

Letters to the editor

Answers to three questions from Alan Berg: Observations from Malawi on poverty, nutrition, and food environments

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In July 2023, the Lifetime Achievements of Alan Berg and the 50th Anniversary of The Nutrition Factor were honored at the American Society for Nutrition's annual meeting in Boston (ASN 2023). I was fortunate enough to have had Alan as a mentor for a project at the World Bank, years after he retired – and benefited from hearing direct (and humble) accounts of some of those lifetime achievements. In retrospect it felt like a postdoc, resulting in a document *Learning from World Bank History* about agriculture and food-based approaches for addressing malnutrition (Herforth and Tanimichi-Hoberg 2014). In preparation for the ASN event, Alan asked me and others to respond to three questions; others' responses are compiled in the June and Sept 2023 volumes of *World Nutrition* (Greiner 2023a, 2023b). This is my response, dated 6 July, 2023:

Alan, your questions have been lightly in the back of my mind as I have listened to a week of presentations on agriculture, nutrition, and health; heard the Minister of Health of Malawi given a presentation in which she expressed a passion for use of existing resources; heard from a farmer activist who talked about the transformation in her household when her husband was convinced to start helping with the daily chores of living; and while traveling the roads in Malawi and observing how people are getting by in this 10th-poorest country in the world. I was surprised to learn that Malawi registers as about as income-poor now as Guinea was in the '90s – a place I visited at the time and witnessed striking levels of visible malnutrition. Looking at trends in income growth and malnutrition, Guinea has stagnated in child nutritional status, while Malawi has improved. Stunting rates in Malawi track with India, while wasting rates are much lower; we see little relationship to Gross National Income (GNI) (Fig 1). (India's wasting rates and lack of improvement are glaring!) I am curious what's behind these different trajectories.

Of course, we only have anthropometry data starting from around 1990...significantly after you wrote "The Nutrition Factor." It's amazing what you were able to say without even having this kind of data at hand.

Your book is a remarkable document. Overall, on every page I was struck by how fully you examined every angle of the problem – how thorough your thinking is, and how

clearly you write. As part of this, you had a way of pulling tables together to present the evidence in the most striking way. You consistently zeroed in on the most important contrasts and story.

In addition to the style of thinking, writing, and presenting evidence, the substance was also remarkable. I was struck by so many things, including:

- How many of the points you wrote about were supported by sound logic but yet unproven at the time...and now are shown by lots of evidence, such as: how malnutrition affects school performance, early child development, future potential, and the reasons why; irreversibility of chronic malnutrition in key periods of development, and the major contribution of malnutrition to mortality, synergistic with infectious disease.
- How starkly education, birth rates, mortality rates, and severe undernutrition rates have improved – it is a different world! I was repeatedly shocked by the statistics you presented from the 1960s.
- How exciting (almost miraculous) it must have been to watch the Green Revolution unfold and the incredible increase in yield of cereal grains in South Asia. (And how the excitement would have overtaken the concern you raised about the drop in legume production, and widening disparities/lack of access to the technologies among the poorest.)
- How worried people were about population growth and famine.
- How worried people were about protein – now rarely mentioned.
- How *not* worried people were about fruits, vegetables, nuts, and pulses (except for their protein content).
- That ultra-processed foods were not yet present, nor competing for budget and calorie share of the poor...
- ...with the big exception of infant formula. Just wrenching to see the statistics about the precipitous drop in breastfeeding rates in the '60s, and read the total lack of awareness or interest among policymakers and medical professionals who felt it wasn't their business.

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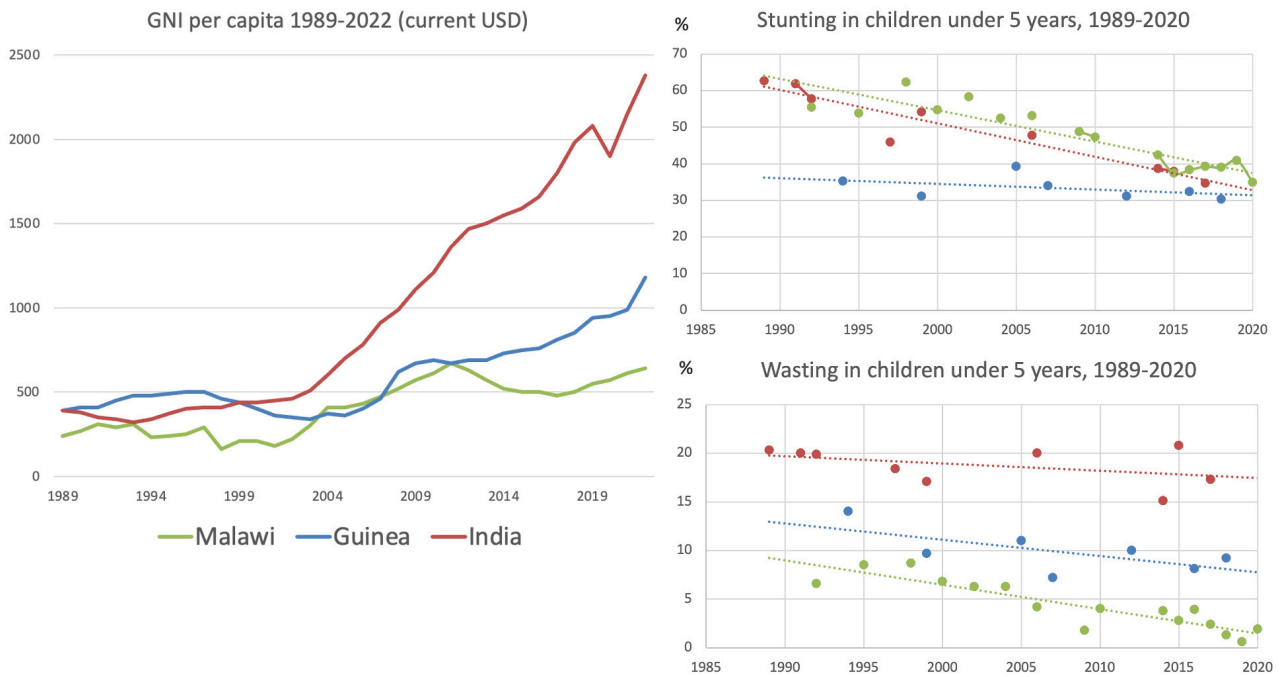


Figure 1. Income, stunting, and wasting, 1989-2020, in Malawi, Guinea, and India

Data source: World Bank DataBank

- Common reference to people in the masculine (“he/him/man”), and no central focus on women’s rights nor the economic power of women.

These reflections relate to your questions:

1. *If you were the all-powerful Queen of Nutrition and could push a button for one thing to happen that would have the greatest positive impact on nutrition, what button would you push?*

Everyone everywhere would be able to access safe sufficient nutritious food to meet their dietary needs – and healthy diets would be not only accessible, but convenient and socially preferable.

2. *What is the best-proven nutrition intervention that we already know works, but has not come anywhere near fulfilling its potential?*

The best proven non-intervention –or in some cases, intervention – is maintaining healthy preferences that are deeply embedded in culture. Some examples of this: dal in India, green leafy vegetables in Kenya, teff in Ethiopia, all kinds of fruit in Brazil. This sounds unremarkable. The everyday consumption of these healthy foods is so mainstream that it’s taken for granted. It becomes notable in situations where it has *not* happened, and where healthy preferences are fast being lost and displaced. I worry about

indigenous vegetables and whole grains in West Africa. And in Malawi. They are considered things you’d rather get rid of; get to white bread and red meat as fast as you possibly can. Here in Malawi, the taxi driver today reminded me that vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans, and whole grains – all those foods recommended by the World Health Organization for the promotion of long-term health, and consumed by a reasonable proportion of people in Malawi¹ - are considered “poverty foods” that people hasten to abandon as soon as they have enough cash for animal source foods, fried snacks, sugary snacks, and fast food.

These attitudes have many causes. Non-ironically, as the taxi driver was talking, we passed several imposing billboards advertising fast food (Fig 2).

I had just run a workshop on cost of healthy diets in Malawi. On average, people spend two-thirds of their income on food, and 96% cannot afford a healthy diet (FAO et al. 2023). The foods advertised on the billboards are unaffordable to almost everyone. So what will people trade for this fool’s gold?

We now have dietary data adding to the evidence in a wider range of countries than ever before: we see that with increasing national income, health protective food consumption gets somewhat higher, but unhealthy consumption quickly rises. Similarly, among individuals, those who report having enough money for food consume more protective foods *and* more unhealthy foods (Global Diet Quality Project 2023a). The ultra-processed foods advertised on

1 Data source: <https://www.dietquality.org/countries/mwi>



Figure 2. Views from the road, Lilongwe, July 4, 2023

Photo credit: Anna Herforth

the billboards in Malawi would displace nutrient-rich foods in the diet, and are defining what is convenient and aspirational.

Reading “The Nutrition Factor,” it was notable how (1) regulation of formula companies, and restrictions on marketing, was rather gingerly suggested...I could see that the movement had not yet gained full confidence or full steam; and (2) there was just really no concern at all about the nutritional impact of ultra-processed foods, despite acknowledgement of Coca-Cola’s reach (already in 1973!).

We saw how a concerted and strong effort in the '70s resulted in the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. The regulation of formula had both sides: promotion of a traditional healthy preference at the same time as regulating its substitute. Right now we are perhaps in an analogous time point about ultra-processed foods. Perhaps by 2030? 2040? we could have a code of marketing of “Real Food Substitutes.” It needs boldness.

How about these sentences you wrote in your book...with only minor modifications (in italics):

“In some countries, aggressive sales promotion tactics persuade ~~the new mother~~ *people* to succumb to the blandishments of the processed food companies. In ~~the West Indies Brazil~~, competitive representatives of ~~baby~~ *food manufacturers* visit the homes of ~~new mothers~~ *people living in slums* and give free product samples. The ~~pediatric~~ *nutritionist* is left increasingly frustrated by the well-financed, steam roller, marketing techniques of the food industry to sell totally unaffordable and inappropriate ~~infant~~ *foods* in impoverished communities, while mouthing sanctimonious platitudes about their world role in improving ~~child~~ *nutrition.*” (p100)

“A more forceful step toward halting the undesirable trend away from ~~breast-feeding~~ *healthy diets* is government

action to control the advertising that might best be described as “anti-nutrition education.” (p101)

So, back to your question: the best intervention that is nowhere near fulfilling its potential? Policy action on ultra-processed foods and beverages. Using the food policy instruments of regulation, taxation, and information. Alongside systemic supports for traditional healthy foods, turning around attitudes: that they are not backwards poverty foods, but lead to *health* and *wealth*.

3. *What is the major constraint today to our seeing more nutrition interventions on a consequential scale? And how to overcome it?*

At national level, it’s an absence of governance, or pollution of government’s role and decisions by moneyed interests; policies (or the lack thereof) that serve corporations rather than the public. Globally, the absence of sufficient international guardrails on corporations results in something beyond plutocracy, something more like global corporate rule. Global institutions can be a global norm-setting influence that could and should counteract international corporate rule. We can do better.

Your chapter on private industry in “The Nutrition Factor” was important. I would like to see someone today go through as transparent a discussion of motives and the relationship between governments and large food industries. I expect it would be difficult, because the food industry has gotten significantly cagier and less transparent than when you were gathering information. (Michele Simon’s book “Appetite for Profit” was excellent on this topic.)

The most important summary point probably goes back to this: “Business corporations are not established for purposes of benevolence; they can undertake socially responsible ventures of significant magnitude only if the ventures

will be profitable; prospects for profitability are not promising unless the existing pattern of corporate involvement in nutrition and government's part in that involvement change." (p144)

So, you have answered the question of "how to overcome it" yourself. The existing pattern of corporate involvement in nutrition, and government's part in that involvement, must change. My small part is providing indicators and data to shift the attention of world leaders to healthy diets (Herforth 2015; FAOSTAT 2023; Global Diet Quality Project 2023b).

It has been useful for me to think about your questions, Alan, while observing some challenges of food and nutrition across the six countries I've laid eyes on over the last two weeks: Malawi, DRC, Ethiopia, Austria, United Kingdom, USA. Note: you cannot get any injera in Addis Ababa airport, where I am sitting now. But you can get Burger King.

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