

Food Production—Shortage to Surplus?

THE Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has now published (HMSO, £2 8s) the most cheerful annual report in its brief history. For one thing, the report (which deals with 1968) says that food production is continuing to "keep slightly ahead of population growth". For another, there is the hope that "a growing number of developing countries can now increase their production a good deal faster than in the past". Indeed, in the foreword to the report, Mr A. H. Boerma, the Director-General of the FAO, is often as much concerned with the problems of glut as with those of threatened shortage. He argues that governments will have to be vigilant in the management of the stocks of foodstuffs which have been accumulating in some countries, and that alternatives will have to be found to the "costly policies" which have been developed for the management of food surpluses in the countries which have in the past been able to enjoy such luxuries.

For the world as a whole, food production increased by 3 per cent in 1968, and population increased by 2 per cent. The FAO's index of food production per head for the world as a whole has increased steadily from 101 in 1957 to an estimated 111 in 1968. Fish production has contributed remarkably to the growth of output, with an increase over the past decade of about a third in the production of food per head. The report quite properly says that food production in the developing countries is especially important, and preliminary estimates suggest that the increase of output of 5 per cent in 1967 was followed, in 1968, by the smaller increase of 2 per cent, but there is cheerful news from the Far East, where the 5 per cent increase was repeated in 1968, even though the weather was not "uniformly favourable". Food production in Africa (up 3 per cent) only matched the increase of population,

the Near East recorded a modest increase, and food production actually fell in Latin America, largely because of a bad harvest.

The pace of growth is being forced by cereal production. The production of wheat in the world as a whole increased by 14 per cent between 1967 and 1968, and by as much as 20 per cent in India, Pakistan and North Africa (where the poor harvest in 1967 makes the comparison a little better than it would otherwise have been). Meat production increased by 2 per cent in the world as a whole, less quickly than in the recent past, no doubt because of the way in which production has been deliberately restrained in the United States and elsewhere. The FAO estimates that the trends of the past few years will be revealed in the statistics finally gathered for 1969—as things are, there is some danger that the persistence into 1969 of drought in countries such as Argentina may have limited the recovery of food production in Latin America, but there is confidence in the continued growth of cereal production in India and hope for sustained expansion in rice production in the Far East.

The contribution of the new high yielding cereals to the good results in 1968 is one of the points dealt with but not finally disposed of in the report. The FAO says that there has been a great variation from one place to another in the ease with which the new strains have been adopted, with the Far East (Taiwan, Ceylon, India, Korean Republic, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines) well in the lead. By contrast, the organization says, only Kenya in Africa and Turkey and the United Arab Republic in the Near East have been as quick to exploit the high yielding varieties of rice, wheat and maize.

The rate of growth of fish production was 6.4 per cent compound in the decade ending in 1967, but many countries have improved substantially on this performance. The most striking achievements are those of South America, where the rate of increase has been 26 per cent per annum for the past decade, and where the total amount of fish production is now a quarter of that in the world as a whole. In Africa, production now amounts to £4 million a year of fish products, with an average rate of growth of 5.8 per cent a year. Among developed countries, those of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have made the most rapid strides in the growth of fish production, which now amounts to close on £7 million a year after growing at 8 per cent a year for the past decade.

Inequalities still persist in the amounts of food available in the countries in different parts of the world. In developed countries, the daily consumption of calories seems everywhere comparable with that typical in the United Kingdom (3,150 calories per day), while the total protein intake per head seems to be about or a little less than 90 grams. In a great many African countries, Nigeria and Ghana, for example, the average intake of food per day is only two thirds of this norm, while in the Far East, average food consumption is sometimes substantially more than in Africa (2,460 calories per day and 74.7 grams of protein a day in Japan) and sometimes substantially less (1,810 calories per day and 45.4 grams of protein per day in India).

