



Source: Boerma, The Hague, 17 June 1970,
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BOERMA, Addeke Hendrik

Dutch agronomist and first Executive Director of the
World Food Programme (WFP) 1962-1967 and fifth
Director-General of the Food and Agriculture
Organization of the United Nations (FAO) 1968-1975

By **Bob Reinalda** · Version 10 December 2020

Was born 3 April 1912 in Anlo, The Netherlands and passed away 8 May 1992 in Vienna, Austria. He was the son of Harm Boerma, farmer, and Janke Wilkens. On 1 August 1935 he married Maretta Gerardina Hendrica Postuma, correspondent, with whom he had three daughters. After their divorce on 10 January 1953 he married Dinah Johnston, FAO employee, on 13 April 1953.

Biography

Boerma grew up on a medium-sized farm in the north-eastern part of The Netherlands. Both his grandfather and father were elected to the Provincial Parliament of Drenthe, where they promoted farm cooperatives and social welfare measures. In 1929 Boerma entered Wageningen Agricultural University to study horticulture and agricultural economics, where he graduated as an agricultural engineer in 1934, having written two theses, one on soft fruit and the other on intensification and rationalization in Dutch fruit growing. He ranked in the top-five of a class of 105. For his military service, partly fulfilled during his studies, he was trained as an officer. By the end of 1934 he became secretary of a provincial farmers organization led by Stefan Louwes, who the government had also made responsible for implementing an agricultural crisis law. Boerma travelled across the province of Overijssel to advise farmers about agriculture in times of crisis and setting up farm cooperatives, agricultural schools and insurance services. He coedited the organization's weekly newspaper and participated in negotiations with the government about the prices of farm products. In 1938 Louwes, who had become Government Commissioner for Arable and Livestock Farming, made Boerma the head of a taskforce at the Ministry of Agriculture charged with the management and distribution of food supplies in case of war. Boerma became responsible for animal feed distribution and the provincial food commissioners. As an official at the ministry's food supply office starting in 1940, Boerma fulfilled a variety of functions regarding food supply and the purchase of arable products

during the occupation of The Netherlands by National-Socialist Germany (May 1940-May 1945). During that period Louwes and his senior staff at the ministry worked to keep Dutch agricultural produce within the country. Louwes and Boerma had regular contacts with underground circles, such as with flour manufacturer Hans de Koster, who was able to forward their intelligence about the country's food situation to the Dutch government-in-exile in London. When the Allied armies reached the southern provinces of The Netherlands in 1944, the Dutch government in London wanted Boerma as its Commissioner for Food in the liberated zone. British secret agents smuggled him out of the still-occupied zone of the country and flew him to London. In October he moved to the liberated south of The Netherlands, where he directed food distribution and prepared for relief supply shipments to the north, where, with liberation delayed until early May, people were hungry and starving during the cold winter of 1944-1945.

After the country's liberation Boerma continued his work as Deputy Director-General at the ministry. On 1 January 1946 he was made Government Commissioner for Foreign Agricultural Relations, which meant that he participated in trade delegations and represented The Netherlands at international conferences. This made him part of the emerging United Nations (UN) System and the incipient European economic cooperation under the Marshall Plan. Boerma attended the fourth Council meeting of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which convened in the United States (US) in Atlantic City in March 1946 to solve the threatening food famine, the second Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Copenhagen, Denmark in September 1946 as well as meetings of the Benelux customs union (Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg). He furthermore chaired the European Seed Conference in Copenhagen and, in 1947, became a member of the Preparatory Committee for the proposed International Trade Organization. Boerma also served as rapporteur of the European group of states which prepared the European Recovery Plan, initiated by US Secretary of State George Marshall in 1947, in Paris, France and was a member of the Dutch delegation to the sessions in Washington DC. His assessment of the Marshall Plan's agricultural aspects was realistic, as he mentioned not only the favourable effects for Europe but also the rise of American costs of living as a result of the food exports.

From 1946 onward Boerma was involved in the FAO, which was formally created in October 1945 after an interim structure put into place in mid-1943. The organization's precise functions remained vague as the result of disagreement about the scope of its activities. Following the 1946 conference in Copenhagen, Boerma participated in the commission that prepared the first session of the FAO Council in Washington DC in November 1947, where the Council replaced the original Executive Committee. The Council also created a World Food Board, though not in the robust form that Director-General John Boyd Orr had in mind. Orr, who sought to work on behalf of the world's hungry, proposed a body with its own financial resources and powers to set a general policy incumbent on the member states. The Board that was created allowed the states to retain their freedom of action. While Orr originally had the support of the US Department of Agriculture, the Department of State opposed extensive involvement of the FAO in the international commodity markets and used the Preparatory Commission to weaken Orr's proposal. Boerma represented his country in this commission. Dutch Minister of Agriculture Sicco Mansholt instructed him to favour commodity agreements in several fields, but Boerma wondered whether the commodity agreements Orr had in mind were compatible with the US Proposals for Expansion of World Trade and Employment which the Department of State had prepared in late 1945. His negative conclusion supported the US and British positions to recommend some intergovernmental commodity agreements but to deny the FAO a policy-making function. Boerma represented The Netherlands in the FAO Council until July 1948, when he joined the organization's staff. Louwes, who had become Special Adviser to Orr in late 1945, was the first Director of the FAO's European Bureau in Rome, Italy which was created in April 1947. When Louwes resigned for health reasons in June 1948, Boerma succeeded him in that position in July. Becoming the FAO Regional Representative for Europe meant that he had to visit the European member states to discuss their needs and their contributions to the organization. Boerma also negotiated with the

Italian government to move FAO headquarters from Washington DC to Rome. When the transfer to Rome began in early 1951, most staff members in the US were fired, while 170 persons and their families sailed in various vessels from New York to Rome. Because only slightly more than a quarter of the Washington staff was transferred, the organization in Rome had to rebuild its secretariat. Another problem was that only one of the foreseen buildings was ready for occupancy by the organization.

In 1948 US national Norris Dodd succeeded Orr as Director-General. He came from the Department of Agriculture, which had supported Orr, but recognized that the major powers were not willing to support a large FAO budget nor a global regulation of agricultural commodities. Dodd therefore shifted the FAO focus to the Global South, which 'increasingly demanded technical assistance rather than concessionary food' (Staples 2006: 96). Given the budgetary restraints, this meant small projects as practical steps toward increased agricultural production. Boerma, who became Director of the Economics Division in April 1951, agreed that 'international cooperation should be geared to the future of the developing countries' and shifted the priorities of his division accordingly (Moritz 1974: 40). In this post he toured Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South and Central America in order to establish relations, gather data and explore project possibilities. The underfunded FAO and its policy of technical assistance profited from the UN's Extended Program of Technical Assistance (EPTA), which commenced its operations in the early 1950s. The FAO received the lion's share of EPTA proceeds, but the organization's goal of global freedom from hunger remained distant, with rapid population growth posing a great challenge. Reliance on EPTA made the FAO even more dependent on the US, the primary contributor to EPTA. In order to keep room of manoeuvre the FAO staff and leadership stressed the apolitical nature of their organization. In 1954 Dutch Minister Mansholt proposed that the FAO establish a system to deal with agricultural surpluses in favour of countries that needed them, but the US, which had such surpluses, opposed this. US national Philip Cardon, FAO Director-General between 1954 and 1956, could not improve the FAO position and left due to health reasons. The 1956 election in the Council did not result in another US Director-General, as the US candidate (John Davis) withdrew and Binay Ranjan Sen from India received 42 votes over 29 for Mansholt.

Sen, the first Southerner to head a UN specialized agency and much aware of the ongoing problem with widespread hunger and undernourishment, redefined the FAO's international role, with direct implications for Boerma's work. Sen hoped to raise awareness of the continued widespread existence of hunger through a Freedom from Hunger Campaign, based on information and education activities. He motivated his staff by offering a theme that encompassed the myriad FAO activities. In 1958 Sen promoted the FAO Campaign through the UN Economic and Social Council, engaged non-governmental organizations and approached US President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The Campaign, approved by the 1959 FAO Conference, 'increased FAO's visibility and established its moral leadership' (Jachertz 2014: 86). Boerma became the Head of the FAO Programme and Budget Service in 1958, although he had to operate with only a meagre budget for the Campaign, and participated in the diplomatic developments between the FAO and the US government. Eisenhower did not support Sen's Campaign, as the US struggled with huge agricultural surpluses and therefore resisted international activities to boost agricultural production. The US established its own surplus programme, named Food for Peace, which provided for the sale of surpluses to needy countries at concessional prices. Sen was aware that this US foreign policy instrument obstructed FAO policies, but decided to embrace it as complementary to the FAO Campaign. The entry of independent African states into the UN and the goodwill towards the 'underdeveloped' world shown by the new John F. Kennedy administration resulted in a situation in which the FAO and the UN Secretariat recognized the window of opportunity to create a new multilateral institution. The US government proposed in the 1960 UN General Assembly that the FAO consider methods for moving surplus food. Sen, who had anticipated this move, created an expert group that devised a programme for surplus agricultural utilization in line with his Campaign. In reaction, Food for Peace Director George McGovern

suggested a three-year experiment, predominantly sponsored by US agricultural commodities and dollars.

Parallel developments in the UN and the FAO during 1961 resulted in the creation of the World Food Programme (WFP), under the joint auspices of the two organizations, for a period of three years, starting in 1963. Sen made Boerma, who was promoted to Assistant Director-General in 1960, available for the joint UN-FAO Administrative Unit. Boerma began as WFP Executive Director on 1 June 1962. WFP offices were at FAO headquarters, with most staff members transferred from the FAO. As there were still few projects, there was plenty of time for debate over what the projects should look like. The first staff members enjoyed 'a kind of continuing policy debate – self-searching and critical in an informal, non-hierarchical style', with Boerma creating a strong and friendly team of directors (Schulthes 2006: 29). The support of seventy states resulted in some 200 projects. Most of them were not paid for with money but with surplus food, while the WFP staff sustained agricultural and rural development opportunities and to a lesser extent human resources development. Approval of the projects was provided by the WFP's twenty-member governing board, the Inter-Governmental Committee, which was made up of an equal number of donor and recipient states. This composition tempered US influence, even though the US contributed most of the resources. Delivery and management of the aid fell solely on the recipient states, which enhanced their responsibility. Boerma now travelled the world to persuade states to support the WFP's international efforts to address hunger. The WFP was the only UN agency given a mandate to use food as a development tool and its development-oriented food aid made it a leading force. After a while the organization also took over the children's nutrition responsibilities of the UN Children's Fund. In 1964 the UN Conference on Trade and Development supported its continuation after the experimental period and in 1965 parallel resolutions of the FAO Conference and the UN General Assembly made the WFP a joint organization for as long as multilateral food aid was feasible and desirable. Boerma continued as Executive Director. Given its experimental character, WFP relations with other international organizations developed smoothly. In 1962 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development published its study on food aid and its role in economic development and soon became instrumental in obtaining its members' financial commitments to the WFP. In 1967 the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) created the first Food Aid Convention as a result of the GATT Kennedy Round, involving a pledge to provide annual food aid to developing states. Boerma also discussed surplus dairy projects with the European Economic Community.

The WFP's success in attracting new resources and Southern support was paralleled by the FAO, which saw its annual budget increase from 7 million dollars in 1958 to 83 million in 1966, while staff tripled to 5,600 in that period. Northern states criticized the organization for its size, bureaucratic attitude and its autocratic leadership. The Dutch Ministry of Agriculture made Boerma a candidate for FAO Director-General in early 1967. Initially Boerma did not have wide support but during the year the Dutch spearheaded an intensive goodwill campaign, with Boerma also profiting from his worldwide WFP activities. The complex election process had four candidates, including Sen. It turned out that he could not be re-elected due to some constitutional arguments, although Northern dissatisfaction with him better explains the pressure to ensure a change of director. The two other candidates were from Chile and Senegal. In the first round of voting on 18 November Boerma received 52 votes over 33 for Hernán Santa Cruz, until then FAO Assistant Director-General for Latin America, and 30 for Gabriel d'Arboussier, Executive Director of the UN Institute for Training and Research. The second ballot showed, respectively, 56, 35 and 24 votes, while the majority required for election was 58. The third ballot was postponed (an unprecedented move) until Monday 20 November, when it was announced that d'Arboussier, originally presented by the African heads of state, withdrew and that the African bloc of states would vote for Santa Cruz. That one African state did not support this move contrasted 'with UN bloc discipline', related to 'the gap between political bodies and agricultural authorities' (Weitz 1997: 24). Boerma won with 60 votes over 55 for Santa Cruz and started his four-year term as

FAO Director-General on 1 January 1968. At the WFP Sushil Dey from India became acting Executive Director until 1 August, when Francisco Aquino Herrera from El Salvador took over.

In 1968 Boerma carried out an internal reorganization of the FAO. In order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization's operations the field projects were regrouped in line with national needs, in combination with a process of decentralization from headquarters and a stronger focus of technical staff on technical work, while at headquarters structural changes followed an in-depth management survey. Since the Freedom from Hunger Campaign was progressing in a piecemeal manner, with the world population still increasing, Boerma's overall strategy moved from hunger toward poverty, focused on the promotion of an increase in agricultural production in developing countries. Private actors, such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, were advancing a green agricultural revolution and both the introduction of improved seed and other techniques through FAO projects and the successful Asian grain harvests of 1966 and 1967 seemed to support his views. His 1969 Indicative World Plan for Agricultural Development presented a 15-year perspective for bridging the gap between food and population, expecting that the world would need 2.5 times as much food in 1985. In order to further develop the Indicative World Plan he called a two-week World Food Congress in The Hague, The Netherlands in June 1970. 1,500 delegates organized into eight commissions discussed the relationship between agricultural and industrial production and the social consequences of agricultural modernization such as alienation from traditional life and unemployment in expanding urban areas. Trade restrictions for industrially produced agricultural products proved another problem for developing countries. The congress organization had invited large groups of young people in order to engage them. Staying in their New Earth Village, they organized a hunger strike and published a newspaper. During Congress debates they opposed the political neutrality that the FAO cherished and favoured a revision of international trade structures in order to provide greater access to the markets of the developed world. The Hague Congress confirmed Boerma's new policy but also revealed obstacles, including the difficulty of changing agricultural power relations between the North and the Global South. At the FAO's 25th anniversary later that year Boerma (1970) worried about the sense of indifference and, at times, cynicism about international organizations among governmental authorities and sectors of public opinion: 'It comes both from highly conservative elements, which are mistrustful of our aims and believe that we cost more than we are worth, and from radical youth, which believes we are not doing enough and have lost touch with the world's real needs'. He therefore reinforced that the FAO and other UN specialized agencies were much more than technical organizations, as they were set up to meet the needs of people and thereby help to preserve the peace among them. In late 1971 he was unanimously reappointed for another four-year term. After a debate about amending the constitution to provide for a single six-year term of office, rather than the existing 4+2+2 formula (hence, eight years total), it was agreed that the amendment would not apply to Boerma, who announced that he did not intend to serve longer than four additional years. As a result, there was no election in 1971.

A major world food crisis emerged in the early 1970s, resulting from bad weather conditions and a decline in food production in 1972. Existing surpluses disappeared and prices rose, with the Global South most affected. Building on Orr's original strategy, Boerma proposed the idea of a baseline for world food security with the FAO coordinating an international system of national reserve stocks (unlike Orr, who wanted reserves to be held internationally). However, Boerma was not given the opportunity to take his project forward. The crisis worsened in 1973 due to rising oil prices and inflation. The US developed its own oil policies and, in September 1973, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger proposed that the UN General Assembly should organize a World Food Conference under UN auspices to maintain adequate food supplies. In this way the US Department of State was involved, rather than the Department of Agriculture, and the UN would also engage the Soviet Union and other Communist states, which were not FAO members. China had ended its membership in 1952 but, against the background of friendlier relations with the US, the People's Republic of China was admitted into the UN in late 1971. Boerma insisted on a renewed FAO membership (effective in 1973). He visited China in early 1973 and noticed that agricultural productivity had increased

enormously. At the World Food Conference in Rome in November 1973 Kissinger announced that within ten years no child would go to bed hungry, which Boerma later deemed unrealistic. The conference recommended the creation of a World Food Council as a UN organ. The US agreed but noted that it would have 'no authority beyond moral suasion to force action on the part of governments or UN bodies' (Shaw 2009: 206). Its headquarters was located at the FAO, with a small secretariat and budget. The sidelined FAO set up a Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture to improve policy on food aid and formulated multilateral food-aid and production plans to strengthen food security with the World Bank and the UN Development Programme.

After a long FAO career Boerma retired and was succeeded by Edouard Saouma from Lebanon on 1 January 1976. While the Northern states praised Boerma for having turned the FAO into an efficient organization, the staff and his successor, who was a Director of the FAO Agriculture Department, were more critical of the condition of the organization and his close relationship with US foreign policy. Like The Netherlands, Lebanon had invested in a thorough and well-funded campaign for a Director-General from the South, with Saouma arguing that 'industrialised countries were "stonewalling"', refusing to address the goals of the New International Economic Order worldview of the South (Weitz 1997: 28). After leaving office, Boerma continued to live in his villa outside Rome, where he enjoyed gardening. He occasionally advised the Dutch Foreign Ministry. The Carnegie Foundation awarded him the Wateler Peace Prize in 1974 and since 1979 the FAO has presented the A.H. Boerma Award to journalists who have brought food security and rural matters in developing countries to the attention of civil society. Boerma later moved to Vienna, where he died from a heart attack at the age of 80.

Archives

Archives A.H. Boerma in Nationaal Archief in The Hague, The Netherlands (Collection 575), see <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.21.281.21>

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