# **WN** *Update*

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## **WN** *International Conference on Nutrition*

## Knowledge, decision – now for the action




*Josephine Atangana of the Central African Farmers Association (left) and Mukhbolor Gungaa of the World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous People (right) spoke for social movements at the ICN*

### *The Development team reports:*

*Rome.* Readers should access the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's *website* for a full account of the International Conference on Nutrition. This includes all ICN official documents, videos or transcripts of all presentations, and many photographs including some of those used here. Many thanks go to all the colleagues in the UN System, especially FAO and the World Health Organization.



*Francesco Branca of the World Health Organization (left) and (right) Flavio Valente of FIAN International, two of the UN and civil society convenors, seeking best possible outcomes to the ICN*

## The ICN official outcome documents



*Children queuing for food in India. Hunger caused by food insecurity, itself caused by poverty, of which the basic causes include inequity, remains a vast human disaster with no end yet in sight*

Representatives of the 170 Member States assembled in Rome for the International Conference on Nutrition, ratified two ICN official outcome documents. They are the *Rome Declaration on Nutrition*, and the *Framework for Action (From Commitments to Action).* They are best read in their entirety. The focus of the *Declaration* is undernutrition, but the additional burden of overweight and obesity especially in children in the global South, is also included. Some of the final commitments of the Declaration are to

- Enhance sustainable food systems by developing coherent public policies from production to consumption and across relevant sectors to provide year-round access to food that meets people's nutrition needs and promote safe and diversified healthy diets
- Strengthen and facilitate contributions and action by all stakeholders to improve nutrition and promote collaboration within and across countries, including North-South cooperation, as well as South-South and triangular cooperation.
- Empower people and create an enabling environment for making informed choices about food products for healthy dietary practices and appropriate infant and young child feeding practices through improved health and nutrition information and education.

*The Framework for Action,* much revised during the final weeks before the ICN, in its final approved form includes a total of 60 recommendations. Its preamble stresses that although ratified by Member States, the official documents are voluntary:

> Building on existing commitments, goals and targets, this Framework for Action provides a set of policy options and strategies which governments, acting in cooperation with other stakeholders, may incorporate, as appropriate, into their national nutrition, health, agriculture, development and investment plans, and consider in negotiating international agreements to achieve better nutrition for all.

Many of the recommendations are phrased in general terms. Few propose any numbers for reduction of disease, or change in food supplies, or dates by when

progress can be gauged, and it is hard to find any that progress further than existing UN Resolutions. For instance

- Recommendation 13. Develop, adopt and adapt, where appropriate, international guidelines on healthy diets.
- Recommendation 15. Explore regulatory and voluntary instruments – such as marketing, publicity and labelling policies, economic incentives or disincentives in accordance with Codex Alimentarius and World Trade Organization rules – to promote healthy diets.

## The public interest civil society organisation statement



*African women tending their fields. Most agricultural produce in the world comes from cooperative, family and other small farms, and in many parts of the world most of the work is done by women*

Two unofficial documents were agreed at the ICN. One was the *Public Interest Civil Society Organisation and Social Movements Declaration.*

Present in Rome were around 150 representatives of public interest civil society organisations and social movements, many of whom also spoke for national, regional and local networks and groups not able to attend the ICN. As with the official outcome documents it is best read in its entirety. It expresses the position of a great range of organisations and movements. *See also the Inter Press Service report here.*

One of the most remarkable achievements of the ICN has been to catalyse international, national and other organisations, some with broad concerns, some with a specific focus, to speak with one voice. The Declaration acknowledges the work done and progress made in the ICN process. It ends by stating

> We call upon Member States to make clear and firm commitments at both national and international levels to ensure the human right to adequate food and nutrition and related rights... We demand that Member States and the UN System live up to their obligations. We hereby declare a worldwide People's Decade of Nutrition. The time for action is now!

## The social movement statement



*Food is more than nutrients. In the form of shared meals, food is an expression of family and community solidarity. Traditional food systems are an intrinsic part of civilisation and culture*

The second unofficial document agreed at the ICN was separately issued by the social movements present and represented. *This Statement on Nutrition* should also be read in full. It is fiery. Its preamble includes

> We, representing social movements around the world including Women, Youth, Indigenous Peoples... Peasants, Workers, Urban Poor, Consumers, Small-scale Farmers, Small-scale Fisher-folks. Mobile Pastoralists and the Landless are strongly concerned that ICN2 neither represents nor reflects the interests of our constituents. Instead, it meets the demands of private sector, including agricultural, food, pharmaceutical and chemical industries, all of whom have played a strong role in exacerbating nutrition and hunger challenges. The private sector is given increasing power and space in policy processes and governance structures, especially at ICN2.

The Statement ends: 'For this and much more that has not been expressed by the oppressed and the unheard, we demand our voices echo and resonate in the hearts of people, international communities and Member States'. There is more to say, in *WN*.

*Development team note:*

This report is made with guidance from leaders of public interest civil society organisations and social movements. Thanks go to Stefano Prato of the Society for International Development, Flavio Valente of FIAN International, Nora McKeon of Terra Nuova, Stineke Oenema of ICCO-Co-operation, Lida Llotska of the International Baby Milk Action Network, Alejandro Calvillo of *El Poder del Consumidor,* and many others.

*The Development team. International Conference on Nutrition. Knowledge, decision – now for the action. [Update]. World Nutrition December 2014, **5, 12**, 1044-1047*



***WN** Big Food Watch*

# Direct action in Mexico

***Access December 2013 BFW Fabio Gomes on Mexican junk food taxes here***
***Access May 2014 BFW Fabio Gomes Letter to Mexican President here***
***Access July 2014 BFW on the Mexican Alliance for Healthy Food here***




*Public health nutrition advocates in Mexico engage in direct action. Here is 'Father Christmas' in Xócalo Square, with Exhibit A stating that sugared soft drinks kill 24,100 Mexicans every year*

***The Big Food Watch team report:***

In Mexico consumption of sugared soft drinks per person is the highest in the world. The 'free trade' NAFTA agreement gives transnational companies special scope to displace Mexican traditional food systems. Mexico is the one country with a former President previously a chief executive of the Coca-Cola corporation. Also, rates of death attributable to soft drinks in Mexico are, at 21,100 a year, the highest in the world. This, from a global estimate of 184,000 deaths a year, comes from the Global Burden of Disease study presented by a team led by Daruish Mozaffarian, now dean of nutrition and science policy at Tufts University, US. 'Almost three-quarters of the deaths caused by sugary drinks are in low and middle income countries' he states. He sees nutrition as 'the greatest global priority for the next 20 years', in light of its impact on disease and disability, and also its economic and environmental aspects.

In Mexico, the outrageous rates of obesity and diabetes, linked as 'diabesity', are constantly being challenged by the civil society organisation *El Poder del Consumidor*, whose founder and director Alejandro Calvillo has a background with Greenpeace. He and his colleagues understand the effectiveness of direct action campaigns backed by reliable evidence, which attract major media attention with wit and punch. Their latest manifestation has been in Mexico City's immense central Xócalo Square, with a 'Father Christmas' (above) apparently crippled by diabetes, telling it like it is about the malign effects of sugared soft drinks in Mexico.

### *Pan American action*

The Pan American Health Organization at its Directing Council meeting in October, ratified its *Plan of Action for the prevention of obesity* in children and adolescents. All Member States endorsed the plan, including the US and Canada. It is very different from the global UN Declaration and Plan for Action approved at the International Conference on Nutrition in November (see the *Update* before this one). While it is necessarily voluntary, it begins 'This five-year Plan sets a goal and proposes five areas of action, including objectives and indicators'. The preamble states

> Identifying the drivers of the obesity epidemic is critical to informing and developing sound policies, actions, and health-related laws and regulations. From a dietary perspective, it is now recognized that the individual's food preferences, purchasing decisions, and eating behaviors are shaped by price, marketing, availability, and affordability. These factors are in turn influenced by upstream policies and regulations on trade and agriculture… A salient current commercial trend… is the ubiquitous availability and increase in per capita consumption of energy-dense nutrient-poor products and sugar-sweetened beverages in low- and middle-income countries.

The Plan lists a series of statutory measures, including taxation, now used in the Americas. Two typical objectives, together with national targets agreed, are

> ***Objective 3.1.*** Implement policies to reduce children and adolescents' consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and energy-dense nutrient-poor products. *Indicator:* Number of countries that have passed legislation to tax sugar-sweetened beverages and energy-dense nutrient-poor products (Baseline 1, Target 10).
> ***Objective 3.2.***. To enact regulations to protect children and adolescents from the impact of marketing of sugar-sweetened beverages, energy-dense nutrient-poor products, and fast foods. *Indicator:* Number of countries that have implemented regulations to protect children and adolescents from the impact of marketing of sugar-sweetened beverages, energy-dense nutrient-poor products, and fast foods in line with the Recommendations from a Pan American Health Organization Expert Consultation on the Marketing of Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children in the Americas. (Baseline 1. Target 15)

The Plan is also costed:

> It is estimated that the total expenditure, including both activities and current and additional PAHO Secretariat staff, will be US$ 3,080,000. The cost of current staff ($1,710,000) is covered under the PAHO regular budget. Resources will be mobilized to cover the cost of additional staff ($600,000) and PAHO activities ($770,000)

A report compiled and published in November by the giant management consultancy company McKinsey estimates that the total impact of obesity on global Gross Domestic Product is, at $US 2.0 trillion, slightly less high than the $US 2.1 trillion cost of smoking, and the $US 2.1 cost of armed violence, war and terrorism. Put like that, the PAHO costings are evidently a bargain.

*Big Food Watch team. Direct action in Mexico.*
*World Nutrition December 2014, 05, 12, 1048-1049*



*Brazilian dietary guidelines*

# At last! Guidelines based on food and meals!

***Access Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population here***
***Access Guia Alimentar para a População Brasileira here***
***Access this issue Editorial Mark Lawrence on the Brazilian guidelines here***
***Access this issue Patricia Jaime on the Brazilian guidelines here***

***The Update team reports:***



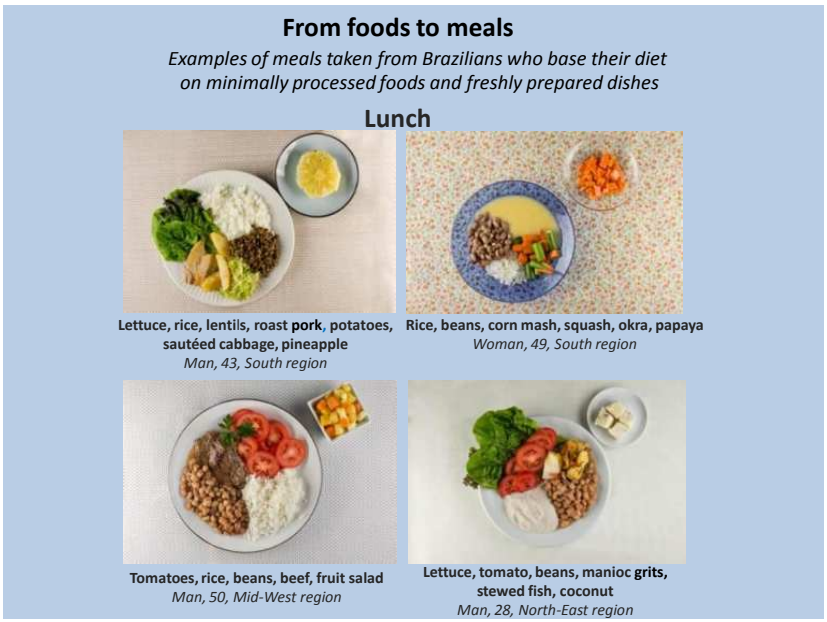
*Brazilian Health Minister Arthur Chioro; Ministry official responsible Patricia Jaime; praise from Mark Lawrence, Marion Nestle, and Michael Pollan; and head of technical team Carlos Monteiro*

***The Update team reports:***

The new official national Brazilian dietary guidelines for the Brazilian population were launched by Health Minister Arthur Chioro (left above, holding a copy) in Brasília on 5 November. *They are now available in English*. Head of the unit at the Ministry responsible for the Guidelines, Patricia Constante Jaime, outlines them in this issue of WN. They have been welcomed throughout Brazil, and in the Americas and elsewhere. Mark Lawrence of Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia (third from the left, above) contributes a *guest editorial in this issue of WN*. He writes

> The *Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population*… are a leap forward. In their incorporation of environmental sustainability, as well as social and cultural dimensions, together with their focus on meals as well as foods and dietary patterns, they include practical recommendations that are good for physical and social health, and also for the health of the planet…
>
> Writing from a high-income country, I can say that the Brazilian guidelines, and the processes that have led to their development, are relevant for health professionals and policy-makers in all including fully industrialised settings. In them, principles are explicitly articulated, problems are newly conceptualised, and new modes of knowledge production are adopted.

Marion Nestle of New York University and the US writer and author Michael Pollan of the University of California at Berkeley (third and second from right, above) together now have over 525,000 social media followers.




*A slide from Carlos Monteiro's November presentation in Washington DC, at a conference held to influence the 2015 US dietary guidelines. It shows fresh meals as actually consumed in Brazil*

They may be the most influential writers on food, nutrition, health and well-being in the US – or anywhere. Both of them love the Brazilian Guidelines and have said so on their websites. Like Mark Lawrence, they are enthusiastic about the broad social and environmental approach taken, and the fact that the recommendations in the Guidelines focus on food and on freshly prepared meals preferably enjoyed in company. Michael Pollan sees them as 'revolutionary', and as Marion Nestle says, the recommendations 'are based on foods, food patterns, and meals, not nutrients' and have a real-life basis:

> Traditionally, families based their diets on natural and minimally processed foods. The guidelines are based on the actual, traditional dietary patterns of a substantial proportion of the Brazilian population of all ages and classes throughout the country.

A total of 60,000 copies of the Guidelines are being distributed free of charge to health professionals at all levels, and to health centres, schools and hospitals. Minister of Health Arthur Chioro said at the launch that the Guidelines are for everybody – of all ages and classes and from all regions of Brazil.

A week after the launch of the Guidelines in Brasília, Carlos Monteiro (right, above), head of the team at the University of São Paulo responsible for the technical formulation of the Guidelines, *presented them at a symposium* in Washington DC organised by Tufts University and George Washington University. The title of his presentation was 'Health, well-being and sustainability on the same plate'. The purpose of the meeting was to think about the scope of the next US official dietary guidelines, due out in 2015. 'I hope everybody listened' commented Marion Nestle.

*The Update team. Brazilian dietary guidelines. At last! Guidelines based on food and meals! [Update]. World Nutrition December 2014, **5**, 12, 1050-1051*



**WN** *Climate*

# Climate change, famine and hunger

***Access December 2009 Tony Michael, Colin Butler on climate here***
***Access March 2014 IPCC report on food systems impacts here***
***Access March 2014 IPCC report on world health impacts here***
***Access May 2014 Tony McMichael, Helen Berry, Colin Butler on climate here***
***Access June 2014 Colin Butler on climate here***
***Access October 2014 Tony McMichael on climate and food systems here***

Editor's note

This is a short extract from a chapter, 'Famine, hunger, society and climate change' in the new book edited by Colin Butler, *Climate Change and Global Health*, published by CABI International. *The full chapter,* with references and another chapter, 'Climate change and health in East Asia' by Mark Wahlqvist, are available here.

***Colin Butler writes:***

Since 2005 there have been two pronounced spikes in food prices. The first one in 2008 was driven by high oil prices, speculation and restrictions on rice exports. However, extreme weather events, themselves possibly influenced by climate change, are likely causes of the second rise, which started at the end of 2010. Prices declined slightly in mid-2013, but are still historically high.

Few published studies have analysed the cause for this second price rise. Two factors seem important in addition to fairly high energy prices. One is the apparently relentless rise in the fraction of global food crops used for biofuels, itself largely in response to the growing scarcity of easily recoverable crude oil, essential for transport using current technology. The second reason may be a non-linear response in the price of food to extreme climatic events. The most notable of these were the Russian and Ukrainian heatwave of 2010 and the Pakistani flood in the same year. The Russian heatwave was especially significant to the global food price because it affected the traditional 'bread bowl' of the former Soviet Union. It led to a 66 per cent increase in the global price of wheat within two months and a lesser rise in other grain prices.

The floods in Pakistan displaced over 20 million people, some of them for months. Both events reduced crop production in 2010, sufficiently to contribute to a decline in per capita global grain production. Previously, the extraordinary European heatwave of 2003 also lowered crop yields. However, this event did not appreciably affect global food prices.

The US then experienced a severe drought and heatwave in 2011and 2012. Although the dryness has apparently occurred at other times in the last millennium, its conjunction with such heat may be unprecedented, and thus attributable in part to elevated greenhouse gas levels. The recent Somali famine may also be related causally to climate change. In the past three decades, the Indian Ocean has warmed especially fast, in association with increased precipitation over the tropical Indian Ocean.

### *Reversal of the burden of proof*

There is increasing support for the proposition that the burden of evidence concerning the contribution of climate changes to such events should be reversed. That is, some climate scientists are now advocating for the view that climate change should be accepted as a contributor to these extreme events until proved otherwise.

Overall, evidence suggests that the effects of climate change on land-based agriculture are increasingly adverse, especially for wheat and maize, but not (yet) for rice and soy. Nocturnal warming in tropical areas harms the yields of both wheat and maize.

The modelling of past and future agro-climatic effects is a formidable challenge. The decline detected in food production ascribed to climate change is likely to be understated, and that of future change even more so. Concern over future climate change and crops is amplified by increasing doubt over the benefits and strength of the carbon fertilisation effect, which may enhance the growth of pests and damage some crops, including cassava, a staple for about 750 million mostly poor people.

### *Famine and its effects*

Increased famines, consequent in part to climate change, appear likely. If left unaddressed, climate change threatens increasingly profound negative effects on food security, and hence on health and nutrition. Rising food prices stimulate social unrest and can contribute to the overthrow of governments. Conflict can occur easily due to the scarcity of raw materials, including food and fertile soil.

While climate change requires adaptation, mitigation is an even more important priority. The World Bank in 2013 warned that if the average temperature rose by 4 degrees, then the most alarming effect was likely to be on food production. Adapting crops to cope with drought, flood and inundation from the sea is feasible to a point, but only to thresholds which may soon be exceeded.

A holistic, global approach is required, which integrates society, education, health care, equity and technology.

*Butler C. Climate change, famine, hunger*
*[Climate] World Nutrition December 2014, **5**, 12, 1052-1053*



**WN** *Hot stuff*

# Vitamin A. Food as good medicine

***Access May 2010 Michael Latham The great vitamin A fiasco here***
***Access June 2010 letters in response to Michael Latham here***
***Access July 2010 letters in response to Michael Latham here***
***Access October 2010 Keith West, Rolf Klemm, Alfred Sommer on Vitamin A here***
***Access April 2014 FAO book Improving Diets and Nutrition here***
***Access October 2014 IJE John Mason, Ted Greiner et al on Vitamin A here***
***Access November 2014 Editorial here***
***Access November 2014 John Mason, Ted Greiner et al on Vitamin A here***
***Access November 2014 GAVA statement rebutting the IJE paper here***
***Access this issue Feedback on Vitamin A here***



*Vitamin A deficiency. Supplements or food: how best to save lives and protect health of children? Michael Latham; Keith West, Rolf Klemm, Alfred Sommer of Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. Brian Thompson, Leslie Amoroso of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization; John Mason, Ted Greiner, Roger Shrimpton, David Sanders, Joshua Yukich; Christine Stabell Benn*

## Editor's note

New readers can begin here, with access above to some of the key documents published on this extremely important and still controversial issue. This is how best to prevent vitamin A deficiency in all countries where this serious and potentially deadly condition is still prevalent. Leading official agencies, funders, research centres, policy makers, scholars and field workers remain divided. The polarised debate is between those who maintain and uphold the current prevailing policy and practice of universal high-dose vitamin A supplementation of young children, and those who believe this approach has limited benefit and should be phased out in favour of government backed food-based programmes. To be continued...

***The Update team reports:***

Those who doubt that population nutrition is a political issue, may change their minds as a result of reading key writing on how best to prevent vitamin A deficiency. Some published in *World Nutrition* in 2010 can be accessed here – see the links above.

It includes strong criticism by Michael Latham of Cornell University (top row left, above) of current global practice, which is to give very high dose supplements to all young children who can be reached in all countries where deficiency is identified as a substantial public health problem. It also includes a series of letters following Michael Latham's commentary, mostly supporting him, and a commentary rebutting him by Keith West, Rolf Klemm and Alfred Sommer of the Bloomberg Johns Hopkins School of Public Health (top row second, third and fourth from left, above), who are leading advocates of current practice.

In April this year the UN Food and Agriculture Organization published a report *Improving Diets and Nutrition. Food-Based Approaches*, edited by FAO officials Brian Thompson and Leslie Amoroso (top row, two right hand pictures). The report is dedicated to Michael Latham, and its first and keynote chapter is taken from his last address to FAO, in which he repeated his serious charges against current vitamin A supplementation policy.

The story has continued in other publications, and in *WN* last and this month. In October the *International Journal of Epidemiology* published a paper by John Mason of Tulane University, with Ted Greiner, Roger Shrimpton, David Sanders and Joshua Yukich (bottom row), whose analysis, conclusions and recommendations, updated with information published since 2010, essentially agree with those of Michael Latham. Since then another trial published in *Pediatrics* has come to light, the work of a team including Christine Stabell Benn (bottom row, right) which reinforces their conclusions. Last month *WN* published a commentary by John Mason and his colleagues in which they respond to questions asking them to give an account of their investigations and their thoughts and feelings on the vitamin A issue.

Simultaneously, the Global Alliance on Vitamin A published an 'Internal briefing note on need for rethinking vitamin A policies'. GAVA is 'an informal partnership' between the non-government organisation Helen Keller International, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health (where Alfred Sommer and Keith West work), the Micronutrient Initiative (the Canada-based organisation dedicated to alleviating 'hidden hunger', which supplies 75 per cent of all vitamin A supplements amounting since 1997 to 8 billion capsules), and the UN Children's Fund. This disagrees with the *International Journal of Epidemiology* paper, but agrees that the underlying causes of deficiency should be addressed – as stated for many years. *To be continued in WN*…

*The Update team. Vitamin A. Food as good medicine. Hot Stuff*
*World Nutrition December 2014, 5, 12, 1054-1055*




**WN** *The Food System*

# Needed: rational US and world food policy

***Access April 2013 Appraisal of Michael Pollan here***
***Access June 2014 Update on Olivier de Schutter here***
***Access 11-12 November New York Times Food for Tomorrow speeches here***

***The Update team reports:***



*How a national food policy could save millions of lives in the US. Statement in the Washington Post by (from left above) Mark Bittman, Michael Pollan, Ricardo Salvador, Olivier De Schutter*

Editor's note

This is edited from 'How a national food policy could save millions of American lives' published 7 November in the *Washington Post.* Mark Bittman writes for the *New York Times*. His speech at the *Times* 'Food for Tomorrow' conference, 11-12 November, *is available here.*, with *his 11 November column.* Michael Pollan is author of *Food Rules.* Ricardo Salvador is director of the food and environment programme, Union of Concerned Scientists. Olivier de Schutter was the UN special rapporteur on the right to food from 2008 to 2014.

How we produce and consume food has a bigger impact on the well-being of people than any other human activity. The food industry is the largest sector of our economy. Food touches everything from our health to the environment, climate change, economic inequality and the federal budget. Yet we have no plan or agreed-upon principles for managing US agriculture or the industrial food system as a whole.

That must change. 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. (The administration even named an Ebola czar to respond to a disease that threatens few people in the US.) So when hundreds of thousands of annual deaths are preventable – as those from the chronic diseases linked to our modern way of eating surely are – prevention is a national priority.

### *A nine-point national food policy*

A national food policy would do that, by investing resources to guarantee that:

1 All people in the US have access to healthful food.
2 Farm policies are designed to support public health and environmental objectives.
3 Our food supply is free of toxic bacteria, chemicals and drugs.
4 Production and marketing of our food are done transparently.
5 The food industry pays a fair wage to those it employs.
6 Food marketing sets children up for healthful lives by instilling in them a habit of eating real food.
7 Animals are treated with compassion and attention to their well-being.
8 The food system's carbon footprint is reduced, and the amount of carbon sequestered on farmland is increased.
9 The food system is sufficiently resilient to withstand the effects of climate change

Only those with a vested interest in the status quo would argue against creating public policies with these goals. But now weigh them against the reality that our current policies and public investments have given us. Because of unhealthy diets, 100 years of progress in improving public health and extending lifespan has been reversed. Today's children are expected to live shorter lives than their parents, a big reason being that one-third of these children will develop Type 2 diabetes, formerly rare in children, that reduces life expectancy by several years. Our fossil-fuel-dependent food and agriculture system is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than any other sector of the economy but energy.

We find ourselves in this situation because government policy in these areas is made piecemeal. Think of diet-related chronic disease, food safety, marketing to children, labour conditions, wages for farm and food-chain workers, immigration, water and air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and support for farmers. These issues are all connected to the food system. Yet they are overseen by eight federal agencies. Amid this incoherence, special interests thrive and the public good suffers.

### *Crazy contradictions*

In the early days of the Obama administration, there were signs that the new president recognised the problems of our food system and wanted to do something about them. He spoke about safety, transparency and competition in the food industry. Since then, the first lady has made childhood obesity her signature issue, elevating food on the national agenda. But as she raises awareness of healthy eating and tries to reform school lunches, she is struggling to undo the damage caused by outmoded agricultural policies that her husband has left largely undisturbed. The result is the spectacle of Michelle Obama warning against high-fructose corn syrup at the same time the president is signing farm bills that subsidise its production.

The contradictions of our government's policies around food become clear as soon as you compare the federal recommendations for the national diet, known as MyPlate, with the administration's agricultural policies. MyPlate recommends a diet of 50 per cent vegetables and fruits. But the administration devotes less than 1 per cent of farm subsidies to support those foods. More than 60 per cent subsidises the production of corn and other grains – food mostly fed to animals, converted to fuel for cars, or processed into precisely the sort of junk the first lady is urging us to avoid. One government is advancing two diametrically opposed goals.

Our food system is largely a product of agricultural policies that made sense when the most important public health problem concerning food was the lack of it and when the US saw 'feeding the world' as its mission. These policies succeeded in boosting the productivity of US farmers. Today they are obsolete and counter-productive, providing $US billions in public support to an industry that churns out a surfeit of unhealthy calories, while at the same time undermining the ability of the world's farmers to make a living from their land.

These farm policies have nourished an agricultural-industrial complex before which the president seems powerless. The administration's early efforts to use anti-trust laws to protect farmers and consumers from agribusiness oligopolies were dropped. When it came to regulating methane, one of the most potent greenhouse gases, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed stringent rules for the energy industry – and another voluntary programme for agriculture, the single biggest emitter of the gas. In February the president signed yet another business-as-usual farm bill, encouraging the dumping of cheap unhealthy calories in the supermarket.

These policies and the diet they sponsor threaten to undermine President Obama's Affordable Care Act. The government now finds itself in the absurd position of financing both sides in the war on type 2 diabetes, a disease that, along with its associated effects, now costs $245 billion, or 23 per cent of the national deficit in 2012, to treat each year. The government subsidises soda, while also writing cheques to pay for insulin pumps. This is not policy. This is insanity.

### *Here is the solution*

But solutions are within reach. The government has the power to reshape the food system. It has already done so once – when as president, Richard Nixon rejigged farm policy to boost production of corn and soy to drive down food prices. There is something the president can do now, on his own, to break the deadlock, much as he has done with climate change. In the next State of the Union address, he should announce an executive order establishing a national policy for food, health and well-being. By officially acknowledging the problem and by setting forth a few simple principles, the introduction of such a policy would create momentum for reform. By elevating food and farming to a matter of public concern rather than a parochial

interest, the president can make it much more difficult for the interests of agribusiness to prevail over those of public and environmental health.

The national food policy could be developed and implemented by a new White House council, which would co-ordinate policies and actions of government departments and agencies to make sure food production doesn't undermine environmental goals. A national food policy would lay the foundation for a food system in which healthful choices are accessible to all and in which it becomes possible to nourish ourselves without exploiting other people or nature.

As Obama begins his last two years facing an obstructionist Republican Congress, this is an area where he can act on his own – and his legacy may depend on him doing so. For he will be able to achieve his goals for health care, climate change, immigration and economic inequality, the four pillars of his second term, only if he addresses the industrial food system and its negative impact on those issues.

### *Progress in the US and Latin America*

There are precedents. Already a handful of states are developing food charters. Scores of US cities have established councils to expand access to healthful food.

Brazil and Mexico are far ahead of the United States in developing national food policies. Mexico's recognition of food as a key driver of public health led to the passage last year of a national tax on junk food and soda, which in the first year has reduced consumption of sugary drinks by 10 per cent and increased consumption of water. Brazil has had a national food policy since 2004. In the city of Belo Horizonte that policy, coupled with an investment of 2 per cent of the local budget in food-access and farmer-support programmes, has reduced poverty by 25 per cent and child mortality by 60 per cent, and provided access to credit for 2 million farmers.

A well-articulated national food policy in the US would make it much more difficult for Congress to pass bills that fly in its face. The very act of elevating food among the issues the White House addresses would build public support for reforms. And once the government embraces a goal such as 'We guarantee the right of everybody in the US to eat food that is healthy, green, fair and affordable', it becomes far more difficult to pass or sign a farm bill that erodes those guarantees.

Think of the food system as something that works for us rather than exploits us, something that encourages health rather than undermines it. That is the food system the people of the United States deserve. Barack Obama, in his remaining time in office, can begin to build it.

*Update team. Needed: rational US and world food policy*
*[The Food System] World Nutrition December 2014, **5**, 12, 1056-1059*

# WN
## Our extending family



*Nutrients, rights, food policy, psychology, politics, prevention – aspects of nutrition, as practiced by John Mason, Olivier de Schutter, Mark Lawrence, Hetty Einzig, George Kent, Isabela Sattamini*

Like money, nutrition is interesting and important in itself, and also in what it represents. This saying is borne out by the range of knowledge and interests of the new *WN* family members above.

John Mason (left), from Tulane University, New Orleans, USA, is a former general secretary of the UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition. He is lead author of last month's *WN* commentary and the recent *International Journal of Epidemiology* paper on vitamin A supplementation. This has attracted a series of letters in our *Feedback* letters section this month. Olivier de Schutter (next), professor of law at the University of Louvain in Belgium, is former UN special rapporteur on the human right to food. He is co-author of the statement on US food policy published in *Update* this month. Mark Lawrence (third from the left) from Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia, is a former general and membership secretary of the World Public Health Nutrition Association. Co-editor of the book *Public Health Nutrition,* he writes our guest editorial this month on the new Brazilian food- and meal-based dietary guidelines.

Hetty Einzig (third from the right), based in London, is an author and psychologist who trains corporate executives with special interest in food and well-being, who wrote our recent *Update* on farmers' markets, to which Sara Garduño-Diaz responds in *Feedback* this month. Next is George Kent, emeritus professor of political science at the University of Hawaii, USA. An authority on infant and child feeding, he is co-author with Michael Latham, Urban Jonsson and Elisabeth Sterken of a ground-breaking *WN* commentary on ready-to-use therapeutic food. His commentaries on nutrition and health in caring communities will be published in *WN* in the New Year. Finally (right), Isabela Sattamini, now of the National Cancer Institute in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is not a new *WN* family member. She has been with us since before the *World Nutrition Rio2012* conference, and has taken a lead in building up our *Feedback* section to what is now a regular 20 or more pages an issue. She is now central in *WN's* publishing and production work, as convenor of our team now working on the development of *WN* as an international on-line journal.