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## World Health Day 1957: Food and Health

It would be idle to deny that the *political* achievements of the United Nations have been few and small. The world institution has been impotent to prevent hundreds of millions of persons from falling prey to a new despotism. It has been ready to enforce the will of a majority against law-abiding nations but has not even attempted to discipline lawless offenders.

By contrast, the *technical* aspects of United Nations work have been conspicuously successful, whether the work has been concerned with the fight against the great epidemic diseases, with literacy, or with the spread of better agricultural methods. The theme of the ninth anniversary of the constitution of the World Health Organization, "Food and Health," a theme jointly sponsored by the Food and Agricultural Organization, illustrates the fact that greater knowledge not only makes us more effective when action has been decided upon, but also makes us more responsible when weighing the decision to act for the benefit of all.

Until 1914 we could describe human nutritional requirements only in the vaguest terms. As a result, measures in the field of nutrition were limited to desultory charities on the part of wealthy individuals or organizations toward the "poor" of their country or the starving abroad. The period between the two World Wars witnessed an explosive development of our knowledge of human requirements for calories, amino acids, vitamins, minerals, and other dietary essentials. The figures corresponding to these requirements were tabulated, first by a committee called by the Health Section of the League of Nations, and later by many other national and international bodies. As our understanding grew, so did the feeling that it was intolerable that the satisfaction of precisely known needs should be left to the vagaries of weather or markets and not insured by systematic planning. Thus, as soon as World War II ended, FAO and its International Emergency Food Committee were ready to allocate available food stocks on the basis of demonstrated needs and calculated requirements. The crisis over, FAO continued to help its member nations to plan their agricultural and food policy with sound nutrition as the essential guide. WHO kept checks on the nutritional status of the more vulnerable groups, trained specialists, and explored with FAO the possibility of introducing supplementary foods to combat nutritional diseases. Lately, these two organizations and the International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) have concentrated their efforts on the prevention of kwashiorkor, a deadly protein deficiency syndrome of infants weaned to a poor diet, which is widespread in Asia, Africa, and Central America.

In congratulating WHO and FAO on their achievements to date, we may take comfort in the thought that such results go even farther than the important fields of food and health. They provide a pattern of application of experimental knowledge to social phenomena which may someday help us to deal not only with the scourges of nature but also with the more perplexing problem of the inhumanity of man toward man.—JEAN MAYER, *Harvard School of Public Health*.