

# The Lure of Alien Bread

Many developing economies are caught in vicious spirals which drag their economies into abject poverty and degradation. **M Iqbal Asaria** reviews a book which shows how one such spiral developed in the case of wheat consumption in Nigeria.

"Many countries in the Third World have become heavily dependent on staple food which they import and for which conditions for local production are poor or non-existent. Once established, such a dependent consumption pattern is self-reinforcing. Alternative sources of domestic supplies are obstructed by taste preferences and rigidities in the linking of domestic producers and markets. Attempts at import substitution on the basis of existing products lead to misallocation of resources at the expense of commodities more natural to the domestic environment. Restrictions on imports, on the other hand, are resisted by those sections of the population who have incorporated this food into their daily diet. Resistance also comes from the importers, traders and administrators as well as those domestic processing industries who have built their existence around the continued flow of imports".

The authors set out to examine these general parameters of food dependency in the context of Nigeria and its soaring wheat consumption. Until recently (the late 1960s) Nigeria was basically self-sufficient in food in market terms. She was a major exporter of agricultural commodities, including items which are also major domestic staples such as groundnuts and palm produce. The consumption of wheat bread had been introduced on a modest scale in the colonial period. It grew with the growth of towns, factory work and salaried people. It began as a luxury but has been transformed into a staple as pressures on urban food supplies have risen. The big leap followed the oil boom of the early seventies. Throughout the 1970s wheat imports grew at an average rate close to 20% per annum. By the early 1980s, imports had reached the level of one and a half million tonnes per annum, making Nigeria a major buyer in the world market.

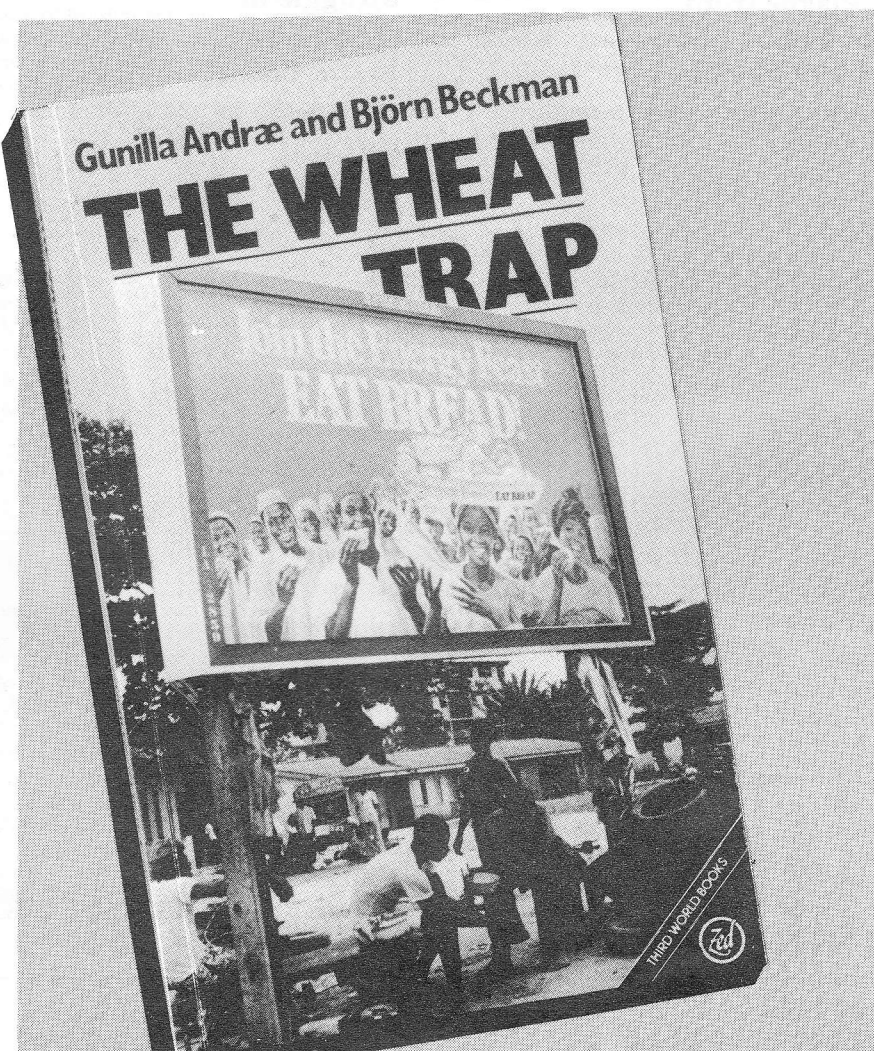
The growth in bread consumption is

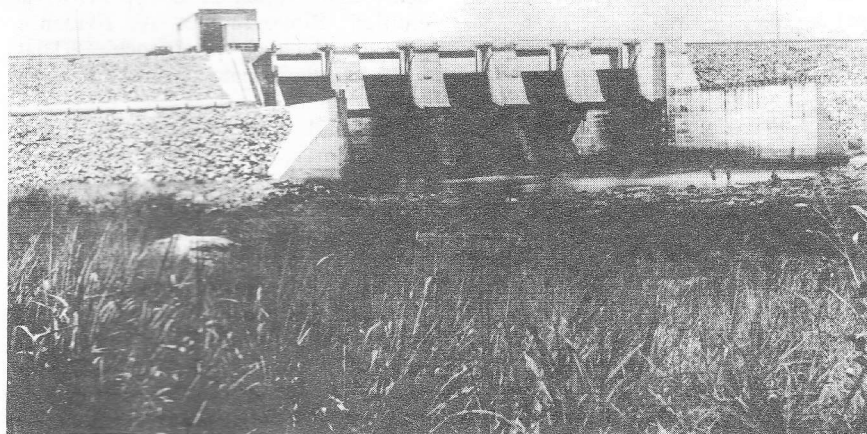
**The Wheat Trap – Bread and Underdevelopment in Nigeria**, Gunilla Andrae and Bjorn Beckman, Zed Books, London, in association with the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1985, 180pp, £6.95.

closely related to the expansion in general of the demand for processed food. This expansion resulted from the rapid urbanisation of Nigeria with the onset of the oil boom. In such a situation, where wheat in one form or another had formed a part of the staple diet, it was only a matter of time before, a convenience food like bread would find its way. In tropical

and sub-tropical climates bread offers the unique advantages of long shelf-life, ideal packaging, ease of mass preparation, ease of handling and shortening of the time required for meals. Like urban proletariats elsewhere, the Nigerian populace took to bread in a big way.

Once the conditions existed for expansion of a convenience food like





bread, then various forces came into play which led to the eventual entrenchment of wheat imports into Nigeria. The large surpluses of wheat on the world market controlled by a few giant exporting firms, coincided with the massive over-valuation of the Naira as a petro-dollar currency. The scene was thus set for import penetration and wheat into Nigeria.

The authors then attempt a detailed examination of why this opportunity was filled by the USA. The dominance of the US is such that by the end of the seventies over 90% of Nigerian wheat imports came from there. Unlike many other third world countries, where US wheat imports have been initiated by cultivating a taste for bread by giving free wheat under the PL 480 programme, Nigeria has not been a regular or particularly large recipient of such aid. It has only benefitted from the normal support measures of cheap credit for grain imports, and in this the US is not alone.

The key to US penetration in the Nigerian market has been its owner interests in the milling industry. In contrast to other countries like Egypt, where over 30% of wheat is imported as flour, Nigerian wheat imports have since the early '60s consistently exceeded 90% raw wheat in content and frequently up to 95%. US control of milling is thus a highly powerful means by which wheat penetration occurs. This was initiated "through the early victory over French interests in the establishment of the first flour mill in Lagos in 1962-63, 'The Flour Mills of Nigeria'. Originally Greek-owned, later Americanised, this mill was built to receive the hard American grain. Its continued dominance in the Nigerian market has safeguarded the continued orientation to this type of wheat rather than to the softer European kind".

From milling, these corporate interests have moved into baking and compounded and entrenched the dependence at the milling level. With capital and technology both geared to milling and baking hard American-type wheats, the astronomic level of wheat imports is almost a foregone conclusion. Also with a large proportion of the country's working population now dependent on this 'cheap' bread the issue of wheat imports has assumed a central role in the country's politics and is increasingly intertwined with other policy matters like the long standing IMF demand for a large devaluation of the Naira. Apart from other consideration, it is clear that a devaluation would threaten the interests of the large number of importers, millers and bakers which have flourished on the back of massive wheat imports. The lobby is so strong that despite a series of austerity budgets - from President Shagari, to General Buhari to Major General Babangida - and despite the precipitate fall in oil incomes, wheat imports have continued at their peak levels.

This is not the end of the sordid tale. Under an entirely understandable objective of attaining self-sufficiency in food production, the Nigerian government has embarked on gigantic schemes to produce hard American-type winter wheat in sub-tropical climates. "It is only in the far north that the dry harmattan winds from late October to February bring sufficiently low temperatures for wheat to survive. At that time there are no rains so the crop depends entirely on irrigation. The question of large-scale domestic wheat production is therefore tied to the question of revolutionising agricultural technology by introducing large-scale irrigation. The modern history of wheat production in Nigeria is (thus) linked to that of irrigation".

But irrigation schemes preceded the wheat growing projects. The idea of irrigation was to better exploit under-utilised water resources in an environment where range of crops, levels of productivity, and crop security are all severely constrained by the shortness of the rainy season and the unreliability of rains. The question of how to irrigate and what to grow have become secondary. Wheat growing has then been increasingly used to justify this massive investment in irrigation schemes. As the authors point out, "It is here that the special requirements of wheat in tropical context becomes so strategic in providing legitimacy for large-scale, dry season irrigation. It is the only crop of major significance in the Nigerian food economy which cannot be grown in the rainy season!"

The authors go on to examine the studies, feasibility and otherwise, done by USAID, FAO and the Commonwealth Development Corporation amongst others. All are found to be wanting and surprisingly lacking in realism. The wheat projects born of such studies and advice have obviously flawed economics and crippling costs. Thus neither are the targets of wheat production being achieved nor are the costs economic by any stretch of imagination. Worse still, even the mundane objective of import substitution and consequent foreign exchange saving on the wheat actually produced is absent! The authors show how the foreign currency content of the irrigation schemes, fertiliser inputs and technical personnel is higher than the savings from import substitution of the wheat produced. Thus, the authors conclude, "Nigeria is trapped between the growing dependence on North American wheat on the one hand, and the illusory policy of import substitution on the other". This they term the *Nigerian Wheat Trap*.

Once entrenched, disengagement is difficult. In the Nigerian case it is compounded by the close alliance of the military and import lobbies, and their allegiance to the US corporate interests. Only a genuine representative polity can bring sufficient moral weight behind the implementation of a realistic policy of self-reliance. The scene will then be set for the development of techniques and technology, mostly indigenous, which will enable the processing of bread substitutes from grains more suited to flourish profitably in the tropical environs of Nigeria. It is not without reason that multinational corporate interests thrive globally under unrepresentative regimes. ■