

WN Editorial

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Facing the facts of this century

The philosophy of nourishment

What is our professional and personal purpose here on the planet? This editorial is one of a series addressing this question, while also highlighting some contributions in the current *WN*. So here goes. Food and nutrition shape states of disease, health and well-being. These are not merely matters of chance or choice. This is known by those with broad vocations and interests. Last November [Pope Francis](#) addressed the UN International Conference on Nutrition. He rightly puts issues of food and nutrition adequacy and security in their ethical, economic and ecological contexts:

No form of political or economic pressure that exploits the availability of foodstuffs can be considered acceptable... I think of our sister and mother, Earth, our planet, and of whether we are free of political and economic pressure and able to care for her, to avoid her destruction. I remember a phrase that I heard from an elderly man many years ago: 'God always forgives our misdemeanours, our abuse, God always forgives; men forgive at times; but the Earth never forgives'. We must care for our sister the Earth, our Mother Earth, so that she does not respond with destruction.

What our contributors say

[Cecilia Castillo](#), writing in the *Visions* series in this issue of *WN*, also rightly positions nutrition as an integral part of public affairs as a whole:

Societal models based on ever-increasing consumption and profit, where basic rights and common goods are considered private property, lead to segregation, discrimination and inequity. These societies, like serf systems, prevent the establishment of adequate and fair welfare and health. For any population to have good nutritional status, sufficient healthy foods must be available and accessible. But this is not enough. Clean water, adequate sanitation, and other public health measures which include vaccination programmes and regular general health examinations, are also essential, not in isolation but all together.

This month the political scientist [George Kent](#), an authority on food and human rights for many years, is also in tune with Pope Francis, and gives an example:

'Markets' mainly benefit the rich and powerful. Strategies of self-sufficiency are beneficial mainly to the poor and weak...The 'market' system promotes the flow of food and

wealth toward money and power, not toward need. One way to protect the vulnerable would be to ensure that all parties have a clear voice in deciding what would be good for them. If small-scale corn producers in Mexico had been given seats at the negotiating table, they might not have been overrun by the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Also in our *Feedback* section, [José Luis Vivero Pol](#), like Pope Francis, upholds societies that in the past and now, value good lives well led more than money:

Unregulated markets cannot provide enough food for everyone.... Moreover, the commodification of food crowds out non-market values worth caring about. These include the conviviality of cooking or eating together and the preservation of food culture and gastronomic tradition which is part of the definition of distinct civilisations and the traditional moral economy of food production and distribution.

What WN stands for

Here now is an outline of the true nature of public health nutrition. This has elements in common with clinical nutrition, just as architects and builders both use steel, but it is an entirely different activity. It is the philosophy, politics and economics of nourishment. This is what *WN* explores. It is what Pope Francis, Cecilia Castillo, George Kent and José Luis Vivero Pol refer to, as does [Claudio Schuftan](#) in his guest editorial in this issue. It sees malnutrition as the biological expression of social disease. It sees epidemics as symptoms of sick societies, such that the issue is not just childhood obesity and diabetes, but overall systems of governance that have gone wrong. All who are committed to the protection of public health and public goods, and who see nutrition both as a cause and as an outcome of the fate of nations, are in for a rough ride, and rightly so.

Clinical nutrition by contrast is a junior department of medicine, famous long ago after discovery of the properties and powers of protein and vitamins. Examples now are tubs of supplements in pharmacies, and nutrition labels of ultra-processed products. Scaled up, clinical nutrition takes forms like addition of folic acid to white flour by statute and to breakfast cereals by corporations, or pills administered to 'at risk' children. These are types of crutch. Practiced on people or on populations, clinical nutrition should be and often is a worthy technical activity. But of itself it is insulated from larger realities. By analogy, surgeons who amputate limbs rotted by diabetes or mangled by bombs operate on what they see. They may think about the wider meaning of what they do, and many do, but this is not part of the job.

What others say

There is more. The context of nutrition is food, which comes from agriculture. Abused or neglected agriculture degrades food. [Vandana Shiva](#) is right. She says:

Bringing the soil to the centre of our consciousness and our planning is vital for the life of the soil, and also for the future of our society.... Civilisations which ignored the health and well-being of the soil, and exploited it without renewing its fertility,

disappeared along with the soil... But we are now unthinkingly adopting the illusion that human progress is based on how fast we can destroy, bury and consume the soil... There is a clash between what Aristotle in his *Politics* called 'chrematistics', the art of money-making, and oikonomia, which is the art of living. The clash is between the soil and Earth-centred agrarian economies of peasant societies, and the money-centered speculative economies.

There is more yet. The pandemic of obesity and diabetes, and the persistence of food insecurity and hunger, in great part result from a discredited yet still dominant political and economic ideology, exponentially accelerated within the last 40 years. This causes climate disruption, itself a cause of global malnutrition which can only get worse. The notion that the current global industrial food system can be 'fixed', is just as much an illusion as imagining that wind-farming will stop the rise in global temperature. [Naomi Klein](#) is right. She says:

The actions that would give the best chance of averting catastrophe – and would benefit the vast majority – are extremely threatening to the elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our major media outlets... It is our great collective misfortune that the scientific community made its decisive diagnosis of the climate threat at the precise moment when those elites were enjoying more unfettered political, cultural, and intellectual power than at any point since the 1920s... The three policy pillars of this new era are familiar: privatisation of the public sphere, deregulation of the corporate sector, and lower corporate taxation, paid for with cuts to public spending... Our economic system... is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity's use of resources. What our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature.

Pope Francis is right

Pope Francis expects his time to be short, and banters about being assassinated. All the more reason to listen to him now. He speaks plain. [Earlier this year he said](#)

Globalisation has helped many people rise out of poverty, but it has also damned many others to starve to death... When money is at the centre of the system, when money becomes an idol, men and women are reduced to simple instruments of a social and economic system, which is characterised, better yet dominated, by profound inequalities. So we discard whatever is not useful to this logic... The culture of waste also leads to a hidden euthanasia of older people, who are abandoned. Instead of being considered as our memory, our link to our own past and a source of wisdom for the present... We need to stop before it is too late. Let us stop, please!... We should not consider this state of things as irreversible. Let us not resign ourselves to it. Let us try and build a society and an economy where humans and their welfare are at the centre, instead of money.

Pope Francis is right. What a magnificent challenge! A prime purpose of this journal is to help us all to face the facts of this century, to grasp the vast task confronting everybody willing to be part of the solution, and to be able to act. Are you ready?

The editors