Legal? Decent? Honest?

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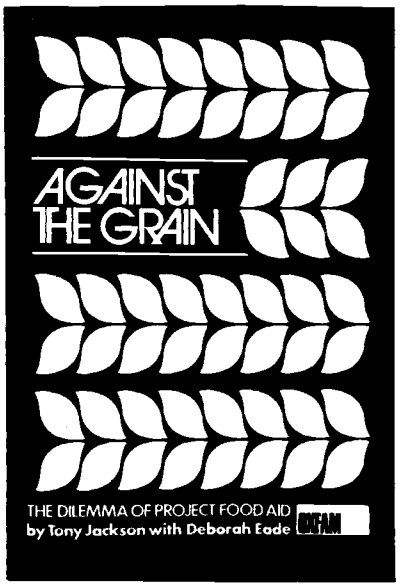
A review of *Against the Grain: the Dilemma of Project Food Aid* by Tony Jackson with Deborah Eade
Oxfam, Oxford 1982 pp 138 £4.50



Against the Grain is a self-confessed polemic which aims to show 'that large scale project food aid is an inherently inappropriate means of promoting development'. It fails in this endeavour, but succeeds very well in demonstrating that the main food aid donors are often guilty of gross breaches of the Trade Descriptions Act and, hence, have only themselves to blame when books such as this one achieve wide interest. Yet if it fails, it does not go down without a fight! In his writing as in life, Tony Jackson is nothing if not stimulating. He explodes systematically many of the myths fostered by the aid agencies to justify their empires, using a wealth of case studies drawn from his own experience, the writings of others and the reports of fieldworkers.

The book is a milestone in a single-minded campaign being waged by the author. In an interview quoted in Oxfam's press release for the book he explains that since his first confrontation with food aid after the 1976 Guatemala earthquake 'it has occupied just about all my working hours because I have become so concerned about it'. This campaign has two clear targets, only one of which is food aid itself. The other is the fraternity of food aid donors — or rather, the higher echelons of their bureaucracies which he accuses of ignoring the evidence of their own evaluations in order to build bigger empires for themselves. Tony Jackson is firing a shot on behalf of the front line fieldworker against the office wallahs at headquarters, although cynics may note that his field of fire has one blind spot: in both the book and the accompanying press release Oxfam is held up as one agency that has 'got it right'. His aim to provide a platform for fieldworkers influences the kind of evidence that he brings forward to support his case. Particular emphasis is given to eye-witness accounts by aid officials, especially those close to the front line: 'as one experienced fieldworker has reported', 'a former FAO adviser shows', and 'an Oxfam official reported' are typical introductions to evidence of food aid's shortcomings.

Herein lies the book's main attraction, but also the weakness that prevents it being anything other than a polemic. Its attraction is that it comes straight from the mouths of at least some horses. It weakness is that it generalises from individual experiences not just without introducing necessary intermediate steps in the argument, but often without appearing to recognise that any such intermediate steps are necessary.

Viewed purely as a hatchet job on the failings of some food aid projects, the book is good. It goes through the main uses of project food aid case by case: disaster relief and refugees, food for work, mother and child health, school and institutional feeding. It then considers the costs and management problems of project food aid, in the light of its achievements and failures, and concludes with a brief consideration of competition between project food aid and local food production. Its conclusions on the main uses of food aid are severe: 'truly successful FFW [food for work] schemes . . . are the exception rather than the rule'; 'by trying to feed the millions [mother and child health]

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programmes fail to reach many severely malnourished children'; school feeding 'tends to be biased against the poor'. In the light of these findings, project food aid is judged to be cost-ineffective.

The problems arise when the author tries to argue from the particular to the general. The flavour of Jackson's methodology is provided by Oxfam's supporting press release which claims that the book 'shows that food aid fosters dependency, competes with local crops for customers and handling and storage facilities, is expensive to administer, often does not reach those in need *and actually does more harm than good*'. All well and good as far as the emphasis (which I have added). Jackson does demonstrate that these failings occur at least some of the time. But he does not show that food aid 'actually does more harm than good' because he does not provide either the evidence or the arguments needed to justify this contention.

To begin with, Jackson exacerbates the problem of justifying the conclusions he wants to draw by limiting his enquiry to project food aid. He excludes bulk deliveries of food aid for open market sales, which account for some 70 per cent of total food aid flows, and which have attracted the most scrutiny from academics and policy makers in the past. Tony Jackson's sole concern is with the work of the World Food Programme, Catholic Relief Services, CARE and a number of other donors that channel food aid directly to particular projects. Evaluating project food aid is a methodological quagmire because the answers to most of the important questions are to be found far outside the confines of the projects receiving the food. The result is an ungainly display of intellectual acrobatics as the seeker after truth leaps from one level of analysis to another. To Tony Jackson, such acrobatics are not merely ungainly, but downright deceptive: a cunning legerdemain designed to show at all costs that food aid is worthwhile. For him, if project food aid does not achieve what the donors set out to achieve (or rather, what they say they set out to achieve), it is a failure. This is too superficial: an attempt must be made to discover what impact food aid is having, and only then can it be judged good or bad (see Maxwell's article in this *Bulletin*).

A second, self-imposed constraint is that when judging success and failure, Tony Jackson uses as a yardstick a highly personalised definition of 'development'. Indeed, it is not always clear what he does mean by 'development', but there seems to be a requirement of a tangible, permanent and directly related output. Thus, employment by itself is not development, nor is education. 'Most of the programmes', writes Jackson, 'provide a welfare service at best while the long-term development benefits have been slight'. By discounting the value of welfare transfers, the author overlooks what is the true justification of much project food aid.

Project food aid grew up because bulk food aid donors were faced with a dilemma: their shipments were not supposed to displace commercial trade (although, in the short term at least, they clearly often do), but if they increased the supply of food in the recipient country they might lower market prices and discourage domestic food production. Project food aid seemed to provide a convenient solution: supply does indeed increase (hence there is no disruption of commercial trade) but so does effective demand because the project participants consume the food aid in addition to their normal intake (hence, there is no disincentive to local agriculture). Given this underlying rationale, it is not surprising that food has been concentrated on projects that purport to have a nutritional component: almost by definition, it is argued, if the project participants experience a nutritional improvement, their effective demand for food will have increased, thus avoiding the twin pitfalls of international market disruption and local agricultural disincentives. The link between food aid and nutrition has been embroidered further by the donors to take advantage of the naive but popular notion that the best way to relieve hunger is to send food half way around the globe.

But it is a myth. Moreover, the donors know that it is a myth. The evidence that project food aid is a potent tool with which to combat malnutrition is weak. So is the justification for believing project food aid to be less risky than bulk food aid. If project food aid is not matched by an equivalent increase in effective demand, it is prone to precisely the same dangers as bulk food aid. But with a difference: it is harder to check on the actual impact of project food aid because it is usually spread thinly over the receiving country. Tony Jackson cites an evaluation of food aid projects in the Caribbean basin:

> the food aid goes out and doubtless the majority of it is consumed. But the overall impression . . . is that the whole thing is such a gigantic operation that no-one can really know what is happening at the end of the line.

Against the Grain has raised hackles in the donor camp, and its author has been accused of biased reporting. There is no doubt that Tony Jackson has gone out of his way to find failures, and has not written a 'balanced' account. But neither do the donors provide a balanced view. Instead of repelling Jackson's assaults, they should reassess their own rationale for project food aid. If the claims they advance for their projects were changed to bear a closer resemblance to reality, critics like Tony Jackson would have greater difficulty in shooting them down in flames.