

## WN Editorial

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### Malnutrition

## The spirit of solidarity

As a priest, then as a bishop, Jorge Mario Bergoglio ministered to children in the slums of Buenos Aires. As Francis, the first pope from the global South, named after the saint who loved nature, he spoke on 19 November from the heart as well as from the head to the representatives of UN Member States assembled at the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) to ratify the *Rome Declaration on Nutrition and Framework for Action*. He also spoke to all people of good faith, saying:

I hope that... the States are inspired by the conviction that the right to food can only be ensured if we care about the actual subject, the person who suffers the effects of hunger and malnutrition. Nowadays there is much talk of rights, frequently neglecting duties. Perhaps we have paid too little heed to those who are hungry. It is also painful to see that the struggle against hunger and malnutrition is hindered by 'market priorities', the 'primacy of profit', which have reduced foodstuffs to a commodity like any other, subject to speculation, also of a financial nature. And while we speak of new rights, the hungry remain, at the street corner, and ask to be recognised as citizens, to receive a healthy diet. We ask for dignity, not for charity.

### *United Nations principles*

In this issue of *WN* we publish and characterise four statements that are outcomes of the ICN. Two are official. These are the *Rome Declaration on Nutrition*, and the *Framework for Action*, compiled by UN officials and representatives of Member States. Earlier drafts of these documents have been *reviewed critically in WN*. Their admirable general intention, as of ICN itself, is to raise the profile of nutrition. But as is the way with high-level statements made for and by governments with sharply different powers and purposes, they lack substance. Thus Recommendation 21 among the 60 voluntary *Framework* recommendations begins 'conduct appropriate social marketing campaigns and lifestyle change communication programmes'.

The official *Declaration* and *Framework* are reviewed severely in the two unofficial documents. These are a Declaration by *Public Interest Civil Society Organizations and Social Movements*, and a separate *Statement by Social Movements*. They are the products of

meetings before and during the ICN in which hundreds of organisations and movements were represented. They address the structural causes of malnutrition. They are written in solidarity with the *principles of the UN* and the World Health Organization, and of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization as set out in 1945, in language John Boyd Orr, FAO founder-director, would recognise.

The public interest and social movement *Declaration* has a broad scope and energy. Thus, some of the many root causes of malnutrition are identified:

Trade agreements, support of agribusiness models and promotion of monoculture and genetically modified organisms, corporate grabbing of land, oceans, lakes, rivers and aquatic resources, and lack of investment in small-scale food production, have led to displacement and impoverishment of small-scale producers all over the world. The lack of... respect for communal tenure of their natural resources, and the privatisation or destruction of governance structures, have all caused malnutrition and environmental damage with irreversible consequences on productive systems.

At the ICN there were sure signs that many Member State representatives, and also UN officials whose task includes tact diplomacy, sympathised with the civil society and social movement concern and frustration. Thus in his opening address, José Graziano da Silva, current successor to Boyd Orr as FAO director-general, said:

This morning, you will be invited to endorse the ICN2 outcome documents: the *Rome Declaration on Nutrition* and the *Framework for Action on Nutrition*. Together, they are the starting point of our renewed efforts to improve nutrition for all. But they are not the finishing line. Our responsibility is to transform the commitment into concrete results. ICN2 is the opportunity to take a big step in the right direction. I hope that during this conference you will announce targets that go beyond the internationally agreed goals.

In her opening address Margaret Chan, director-general of WHO, also gave a strong sign of support for the people on the ground who produce most of the world's food:

According to some experts, the world's food system, with its reliance on the industrialised production of ever-cheaper, highly processed and unhealthy foods, is broken... In large parts of the developing world, especially in Africa, smallholder farmers are the backbone of the economy. The globalisation of an industrialised food supply crowds them out of their traditional livelihoods, often replacing healthy diets with unhealthy ones.

### ***The need to be fair***

Some of the experts referred to by Margaret Chan are in the US. This month *WN* publishes a *manifesto by Mark Bittman*, Michael Pollan, Ricardo Salvador and Olivier de Schutter on the need for a green, nourishing, fair US food policy. Thus:

The food system and the diet it has created have caused incalculable damage to the health of our people and to our land, water and air. If a foreign power were to do such harm, we'd regard it as a threat to national security, if not an act of war, and the government would formulate a comprehensive plan and marshal resources to combat it.

This month's *Feedback* includes letters commenting on last month's commentary by John Mason and colleagues, questioning current global policy on prevention of vitamin A deficiency. *George Kent* identifies the ideologies of opposed groups:

Interveners favour programmes designed by outside experts to be delivered to needy people. In contrast, empowerers call for supporting people in addressing their own concerns on their own terms and with their own resources...Interveners want to control what you eat, while empowerers want to guide you in what you choose to eat... Addressing malnutrition effectively requires much more than nutrition science.

The quotations above have a moral basis. The basic foundation of public health nutrition is ethical, committed to protect and promote the public interest and common goods. Thus, everybody committed to population health must surely oppose privatisation of primary health care. Those who say that public health professionals should not be 'activists' may overtly or tacitly support 'the free market', also known as 'neo-liberalism', the ideology that unleashes reckless corporate power. They could be seen as activists in the cause of taking lines of least resistance.

### ***The common good***

In our foundation document, *WN* is identified as a journal of ideas, 'seeing the world as it is, and also as it can and should be'. This implies an interest which we should declare, surely in common with all who work for equity, justice and the common good. This is solidarity with the purpose and principles of the United Nations. When *WN* contributors see shortcomings within the UN – whose agencies can move only with the consent of Member States – they do so, we believe, as friends of the UN. This is what good friends are for.

This circles round to the International Conference on Nutrition. Pope Francis spoke of two challenges. In his words, the first concerns hunger, of which 'There are few... topics as likely to be manipulated by data, statistics, the demands of national security, corruption, or futile lamentation about the economic crisis'. In his words:

The second challenge to be faced is the lack of solidarity. Our societies are characterised by growing individualism and division. This ends up depriving the weakest of a decent life, and provokes revolts against institutions. When there is a lack of solidarity in a country, the effects are felt throughout the world. Indeed, solidarity is the attitude that makes people capable of reaching out to others and basing their mutual relations on this sense of brotherhood that overcomes differences and limits, and inspires us to seek the common good together.

May solidarity flourish. We look forward to Expo Milano, with its theme *Feeding the Planet. Energy for Life*, beginning next May, and on concerted action from the G77 group of nations, now the G133+China, as consciousness-raisers and game-changers.

***The editors***