

# Aims of United Nations Food & Agriculture Organisation

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TO many people the letters FAO may mean nothing more than another of those rather irritating combinations of initial letters which appear in profusion in the daily papers and other publications. Nevertheless, in view of the Dominion's predominantly agricultural economy, those initials, standing for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, are of considerable interest to New Zealanders in general and the farming community in particular. Also of particular interest is the fact that the Director-General of Agriculture, Mr. E. J. Fawcett, is a member of FAO's executive committee and was one of the three vice-chairmen of the conference held last year at Copenhagen. FAO came into being as an agency of the United Nations, being, in fact, the first of the permanent United Nations organisations, but it had its genesis in the minds of many of the world's agricultural economists and nutritionists some years before the war.

TO understand and appreciate fully the aims and scope of FAO it is necessary to have some knowledge of the development of agriculture in relation to the growth of population during the past century or so. For convenience most of Europe and the Americas, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand may be termed the Western World and the rest of the sphere the Eastern World.

Between 1830 and 1930 the production of food in the Western World expanded prodigiously because of the application of science to farming, improvements in the system of land tenure, and, above all, the opening up of the New World (the Americas, Africa, New Zealand, and Australia), which increased manifold what may be termed Europe's food catchment area. It is true that population trebled and perhaps even quadrupled during the same period, but agricultural production increased even faster and by 1930 consumption a head was greater in quantity and better in quality than it was in 1830.

## Twentieth Century Trend

During the twentieth century, however, new trends set in. The rate of population growth slowed down and the production capacity of farming under existing trading conditions became more than adequate for requirements. In the economic sphere there developed in the 1920's the phenomenon of trade barriers—tariffs, which were a product of post-war economic maladjustments and the all-pervading spirit of economic nationalism. Food exporting countries of the New World imposed tariffs to build up infant manufacturing industries, at the same time expecting the older manufacturing countries to absorb their surplus agricultural produce. In

1929 came the "slump," which intensified the practice of dumping and caused tariff walls to be built even higher.

Finally there arose the anomalous position of the 1930's when there was enormous unused capacity to produce food, and, in some cases, considerable unused production on the one hand and unemployment and poverty on the other. Thus arose the catchery of the 1930's "poverty amid plenty," a cliché which, if not strictly accurate, had some solid foundation in fact.

This phenomenon of poverty amid plenty, however, applied at most to only one-third of the world's two thousand million inhabitants. The other two-thirds, the inhabitants, of the Eastern World, experienced no crisis and, in fact, no agricultural revolution at all comparable with that of the Western World. The bulk of its population are subsistence farmers—that is, the food consumers are the food producers—and in consequence there is no complex market and financial system to get out of gear. The birth rate had been and still is extraordinarily high, but famine and disease have resulted in a very slow increase in population, though there has been some increase, with which the food output has barely kept pace. Poverty is rife and will undoubtedly continue while the agricultural technique continues to be dominated by superstition and ignorance.

That, in brief, was the world agricultural situation before 1939, and though the war has brought the problem to the light of criticism much sooner and with much greater clarity than would otherwise have been the case, and has replaced temporarily a



Mr. E. J. Fawcett.

condition of extensive food surpluses by one of even vaster food deficits, the whole question of the production and distribution of the world's food supply has been in the minds of many of the world's thinkers for a long time.

## Earlier Organisation

FAO cannot be claimed as the first organisation of its kind. In 1905 there was founded at Rome the International Institute of Agriculture (I.I.A.), the result of a convention between the representatives of 40 countries. That organisation, which by 1930 had representatives from 74 countries, may be regarded as the pioneer of official international institutions, but it confined its activities to the international sphere and its essential objects were much narrower in concept and scope than those of FAO. They may be summarised as follows: "To collect, examine, and publish statistical, technical, and economic information about all phases of farming, including such things as trade in agricultural products, prices, wages paid for farm work, the recording of new diseases of crops and stock and, where possible, effective measures for their control; to study problems of agricultural credit and co-operation and publish available information; and, should occasion arise, to submit for the approval of the various Governments measures for the protection of the common interests of farmers and the improvement of their conditions."

Thus, the I.I.A. did not envisage dealing with the huge problems of overproduction in the Western World and the raising of nutritional standards over the greater part of the Eastern World.