WN *Development*

World Nutrition **Volume 6, Number 1-2, January-February 2015**

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association
Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/

Nutrition
Visions for this century (3)





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Access November 2014 Urban Jonsson, Claudio Schuftan on ICN2 here
Access the ICN2 official Rome Declaration here
Access the ICN2 official Framework for Action here
Access the public interest civil society organisations statement at ICN2 here
Access the social movements statement at ICN2 here
Access November 2014 Visions for this century (1) here
Access December 2014 Update on ICN2 here
Access December 2014 Visions for this century (2) here

Editor's note

This is the third issue in which members of the *WN* editorial family have written about the state of world nutrition and public health now, and of their visions for the future. The previous two in the series can be accessed above. The context has been the November UN International Conference on Nutrition (ICN). *Visions* contributions have added colour and personality to the official and unofficial collective statements made from and to the ICN, also accessible above. Our work continues. We will continue to publish *Visions* statements, not only from WN family members, throughout 2015, in the form of full contributions, *Updates,* and letters in our *Feedback* section.

Brooke Aksnes writes:

In this third month of our *Visions* series, a final two contributors reflect on the needs of public health and nutrition for this 21st century by addressing the same ten questions and enquiries, making 12 contributions in all, and finally I share how the *Visions* series and project has helped me develop as a young professional. This month we begin by summarising the themes, concerns, fears and hopes that have emerged as most strongly identified or expressed.

We begin our 2015 *Visions* with Maria Alvim, now sharing responsibility for the *WN Feedback* section, from the federal university of Juiz de Fora in Minas Gerais, Brazil and Geoffrey Cannon, senior research fellow at the Centre for Epidemiological Studies in Health and Nutrition at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, and also *WN* editor. A retrospective look at this series comes from me, Brooke Aksnes, public health education and promotion graduate student at the Free University of Brussels, Belgium.

All contributors were in effect invited to think along the same lines as the policy-makers in UN member states and UN agencies who constructed the November International Conference on Nutrition and its outcome documents. The questions and enquiries for everybody have been:

1 What mainly determines population well-being, health, disease?
2 What mainly determines population good nutritional status?
3 How useful are the current nutrition sciences?
4 Are enough governments and official agencies making real progress?
5 Are current dietary guidelines and nutrition education programmes effective?
6 What types of civil society groups are most responsive to the biggest issues?
7 Name up to three inspiring leaders likely to be active in 2030, with reasons
8 Identify up to three of your greatest fears, with reasons
9 Identify up to three of your greatest hopes, with reasons
10 Make any other relevant remarks as you may wish.

Box 1

The main themes

Our sample is of members of the WN editorial family, who are all contributors to and guides of WN. Five themes emerged strongly in many or most of the responses:

- Need to address the underlying, basic and structural causes of states of health
- Lack of 'big picture' independent policies and actions
- Overwhelming power of transnational corporations
- Increasing relative and absolute inequity and poverty
- Frightening implications of resource depletion and climate change

The responses analysed

1 What mainly determines population, well-being, health and disease?

Most contributors included social and economic determinants of health such as cultural beliefs, social support, and income, in their responses. The need for environments that are conducive to healthy lives and that include accessible and equitable health services and proper hygiene was also a common theme. The level of equality in a society was listed as an important factor in well-being, health and disease. Thiago Hérick de Sá remarked on the immensity of the prospects:

> These have always been major questions for any society. The difference now is that personally and professionally, we are challenged to make those decisions at a global scale.

2 What mainly determines good population nutritional status?

Mark Wahlqvist said, in a perfect summation of the underlying response themes:

> There are four principles that underpin nutrition for optimal human health. One is well-nourished parents at conception and during foetal life. Two is breastfeeding. Three is regular physical activity. And finally, four is consumption of adequate biodiverse foods.

Most responses emphasised adequate food supply systems that provide affordable, minimally-processed, biodiverse food from local sources in adequate amounts. Nutrition education was frequently cited as a determinant of good population nutritional status. More than one contributor listed nutrition during foetal development and breastfeeding as important factors in being well-nourished.

3 How useful are the current nutritional sciences?

Isabela Sattamini was one of the many who saw the need for 'big picture' thought and action:

> [Current nutrition science is] concerned with achieving the same standards as medicine, turning nutrients into remedies, managing diseases, not investing in prevention and health promotion and in general overlooking most or all wider aspects. Nutrition is also a social and political science.

Contributions generally stated or implied that there is sufficiently deep knowledge surrounding nutrition in its clinical context, but not nearly enough sustainable, real-life application in culturally and socially appropriate contexts.

4 Are enough governments and official agencies making real progress?

Responses to this question were a unanimous 'no'. Contributors made clear that real progress is impeded by challenges posed by ineffective governments, unregulated

capitalism and climate change. Exceptions to the 'rule' of non-progress, however, were cited, as in a number of countries in Latin America, as well as France and Hungary, where steps are being taken to ensure responsible marketing of food products, protect traditional food systems and provide relevant dietary guidelines. A realistic response came from Maria Alvim:

> There are numerous government agencies and programmes that are taking beautiful action… But still there is much to do, especially in the contexts of tackling the out-of-control marketing strategies of huge transnational and other corporations, and building more public appreciation of food and nutrition education.

5 Are current dietary guidelines and nutrition education programmes effective?

> In very general terms, I find nutrition education very patronising. There is an overwhelming focus on telling people what to do, without adequate attention to understanding the limiting factors and capacities that would need to be in place and strengthened in order for the information to be translated into action.

This is what Olivia Yambi said, in capturing what turned out to be a consensus that most dietary guidelines fail to address the most powerful shapers of dietary patterns, such as poverty, inaccessibility, out-of-control marketing, and misguided food and agricultural policies. Contributors also said that dietary guidelines and programmes are often commercially-oriented or have an end goal other than improved nutrition.

6 What types of civil society groups are most responsive to the big issues?

> First, reject the concept of 'non-state' actors which like 'stakeholders', is a manipulation meant to merged conflicted industry with genuine public interest groups. Next, please distinguish between two main types of genuine non-governmental organisation. One is international NGOs funded by big traditional donors that have to protect their funding. The other is a mixture of 'public interest civil society groups' and 'social movements', both of which are clearly more responsive to claim holders' demands."

This is what Claudio Schuftan said, in outlining classes of civil society groups, asserting that social movements are among the most responsive. Almost every contributor had the same view, and included references to grassroots and social movements. 'Responsive' groups were described as transparent, accountable, democratic, community-connected and culturally relevant.

7 Name up to three inspiring leaders likely to be active in 2030, with reasons.

> The time when great leaders emerged is past. Real leaders up to 2030 and beyond will be ordinary citizens who will take responsibility for their lives.

Anthony Fardet, who said this, struck a chord. Many contributors did list a number of leaders – mainly those who are challenging norms and pushing for change in all

sorts of areas, including research, journalism, civil society and gastronomy. But the prevailing theme was that every one of us can, and should, be leaders as citizens. Thiago Hérick de Sá shared the moving story of Lia, an impoverished courageous woman who has fought for her community, Raj Patel venerated the 'Unknown Activist', and Anthony Fardet insisted that 'in this century, we are all leaders.'

8 Identify up to three of your greatest fears, with reasons.

The main fears expressed were of the growing power of transnational corporations, which transcends law and acts against the interests and well-being of humans; the consequences of climate change on food production; and displacement of traditional and locally-based diets by a global industrialised food system based on the ultra-processing of foods by transnational corporations.

Sara Garduño-Diaz was frustrated by industry's effect on the human diet:

> I see the widespread adoption of a non-seasonal 'global diet' based on the same foods and products all over the world. Where are traditional foods going? Restaurants are taking over and encouraging this behaviour, while local eating practices are being displaced.

9 Identify up to three of your greatest hopes, with reasons.

While often daunted, contributors outlined a number of hopes. Overlying themes were the triumph of sustainable, local and traditional food systems over today's prevailing corporate agriculture; the general population assuming active responsibility for the well-being of the environment; and a global movement to value people's lives and well-being over money and power. Raj Patel believes that all these hopes can be realised through agro-ecology:

> History's great moments have come through active, intelligent, widespread organization in which people have been encouraged to think for themselves. Agroecology embodies this kind of principle –in which everyone is a scientist, activist, critic, transformers, and finally, a penitent before nature.

10 Make any other remarks as you may wish

Contributors repeated their hopes for better humanity by way of responsible nutrition systems. Readers were encouraged to 'stay positive and inspired', to consider equitable solutions as the best ones, to be optimistic and fight for tradition. Diana Parra used her closing remarks as an inspiring call to responsibility for those who believe answers exist for the twenty-first century:

> When we envision solutions in bleak times, these may sometimes seem like dreams. But 'in dreams begins responsibility'. There is movement... I sense hope in the air.

Maria Alvim





Education encourages children – and adults too – to make conscious choices. Two children at a day care centre in Juiz de Fora, Brazil, being oriented for nutrition education using pedagogical methods

What mainly determines population well-being, health, and disease?

Health is not merely the absence of disease. It can be determined by human biology, and also by physical, cultural, social and economic environments to which populations are exposed. A balanced diet, regular physical exercise and emotional stability are all essential to positive health and well-being. Other habits and behaviours can also influence health status.

What mainly determines good population nutritional status?

A population has good nutritional status if food is accessible in adequate quantity and quality. People need critical knowledge that enables and empowers them to make good food choices. Nothing changes if a person has access to healthy food but consistently fails to make healthy choices.

How useful are the current nutritional sciences?

As a young nutritionist, I believe that the work of nutrition is very important to

hospitals, research, food production, sports, and other fields. The greatest potential is in the nutritionist's role as an educator who influences people's food choices. For example, when carried out correctly, nutrition education enables people to eat well personally and also in group contexts, with family, friends, colleagues, constructing a multi-generational cycle.

Are enough governments and official agencies making real progress?

In Brazil, my country: yes, they are. There are numerous government agencies and programmes that are taking beautiful action. A good example is the *Bolsa Família* (Family Food Basket) programme, which has been cited by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as an important initiative that is helping permanently to remove Brazil from the 'hunger map'. But still there is much to do, especially in the contexts of tackling the out-of-control marketing strategies of huge transnational and other corporations, and building more public appreciation of food and nutrition education.

Are current dietary guidelines and nutrition education programmes effective?

In Brazil, our new official national dietary guidelines have just been released. They are revolutionary. They are based on explicit principles. Some are as follows. To be relevant and effective, dietary guidelines need to be tuned to their times. Diet is much more than the intake of nutrients. Healthy diets are derived from socially and environmentally sustainable food systems. Dietary guidelines should broaden autonomy in food choices. National dietary guidelines have great public health potential, but remain underexplored. Brazil so far offers very few nutrition education programmes, which makes the system ineffective.

What types of civil society groups are most responsive to the big issues?

Scientific and academic societies, as well as civil society groups centred on creating cause-specific dialogue and action, are the most responsive. Also on the map are councils at local, state and national level that bring attention tospecific issues and open doors for citizens to participate in government affairs.

Name up to three inspiring leaders likely to be active to 2030, with reasons

The first on my list is Bettina Koyro, a German woman who has greatly benefitted Brazil. She worked for 10 years in rural Minas Gerais in Brazil to improve malnutrition, anaemia and other issues related to the poor nutritional conditions of the area. By way of culturally-relevant agricultural and nutrition education that focuses on cost-effectiveness and nutrient density, she encouraged people to grow and use non-conventional plant foods to increase the nutritional quality of their diets for an extremely low cost.

Upon moving to Juiz de Fora, my own city, Bettina fought for the implementation of the Municipal Council for Food Safety, for a restaurant dedicated to the poor, and

for the Brazilian Food Acquisition Programme. Through relevant education, Bettina improved the health and self-esteem of many Brazilians. I find one of her quotes particularly insightful:

> I think I can show people a sense of organisation and struggle that is not very common in Brazil. As we won many advances, people began to believe in success when they organise and fight. This positively changes lives because people start whining and become the protagonists of their own destinies.

My second inspiration is the British chef Jamie Oliver. As a successful entrepreneur and social activist, he has raised public awareness of the growing obesity epidemic. His passion for great food and cooking inspires people globally and enabled him to highlight the importance of cooking for health. Jamie has led a number of public nutrition projects, including a crusade for healthier school lunches in the UK named 'Jamie's School Dinners'. This project received such widespread recognition on an international level that the UK government committed more than one billion dollars to the reform of the school food system an instated a country-wide ban on junk food in schools.

My third choice is Arlete Rodrigues. She is a professor in the department of nutrition at my university, the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. In her classes, she highlights the multiple factors involved in the act of eating, broadening the narrow perspective of many students that food is only an accumulation of nutrients. She is able to break the old taboos of nutritional science and promote a holistic view on body acceptance, appreciation of culture, tradition, religion and food and nutrition education.

Identify up to three of your greatest fears, with reasons

My biggest fears are the rising of water level, a lack of food, and war. These three fears are intertwined with climate change, and their coming will happen soon if action is not taken.

Identify up to three of your greatest hopes, with reasons

My greatest hopes include that the current dominant uncontrolled capitalistic system will be replaced by a more sustainable one that puts human well-being at its centre; that the leaders of nations will begin to consider humans and the environment more in their decisions; and that all people personally and at population level become more conscious of their actions.

Make any other remarks as you may wish

I wish to be more optimistic. But I have more fears than hopes. Many things in the world need changing, and I feel overwhelmed. I try to do my best. As a nutritionist, I educate. As a consumer, I make healthy and sustainable choices. As a human, I am compassionate and humane.

Geoffrey Cannon





Pandemic obesity and diabetes are symptoms of sick societies. New diseases such as Ebola fever are also sending out signals, as are Gaza and Isis, and more storms, inequity, famines, riots and slums

What mainly determines population well-being, health, and disease?

The quality of society, at all levels and in all relevant respects. Determinants of well-being and good health should be considered first. Focus on disease is like judging travel in terms of car wrecks, industry in terms of bankruptcies, or marriage in terms of domestic violence. Determinants of good health include relative and absolute degrees of equity, independence, security and peace; of family, community, municipal and national solidarity; of self-determination and self-respect and ability to make and sustain relationships; and of belief in the present and hope for the future. More specific fundamental and elemental determinants include the quality of basic health care, education, employment, shelter, sanitation, earth, air, and water.

We all die, vulnerability to disease is in part inherited, chronic diseases tend to be a function of ageing, and mistakes, disasters and accidents happen. But in general the degree of pathology – emotional and mental as well as physical – in any society is a function of its quality. Epidemics are signs of societal breakdown, and any form of medical response to epidemics of any sort, however essential and vital, can at population level be only first-aid. Widespread infectious and deficiency diseases can be eradicated or countered, smallpox and goitre being the classic examples. But epidemics cannot be conquered with drugs, surgery, or adjustments in 'lifestyle'.

What mainly determines good population nutritional status?

Equitable, fraternal, resourced, sustained versions of the above. Rational agriculture systems that favour family farming and guarantee markets and prices for fresh and minimally processed foods. Flourishing national, regional and local food producers, manufacturers and traders, protected against transnational penetration and exploitation. Statutory restriction of ultra-processed food and drink products similar to that used to control use of tobacco. Strengthening of established food cultures at all levels, and of dietary patterns based on freshly prepared meals

How useful are the current nutritional sciences?

Clinical nutrition, practiced on individuals, groups or populations, is and should be effective immediate treatment for deficiency states and diseases and nutrition-related infections. At population level it can be of lasting benefit only when part of a broad, adequately resourced and supported system of public health which includes primary health care. These systems are jeopardised by the current dominant political and economic ideology that involves the privatisation of public health.

Epidemics such as of obesity or chronic diseases are symptoms of sick societies, effectively prevented and controlled only by reform of society as a whole. Once all types of nutrition are reshaped and positioned as part of the public health movement, and as such dedicated to the restoration and strengthening of the concepts and institutions of public health and public goods, they can be what they should be – powerful forces for protection and improvement of personal, population and planetary health and well-being.

Are enough governments and official agencies making real progress?

No. But there are two recent reasons to be cheerful. One is the recent initiative of the Pan American Health Organization, and its director Carissa Etienne, supported by Enrique Jacoby, Chessa Lutter, and many other dedicated public servants in PAHO and national governments, in which its member states are now pledged to regulate transnational food and drink product corporations.

Two is the *Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population*, for which Patricia Jaime of the Brazilian federal government and her team have special responsibility, now available on line in English. Governments of a number of Latin American countries such as Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Uruguay are also genuinely committed to protect and strengthen established and traditional agriculture and food systems, and other relevant public goods.

Are current dietary guidelines and nutrition education programmes effective?

In isolation, no.When supported by publicly funded programmes that protect public goods and public health, with sustained support from senior government ministers and influential public servants, civil society organisations and social movements, yes.

What types of civil society groups are most responsive to the big issues?

Those that practice direct action. Radical public interest organisations and social movements. Examples include *La Via Campesina,* the People's Health Movement, the International Baby Food Action Network, and *El Poder del Consumidor.*

Name up to three inspiring leaders likely to be active to 2030, with reasons

Naomi Klein. Raj Patel. David Stuckler. All that they write or organise is valuable. They inspire others. They see the big picture of which states of population nutrition are one aspect. They have coherent world views that identify basic and underlying political, economic and social determinants of states of society. They are brave.

Identify up to three of your greatest fears, with reasons

First, the triumph of ruthless reckless capitalism (not capitalism as such). Until its greed is blocked by regulation that encourages socially responsible entrepreneurs, society will become more diseased, with more corporate takeover of appropriate and sustainable farming and food systems. This is already happening, with land grabbing and seizure of water supplies. Second, change of climate continuing at the rates now projected into the second half of the century, when its impacts may be irreversible. Third, increased concentration of industrial agriculture that degrades food supplies, destroys rural livelihoods, and pushes populations into urban slums.

Identify up to three of your greatest hopes, with reasons

Fully participatory, responsive and accountable democracy. Corporate trusts busted. Radical decrease of use of energy. Development measured in terms of quality. Renewal and protection of small and family farming systems. Such peaceful revolutions will also be good for rational and responsible industry, trade and employment. Systems of governance systematically different from those now dominant. At global level in the short term, hopelessly unrealistic. But some relatively well resourced countries, regions and communities, are making a start.

Make any other remarks as you may wish.

The world and the biosphere is being damaged by human activity. Repair and recovery is possible only after this is admitted. The outrageous conditions of life in many parts of the world, especially those that have been colonised, exploited or invaded, are also symptoms of a general sickness. Ebola, Gaza and Isis are signals, as are melting glaciers and vast storms. Writing at the end of 2014, it is not easy to discern how the human species can step off its present path. It would be nice to think that things can only get better, but this is not an evidence-based position. Privileged and potent people, including the middle classes in high-income countries and settings, are protected from the realities that press on most people in the world. In a *Prison Notebook*, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) recommended pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. This may be the best policy right now.

Brooke Aksnes



Yes, it is me again! As convenor of the *Visions* series, my contribution was the very first featured in November. All the *Visions* pieces have been written by members of the *WN* editorial family. After three months alongside this insight-oriented project, I have learned and reflected a lot, and developed my own thinking, just as we all hope you our readers have. So here is some of my evolved perception of public health and nutrition in the 21st century, not just as more musings of a budding young professional, but as an insight into the influence *WN* discussions have on its readers, with me as an example.

All responses to the enquiries paint a bleak picture of the 21st century at first. But many contributors have high hopes that people personally and as family members and citizens can and will take charge of their own lives. This is what has inspired me.

Contributors say that nutrition programmes and dietary guidelines focus too much on theoretical requirements and on what people should do, without paying much if any attention to what people can or will do. Also, population nutrition will not improve in the absence of genuinely enabling environments. At a basic level this points to the need for food and nutrition security – accessible, affordable nourishing food, always reliably available. Diana Parra says that food guidelines and nutrition programmes need to 'get real' and address actual situations with clear messages.

Similarly, contributors feel that nutrition interventions are missing the point. Surely this could be resolved given proper respect for people and their actual situations, culture, circumstances, needs and preferences.After three months and twelve responses including my own, I have come to realise that public health professionals must start locally and work in partnership with the people they are working with. This is the way to improve personal, community and social health and well-being.

But building nutrition interventions from the bottom up is possible only when local leaders and vocal citizens stand up for their rights. Like so much else in life, therefore, improved nutrition in any sense, begins with empowerment. People must become owners of their own health and well-being and that of the people in their lives. As many *Visions* authors state, the right approach here is not indiscriminate micronutrient supplementation, or overly-generalised food guidelines, or production of descriptions and explanations. What is mostly needed is local movements that

grow. I agree with Raj Patel that agroecological principles best express, guide and inspire these movements.

In my original contribution I expressed high hopes for equitable, sustainable and responsible food systems and supplies. Was this blind faith? There is not a lot of evidence that these are emerging in a big new way, and I did not offer a plan of action. But now I am cheered. My naïve vision has been supported by eleven fellow professionals, some very qualified and experienced. Again and again, contributors have mentioned unnamed heroes, everyday leaders and grassroots social movements as solid foundations for community empowerment from which a new fair world order could emerge and consolidate.

I am a postgraduate student who initially came forward to work with *WN* as a way to stay updated and to be engaged. With my other work so far with *WN*, convening *Visions* has enabled me to contact and consult world-class professionals and in this way to develop my understanding of the world crisis and within it, the challenges and opportunities now facing public health nutrition. For me too this shows the special value of *WN* as a meeting point for professionals of all qualifications, and a platform for intellectual exchange and development.

My news is that *Visions* is now planned to continue throughout 2015. Please get in touch with me. We are looking for more full-scale contributions, updates, and letters to be published in *Feedback*. Thank you for growing with me.

Status

Readers may make use of this commentary if *WN* is cited. Cite as: Aksnes B, Alvim M, Cannon G. Nutrition. Visions for this century (3). [*Development*] *World Nutrition* January-February 2015, **6**, 1-2,,28-40. All *WN* contributions are obtainable at www.wphna.org/*World Nutrition* commentaries are reviewed internally or by invitation. Contributions to *WN* are the responsibility of their authors. They should not be taken as the view or policy of the World Public Health Nutrition Association unless this is explicitly stated.

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Please address letters for publication to wn.letters@gmail.com. Letters should usually respond to contributions to *World Nutrition*. Usual length for main text of letters is between 350 and 1000 words. Any references should usually be limited to up to 10. Letters are edited, may be developed, and once edited are sent to the author for approval.