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THE WEANING PERIOD WITH PARTICULAR
REFERENCE TO WEANING FOODS

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RECENT ACTIVITIES OF FAO IN THE FIELD OF INFANT FOODS

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Introduction

The development, production and distribution of weaning foods has been the concern of FAO, WHO and UNICEF over the last two decades and formed an essential part of their joint protein food development programme. A number of weaning food projects were launched jointly in various countries, mostly in the Mediterranean basin. Other ventures also were initiated elsewhere by other agencies on a bi-lateral basis. The degree of success of these ventures is open to all kinds of interpretation depending on the angle from which they are considered. A general criticism is that the impact made on the nutritional status of infants and young children can be considered very limited if judged by the volume of direct sales or welfare distribution, even if the available production facilities were producing at full capacity. The distribution usually is confined to urban centres with little, if any, penetration into remote rural areas. The infants and young children of low income groups, at risk of malnutrition, can benefit only if nutrition intervention programmes are in operation and the weaning foods distributed free or at a heavily subsidized price because any processed weaning food, unavoidably, will be more expensive than the staple food it is designed to replace.

The experience so far gained at FAO indicates that processed weaning food projects should be considered in the framework of possible solutions, but not as the solution, of infant malnutrition. Such projects are subject to human, social, economic, commercial and other constraints. These constraints dictate the necessity that projects should be considered within the national food and nutrition policies adopted by the interested countries and also dovetailed with related nutrition and health intervention programmes. It is essential that the political will exists to face the problem of Protein-Calorie Malnutrition (PCM) so that efforts and investments be coordinated in overcoming the constraints mentioned above and thus achieve lasting improvement of the nutritional status of the young generation.

3. Although national plans to solve the food and nutrition problems focus, by necessity, on long-term programmes for agricultural and industrial development, the importance of dynamic and rapid intervention by policy decisions and adequate financing to alleviate PCM in low income groups cannot be over-emphasized. At the same time,

the role and responsibility of Industry, to cooperate in Government-planned programmes for the production and distribution of protein foods for infants and pre-school children, might be decisive to the success or failure of such programmes.

4. Historical reasons in developing countries have created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and distrust between food industry and government. A gap difficult to bridge so far in free economy countries has made cooperation very precarious and fragile. In centrally planned economies, however, this gap apparently does not exist since food production as well as other economic and social programmes are state-sponsored and controlled. More often in developing than in developed countries there appears to be severe inhibition of growth of the food industries because of delays and frustration caused by government policy in licencing, credits, customs regulations, pricing and food standards. There are, however, examples where industry has been given substantial incentives to develop the production and distribution of protein foods in terms of licencing, exemption of tax and import duties for equipment and needed supplies, and absorption by government agencies of an agreed volume of the production for the national nutrition intervention programme.

Activities of FAO

5. Because of the limited success of weaning food projects developed over the years for the reasons mentioned, and because of the rigid and monolithic approach to develop, produce and try to sell or otherwise distribute a weaning food, FAO recently has been attacking the problem through a number of inter-related activities. These activities are always considered on a country or case basis and within the food nutrition policies, whether refined or primitive, of the country involved. The activities described in this paper cover the FAO/Industry Cooperative Programme (ICP) with its Joint Task Force on Protein Food Development; Food Promotion Seminars and Workshops; Feasibility Studies and Project Development and others.

6. During the last few years FAO has seen a growing need for a catalyst to bring Industry into closer cooperation with FAO's Member Governments. In particular attention was directed to internationally operating industries which possess both the know-how and the financial means, but which shy away from investments in food industry development in developing countries. This disturbing situation results mainly from mutual distrust and suspicion already mentioned for reasons which are known and will not be dwelled upon in this paper. The Industry Cooperative Programme (ICP) within

FAO aims precisely at dispelling this mistrust, at establishing mutual confidence between international industries and national governments and at exploring and creating investment opportunities for food and other industry development.

Joint FAO/ICP Task Force on Protein Food Development

7. The ICP in its desire to assist in the field of protein food development decided on two short-term objectives:

- a) to mount a successful, on-going protein food production and marketing operation in a developing country, and
- b) to prove the point that success in this field is more easily --- perhaps only --- to be achieved through the unique synergism of UN/Industry/Government cooperation.

In order to reach these objectives the ICP formed a Joint FAO/ICP Task Force (JTF) on Protein Food Development. The purpose of the JTF is to work up a programme of action to increase the protein availability with special emphasis and impact on the vulnerable groups in the developing countries through FAO, Industry and Government cooperation. The development of this programme is now under way.

Seminars and Workshops on Food Promotion

8. One of the programmes of FAO and in particular of the Food Policy and Nutrition Division concerns the promotion of better use of protein foods to alleviate PCM and to improve food consumption patterns. The core of such programmes consists of extensive and intensive research leading to a sound assessment of the nutritional status of populations, of family and individual food habits, of consumer and purchasing behaviour. Based on this assessment priority nutritional targets may be established and ways and means defined by which nutritious foods can be produced and marketed effectively.

9. The first Seminar on Food Promotion was held in Istanbul, Turkey in October 1971, hosted by the Government of Turkey, organized and conducted by the Food Policy and Nutrition Division of FAO and sponsored by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA). Its purpose was primarily to strengthen the efforts of selected personnel from developing countries in planning and implementing promotion campaigns for nutritionally beneficial foods, especially new, processed protein-rich foods. Subsidiary objectives were: (1) to explore the relevance of product promotion practices to the marketing systems and environment of developing countries, especially those of Africa and the Near East, (2) to evaluate different experiences in applying techniques of consumer research, media planning, campaign organization, and

advertising design to problems of food marketing and (iii) to recommend ways and means of promoting new foods in harmony with the economic, social and nutritional objectives of developing countries.

10. The Istanbul Food Promotion Seminar had advocated the organization of related seminars or workshops on a convenient sub-regional basis for the developing countries concerned. Accordingly, a first FAO/SIDA Regional Workshop was convened in Nairobi, Kenya from 22-27 April 1974 on behalf of five countries of East Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. It was organized by the Food Policy and Nutrition Division of FAO, sponsored by SIDA and held under the auspices of the Government of Kenya. The motive of the Workshop was the concern of the countries in this region, shared by FAO, and other international agencies to improve human nutrition. Promoting consumption of nutritionally beneficial, locally available foods is one of the means by which the countries concerned can achieve that goal. Food promotion, however, is a complex, multi-disciplinary activity, as complex as the consumers themselves. This Workshop therefore applied itself to the task of identifying specific needs, opportunities and suitable methods for the conduct of food promotion campaigns within the five countries. In particular the Workshop attempted to give assistance to individuals at work in these countries in planning and implementing programmes which can effectively stimulate consumption of nutritionally desirable foods by those groups of the population most in need of dietary improvement.

11. Along the same lines the following activities are now under preparation:

- a) The FAO/SIDA Regional Seminar on Food Promotion for the countries of the Andean Zone to be held in mid-1975, and
- b) The FAO/SIDA Regional Workshop on Food Promotion in West Africa to be held by the end of 1975.

Breast Feeding

12. The decline of breast feeding in several developing countries has been drawing the attention and concern of many quarters including that of FAO and WHO which are particularly concerned with the nutritional implications of early weaning for the health and development of the infant. Early weaning and introduction of bottle feeding with well-balanced formulated foods in adequate quantity, prepared and served under hygienic conditions, do not appear to affect adversely the infants in industrialized countries. The situation, however, is entirely different in developing countries and, in particular, in many urban and peri-urban situations. Adequately nutritious substitutes for breast-milk, if available, are more often than not beyond

the economic reach of the family. Hygienic conditions and the supply of safe water to ensure safe formula-feeding of the infant are far from satisfactory. The most frequent result is high incidence of infectious diseases and of malnutrition. As other speakers are dwelling on aspects of the subject I will only refer here to activities of FAO.

3. FAO is presently designing pilot projects for exploring the effects of various promotional efforts in certain developing countries and the possibilities to halt and indeed reverse the decline of breast feeding. These projects will draw on the information obtained from the ongoing WHO survey on the role of human milk in developing countries. Bilaterally active agencies and other UN agencies have expressed their interest and indicated support for these proposed pilot projects.

Infant Food Projects

During the last 2-3 years FAO's involvement in infant food projects in the Mediterranean basin, which were jointly launched with UNICEF and WHO, became marginal and at present UNICEF has taken over complete control of their development and follow-up. There have been, however, requests to FAO from a few Governments for assistance in the planning and production of infant foods. These projects, described below, have been initiated with the co-operation of WHO.

4.1 Tanzania. The Government of Tanzania, through its Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, had requested FAO to assist in providing information necessary in making a decision on possible project formulation and implementation for the production of infant foods. Based on local materials, FAO prepared a batch of formulated infant food in facilities available in Nairobi, Kenya and then shipped to Tanzania. Medically supervised acceptability and tolerance trials with pre-school children were conducted in Moshi and the results were evaluated by the regional WHO Office in Brazzaville. The parastatal National Milling Company requested the production of an additional quantity of 7 tons for consumer trials. FAO is now arranging for the production of this quantity with the "Plasmon" Company in Milan, Italy for shipment to Tanzania. The results of the market trials will be decisive for Government plans to proceed with industrial production and distribution of the infant food by the National Milling Company.

4.1 Sierra Leone. A pilot project for the development of protein food mixtures for feeding infants and young children is underway now. The objective of the project is to improve the availability of nutritious foods to the highly vulnerable groups of

the population in keeping with the Government's nutrition policy. The Ministry of Development indicated that a policy decision has been made to set the price of the food mixture — named Bonnisced Max — at a level low enough to reach this objective. The funds needed to subsidize the price will be provided by Government Services. In particular the Ministry of Social Welfare will make provision to cover costs in excess of estimated revenues.

14.3 The project operated by FAO is essentially financed with UNDP and Government contributions, but UNICEF assisted also by donating two trucks to the Government for the project. OXFAM made a useful donation towards the purchase of raw materials. In addition to the Ministry of Social Welfare, the cooperating agency of the government, the Ministry of Agriculture and National Resources and the Njala University College have been associated with various aspects of the project. Assistance is being also extended by the Ministries of Health, Education and Trade. WHO, as in similar projects, has been associated with the feeding and tolerance trials and other health aspects of the project. The Government intends to reach a production of 300 metric tons per year as quickly as possible.

15. Feasibility Studies

15.1 Niger. Within the framework of a UNDP/FAO project for the industrial processing of millet, a feasibility study for the production of weaning food in Niger was conducted in 1973. The conclusions of this study were that while the technical facilities available at Zinder, Niger were compatible to the production of infant foods based on millet, groundnuts and niébé beans, the economic feasibility was precarious, essentially because of the extremely small market. The Government is considering, however, the possibility of launching the production on a social welfare basis.

15.2 Libya. A feasibility study for the production of infant foods was conducted in 1972 jointly by FAO, WHO and UNICEF at the request of the Government. The study was conditioned by the Government's expressed instruction that the distribution will be strictly on a welfare basis. No implementation of the recommendations of the study has commenced as yet.

15.3 Cameroon. The Government of Cameroon requested FAO to conduct a feasibility study for the production of weaning foods. UNDP has just approved the funds needed for the study which will commence shortly.

Lebanon. The assistance of FAO and UNDP for the creation of a pilot plant for production of infant food has been requested by the Government. Negotiations are now under way.