

Contents

<i>List of Tables, Figures and Annexes</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xviii

Part I 1945–70. Early Attempts: FAO's Pioneering Work

1	FAO's Origins	3
2	Food Surpluses: Historical Background	12
3	World Food Board Proposal	15
4	International Commodity Clearing House	32
5	A World Food Reserve	37
6	National Food Reserves in Developing Countries	58
7	International Commodity Agreements	65
8	Freedom from Hunger Campaign	77
9	The Development of Food Aid	85

Part II 1970–90. The World Food Crisis of the 1970s and its Aftermath

10	World Food Crisis	115
11	World Food Conference 1974	121
12	International Undertaking on World Food Security	150
13	An International Grain Reserves System	155
14	International Emergency Food Reserve	159
15	Global Information and Early Warning System	163
16	International Trade, Stability and Agricultural Adjustment	165
17	World Food Council	167
18	ILO World Employment Conference, 1976	222
19	Food Entitlement	230

20	Pragmatism and Politics	235
21	World Bank Perspective	259
22	Food Subsidies	264

Part III The 1990s and Beyond: International Conferences

23	International Development Strategy for the 1990s	271
24	International Conferences	274
25	World Summit for Children, 1990	279
26	UN Conference on Environment and Development, 1992	286
27	International Conference on Water and the Environment, 1992	299
28	International Conference on Nutrition, 1992	304
29	World Conference on Human Rights, 1993	313
30	World Conference on Overcoming Global Hunger, 1993	318
31	International Conference on Population and Development, 1994	321
32	World Summit for Social Development, 1995	328
33	A 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture and the Environment, 1995	334
34	Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995	340
35	World Food Summit, 1996	347
36	World Agricultural Trade: WTO and the Doha Ministerial Declaration, 2001	361
37	UN Millennium Summit, 2000	364
38	International Conference on Financing for Development, 2002	369
39	World Summit, 2005	375

Part IV Assessment. The Graveyard of Aspirations

40	Redefining the Concept of Food Security	383
41	Dimensions of Poverty and Food Insecurity	387
42	Future Action	432

<i>Notes</i>	462
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<i>Bibliography</i>	476
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<i>Index</i>	496
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1

FAO's Origins

The United Nations Conference on Food and Agriculture, convened by President Franklin D. Roosevelt at Hot Springs, Virginia, USA in May/June 1943, during the Second World War, led to the creation of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). In his State of the Union address on 6 January 1941, before the United States entered the war, President Roosevelt had identified 'four essential freedoms': freedom of speech; of worship; from want; and from fear – 'everywhere in the world' (Rosenman, 1950). FAO's founding conference was organized 'to consider the goal of freedom from want in relation to food and agriculture'. It was recognized that 'freedom from want means a secure, an adequate, and a suitable supply of food for every man' (FAO, 1943). The conference was strongly influenced by the 'new science' of nutrition and its importance for health and well-being, already recognized by the League of Nations before the Second World War (see below). Its ultimate objective was defined as insuring 'an abundant supply of the right kinds of food for all mankind', hence the importance of dietary standards as a guide for agricultural and economic policies concerned with improving the diet and health of the world's population. The work of the conference emphasized 'the fundamental interdependence of the consumer and the producer'. All inhabitants of the earth were consumers. At the time, more than two-thirds of adults were also food producers.

The bold declaration adopted at the conference stated:

This Conference, meeting in the midst of the greatest war ever waged, in full confidence of victory, has considered the world problems of food and agriculture and declares its belief that the goal of freedom from want of food, suitable and adequate for the health and strength of all peoples can be achieved.

The first task the declaration identified after winning of the war was to deliver millions of people from tyranny and hunger. Thereafter, a concerted effort was needed to 'win and maintain freedom from fear and freedom from want. The one cannot be achieved without the other'. But, the declaration also stated: 'There has never been enough food for the health of all people'. Food production had to be 'greatly expanded', for which 'we now have the knowledge of the means

by which this can be done'. It required 'imagination and firm will' on the part of governments and people to make use of that knowledge.

The declaration recognized that

The first cause of malnutrition and hunger is poverty. It is useless to produce more food unless men and nations provide the markets to absorb it. There must be an expansion of the whole world economy to provide the purchasing power sufficient to maintain an adequate diet for all. With full employment in all countries, enlarged industrial production, the absence of exploitation, an increasing flow of trade within and between countries, an orderly management of domestic and international investment and currencies, and sustained internal and international economic equilibrium, the food which is produced can be made available to all people.

The primary responsibility for ensuring that people had the food needed for life and health lay with each nation. But each nation could fully achieve that goal only if all work together. The declaration ended:

The first steps towards freedom from want of food must not await the final solution of all other problems. Each advance made in one field will strengthen and quicken advance in all others. Work already begun must be continued. Once the war has been won decisive steps can be taken. We must make ready now.

It became clear at an early stage of the conference that there was general agreement that a permanent organization in the field of food and agriculture should be established. It was also agreed that the organization should act as a centre of information and advice on both agricultural and nutritional questions, and that it should maintain a service of international statistics. The conference recommended the establishment of an Interim Commission in Washington, DC to draw up a detailed plan for the permanent organization for the approval of governments and authorities represented at the conference.

After two and a half years of preparatory work by the Interim Commission, FAO was established at the first FAO Conference in Quebec, Canada in October 1945 and Sir John Boyd Orr, 'that brave persistent Scottish prophet, that pioneer in nutrition, that indefatigable researcher, that prophet of greater human welfare', was elected as its first director-general (FAO, 1945). An executive committee of 15 members was also elected. Washington, DC was designated as the temporary seat of FAO but it was agreed that the permanent location should be at the United Nations on the understanding that that would also be the location of ECOSOC. Eventually, ECOSOC was placed in Geneva, Switzerland and FAO was located in Rome, Italy, where it inherited the library of the International Institute of Agriculture.

In his address to the conference after his election, Boyd Orr gave an indication of the vision of the 'great world scheme' he had for FAO. He noted that in the past

forty years, science had advanced more than it did in the previous two thousand years to 'let loose new forces into the world'. He added:

those forces cannot be bottled up; they must either be harnessed to serve the ends of mankind, or they will break loose in a riot of destruction. How those forces are used will affect all nations equally. The world is now so small that any war will be a world war; and prosperity must be a world prosperity. Governments realize this, and they are, therefore, attempting to set up world organizations which will enable those powers of science to be applied on a world scale. It is very fitting . . . that FAO should be the first of these organizations. It deals with the primary products of land and sea; it deals with food – the primary necessity of life.

He went on:

Each nation has accepted the responsibility . . . to provide, as far as possible, food and a health standard for all peoples. . . . But something new has arisen. All the governments have agreed to cooperate in a great world food scheme, which will bring freedom from want to all men, irrespective of race and colour. . . . If the nations of the world are going to get together to feed the people of the world, they must increase the production of the most important foods. In many cases that production must more than double. This will bring prosperity to agriculture . . . [which] must overflow into other businesses and into world trade. But . . . we do these things not because they will bring prosperity, but because they are right . . . if we put first things first, and do the things which we know to be right, a great many social, economic and political difficulties will disappear. . . . You say it is a dream. Then, it is the business of FAO to make that dream come true. . . . I am almost tempted to say that if this Organization succeeds it will perform a miracle. Well, we are living in a day of miracles.

The need for some form of multilateral world food security arrangement had already been recognized by the League of Nations before the Second World War to rationalize food production, supply and trade for the benefit of both producers and consumers, in both developing as well as developed countries. Attention was focused on two basic concerns: first, to reconcile the interests of producers and consumers by protecting them from uncontrolled fluctuations in world agricultural production and prices; and secondly, to use constructively agricultural output in excess of commercial market demand (the so-called agricultural 'surpluses') to assist economic and social development in developing countries *without* creating disincentive to their domestic agricultural production or disruption to local or international trade. This vision of world food security that re-emerged at the creation of FAO has remained a constant, if flicking, light.

In the 1920s, the preoccupation with post-war recovery and the impact of a rather short lived boom and slump, followed by a new era of prosperity (which in the views of many was expected to last much longer than it did), provided relatively little incentive for intergovernmental action on international commodity

problems, although there were some, mainly producers', agreements. In the early 1930s, on the other hand, the disastrous effects of the Great Depression on consumer purchasing power and on the incomes of primary producers, underlined the need for some form of intergovernmental arrangement for staple foodstuffs. At the same time, the results of important new advances in the science of nutrition were widely propagated. This led to the discovery that the incidence of chronic malnutrition, with harmful effects on health, was widespread, even in relatively high-income countries, and particularly among children and other vulnerable groups. Following the Great Depression, when markets for staple foods were glutted and producers faced ruin, the growing recognition of the widespread character of nutritional deficiencies strengthened the conviction that there was something wrong with the recurring manifestations of 'poverty in the midst of plenty' and that solutions should be sought through the selective expansion of food consumption rather than through the curtailment of output that had been previously practiced. Furthermore, the basic cure of under-consumption had to be seen in the promotion of measures designed to raise the real incomes of needy people.

In the early 1930s, Yugoslavia proposed that in view of the importance of food for health, the Health Division of the League of Nations should disseminate information about the food position in representative countries of the world. Its report was the first introduction of the world food problem into the international political arena.¹ Dr. Frank Boudreau, head of the League's Health Division, with Drs. Aykroyd and Bennet, visited a number of countries and submitted a report on *Nutrition and Public Health* (1935), which showed that there was an acute food shortage in the poor countries, the first account of the extent of hunger and malnutrition in the world. Discussions held on nutrition policies in the Assembly of the League of Nations were based on some important pioneering efforts that had helped to prepare the ground and led to further practical progress. These endeavours marked the beginnings of co-ordinated nutrition policies in a number of countries. Meanwhile, the hardships caused by the unprecedented slump of the early 1930s, and fears of their recurrence, led governments to adopt national price and production controls for foodstuffs and other agricultural products in exporting countries, coupled with trade restrictions in importing countries. At the same time, there was also growing interest in the regulation of world trade in foodstuffs and other staple products through intergovernmental action.

The ILO, in a comprehensive report on intergovernmental commodity control agreements, stated that 'although there was a marked tendency for raw material control schemes to develop before the great depression, intergovernmental schemes have developed during the years since the depression' (ILO, 1943). In essence, the inter-war agreements for foodstuffs were based on quotas as well as the operation of buffer stocks. The possibility of organizing international buffer stocks as part of international control arrangements was first discussed more thoroughly only in 1937 by the League of Nations Committee on the Study of the Problems of Raw Materials. To sum up, the main trends of thought and action developed during the 1930s were: first, the beginning of national nutrition policies based

on the spread of newer knowledge of nutrition and promoted by international co-operation; second, and partly in conflict with the first, the growth of market rigidities, national price and production controls, and trade restrictions; and third, growing interest in intergovernmental commodity arrangements.

No action was taken on the League of Nations nutrition report until 1935 when the subject was raised again in the Assembly of the League by Stanley Bruce, formerly Prime Minister of Australia, and by then Viscount Bruce of Melbourne and High Commissioner for Australia in London. Bruce had attended the World Monetary and Economic Conference in London in 1932–33 when, as a result of the economic crisis, and the shrinkage of international trade, widespread unemployment occurred in both Europe and the United States. The only remedies that were being applied were tariff barriers and other measures to *restrict* the production of food and other goods in order to raise prices. Bruce uttered the solemn warning that 'an economic system which restricted the production and distribution of the things that the majority of mankind urgently needed was one that could not endure'. He predicted disaster unless measures were taken to develop the potential wealth of the world in a rapidly expanding world economy. Bruce proposed at the League of Nations that committees should be set up to find out how much more food was needed and what means might be taken to get nations to cooperate in a world food plan based on human needs.

As a result, a three-day debate took place in the Assembly of the League of Nations during which it was argued that increasing food production to meet human needs would bring prosperity to agriculture, which would overflow into industry, and bring about the needed expansion of the world economy, through what Bruce described as 'the marriage of health and agriculture'. This new conception of considering food in all its relationships to health, economics and politics, roused considerable enthusiasm. It was decided to consider ways and means of applying this new idea in practice. An international committee of physiologists, including Americans and Russians, was appointed to report on the food needed for health. An 'International Standard of Food Requirements' was agreed upon, which gave an indication of the amount of food needed throughout the world. A 'mixed committee' of leading authorities on nutrition, agriculture and economics was then appointed to examine and make recommendations on every aspect of the food problem, including production, transport and trade. This committee of 20 members brought out a report on the benefits from developing the world's food supplies. A conference was called to consider what action to take to implement its recommendations. Bruce and others sent the following telegram to Boyd Orr with whom the subject had been discussed: 'Dear Brother Orr, this day we have lit a candle which, by the Grace of God's grace, will never be put out' (a reference to a speech made by Hugh Latimer when he and another Protestant were burned at the stake) (Boyd Orr, 1966, p. 119).

At the committee which had been charged to draw up the standard diet needed for health, Boyd Orr sat between the American and Russian delegates. He found that both 'co-operated harmoniously' in preparing the report. When it was received, the League of Nations Assembly decided to set up another committee

of financiers, economists, business men and scientists to work out the economic advantages of a world food policy. The final report on *The Relation of Health, Agriculture and Economic Policy*, published by the League in 1937, indicated the lines along which the expansion of the world economy could most easily begin. It was declared a best-seller by *The New York Times* (Boyd Orr, 1966, p. 120). Walter Elliot and Earl De La Warr, respectively Minister and Under-Secretary for Agriculture in the United Kingdom, saw that the food problem of a 'glut' followed by a fall in food prices paid to farmers was one of under-consumption rather than over-production. In 1938, 22 nations, including the United States and Russia, met in conference to arrange how this new world food policy could be carried out. But the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 brought this promising development to an end. The view was expressed that if the League of Nations had devoted more time to social and economic problems than to politics, it might have succeeded in eliminating the causes of war.

The conference at Hot Springs in 1943 was attended by some of those who had taken part in the League of Nations work and debates on nutrition and food security. They discussed the League's work with both President Roosevelt and Vice-President Henry Wallace, and suggested that as food was, in Roosevelt's language, 'the first want of man', a world food policy would be the best way to begin to fulfil the promise of freedom from want for all people that was previously made in the *Atlantic Charter*, signed by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill in August 1941 (Freidel, 1990, pp. 387–8).

Out of this historical background emerged FAO. Of all the personalities involved, Frank McDougall is especially linked with the founding of FAO (Boerma, 1968; Phillips, 1981). Born in the United Kingdom, he became a fruit grower in Australia and then economic adviser to Lord Bruce, the Australian High Commissioner in London. MacDougall had shown a keen interest in the work of Boyd Orr on human nutrition and had frequently visited his research institute in Scotland, and had kept Lord Bruce informed. He was enormously impressed by the new knowledge of nutrition that developed between the two world wars. He was equally impressed by the paradox of the emergence of food surpluses during the depression of the 1930s alongside hunger and malnutrition not only in the developing countries but also among the unemployed, children and old people in the most economically advanced countries. His conviction that these two 'evils' should cancel each other out was crystallized in his phrase 'the marriage of food and agriculture'. He succeeded in inducing the League of Nations to set up an international committee on nutrition. He wrote a memorandum on *The Agricultural and Health Problem* in 1935, which served as a first step towards bringing before the League the findings of nutritionists indicating that a large proportion of the world's population did not get enough of the right sort of food, and the view that food production should be expanded to meet nutritional requirements, rather than restricted (Phillips, 1981). But his greatest success was when he sold the idea of an international agency to combat hunger to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which led to the Hot Springs conference.

The recommendations for approval at the Hot Springs conference called for national and international action under three main headings: consumption levels

and requirements; expansion of production and adaptation to consumer needs; and facilitation and improvement of distribution. They advocated the use of international commodity arrangements as a means for promoting stability and orderly development. It was also recommended that 'adequate reserves should be maintained to meet all consumption needs' and that 'provision should be made, when applicable, for the orderly disposal of surpluses'. The report of the conference distinguished three types of 'functional disorders' in international commodity distribution: short-term fluctuations in prices; disorders concomitant of general cyclical depressions; and disorders that were structural modifications in relations between existing productive capacity and the need of society for certain commodities or groups of commodities. The conference unanimously agreed that 'the world after the war should follow a bold policy of economic expansion instead of the timid regime of scarcity which characterized the 1930s'. Different views were expressed on the nature of international commodity regulations. Some delegates envisaged future arrangements chiefly for the establishment and operation of buffer stocks. But it was not possible to reach agreement concerning the part to be allotted to quantitative regulation for both short-term fluctuations and long-term disequilibrium. In a resolution summing up the conclusions of the conference, it was recommended that international commodity arrangements should be so designed as to promote 'the expansion of an orderly world economy'. A 'body of broad principles' should be agreed upon, which should include fair prices for both consumers and producers.

At the first session of the FAO Conference, held in Quebec City, Canada from 16 October to 1 November 1945, attended by representatives of 44 countries, FAO's constitution was approved by which member nations 'being determined to promote the common welfare' pledged 'to work separately and collectively' for the purposes of FAO, which were defined as

- raising levels of nutrition and standards of living of the peoples under their respective jurisdictions;
- securing improvements in the efficiency of the production and distribution of all food and agricultural products;
- bettering the condition of rural populations; and thus
- contributing toward an expanding world economy [and ensuring humanity's freedom from hunger] (FAO, 1945).²

The constitution also set out, clearly and explicitly, the functions of FAO:

- The organization was to 'collect, analyze, interpret and disseminate' information relating to 'nutrition, food and agriculture'.
- It was to 'promote and, where appropriate, recommend national and international action' concerning:
 - (a) scientific, technological, social, and economic research relating to nutrition, food and agriculture;

- (b) the improvement of education and administration, relating to nutrition, food and agriculture, and the spread of public knowledge of nutritional and agricultural science and practice;
 - (c) the conservation of natural resources and the adoption of improved methods of agricultural production;
 - (d) the improvement of the processing, marketing and distribution of food and agricultural products;
 - (e) the adoption of policies for the provision of adequate agricultural credit, national and international and
 - (f) the adoption of international policies with respect to agricultural commodity arrangements.
- It was also to
 - (a) furnish such technical assistance as governments may request;
 - (b) organize, in cooperation with the governments concerned, such missions as may be needed to assist them to fulfil the obligations arising from their acceptance of the recommendations of the United Nations Conference on Food and Agriculture and of FAO's constitution; and
 - (c) generally to take all necessary and appropriate action to implement the purposes of FAO.

Like the other specialized agencies of the UN system, FAO was to have its own budget based on assessed, not voluntary, contributions from its member states. These contributions were augmented by resources from the UN Technical Assistance Board (TAB), later the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA) and the UN Special Fund (SF). EPTA and the SF were amalgamated in 1965 to form the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Trust funds were also deposited by donor governments in FAO for special projects and programmes that they wished the organization to implement.

The Quebec conference discussed both problem of food shortages and the possible recurrence of food surpluses that had existed before the war. Concerning shortages, it foreshadowed the need for an internationally representative body to allocate scarce supplies. As to surpluses, it prophesized the need for national agricultural adjustment programmes, framed in the light of international review and consultation, and advocated international commodity agreements and special international measures for wider food distribution. The conference also recommended that 'adequate reserves should be maintained to meet all consumption needs' and that 'provision should be made, when applicable, for the orderly disposal of surpluses'. Taken together, 'these recommendations constituted a surprisingly accurate forecast of what the world would need in the post-war decade' (Yates, 1955, p. 76).

Intent on achieving the long-term objective of improving overall food intake, the conference at Hot Springs had recommended that 'adequate reserves should be maintained to meet all consumption needs' and that 'provision should be made, when applicable, for the orderly disposal of surpluses'. It went into some detail

about 'functional disorders' in the world distribution of food but had little to say about planning for emergencies. This reflected the broad approach taken at the time. Intent upon the long-term objective of improving overall food consumption, the conference gave little attention to accidental (but recurring) disruptions in supplies that required emergency assistance. The urgent task of providing the war-ravaged countries of Europe and Asia with food and other essential relief goods was addressed at another conference held in Washington, DC in November 1943, which led to the establishment of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) (Woodbridge, 1950).

The spirit of international solidarity among allied nations during the war, which led to the creation of the United Nations in 1945 and the other UN specialized agencies, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), started to unravel by the time of the first FAO conference in Quebec, Canada in 1945 as the major economic powers returned to self-centred national policies and preference for bilateral as opposed to multilateral arrangements. Their intentions were clearly expressed. FAO was to keep off the short-term food crisis and commercial and commodity policies and concentrate on long-term issues of nutrition, production and national distribution. The course of subsequent events, and the personality of the first FAO director-general, Sir (later Lord) John Boyd Orr, called for different action. The world food situation rapidly worsened and the agencies involved in handling it, including the UNRRA, were blamed at the UN General Assembly in February 1947. UNRRA was disbanded and Boyd Orr announced that FAO was willing to take over its role and accept responsibility for mobilizing world resources to meet the crisis. He proposed calling a conference, which took place in Washington, DC in May 1947, for which FAO prepared a survey showing the expected severity of the food situation. This resulted in the establishment of an International Emergency Council (later Committee), which was eventually absorbed into FAO as its Distribution Division. At the same time, Boyd Orr was requested to submit to the next FAO conference in Copenhagen, Denmark proposals for dealing with the long-term problems, including the risk of accumulating surpluses.

Index

- A 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture and the Environment, *see* International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
- Adam, Ibrahim (Chair, Preparatory Committee, International Nutrition Conference, 1992), 305, 472 n7
- Adjustment with a Human Face* (UNICEF study, 1987), 279, 385
- Africa, increased aid to, 374
- 'Agriculture, Food Security, Nutrition and the Millennium Development Goals', 2005 article, 404–5
- Ahmed, Salahuddin (Bangladesh Permanent Representative to FAO, Deputy Executive Director, World Food Council, (1978–82) Deputy Executive Director, World Food Programme (1982–94), 182–4
- al-Qaeda* terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC, 11 September 2001, 428
- Annan, Kofi A. (United Nations Secretary-General, 1997–2006), 283, 292, 297, 356–7, 370, 450
- Anstee, Margaret Joan (United Nations Assistant Secretary-General), 471 n41
- Armstrong, Anne (President Ford's adviser and leading member of US delegation to 1974 World Food Conference), 135
- Atlantic Charter* (signed by US President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Churchill, August 1941), 16, 25
- Atwood, Brian (Administrator, United States International Aid Department), 318
- Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change, scientific symposium, UK, February 2005, 445–6
- Aykroyd, Dr. D. (co-author, League of Nations report on *Nutrition and Public Health* (1935), 6
- Aziz, Sartaj (Director, FAO Commodities and Trade Division, Deputy Secretary-General, 1974 World Food Conference, first Deputy Executive Director, World Food Council, Deputy President, International Fund for Agricultural Development, Pakistan Minister of Agriculture and Foreign Minister)
- assessment of 1974 World Food Conference, 146
- career, 144, 471 n41
- contributions to 1974 World Food Conference, xvi, 123–5, 144–5
- proposal for an international system of food security (1976), 180
- proposal for Rome Forum (1974), 128
- Ban, Ki-moon (present United Nations Secretary-General, 2007–), 460
- Bariloche Foundation, 222
- basic needs concept, *see* International Labour Organization (ILO), World Employment Conference, 1976
- Baumgartner, M. (French Minister of Finance), 86
- Beckmann, David (President, Bread for the World), 403
- Bennet, Dr Paul (co-author, League of Nations report on *Nutrition and Public Health* 1935), 6
- Benson, Ezra Taft (US Secretary of Agriculture), 87, 472 n17
- Berlusconi, Silvio (President, Italian Council of Ministers and Chair, World Food Summit +5, 2002), 356
- Bevin, Ernest (member of PM Winston Churchill's war cabinet), 25
- Bezanson, Keith (President, Canadian International Development Research Council, later Director, Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK), 337–8
- Blau, Gerda (Director, FAO Commodities and Trade Division), 35
- Boerma, Addeke (FAO Director-General 1968–75), 29, 121, 137, 219
- Address to 1974 World Food Conference, 135–6

- Boserup, Ester (author of *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970) Danish representative to the UN Commission on the Status of Women), 341, 473 n18
- Boudreau, Dr Frank (Head, League of Nations Health Division), 6
- Boumedienne, Houari (President of Algeria), 122
- Boutros-Ghali, Boutros (United Nations Secretary-General, 1992–6), 215, 218, 318–19, 331–2, 351
- Brandt, Willy (Chancellor of West Germany), 122
- Broadley, Herbert (member of UK delegation and chairman of committee that discussed the World Food Board proposal, Second FAO Conference, 1946), 26
- Brown, Lester (Founder, President, Worldwatch Institute (1974) and Founder, President, Earth Policy Institute (2001), 286, 407–8, 467 n7
- Brownell, Kelly (co-author, *Food Fights*, Director, Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders), 411
- Bruce, Stanley (later Viscount Bruce of Melbourne), 7, 27
- Brundland, Mrs Gro Harlem (Norwegian Prime Minister and Head, World Commission on Environment and Development), 286
- Buffer stock financing facility (IMF), 240–1
- Butz, Earl (US Secretary of Agriculture and leader of the US delegation to the 1974 World Food Conference)
views at conference, 132–3
views on international grains reserves proposal, 157
- Calder, Richie (Introduction to Boyd Orr autobiography *As I Recall*, 1966), 304
- Canadian food surpluses, 14
- Canadian Wheat Board, 14
- Carter, Jimmy (US President), 227, 319
- Castro, Fidel (Cuban President), 351
- Chavez, Hugo (Venezuelan President, Chairman,), 298
- China, effects on world food security, 407
- chronic food insecurity, concept of, 40
- Churchill, Winston (later Sir Winston) (UK Prime Minister), 16, 25
- Clayton, Will (US government official charged with trying to organize the International Trade Organization), 27
- climate change and global warming, 443–51
An Inconvenient Truth, film and book on global warming, 447
Convention on Biodiversity (1972), 290
Convention to Combat Desertification (1995), 290
Kyoto Protocol (1997), 444
livestock and global warming, 451
Montreal Protocol on climate change (1987), 290
Multilateral Fund for implementing the Montreal Protocol (1991), 291
Nairobi Framework to help developing countries reduce carbon emissions, 450–1
Stern report on the economics of climate change, 447–8
UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1992, 290, 296
US objections, 446–7
Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer (1997), 290
- Cochrane, Willard (Director, US Department of Agriculture's Economic Service), 93
- Codex Alimentarius Commission (FAO/WHO), 304
- Colombia [University] Declaration on a broad concept of economic and social development (1970), 144
- Commission for International Commodity Trade, 30
- Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), former Soviet Union, 192
- Compensatory Financing Facility (IMF), 194, 210, 240–1
- Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme*, 360
- Conliffe, John B. (University of California, chairman of the expert group that proposed an International Commodities Clearing House), 32
- Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), 208, 334, 349
- consumer food subsidies programmes, 364–8
- Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, *see* United Nations (UN)

- Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), 280, 284
- Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development* (1995), *see* United Nations (UN)
- Copenhagen Seminars for Social Progress, 331
- Costa Rican government proposal for a World Food Reserve, 38
- Crookes, Sir William (predictor of worldwide starvation in the 1890s), 115
- Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 222
- De Cuellar, Perez (United Nations Secretary-General), 215
- de la Warr, Earl (UK Under-Secretary for Agriculture), 8
- Declaration of the United Nations*, 1942, 23
- Declaration on the Right to Development*, 315
- Desai, Nitin (Chief, UN Department on Sustainable Development and Secretary-General, World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002), 293–4
- Diouf, Jacques (present FAO Director General, 1996), 347, 357–8
- Disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), concept of, 396
- Dodd, Norris, E. (US Undersecretary of Agriculture and FAO Director-General, 1948–53), 26, 32
- Doha Development Agenda/Round, *see* World Trade Organization (WTO)
- Donne, John (English poet), 79
- Dublin Statement on Water and the Environment, 1992, 300
- Education for All*, global monitoring reports (UNESCO), 418
- aid for, 419
- gender disparities, 418
- literacy, 419
- meeting the Millennium Development Goals for education, 421
- Eisenhower, Dwight D. (US President)
- food for peace proposal, 87
- multilateral food aid facility proposal, 89
- Elliot, Walter (UK Minister of Agriculture), 8
- Emmerij, Louis (Director, ILO World Employment Programme, Rector, Institute for Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands, President, OECD Development Centre, Special Adviser to the President, Inter-American Development Banks, Co-Director, United Nations Intellectual History Project), xvi, 471 n43
- employment, importance of, 422–3
- concept of working poverty, 422
- extent of unemployment, 423
- Ending Hunger in our Lifetime* (IFPRI publication, 2003), 403–4
- European Union (EU), formerly EEC agricultural surpluses, 86
- Common Agricultural Policy, 86
- views at 1974 World Food Conference, 136
- Ezekiel, Mordecai (Director, FAO Economic Division), 35–6, 464 n23
- Fall, Ibrahim (UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Secretary-General, World Conference on Human Rights, 1993), 314
- famine in biblical times (seven fat and seven lean years in Egypt), 44, 115, 463 n19
- fast food industry, growth of, 409–10
- Fast Track Initiative for aid to education (IMF/World Bank), 419
- Food Aid Conventions, 75–6, 194
- Food aid, development of, 85–109
- concept of food entitlement, 230–1
- criticisms of concept, 233–4
- entitlement protection, 231–2
- an expanded programme of surplus food utilization, *see* World Food Programme (WFP)
- famines and entitlement, 231
- food aid during the second UN development decade study, *see* World Food Programme (WFP)
- food aid for food security, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- food aid in sub-Saharan Africa, 393
- food entitlement concept of Amartya Sen, 230–4
- future of food aid, 109
- global food aid compact proposal, 109
- guidelines and criteria for food aid, *see* World Food Programme (WFP)
- improved food aid policy resolution of 1974 World Food Conference, 141
- international emergency food reserve modalities, *see* World Food Programme (WFP)
- multilateral food aid study (1968), 103–5

- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- Committee on Commodity Problems (CCP), 35
 - Committee on World Food Security (CFS), 142
 - Constitution and functions, 9–10, 23
 - Consultative Subcommittee on Surplus Disposal (CSD), 35
 - counteracting excessive food price fluctuations, 44–8
 - creation of FAO, 3–4, 9–10
 - disposal of agricultural surpluses study (1954), 51
 - effects on 1974 World Food Conference on FAO, 146
 - European Agriculture: Policy Issues and Options to 2000* (1990), 250–1
 - famine reserve proposal, 28
 - FAO Charter for the Soil (1981), 286
 - FAO Council, 29
 - FAO Group on Grains, 74
 - FAO motto, '*Fiat Panis*', 31
 - FAO *Trust Fund for Food Security and Food Safety*, 359
 - financing of FAO, 10
 - First FAO (Founding) Conference, Quebec, Canada, 1945, 9–10, 11
 - food aid and food security paper (1985), 251–5
 - food financing facility proposal, 240–1
 - Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information and Mapping System* (FIVIMS), 394
 - Food Security Assistance Scheme, 238–40
 - Freedom from Hunger Campaign (1960–70), 77–84, 305; *Man's Right to Freedom from Hunger Manifesto* (1963), 81–2; publications, 80; Special Assembly on Man's Right to Freedom from Hunger, 14 March 1963, 81–2; World Food Congress (1963), 81–3; World Freedom from Hunger Week, March 1963, 82; Young World Assembly (1965), 83
 - Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture, 163–4, 202
 - impact of economic adjustment on food security and nutrition in developing countries study, 201
 - Indian pilot study on agricultural surpluses to finance economic development (1955), 52–4
 - Indicative World Plan for Agricultural Development, 244–6
 - infrastructure and storage needs of developing countries study, 194, 239
 - Interim Commission for detailed plan of FAO (1943–5), 4
 - International Alliance Against Hunger*, 358, 360
 - international commodity agreements, 65–76; objectives, 66–8; types of agreements, 68–73
 - International Commodity Clearing House proposal, 32–4
 - International Conference on Nutrition, with WHO (1992), 304–12, 347; FAO/WFO collaboration, 304; Plan of Action on Nutrition (1992), 311–12; World Declaration on Nutrition (1992), 309–11
 - International Emergency Council (later FAO Distribution Division), 11
 - international price stabilization reserve proposal, 29
 - international trade, stability, and agricultural adjustment, 165–6
 - International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*, 359
 - International Undertaking on World Food Security, 150–4
 - location of FAO, 10
 - medium-term projections for agricultural commodities, 1962–70
 - minimum safe level of global food stocks for world food security, estimate of, 152–4
 - national food reserves in developing countries report, 58–64; commodity composition, storage, rotation and costs, 63–4; definition of roles, 61–3
 - Plan of Action on World Food Security, 194, 255–6
 - Preparatory Commission on World Food Proposals (1946), 27–30
 - Preparedness for large-scale and acute food shortages, 237–8
 - Principles of Surplus Disposal (1954), 54–7
 - regional and sub-regional food security schemes, 243–4
 - revised concept of World Food Security, 241–3
 - Second FAO Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark (1946), 11, 25–7

- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) – *continued*
- Soil Map of the World (with UNESCO) (1961–78), 249
- Special Action Programme for the Prevention of Food Losses, 239
- Special Meeting on Urgent Food Problems, Washington, DC (1946), 15
- Special Programme for Food Security, launched 2002, 35
- UN Conference on Food and Agriculture, Hot Springs, Virginia, USA, May/June 1943, 3–4, 8–9, 10
- voluntary guidelines to the right to food security, 461
- World Agriculture: Toward 2000* (1988), 248–50
- world emergency food reserve study, 37–57; Plan of the Three Circles, 44
- World Food Board Proposal, 15–31
- World Food Capital Fund proposal, 54
- World Food Reserve study, 37–57
- World Food Security Compact, 256–8, 308
- world food security, revised concept of, 241–3
- World Food Summit (1996), 347–56
- World Food Summit +5 (2002), 356–60
- World Food Surveys: first (1946); second (1952); third (1962); fourth (1977); fifth (1987), sixth (1996), 246–8
- food security
- a central development goal, 456
 - definitions of, 383
 - difference between food and nutrition security, 397
 - Food and Nutrition Security in the Process of Globalization and Urbanization* (2005), 455, 475 n21
 - Food Security and Nutrition: The Global Challenge* (1993), 381, 475 n21
 - food security for children: effects of poverty, armed conflicts and HIV/AIDS, 398–401
 - human right approach to, 460–1
 - international conventions, declarations, compacts and resolutions, 388
 - redefinition of the concept, 383–6
- food surpluses, historical background, 12–14
- changing attitudes towards food surpluses, 85–6
 - possible uses, 48–57
- Principles of Surplus Disposal*, see Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- Ford, Gerald (US President), 121
- Address to the UN General Assembly (1974), 130, 134
- Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), see United Nations (UN)
- Freedom from Hunger Campaign, see Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- Further Actions and Initiatives to Implement the Beijing Platform of Action [for Women] (2000), 344–6
- G77, 121, 138
- see also non-aligned countries (G77)
- G8 Summit, Gleneagles, Scotland (2005), 374
- GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), 30
- gender-in-development, concept of, 341–2
- gender mainstreaming, 342
- genetically modified (GM) crops and food, 437–43
- criticism of US Food and Drug Administration policy on, 443
- FAO statement on biotechnology, 441–2
- FAO, WHO and WFP statement on, 442
- future prospects for Africa, 442–3
- GM Science Review, UK, 439–41
- report of UK Prime Minister's Strategy Unit on, 439
- UK public debate on, 437–8
- German Foundation for International Development, 181
- Ghissassi, Abdellatif (member of World Food Council review group), 471 n41
- Glickman, Dan (US Secretary of Agriculture, head of US delegation to 1996 World Food Summit), 351
- Global Burden of Disease Study* (WHO and World Bank sponsors), 392
- Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing Countries* (1994), 290
- Global Consultation on Safe Water and Sanitation for the 1990s, New Delhi, India (1990), 299
- Global Environment Facility (GEF), see United Nations (UN)

- Global Information and Early Warning System for Food and Agriculture, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- globalization, 451–6
 antagonists views of, 453–6
 protagonists views of, 452–3
- Gorbachev, Mikhail (former President, Soviet Union, Nobel Peace Prize, and chairman, Green Cross International), 429–30
- Gore, Al (US Vice President, presenters of documentary, and author of book, on *An Inconvenient Truth* on global warming), 447
- Grant, James. P. (UNICEF Executive Director), 279
- Grant, Malcolm (Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Land Economics, University of Cambridge, UK), 474 n14
- Green Revolution, 115
- Griffiths, Peter (author of *The Economist's Tale*, 2003), 473 n5
- Hall, Tony (US Congressman), 318, 472 n13
- Halonen, Tarja Kaarina (President of Finland and Co-Chair, World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization), 474 n19
- Hammarskjöld, Dag (United Nations Secretary-General, 1953–61), 381
- Hannah, John (Deputy Secretary-General, 1974 World Food Conference, first Executive Director, World Food Council), 123, 169
- Hao, Chung-Shih (Chinese Vice-Minister for Agriculture), 136
- Hoffman, Paul (US Administrator of the Marshall Plan, Managing Director, UN Special Fund, and first Administrator, UNDP), 100
- Hoover, J. Edgar (US President), 13
- Horgen, Katherine (co-author, *Food Fights*, Consultant, Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders), 411
- human rights approach to food and nutrition security, 460–1
- human rights movement in the 1980s, 460
- human security
 concept of, 428–9
 Human Security Network (founded 1999), 429
- UN Commission on Human Security, *see* United Nations (UN)
- Worldwatch Institute report on, 430–1
- Humphrey, Hubert H. (US Senator and Vice President in the Johnson Administration), 86–7
- hunger and malnutrition
 causes of, 387–8
 classification of hungry poor, 391–4
 costs of, 394–7
 effects of IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programmes on, 385–6
 effects on children, 397–400
 food emergency 'hotspots', 392
 hunger, malnutrition and poverty linkages, 387
 scientific study of disease-related malnutrition, 402
 special problems of sub-Saharan Africa, 392–3
- Task Force Hunger report on *Halving Hunger: It Can Be Done* (2005), 406–7
- UNICEF/World Bank joint study on, 400–2
- Hunger and Public Action* (Dreze and Sen, 1989), 230
- IMPACT (IFPRI's research and global food model), *see* International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
- income factor: number of people living on \$1 and \$2 a day, 415–18
- Indian Famine Code, 42
- institutional incoherence, 349
- Inter-American Coffee Agreement (1940), 22
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 444, 451
- International Alliance Against Hunger*, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), *see* World Bank
- International Bill of Rights (1966), 314
- international commodity agreements, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), 229
- International Conference of Financing for Development (2002), 369–74
The Monterrey Consensus, 372–3
- International Conference on Human Rights (1968), 314

- International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) (1994), 321–7
Programme of Action, 322–4
 targets, 324–6
 ten years later, report on, 413–15
 UN Special Session (ICPD +5), 327
- International Conference on Water and the Environment (1992), 299–303
- international conferences (1990–2005), 274–8
- international conferences on population issues, 321
- International Convention to Combat Desertification* (1995), *see* climate change and global warming
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966), 314
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966), 314, 460
- International Development Association (IDA), *see* World Bank
- International Development Strategy for the 1990s, 271–3
- International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade (1980s), 299
- International Emergency Food Reserve (IEFR), *see* World Food Programme (WFP)
- International Finance Facility*, launched 2005, 377
- International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
 A 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture and the Environment, 334–9
 All Africa Conference on Food and Nutrition Security (2004), 406
 annual report 2003–4, 404–5
 IMPACT (IFPRI's research and global food model), 338
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 141, 142, 145, 202, 264–8
- International Institute for Environment and Development, 286, 471 n5
- International Labour Organization (ILO)
 intergovernmentally controlled commodity agreements, report on (1943), 6
 World Employment Conference (1976), 222–9; basic needs concept, 223; criticism of basic needs concept, 226–7; Declaration of Principles, 223; defence of basic needs concept, 228; Programme of Action, 223–4
 World Employment Programme, 222
- international migration and food security, concern about, 193
- International Monetary Conference, Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, USA (1944), 29
- International Monetary Fund (IMF), 11, 23, 29, 72, 194
- International Nutrition Conference (1992), *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Organization of Hunger* (P. Uvin, 1994), 386
- International Rice Commission, 30
- International Trade Organization (ITO), 23, 25, 29, 30
 Draft Havana Charter of ITO (1948), 30, 66–9, 69
- international trade, stability and agricultural adjustment, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture* (2002), *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Undertaking of World Food Security*, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Wheat Agreement, 73–5, 189
- International Wheat Council (later International Grains Council), 22, 29
- Japan, agricultural surpluses, 14
- Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development (2002), *see* United Nations (UN)
- Johnson, Lyndon B. (US President), 86
- Joint Organization for marketing wool surpluses (1946), 23
- Jolly, Richard (Director, Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, UK, Deputy Executive Director, UNICEF, Architect, UNDP *Human Development Report*, Chair, UN Standing Committee on Nutrition, Chair, Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, Co-Director, United Nations Intellectual History Project, Honorary Professorial Fellow, IDS), xv, 279

- Kalantari, Issa (Iranian Agricultural Minister, President, World Food Council), 215
- Kennedy, John F. (US President 1961–3)
address to UN General Assembly, 11 January 1962, 102
executive order on an expanded programme of food distribution to needy families in the United States (21 January 1966), 94
executive order on responsibilities of director, US Food for Peace Programme (22 January 1961), 94
inaugural address (20 January 1961), 94
last address to the UN General Assembly (20 September 1963), 103
presidential election campaign speeches, 88
proposal for an international conference to establish a world food agency, 88
proposal to establish an American Food for Peace Council (1960), 94
special message to Congress on agriculture (1961), 95
special message to Congress on foreign aid (1961), 95
State of the Union address, 11 January 1962, 94–5
UN decade for development (1960s) proposal, 71, 99
World Food Congress address (March 1963), 81
- Keynes, John Maynard (famous British economist, leader of the UK delegation to the Bretton Woods conference 1944, originator of the International Trade Organization proposal), 29
- Kissinger, Henry (US Secretary of States, Nixon and Ford Administrations), 121–2, 471 n2
Keynote address at 1974 World Food Conference, 131–2
national security study memorandum on food (1972), 131
proposal for a world food conference, 121–2, 130
statement to UN General Assembly (24 September 1973), 121
views on an international grains reserve system, 121–2, 130
- Koehler, Horst (Managing Director IMF), 371
- Kracht, Uwe (Senior Economist (1976–86) and Chief, Policy Development and Economic Analysis (1986–93), World Food Council secretariat, Coordinator, World Alliance for Nutrition and Human Rights), xvi, xvii, 469 n26, 473 n2
- Kruger, Anne (Chief Economist, World Bank, First Deputy Managing Director, IMF, Director, Centre for Research for Development and Policy, Stanford University, USA), 474 n10
- Kyoto Protocol* (1997), *see* climate change and global warming
- Lasso, Jose Ayala (first UN Commissioner for Human Rights), 472 n11
- Latimer, Hugh, 7
leadership, national and international, 456–7
- League of Nations
International Standards of Food Requirements (1937), 7
Nutrition and Public Health report (1935), 6
The Relation of Health to Agriculture and Economic Policy report (1937), 8
Study of the Problems of Raw Materials (1937), 6
- Lima Declaration and Plan of Action on Industrial Development and Cooperation (1975), 222
- locating food insecure people, 394
- Long, Carolyn (President, InterAction), 320
- ‘Make Poverty History’ speech of Nelson Mandela, London, 3 February 2005, 387
- Malthus, Thomas (author of population growth outstripping food production prediction), 115
- Mandela, Nelson (former South African President and Nobel Peace Prize 1993), 387
- Marei, Sayed Ahmed (Secretary-General, 1974 World Food Conference and first President, World Food Council), 123, 128, 130–1, 137, 138–9, 144, 169, 467 n4
- marriage of health and agriculture concept, 7
- Marshall, George C. (US Secretary of State, Truman Administration and originator of the Marshall Plan for European recovery after World War II), 13
- Marshall Plan (European Recovery Programme), *see* United States (US)

- Maxwell, Simon, (Director, Overseas Development Institute, London), xv
- Mbeki, Thabo (South African President, President, World Summit on Sustainable Development), 292–3
- McCarthy, Joseph (US senator leading the communist witch-hunt in the 1950s), 30
- McDougall, Frank (FAO founding father), 8
- McGovern, George S. (US Congressman and Senator, first Director of the US Food for Peace programme), xv, 95–6, 131, 465 n46, 466 n47
- Food for Peace programme achievements, 101
- initiative to establish a multilateral food aid programme, *see* World Food Programme (WFP)
- proposal at 1974 World Food Conference, 133, 135, 141
- proposal to end world hunger, 432–3
- US Senate Select Committee report on *Nutrition and Human Needs* (1974), 133
- McNamara, Robert (President, World Bank), 227
- Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), *see* United Nations (UN)
- Mkapa, Benjamin W. (Tanzanian President, Co-Chair, World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization), 474 n19
- Mongella, Gertrude (UN Assistant Secretary-General for the Advancement of Women, Secretary-General, Fourth UN Women's Conference, 1995), 342
- Monroe, Charles (President, International Federation of Agricultural Producers), 137
- Montreal Protocol [on climate change] (1987), *see* climate change and global warming
- Moore, Mike (WTO Director-General), 371–2
- Mubarak, Mohamed Hosni (Egyptian President, President, International Conference on Population and Development, 1993), 322
- Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative, 380
- Multilateral fund for implementing obligations under the Montreal Protocol (1991), *see* climate change and global warming
- Nakajima, Hiroshi (WHO Direct-General), 308–9
- national food reserves in developing countries, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- Nestle, Marion (author of *Food Politics*, Professor and Chair, Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health, New York University), 410
- New International Economic Order (UN General Assembly resolution 1974), 129
- New Partnership for Africa's Development, 360
- Nixon, Richard M. (US Vice President in the Eisenhower Administration, later US President), 88, 121
- proposal for a multilateral food aid facility, 88–9
- non-aligned countries (G77), 121, 138, 173, 469 n20
- obesity, 408–13
- contributing factors, 409–12
- definition, 473 n8
- WHO International Task Force on Obesity, 412
- OPEC (Oil Producing and Exporting Countries) and fund, 117, 176, 469 n20
- Orr, Sir (later Lord) John Boyd (first FAO Director-General, 1945–48)
- address at Hot Springs conference after election in 1945, 4–5
- autobiography *As I Recall* (1966), 16
- cable by Stanley Bruce from the League of Nations Assembly, 7
- FAO takeover of UNRRA responsibility, 11
- Food, Health and Income* report (1936), 16–17
- human nutrition work in Scotland, 16
- League of Nations committee on standard diet for health, 7
- Nobel Peace Prize, 1949, 31
- UK peerage, 31
- World Food Board proposal, 15–31
- Paarlberg, Don (US Food for Peace Coordinator), 87
- Panitchpakdi, Supachai (Director-General, World Trade Organization), 425
- Patton, James G. (President, US National Farmers Union), world food agency proposal, 88

- Pearson, Lester (Canadian Prime Minister), proposal to the UN General Assembly for a world food bank (1959), 100
- Pinstrup-Andersen, Per (IFPRI Director General), 334–6, 402
- Pisani, M. (French Minister of Agriculture), 86
- Plan of Implementation, World Summit for Sustainable Development, 2002*, see United Nations (UN)
- Pope John Paul II
address at 1996 World Food Summit, 350–1
inaugural address, 1992 International Nutrition Conference, 307
- Pope Paul VI, views at 1974 World Food Conference, 136–7
- Powell, Colin (US Secretary of State), 298
- Prebisch, Raul (Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Latin America, first Secretary-General, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development secretariat), 66, 68, 462 n1, 462 n3, 464 n3, 464 n20, 464 n30
- Preeg, Ernest (US trade negotiator), 474 n11
- Preston, Lewis T. (World Bank President), 318
- Principle of Surplus Disposal, see Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- Quesada, Vicente Fox (Mexican President), opening statement at International Conference on Financing of Development (2002), 370
- Rasmussen, Anders Fosh (Danish Prime Minister and EU President), 298
- Rasmussen, Poul Nyrup (Danish Prime Minister, President, Social Summit, 1995), 329
- Redistribution from/with growth concept, 471 n44
- right to food, US objections, 354–5, 358–9
- Roosevelt, Franklin D. (US President), 3, 8, 23, 25
four freedoms address, January 1941, 3, 355, 365
- Rosegrant, Mark (Director, IFPRI Environment and Production Technology Division), 374 n7
- Roslov, Aleksei (Soviet Union Deputy Secretary-General, 1974 World Food Conference), 123
- Runov, B. (Soviet Deputy Agriculture Minister), 136
- Sachs, Jeffrey (Director, Earth Institute, Columbia University, New York, Director, UN Millennium Project), 434–6, 474 n13
- Sadat, Anwar (Egyptian President), 123
- Sadik, Nafis (Executive Director, UNFPA, Secretary-General, International Conference on Population and Development, 1993), 322, 326–7
- Santayana, George (author of *The Phases of Human Progress*, 1905), 461
- Saouma, Eduardo (FAO Director-General 1976–84), 219–20, 235–7, 251, 255, 256–8, 307–8
- Schlosser, Eric (author of *Fat Food Nation*, 2002), 409
- Second World Food Congress (1970), 159
- Sen, Amartya (Nobel Prize for Economics, 1998), 230–4, 404, 450, 463 n13, 472 n12
- Sen, Binay Ranjan (FAO Director-General 1956–67), 77–80, 87, 93–4, 96–7, 304, 308
- Sen, S. R. (Indian Planning Commission), 103–4
- Serageldin, Ismail (Vice President, Environmentally Sustainable Development World Bank, Chair, World Conference on Overcoming Global Hunger, 1999), 320, 472 n12
- Singer, Hans (later Sir Hans), v, xv, 66, 68. 462 n1, 462 n3, 464 n20, 464 n30, 465 n38, 471 n24
- Snow, C. P. (British scientist and author) address at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, USA on 12 November 1968 on the threat of widespread famine, 163, 388
- Solow, Robert (Nobel Prize for Economics), 450
- Soviet Union record grain imports (1972–3), 116, 120
- Stern, Sir Nicholas (Chief Economist, World Bank, Head, UK Government Economic Service), author of *The Economics of Climate Change* (2006), 447–50
- Stevenson, Adlai (US Ambassador to the UN), 465 n39
- Stiglitz, Joseph (Chief Economist, World Bank, Nobel Prize for Economics), 399, 450

- Strachey, John (UK Minister of Food), 26
- Strong, Maurice (Secretary-General, Earth Summit 1992), 289–90
- Sub-Saharan Africa, improving the response to food insecurity, 392–3
- Sutherland, Peter (first WTO Director-General), 425
- Swaminathan, M. S. (Co-Coordinator, Millennium Project Task Force on Hunger), 473 n7
- Swift, Jonathan (British author of *Gulliver's Travels*), 1
- Tanco Jr., Arturo R. (Philippines Agricultural Minister, President, World Food Council), 211
- trade, importance of, 363
- transitory food insecurity, concept of, 40
- Trant, Gerald I. (Executive Director, World Food Council, 1986–92), 214, 221
- Truman, Harry S. (US President), 13
- UN bodies with interests in food and nutrition security, 207–8, 349
- UN Conference on Food and Agriculture, Hot Springs, Virginia, USA May/June 1943, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- UN Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, Sweden, 1972, 129, 286
- UN Conference on Trade and Employment, Havana, Cuba, 1948, 66–7
- UN Conference on Water, Mar del Plata, Argentina, 1977, 299
- UN Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 345
- UN Decade for Human Rights Education, 1995–2004, 316
- UN Decade for Women, 1976–85, 340
- UN Decade on the Eradication of Poverty (1997–2006), 331
- UN Declaration on Human Rights (1948), 314, 360
- UN Development Decades: first (1960s); second (1970s); third (1980s); fourth (1990s), 271, 341
- UN Development Fund for Women, 341
- UN Division for the Advancement of Women, 341, 342
- UN Emergency Operation, 1974, 130
- UN four world conferences on women, 340
- UN Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), 340–6; Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 342–3; Implement the Beijing Platform of Action (2002), 344–6; UN General Assembly resolution on Further Action and Initiatives to Implement the Beijing Platform for Action, 344; UN Special Session on progress in implementing the Beijing Declaration (2002), 343–4
- UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1994, *see* climate change and global warming
- UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNICEF lead agency), 419
- UN High-level Committee on Programmes, 298
- UN High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development (2005), 373
- UN High-level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (2005), 377
- UN High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2003), 375, 378
- UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Employment and Sustainable Livelihoods (chaired by ILO), 290
- UN International Resources and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, 341
- UN Millennium Declaration (2000), 365–6, 372
- UN Millennium Development Goals and Targets, 360, 366–7
- UN Millennium Project for Achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals, 360, 376, 433–4, 436; Task Force on Hunger report, 406–7
- UN Population Conference, Bucharest, Romania (1974), 129, 321
- UN Population Division, 322, 413
- UN Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development, 1986–90, 180
- UN Security Council, reform of, 364, 378
- UN Special Session on Children (2002), 282–5; A World Fit for Children, declaration and plan of action, 283–5
- UN Special Session on Population and Development, 1999

- UN Special Session on the Social Summit (2000), 332–3
- UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN), 208, 397
- UN Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO), 286
- UN System Chief Executive Board (CEB), 298
- UN World Food Conference (1974), 121–49; conference impact, 143–8; conference proceedings, 129–39; conference resolutions: on food production, 104–1; on food aid, 141; on food security, 141; on follow-up measures, 141–2; national and international action proposals, 125–7; NGO declaration, 142–3; preparations for, 123–5; Rome Forum, 128–9; Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition, 139–40; World Food Authority proposal, 137–8; World Food Security proposal, 146
- UN World Summit (2005), 375–80
- United Nations reform, 364, 458
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948
- Women, Peace and Security. UN Security Council resolution (2000), 346
- World Charter for Nature (1982), 286
- World Commission on Environment and Development (1983), 286–7
- World Conference on Human Rights (1993), 313–17; Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action on Human Rights (1993), 314–16
- World Summit for Social Development (Social Summit) (1995), 328–33; Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, 329–31
- World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), 291–8
- UN Economic and Social Security Council proposal, 221
- UN Economic Security Council proposal, 220
- United Nations (UN)
- Administrative Coordination Committee (ACC), 208
- Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ), 208
- Charter of the United Nations* (1945), 16, 313–14, 315, 372, 460
- Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 23, 30
- Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA), 10
- Special Fund (SF), 10
- Special United Nations Fund for Economic Development (SUNFED), 369, 462 n11
- UN Central Emergency Revolving Fund, 379
- UN Climate Change Conference, Nairobi, Kenya, November 2006, 450
- UN Commission for Human Rights (converted to UN Human Rights Council), 316–17, 379
- UN Commission for Social Development, 331
- UN Commission on Sustainable Development, 290
- UN Commission on the Status of Women, 341–2
- UN Committee on Programme and Coordination, 208
- UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 341
- UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) (1992), 286–91, 296–7, 321; Agenda, 21. Programme of Action for Sustained Development, 288–9; Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 288; Statement of Forest Principles, 289
- United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 206, 279, 398–403
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 194, 229, 427–8
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 10, 208, 229
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 23, 249
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 191, 290
- United Nations Joint Inspection Programme (JIU), 208, 210
- United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), 11, 26
- United Nations World Food Conference, 1974, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

- United States (US)
 Agricultural Adjustment Act, 1933, 13
 Agricultural Adjustment Act, 1935, 13
 Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act (PL 480), 1954, 49–51
 Agriculture Act, 1949, 34
 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 409
 Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), 13, 34
 European Recovery Programme (Marshall Plan), 1948–53, 13, 34
 Export-Import Bank, 1934, 34
 Federal Farm Board (established 1929), 12
 food aid programme, 86, 133
 Grain Stabilization Board, 1933, 13, 34
 International Food and Nutrition Act, 1965, 102
 International Grains Reserves System proposal, 1974, 155–8; House of Representatives resolution, 1974, 155
 Lend-Lease Act, 1941, 13, 34
 Mutual Security Act, 1951, 34, 49
 Overseas Development Council, 119
 Public Law (PL) 480 Food Aid (Food-for-Peace) Programme record cereals exports 1974, 116
 Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health, 1988, 411
 Surplus Act, 1944, 34
 US reservations concerning the right to food: at the 1996 World Food Summit, 354–5; at the 2002 World Food Summit +5, 358–9
 US views expressed at the 1974 World Food Conference, 133–5, 147
- Veil, Simone (Chair, International Nutrition Conference, 1992), 472 n7
- Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, 1985, *see* climate change and global warming
- Voluntary Guidelines to Achieve the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- von Braun, Joachim (IFPRI Director General), 402, 473 n6, 473 n7
- Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM), *see* World Food Programme (WFP)
- Waldheim, Kurt (UN Secretary General, 1972–81), 130
- Wallace, Henry (US Vice President in the Roosevelt Administration), 8
- Ward, Barbara (Lady Jackson), 128, 144, 147–8, 279, 286, 467 n7, 471 n5
- Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), 299, 302
- Whelan, Eugene (Canadian Agriculture Minister, President World Food Council), 211
- Williams, Maurice (Chairman, OECD Development Assistance Committee, second World Food Council Executive Director 1978–86), 182–3, 185, 198–9, 470 n39
- Wilson, Woodrow (US President and founder of the League of Nations), 460
- Wolfensohn, James D. (President, World Bank), 371
- Wolfowitz, Paul (President, World Bank), 450
- women in development concept, 341
- Women, Peace and Security, UN Security Council resolution 2000, *see* United Nations (UN)
- Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970), 341
- World Bank
 International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), 11, 23, 29
 International Development Association (IDA), 320, 462 n11
 perspective on hunger and malnutrition, 259–63
 World Conference on Overcoming Global Hunger (1993), 318–20
- World Campaign against Hunger, Disease and Ignorance proposal, 83–4
- World Charter for Nature, 1992, *see* United Nations (UN)
- World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization (established by ILO in 2001), 453–4
- World Conference on Overcoming Global Hunger (1993), *see* World Bank
- World Declaration and Plan of Action on Nutrition, 1992, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- World Economic Forum, 453

- World Food Board proposal, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- World Food Congress, June 1963, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- World Food Council (WFC)
- assessment of effectiveness, 210–21; advisory group report on, 212–13
 - coordination mechanism, 206–10
 - establishment, 146–7, 167
 - functions and responsibilities, 167–8, 170
 - major food and hunger issues, 174–7
 - membership, 167
 - modus operandi*, 168–74
 - presidents and executive directors, 167, 168, 221; World Food Conference resolutions, implementation of, 175–6; World food situation, 174–5
 - strategic perspectives on world hunger and poverty, 193–7
- WFC declarations: Beijing Declaration, 1987, 200–2; Beijing Proposal on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development, 1993, 205–6; Cairo Declaration, 1989, 188, 203–5; Cyprus Initiative, 1988, 188, 202–3; Manila Communiqué, 1977, 197–8; Mexico Declaration, 1978, 198–200
- WFC initiatives: Africa's food problems, 180–1; developing countries food security and changes in eastern Europe and the CIS, 192; developing country-owned reserves, 190–1; eradicating hunger and malnutrition, 184–9; food crisis contingency planning, 189–90; food priority countries, 177–9; food security and environmental management, 191–2; international food security system, 179–80; international hunger initiative, 187, 202; migration and food security, 193; national food strategies, 182–4
- World Food Conference 1974 resolution establishing WFC, 175–6
- world food crisis, 1972–4, 115–20
- World Food Programme (WFP)
- An Expanded Programme of Surplus Food Utilization proposal, 89–93
 - Food aid during the Second UN Development Decade report, 106–9
 - governing bodies, changing roles and responsibilities, 141–2
 - growth and status, 109
 - guidelines and criteria for food aid, 109–11
 - International Emergency Food Reserve (IEFR), 159–62, 194
 - McGovern initiative to establish a multilateral food aid programme, 97–9, 100–1
 - multilateral food aid study, 103–5
 - proposals to change WFP: Argentine proposal for a 'World Food Fund', 103; Israeli proposal for increased food production, 103; Lebanon proposal to establish a 'World Commodity Organization', 103; Netherlands proposal to create an 'Emergency Food Supply Scheme', 103; Uruguayan proposal for a 'World Food Bank', 103
 - UNCTAD recommendation for a future WFP, 103
 - Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAS), 394
- World Food Reserve study, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- world food security, alternative views, 407–8
- World Food Summit +5, 2002, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- World Food Summit 1996, *see* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- world food system, evolution of, 385–6
- World Health Organization (WHO), 23, 304, 308
- World Meteorological Organization (WMO), 164
- World Monetary and Economic Conference, London, 1932–3, 7
- world population growth, 413
- effects of HIV/AIDS, 413
- World Social Forum, 453
- World Summit for Social Development (Social Summit), 1995, *see* United Nations (UN)
- World Summit on Children, 1990, *see* United Nations (UN)
- World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* (1995), 343

- World Trade Organization (WTO), 208, 361, 423
 - criticism of, 424
 - proposals for reform, 425–7
 - WTO Working Group for Trade and Food Security, 354
- world water forums, 302
- World Water Week, Stockholm, Sweden, 2006, 302
- World Weather Watch System, 164
- Worldwatch Institute (founded 1974), 286
- Yugoslavia proposal for a world food report, League of Nations, 1933, 6