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Editorial

Introduction to the final issue of World Nutrition for 2024

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Will the field of public health nutrition (PHN) be able to make a difference in the challenging year ahead? One thing we can be certain of – it will be a time of turmoil, with the US poised to install a dictator wannabe apparently beholden to another dictator actively engaged in taking over another country. Some factions of the new US government will be aiming to rid the country (and, given US commercial dominance, the world) of the current industry regulatory framework – already relatively weak – that is designed to protect human and planetary health.

So, will this be the right milieu for instituting the kinds of regulations and taxation regimes we know will be necessary to reduce the huge impact the ultra-processed (UPF) food industry is having human health and that they, along with Big Agriculture are having on planetary health? Or will it be the perfect opportunity for the UPF industry to pull out all the stops and go on an aggressive attack against our field?

Struggles against UPF are recent. It only gradually became an issue of interest after Carlos Monteiro (2009) published his first article about it. As I say in the accompanying editorial, the UPF industry is going to continue to follow the pathways to fight regulation and activism already laid out by the oil, tobacco, and baby food industries. Already in 1979, a business department professor at Boston College told me he was teaching lessons learned from how Nestle fumbled its way into the international boycott started in 1977. Mariath and Martins (2020) explored how the UPF industry was infiltrating interest groups in Brazil already several years ago. Slater et al. (2024) have mapped out 268 interest groups already affiliated with the UPF industry. Nearly 1/3 are located in Washington DC or Brussels, and the rest in capital cities of major national markets for UPFs.

Scientists like us cannot create a powerful enough movement to make social and political change. The official UN system hardly offers a way forward. The UPF industry successfully prevented the UN Food Systems Summit from doing or saying anything threatening to their bottom line (Arnanz, 2023).

We will need instead to ally with action groups. In our field, the baby food action movement, particularly the International Baby Food Action Network, IBFAN, started in the mid 1970s, has led the way in going after the baby food industry's malpractices. By the early 1990s, they were joined by the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action, doing complementary work, particularly on the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative, and conceiving of and annually supporting World Breastfeeding Week.

Are there such NGOs and political action groups with whom those concerned about UPFs could make common cause? IBFAN worked for years to build bridges with groups in other potentially interested and relevant movements such as environmental groups. Their message was: you support our work and we'll support yours.

Already in Monteiro's home country, there is a Brazilian Alliance for Healthy and Adequate Food, formed in 2016, though it has a much wider ambit that just UPFs, much related to the right to food. A San Francisco-based climate change group called Nexus already has an action plan for UPFs. It lists numerous action groups that work in the US on food-related issues. Now that JFK Jr is drawing so much public attention to the UPF industry (irrespective of all the harm he is doing otherwise), perhaps there is a basis for starting a targeted US group, a UPF Action Coalition of some kind?

There are a number of extant potential allies elsewhere. Several international groups work on obesity. One of the largest, the UK-based World Obesity Federation, does include "processed food" in its discussions about the roots of obesity. Perhaps of greater international importance is the NCD Alliance, based in Switzerland. Both these groups have corporate partners in the form of pharmaceutical companies selling obesity drugs, but no UPF companies. They also have funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the main supporter of IBFAN and WABA from 1979-2010. A search on their website brings up dozens of relevant articles and posts. Surprisingly, even more advanced in its work on the UPF issue is the UK-based Soil Association. An extensive review of the evidence on UPFs is available on its website. The largest independent global food action groups, **Act4Food Act4Change** and **Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa**, do not appear to be engaging on this issue yet. If these or other groups get serious about having an impact on UPF consumption, they might look for guidance at how IBFAN became such a formidable anti-industry actor.

First, IBFAN was viable only because the issue they were working with inspired enough passion in enough people around the world. We need to utilize the social media and

identify allies there. I highly recommend the rapidly growing progressive version of X, Bluesky, where you can already choose feeds such as #Nutsky that focus on nutrition.

Second, IBFAN quickly began approaching bilateral and other donor agencies, receiving assistance from scientific allies to write grant proposals and secure the funding needed to strengthen their work in much of the developing world. As in the case of breastfeeding, groups working on UPFs can easily make the case that it is the developing countries that are suffering worst, where obesity and NCDs are increasing most rapidly, and where pharmaceutical approaches offer little hope in the foreseeable future.

Now to turn to the current issue of World Nutrition. After the above-mentioned editorial, it begins with an important study by Masumo et al. examining the determinants of vitamin A deficiency among pregnant women in one region of Tanzania. This is followed by a suite of articles from Nigeria. Nweke et al. explore the socio-economic correlates of nutritional status in young children in a city in Nigeria. Then Abdussalaam et al. utilize an international diet quality index to look at dietary diversity and other issues among second school students in two local government areas of Nigeria. Balogun et al. assess the breastfeeding practices and nutritional status of infants under one year of age in another local government area of the country. Oyesanya et al. use a similar diet quality questionnaire to determine the diet quality of women of reproductive age in a third local government area of Nigeria. Adeyanju and Fadupin examine the nutritional status of young children in rural areas on the outskirts of Ibadan and link it to household food insecurity. Okorie, et al. examine the link between minimum dietary diversity and anthropometry of women of reproductive age in another local government area.

In research elsewhere, Sinha et al. study children with sickle cell disease linked to three specialist institutions in Chhattisgarh, India, looking at the determinants of the extremely prevalent malnutrition they suffer from. Dembele examines and discusses the socio-cultural and behavioral factors possibly involved in overweight and obesity in the women of reproductive age in Burkina Faso, based on data from the latest Demographic and Health Survey of the entire nation. In contrast to these cross-sectional studies, Ahmed et al. contribute a randomized controlled trial showing that sun-dried tomato powder reduces blood sugar levels and improves the lipid profile among people with type-2 diabetes.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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