonistic, sometimes (but very rarely) even incompatible approaches. The UNU should be a forum for comparison, confrontation and debate among these approaches, not one more expression of the Western pretense of universality.

Onthe other hand, better geo-political representativity is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient condition for this diversity. The diversity can also be brought about on a completely individual basis, even if all of them are picked from the same country (provided the country benefits from sufficient academic freedom to harbour diversity in mature forms.) Not having participated in the deliberations I am not in a position to judge the level of diversity. However, the list of participants does not include the best known critics of the present structure of food production, to my knowledge. Many of these critics seem to be of the opinion that the food corporations play a major role in distorting the production and consumption patterns, and it is therefore remarkable that there were representatives of two such corporations present (among the US experts, from General Foods Corporation, and from Campbell Soup Company), They should certainly have been there, with their impressive accumulation of expertise and experience, but so should their critics - for instance the important research group from the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington (to mention one out of many, and one from the US since they would be best capable of arguing the case knowing the US corporations better). The answer to the objection that this would smack of "politics" is, of course, that so does the present list.

Finally, there is the problem of representation of disciplines. One break-down, using the institutional affiliations and titles (which may sometimes be misleading when it comes to identifying individuals) would be as follows: 11 in nutrition and food technology (including the two from food

corporations) and one from FAO ; three in medical sciences/pediatrics, and one from WHO, and three in the fields of agricultural and development economics. This is far from the multidisciplinarity the UNU goes in for. Moreover, where are the practitioners - the food politicians, the leaders of rural movements, the consumers? And most importantly, where is the built-in guarantee that fundamentally different views are represented? For there are several very different conceptual frameworks in this field, out of which only one is well reflected in the report.

(2) The old paradigm and the new.

My own impression from following the debate on the hunger problem, and to some extent from my own research (on some problems retaining to fisheries; see the FAO magazine CERES No.41), would be that we are here as in so many other fields in the transition phase between two (or more) paradigms. This is an important phase because any intellectual (and political) crisis is also a situation of flexibility and great opportunity of fresh thinking - and that is precisely what I felt was so missing from the report. The following is a clarification of that statement.

We know that primitive agriculture does not constitute a sufficient basis for providing adequate nutrition, quantitatively or qualitatively. It may do so in some places at some times, but it is vulnerable. The very limited economic cycle on which it is/was based, with the nature basis, production and consumption all located close to each other, and with no scientific inputs, is incompatible with the objective needs of the world's population.

From this, however, it does not follow that the extreme negation of this cycle constitutes the solution either. The extreme negation, engendered by world capitalism, operates on the basis of world-encompassing economic cycles whereby soil and other natural resources are used for the production of

nutrients consumed by those able to pay - meaning above all richer people in the rich countries. These cycles, then, usually have their administrative, R&D and finance facilities in the rich countries, from which flow managerial skills and decisions, scientific/technical findings and capital into the poorer countries, or into the elite recipients in the poorer countries. Such cycles can only be administered efficiently by transnational corporations, hence the international food corporations. The evidence that a substantial part of the productive natural resources located in poor countries are used to produce food consumed in rich countries, often via the wasteful conversion of, say, fish protein to broilers, is impressive. But similar cycles also operate inside the poor countries, favouring elites in the bigger cities of those countries.

The dissatisfaction with this structure has led in many countries to the search for alternative structures, and sometimes also to an unfortunate, romantic nostalgia for the old pattern (a tendency found among some rich country intellectuals). One element in the new formula would be to reserve, sometimes using expropriation and nationalization as instruments, national natural resources that can be used for food production for internal consumption, and no longer for cash crops for export. Another element would be to look for intermediate economic cycles, building on local self-reliance as far as possible, transcending the limitations of the village, but being sceptical of "internal exportation" to the big cities (which would then have to grow more of their own food in the immediate environment - or, which may be no bad solution, reduce their population). Still another element is the well known transition from land reform (abolishing latifundos and minifundos, emergence of more viable family farms) via mutual aid and farmers cooperatives of elementary and advanced nature to some type of communal ownership pattern

(Chinese peoples communes, the Israeli Kibbutzim, agro-towns in Bulgaria, ujamaa villages in Tanzania, sarvodaya experiments in India, similar patterns in the other Third World socialist countries, etc.). There are very many variations of this theme, but they all seem to be directed against two other "solutions"; fragmentation into individual farms, incapable of utilizing new knowledge and withstanding pressure from nature and economic forces onthe one hand, and large-scale state centralization (Soviet model) on the other. The emergence of the rural commune as entrepreneus, self-reliant, constructed (often) as a federation of villages, producing what it consumes, and exchanging the surplus from a position of collective strength seems to be rather significant.

Needless to say one is speaking here not merely of intellectual exercises and paper plans, but of stark political realities, since there are very strong political forces supporting and resisting these structures. The problem is what follows from this if one wants to design a research programme in the terribly important field of world hunger. There are many implications, and the following is one list.

a. The most important factor in alleviating world hunger is structural.

It is very hard to prove this assertion, but the experience of the socialist Third World countries would tend to corroborate it. It is therefore remarkable to the point of the scandalous that this possibility is not mentioned in the conceptual framework of the report. Equally important as an empirical study of how they went about would be research into these structural factors, into various alternative models involving such components as local self-reliance (and elements of national and collective Third World self-reliance in food matters) and intermediate economic cycles, probably also implying some kind of intermediate technology. National and

collective self-reliance should actually also be stressed: both in order to make countries and regions less vulnerable to pressures from food-exporting countries, and in order to make use of complementary economies.

To the extent that this proposition is true first priority should certainly be given to such topics of research as how inadequate structures can be overcome, not eschewing them with a bland reference to "the complexity of contributing social, economic, and political factors, and resistance to change", even using this as a basis for the statement "no early solution to the problem of poverty is in sight" (both from P.2). The point about what happened in the socialist countries was precisely that it went relatively quickly - although it may, also conceivably, have been for other reasons than the ones indicated here. Precisely that would constitute an excellent research topic in its own right.

A study of this kind would probably call on the expertise of historians, social scientists (particularly specialists in rural sociology) in cooperation with nutritionists, some of them from the countries concerned, some of them from other countries. It would not be an easy study to launch, but if the UNU should not do it, who else would be capable?

b. The report on hunger is conceptually within the old paradigm.

"Post-harvest food and agricultural technology is an inter-disciplinary science whose functions begin after crops are harvested, animals slaughtered, or fish caught. It covers handling, storage, processing, packaging, and transport, as well as distribution and ultimate use of food. Its main objective is to contribute towards solving world food problems through inter-disciplinary application of science and technology and management practices in order to conserve food and improve, to the extent possible, its nutritional quality to meet human needs." (p.11.)

This looks so obviously true, yet raises some very important problems that can be summarized under one heading: it is quite possible that these measures may preserve food and increase the total volume of food available, but at the same time they may also increase the costs, pricing the products out of the reach of the poorest people. There is also another aspect to it: instead of mobilizing the ingenuity of people themselves, making them more self-confident, this will probably play much more power to generate ideas into the capitals and cities where universities and institutes tend to be located, thus tipping the intellectual balance even further in favour of the centre and away from the periphery the suggestions no doubt are intended to serve.

To be more specific: the approach taken may be dangerous precisely because it is so compatible with the extended and expanding economic cycles idea. It takes no imagination to envisage the transnational corporations in the field of food packaging entering the picture since they represent great expertise in all phases indicated (handling, storage, processing, packaging, transport, distribution). But in order to do anything like this both capital

and research are needed, if models are to be practised widely in the poorer parts of the world - and the capital is likely to come from centres which would want their money back, and with interest. Thus, even if the poor were able to pay, profits would be more likely to accumulate in the centres, would not necessarily be reinvested locally, and if they were, not necessarily for the purpose of alleviating hunger.

This is all reminiscent of the green "revolution", and reading the report one gets the impression that the quantity of good research on the social impact of certain innovations in the field of high-yield varieties (but also ecologically more vulnerable because of decreased diversity) is not properly reflected. Today there is no contradiction between increased output and decreased consumption locally, for the reasons mentioned: the structure makes research and capital-intensive forms of production compatible with stagnant or decreasing levels of need-satisfaction for, say, the bottom 10, 20 (even more) percent. At the same time it also contributes to the migration from the rural environment precisely because cycles are set up where everybody senses where capital and ideas come from, hence where the center is. It is very often forgotten in this type of study that people do not only want to be fed, they want to be somebody - they want to be a little center of their own. Such factors are not imponderables, they are highly tangible when they get political expression as they sometimes do, but are not easily integrated into the paradigms of nutritionists and economists.

The report mentions the importance of offsetting "food losses at a time when production costs have increased as a result of a three-fold rise in the cost of fertilizers and other inputs" (p.13). Of course this presupposes,

by and large, use of fertilizers based on considerable input of expensive energy (oil) rather than, for instance, the use of a mixture of finely chopped waste from agricultural activities and human waste that seems to play an important role in a high number of Chinese people's communes (including those surrounding big cities with considerable output of human waste)." Again one sees clearly the differences, even contradiction, between the extended and the more local or intermediate cycles, and once more the warfare and the underlying thought patterns are fetishism, parallelism, and polytropy.

On the other hand, the report does emphasize the importance of the transformation of traditional technologies and the development of new ones, because many traditional technologies exist in developing countries for the conservation and processing of food, but social and economic conditions are reducing their effectiveness (pp. 12-3). There is no reason to disagree with this: the problem is how to do it, and particularly how the UNU can go about it. Is it through their academics, above all trained in or by the industrialized West, will have most to offer in this regard? How good will they be as catalysts in stimulating local ingenuity? Or, is it more likely that they will tend to use local technologies as some kind of raw material and turn out more capital and resource intensive versions of the same? If so, is not the experience of recent years rather overwhelmingly in favour of showing that this is not the way to proceed?

And what about the social scientists that are called for in this report, in its praiseworthy effort to make the research wanted more transdisciplinary: what is their role? Nothing is really said about this, but experience from the past often points to one very obvious role: that of understanding the local population so well that the center (national and/or international) becomes more skilfull in manipulation, breaking down local 'psychological resistance'. In that psychological resistance, however, is often buried the

gem of autonomy around which patterns of self-reliance can be built [illegible] forget to count in connection with [illegible] skills although they know perfectly well how to count money, be they even totally illiterate. But to the centre is resistance, "laziness", traditional culture [illegible] to the periphery be the last ditch effort to withstand and resist, often at a subconscious level, the overwhelming pressure to change them from the outside - of course with the best intentions.

The report calls [illegible] social scientists capable of identifying problems of socioeconomic significance, interdisciplinary well-organized inter-disciplinary projects for their solution, and completion well within a time target" (p. 14). This, of course, is very true, as far as it goes, and reveals considerable [illegible] for the social sciences. It is always my experience talking with [illegible] peasants, Kerala fishermen, etc. that they know perfectly well where the problems of socioeconomic significance are located. If a basis of some confidence exists they will very soon tell you about land-owners, about money-lenders, about the routes that [illegible] to the city and so on. It is pretentious to believe that [illegible] will be much more able than the social scientists to locate and identify and comprehend their own problems, and it looks as if one is searching for other types of explanations when one calls for that type of research. Social scientists of the conventional variety will [illegible] for factors that can fall under the "resistance to change" [illegible] cultural vs. modern, etc. lines and this in turn will engender [illegible] to change habits and attitudes, rather than structures. No doubt there are [illegible] where this is necessary, in some cases where it even may be sufficient, but as a whole the structural shortcomings the report, politically speaking, [illegible] biased. It belongs in this picture that the authors probably see themselves as conveyors of objective, scientific insight,

but that is according to a very special (Western, positivist) conception of what the scientific exercise is all about.

If intellectuals should play a role here it should probably rather be:

(1) to serve as catalysts for local discussions, bringing into the play some scientific insight, but above all trying to stimulate the type of discussions that play such a fundamental role in societies organized on a more communitarian basis;

(2) to serve as conveyors from grassroots to grassroots, since intellectuals have the privilege of travel (and of symbolic travel by reading accounts of what takes place in far away places), and could make the findings of an ujamaa community in Tanzania available to a sarvodaya community in India.

At present intellectuals are generally very poorly trained for such roles, and it is not even evident that intellectuals would be best at either role. But what they are not they may become, thus making use of intellectuals as depositories and conveyors of knowledge not only serving them in the role of creating and disseminating knowledge.

To continue:

"Any policies affecting income distribution will have nutritional consequences, and if the result is improvement in the income of lower socioeconomic groups, the nutritional effects could be beneficial" (p.25).

"Decisions on the crops to be grown for commercial food crops for processing and sale can have either positive nutritional consequences, if higher incomes are generated, or negative ones if they lead to a decrease in the production of more nutritionally beneficial foodstuffs" (p.25).

True, because it is trivial bordering on the tautologous. What is forgotten is how more capital and research intensive forms of production may increase the costs much more quickly than changes in income distribution: the former often come very rapidly, the latter is more sluggish. It is also forgotten that what usually happens is that there is some kind of geographical co-existence between a modern, extended economic cycle with corresponding technology and a primitive/traditional, much more limited cycle: with the former tapping the latter for raw material, the little there may be locally of capital and labour - to the point of demoralization and ultimately destroying the traditional cycle, without overcoming the gap between prices and income available to the masses.

In short: the report is structure-blind. That does not mean that there are not many good ideas in it which, given the right structure, might be very meaningful. Thus, there is some mention of farmer cooperatives (p.26), unfortunately in a very crude way since there is no reference to any typology of farmer cooperatives (and there are very many types in the world today). But I do not find in the report the type of thinking that could give new life to the world countryside, creating better rural communities, more self-respect and self-reliance. Ultimately I do not even find convincing ideas about how to diminish hunger. Everything said is simply much too similar to what has already been suggested after the Second World War, to a large extent tested, and found wanting. Consequently I do not think the report lives up to the standards the WFP has set for itself, to a large extent because the WFP has departed from its own principles and produced a report that is written from a particular point of view rather than drawing on the tremendous richness of human experience in this field.

(3) A note on intellectualization.

Finally, a remark that is not so much related to this particular report as to the approach in general. Food is essential in human life but in a much broader sense than as a carrier of nutrition. Food is a way of life; sharing a meal is a social act, making food is an act of social communication, a language, often of love and dedication. We spend considerable portions of our lives in activities relating to food: making it (directly or indirectly through our work), preparing it, eating it, digesting it. In the greater part of human history people have done this themselves: they have conceived of food in its totality, have tried to get it in adequate quantity and quality. Human history is replete with accounts of the failures: the famines, terrible stories of starvation; it does not reflect the overwhelmingly positive side of the total story - feelings of satisfaction, of togetherness, of sharing.

It is only recently that western science has tended to project the tremendous complexity called food on a two-dimensional space (or some more dimensions), in terms of calories and proteins, and have divided mankind into the vast masses - most of us - and the food specialists. They have made tremendously important contributions to mankind precisely by reducing complexity to something that can be scientifically and technologically handled, and by guiding the rest of us in our relation to food. However, nothing is unproblematic in this world, and the lack of self-criticism engendered by their important successes is also prominent in this report, written by food specialists.

Thus, where is the reference to the quality of food? It may be objected that this would be frivolous in a world where hunger is rampant; but I am not thinking of French/Chinese cuisines. I am thinking of the quality of the experience of satisfying the need for food, because I am not convinced that it is covered adequately by the conceptual framework nutritionists use. Is it really true

that it is all a question of proteins/calories (minerals, vitamins, etc.), or does it also matter how it is produced, how it is consumed? Are the food specialists agnostic enough about this, willing to say that there may at least be something problematic here? For instance, is it really true that they know better than the total wisdom of, say, one and a half billion women (because they are mostly women in our division of labour world) around the world as to what matters in the fight against hunger? And if not, what would be the ways of bringing into the world reservoir of knowledge, in some form or another this enormous invisible college? To what extent would nutritionists be willing to listen carefully all around the world, not only to collect recipes and food habits but to take in the total setting in which food is produced and consumed?

I do not know - the foregoing reflections are guided by intuitions only, and by some knowledge of corresponding ways of putting the problem in the field of health. What is problematic however, is that there is not even the slightest indication in this direction in the report: it is all unidirectional, from the centres of 'excellence' via training centres and fellowships down to the masses; never from them. Considerable faith in own patterns of thought and social structure and processes for knowledge production is needed for this kind of approach, and it would be sad if the UNU should add still more to the overwhelming asymmetry between the power centres and peripheries in the world - power taken both in its economic, political and cultural - including scientific - sense.