

D John Shaw (1934–2015)

“WFP’s Licensed Intellectual”

John Shaw, the economist and author, who died in August at the age of 81, was a member of the Editorial Board of the journal *Food Policy* for over 30 years. *Food Policy* was launched in the wake of a global crisis and following the World Food Conference of 1974.

John’s career was largely within the UN and included a late post-retirement flowering, which resulted in a series of authoritative books on international development and the history of the United Nations. For thirty years before that, he was at the heart of global policy-making in successive roles at the UN World Food Programme (WFP), latterly as Head of Policy Affairs.

John Shaw joined the fledgling WFP in 1963. WFP’s remit was to pioneer uses of food aid through the UN system, complementing programmes by other donors, especially the USA. In an era of global food surpluses, WFP was to receive donations of food and use them for school feeding or food for work projects. The multilateral dimension was important. US food aid had rightly been criticized for being used as a political tool, favoring friends and punishing enemies. The WFP, jointly managed by the UN in New York and the FAO in Rome, but overseen by UN Member States, was to be more neutral, transparent and accountable.

A living embodiment of the WFP’s institutional memory

Working in evaluation, then in policy, from early on as WFP’s licensed intellectual, and eventually as a living embodiment of the institutional memory, John Shaw supported successive Executive Directors, and helped steer WFP through momentous changes.

As the use of food aid changed, it was also important for WFP to become more professional and better governed. The case had to be made repeatedly – and John Shaw made it. His policy papers were forward-looking and policy-relevant, respectful of history and fluently written. Many would have suc-

cumbed to the apparent drudgery, but John Shaw flourished. He was relentlessly optimistic, urbane and engaged, endlessly excited by new ideas.

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In 1994, John Shaw moved into nominal retirement, partly in London, partly in Houston, but actually probably mostly in the Library of Congress. He wrote academic articles and volumes of papers, but will be remembered principally for three big books.

The first of these, published in 2002, was a biography of Professor Sir Hans Singer, the eminent and much-loved development economist, refugee from Germany, student of Keynes, and one of the first economists appointed to the UN.¹ The second book, published in 2007, was a history of world efforts since 1945 to achieve food security.² The final book, published in 2011, was a history of WFP as a humanitarian donor.³

The humanitarian sector continues to evolve, as will be seen at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. The core principles established by Henri Dunant following his experience on the battle field of Solferino in 1859 still hold: neutrality, impartiality and humanity are the keystones of humanitarian principles and law. WFP has been part of this revolution.

John Shaw was married to Ileana for 56 years. Ileana died just weeks after John himself. He is survived by two children, Elizabeth and David, and a grandson, Christopher.

Correspondence: *Simon Maxwell CBE,*
20 West Drive, Queens Park, Brighton BN2 0GD, UK
Email: sm@simonmaxwell.eu



D John Shaw (right) celebrating his milestone publication *World Food Security* – in the words of the publisher Palgrave Macmillan, “the first comprehensive history of the numerous attempts made since the Second World War to provide food security for all”.

References

01. Shaw DJ. *Sir Hans Singer: The Life and Work of a Development Economist*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. ISBN 9780333711309.
02. Shaw DJ. *World Food Security: A History since 1945*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. ISBN 9780230553552.
03. Shaw DJ. *The World's Largest Humanitarian Agency: The Transformation of the UN World Food Programme and of Food Aid*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. ISBN 97802308732, which in particular updates his earlier 2001 *UN World Food Programme and the Development of Food Aid*, Palgrave Macmillan.

This appreciation of John Shaw was drafted by Simon Maxwell with contributions from Sir Richard Jolly, Richard Longhurst and Edward J Clay. It is published here in abridged form [Ed.].