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Commentary

Use your power

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INTRODUCTION

We're living through a time of extraordinary tension. The stakes for people and planet have been increasing, year on year, as we've failed to get to grips with cascading crises (climate, food, health, equity). But now, on top of that, we have a new wave of structural violence perpetuated by populist leaders around the world.

Enduring progress in food security, nutrition and health cannot be achieved without the protection and fulfilment of basic human rights. But these are being trampled underfoot, especially in the US where even the word 'equity' has been blacklisted. Donald Trump and his marauding henchmen do not care one iota for human rights as they take a wrecking ball to US development assistance, science, and civil society organizations.

In late January, Elon Musk posted on his social media platform: *'We spent the weekend feeding USAID into the wood chipper. Could gone (sic) to some great parties. Did that instead.'* The richest man on the planet gleefully severing a lifeline for many of its poorest inhabitants. We may have expected a degree of insanity, but this was sheer, abject cruelty – the polar opposite of 'do no harm'.

Then, on 25 February, a few days ahead of his trip to meet Trump, UK prime minister, Keir Starmer announced he was about to plunder the UK aid budget – much of which was supporting nutrition programming to extremely vulnerable people – in order to boost defence spending.

Yes, there are many criticisms of aid and important discussions about what we mean by development in the 21st century – but this shows a brazen disregard for some of the world's most desperate people. It's also extraordinarily myopic.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

As I was writing *Food Fight* last year, I became engrossed in the history of activism – in the different roles of the individual versus the collective; about whether to work inside or outside political institutions.

One thing that's crystal clear is that this is no time to cower in the shadows and stay silent, hoping no-one will notice – no time for wishful thinking that the storm will pass. We need to remember the words of American social reformer, Frederick Douglass in 1857: *'Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will…The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.'*

We need to fight back against injustice. This is a time for solidarity with those directly affected and for active resistance.

But what does this look like?

Three big lessons from history are relevant in any struggle for change – whether it's challenging transnational corporations who pollute food environments with unhealthy foods, governments who fail to act – or more acute crises, such as the clampdown in the US.

FIRST, BREAK OUT OF YOUR SILO

Nutrition has always operated at the interface between food and health, has always demanded interdisciplinary thinking and action. If we allow ourselves to be locked into silos – we lose our strength.

In the late 1970s, I first became interested in this field because nutritional status was then (as it still is now) a powerful indicator of health and social justice and I wanted to make a difference. Making a difference could be done through generating knowledge (via research) or through direct action, or both.

I always thought the divide between research and action and the idea that researchers should not hold political views to be completely unrealistic and self-defeating. There is a quaint old notion that this would compromise a researcher's objectivity and credibility. But we all have positions, values and beliefs. We need to be *explicit* about them, not disavow them. Any professional (researcher or activist) needs to demonstrate honesty, integrity and open-mindedness in whatever they do. Working with a research organisation that is supported by another public or private organisation is to implicitly take a position. Silence and inaction are not neutrality.

Of course, academics/researchers and activists/social movements have different theories of change and different pathways. Applied academia targets bureaucrats who design policy while civil society and social movements seek to

mobilise people to disrupt the status quo in the struggle for their rights to be respected.

Better links between these two worlds can pay huge dividends. Yes, research can improve action, but it works the other way too – action can enhance the relevance (and thus impact) of research. By researching real-world action, we see the roadblocks, the entry points, the windows of opportunity.

Collaborations between researchers and civil society require these differences to be surfaced and discussed to enable joint action to achieve shared goals. Open debate is key to good research anyway, but it should be seen as an integral part of it.

Most of the barriers to change lie in 'black box' zones of political decision-making. We need to shine a light in these boxes with research. We need more and better research on political economy, on governance for nutrition and on the commercial determinants of nutrition and health – so that all forms of knowledge generated by research can be put to better use.

In 2023, former Oxfam advisor, Duncan Green described a new hybrid breed of 'pracademics', who are both academics and active practitioners (Green 2023). The word may be clunky but this is a positive move.

More recently, Christina Pagel and colleagues argue that the UK scientific establishment needs to practice solidarity and resistance with their American counterparts: *'we must move beyond merely producing evidence; we must become its advocates, fighting for truth and integrity in public discourse…we cannot afford to 'stay in our lane.'*

SECOND, USE BOTH INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE AGENCY

The food industry views us as consumers, waiting for their products at the end of the food chain. But we're all citizens, first and foremost. We have power and agency, both individually and collectively – we need to use both.

To be a 'citizen' implies engagement, contribution, and action. Deriving from the Latin '*civitas*,' cities are where people come together and citizens – their inhabitants – are literally *'together people.'*

It's always been this way. Most early human food was gathered, not hunted, by groups of women working together, not by the heroic lone male hunter (Solnit, 2019).

The individualism of the 'great men theory' of history frames your problems as yours to solve alone. It's really on you, no-one else is to blame. This flawed language of heroes and villains also plays into the hands of corporations and governments who wield the 'nanny state' argument to justify 'business as usual' and political inaction.

The inconvenient truth of this story is that most change comes from group action.

Anti-apartheid activists knew this. 'Organise or starve' was a mantra passed down through generations. Nelson Mandela often spoke of 'ubuntu' – the philosophy that supports collectivism over individualism, highlighting the interdependence of humans on each other and our responsibility to the world around us. ('I am, because we are.')

Resistance also requires inspiration. Saying 'no' is a start, but it's not enough. In her eponymous book, Naomi Klein impels coalitions of the 'no' to develop a collective vision of the 'yes' in pursuit of change (Klein 2017).

To connect, not compete. 'My crisis is bigger than yours' will never work in the long run, especially when it's clear that crises interact. We need to see (and seize) the common ground – across food, health, climate, education, and other domains. As Audre Lourde said: '*There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.'* This reminds me of the struggle to promote (horizontal) community-driven development while villages and communities were being laser-targeted by vertical top-down programmes from donors and governments.

Civil disobedience has to do more than disrupt. It must enlighten people and enable them/us to see the problem as well as the (potential) solution, and how our futures are connected. Staying in our lane, our comfort zone or echo chamber may confer identity and meaning. But it can also stop us thinking for ourselves and it can block innovation that comes from crossing boundaries. We need to *'stitch together the many now-siloed, single-issue, simple-place patches of activism into a single quilt.'* (Freudenberg 2021).

As well as linking up better, we need to build on the past to learn countertactics from other activist organisations and social movements. History provides many examples of the power of social movements – for example, the establishment of a Welfare State in the UK following the Second World War, the introduction of female suffrage after several decades of effort by the suffragette movement, the trade union movement fighting for an eight-hour working day, anti-apartheid, and HIV activists taking on Big Pharma, forcing them to reduce drug costs.

None of this is to downplay the power of individual action. But it is leaders who act as enablers and catalysts – who create the conditions for change and spur action – that have the most impact (Nisbett et al. 2014). Non-hierarchical 'lateral leadership' – the ability to work successfully across sectors, bridge disciplinary divides (e.g. between agriculture and health), build collaborations and alliances and communicate effectively. These leaders don't demand followers – they don't lead 'on behalf of' – they lead *with* others whose agency is increased because of them. They inspire and motivate and unleash the potential of colleagues and collaborators around them.

It's all about power – what type, how it's used, by whom for what purpose. Events in the US over the last two months are examples of authoritarian 'power over' others. To counter this, we need to draw on our 'power within, power with and power to' respond.

Striving for justice across borders and disciplines requires active solidarity. Keetie Roelen, in her excellent new book 'The Empathy Fix', shows that this starts with empathy. Many poverty programmes fail, she argues, because dignity and agency are ignored. To address the 'collective empathy deficit', she proposes a '3R process' – Relate, Realise, Respond – to proactively build empathy.

THIRD, DITCH THE DESPAIR, ACT NOW BUT PLAY THE LONG GAME

One big mistake in responding to authoritarian regimes and executive orders is to fight amongst ourselves, to play their cruel game, take the path of least resistance by obeying, and competing for dwindling resources.

Many of us may feel increasingly isolated and atomised as the world seems to be sliding into a trough of populist politics and disinformation. At such times, more than ever, we need to rediscover our positivity and unleash what singer Nick Cave describes as the '*warrior emotion of adversarial hope that lays waste to cynicism*' (Cave 2024).

On the third anniversary of the death of Paul Farmer (founder of Partners in Health), the current CEO spoke of how the organization has been hit by structural violence in every place it works, but "thanks to Paul, we know that countering failures of imagination, harnessing the power of partnership, and transforming angst into hope and action will bend the arc toward justice even in dark times" (Pai 2025).

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han, who has studied hope, writes: '*In a climate of fear, there is no hope. Fear represses hope. Fear isolates people…Hope, by contrast, contains a dimension of 'we.' To hope means to spread hope, to carry the torch, keeping its flame. Hope goes far beyond passive expectations and wishes. Hope's fundamental traits are enthusiasm and motivation. It is a spring. Active and strong hope inspires people to creative action.'*

Last word to musician, Brian Eno who has spoken about social revolution happening in two phases. First, people realise the current system isn't working and then they realise that everybody else has realised it too. This is when things start to take off, when people come together, energies converge and coalesce and a movement is born (Eno 2022).

The original meaning of the Greek word '*krisis'* was 'a turning point.' That's where we are right now. We need to choose the right path and the right strategy to turn things around.

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