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Development. International Conference on Nutrition

The real issues are being evaded

Urban Jonsson and Claudio Schuftan report:

We write as public health nutrition professionals who have a long-standing and unswerving commitment to the purpose and principles of the United Nations, including its 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Here we comment on the state of negotiations at the UN system, and in particular the impact of the most powerful UN member states on global public health and nutrition. We give as a current example, the second UN International Conference on Nutrition (ICN), taking place this month in Rome.

In common with very many friends of the UN, many of whom work within the UN itself, national governments, social movements and professional and public interest civil society organisations, we are disturbed by lack of progress in the ICN preparatory process. Analysis of recent documents, and knowledge of the march of events since and before the first ICN in 1992, tells us that the basic reason for what looks like becoming a gravely disappointing ICN *Declaration and Framework for Action* is not technical. It is political.

The UN officials who are part of the secretariat of the conference are doing their best. The issue, as we see it, is the determination of rich and powerful member states in the global North, influenced by transnational corporations, to dilute the more pointed points of the draft documents. Their motive is to maintain the status-quo that entrenches their own and corporate power on key global decision making. This includes their refusal to allow any commitment to the fulfilment of human rights, which includes the right to nutrition which, of course, means securing universal access to adequate and nourishing diets.

Public interest civil societies and social movements have long been trying to engage in the ICN2 preparatory process, as previous reports in *WN*, accessed above, show.

They have constantly submitted recommendations to the draft documents with little acknowledgement and less influence until a late stage.

Frustration and indictment

Their frustration is reflected in a statement released to the press on 14 October. This indicts the draft ICN *Declaration* and *Framework for Action*. After negotiations in conference the conclusions include:

Unfair trade agreements, lack of investment in small-scale food production and support to agro-business models have led to displacement of small-scale producers all over the world. Marketing of ultra-processed products, high in energy, sugar and salt, has contributed to the surge of obesity the world over. The documents fail to recognise gender inequality and women's rights violations such as child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, violence against women, considered as the root causes of woman and child malnutrition. How can we expect a political declaration based on such a flawed diagnosis to serve as the basis for an effective and coherent framework for action?

We must point to similarities between the ICN2 preparatory documents, and the *UN Sustainable Development Goals* preparatory documents, both widely seen as giving a green light to corporations. In both there is (a) systematic avoidance of human rights principles and standards in development and nutrition plans, and (b) systematic evasion, in the recommendations, of binding promises by member states that could be measured and monitored by commensurate participatory processes.

As with the outcome documents of the 1992 ICN, the *Framework for Action* of ICN2, and indeed the overall vision of ICN2, originally was meant above all to protect the interests of the populations of impoverished countries in the global South, especially in Asia and Africa. But successive drafts of the *Framework* have been weakened, with only incidental reference to what we see as the fundamental issue of human rights. We see the signs of a concerted effort by some of the most powerful member states to protect their current prerogatives in world affairs. The public interest civil society and social movement complaint here is:

CSOs engaged in the ICN2 preparation repeatedly urged Member States to re-affirm that all food and nutrition related policies must be coherent with the realisation of the right to nutrition, as well as the full realisation of women's rights. They also requested governments to implement policies that are consistent with food being the expression of values, cultures, social relations and people's self-determination and sovereignty over their land and natural resources.

The real issues

The fundamental issues that must be addressed are the basic and underlying social, economic and political determinants of the states of population health and nutrition. This is surely obvious to those engaged in international public health nutrition. But:

CSOs repeatedly stressed that the primary response to the challenge of malnutrition in all its forms must be embedded in local food and agriculture systems based on food sovereignty, small-scale food producers, agro-biodiversity, deep ecological foundations and sustainable use of natural resources, native seeds and traditional knowledge as well as local markets. Furthermore, such responses must be coherently articulated with policies and strategies to ensure access to decent jobs and living salaries, universal access to quality health services, water and sanitation services, rights-based social protection, and other related ones, such as climate change resilience and mitigation.

Therefore, the response from those responsible for the ICN2 outcome documents has dismayed those concerned with the public interest and public health:

The voices of CSOs demanding that the documents reflect these issues went mostly unheard. Governments did not set the bar any higher than that set by the first International Conference on Nutrition in 1992. They ignored major developments of the past 22 years such as the increase of unaccountable power of transnational corporations and their undue influence in policy processes. The ICN2 outcome documents so far profoundly frustrated CSO and participating social movements' expectations due to the nature of these documents' weak and non-binding recommendations.

In this and other parallel high level international negotiations, civil society organisations and social movements are the one group of actors that consistently and resolutely uphold the principles on which the United Nations was founded. The UN absolutely must remain a force for equity and justice in the world. Their collective voice must be heard. But instead, there is now a new move, apparently sanctioned within the UN, that has invented a new group of 'stakeholders', with the name of 'non-state actors'. These 'NSAs' are composed of all groups outside government, in which are lumped together all genuine civil society organisations, with transnational corporations and their allied entities!

The views we express and indicate here are shared by representatives of many middle- and low-income UN member states. They have persistently argued in many UN conferences, negotiations and debates that, without structural reform, social, economic and environmental progress will remain impeded. In ICN2 debates' endless wrangling on this basic point has threatened to derail the entire process.

The public interest

Given the history of unfulfilled past UN treaty commitments, countries in the South, within the 'G77' group (now 133 member states plus China), are expecting the ICN2 outcome documents to be a step backwards. They predict that pressure from powerful governments in the North will ensure that the final documents will avoid commitment to human rights principles, will keep crucial goals diluted in imprecise language, and will evade any final binding resolutions on progress that can be measured or monitored by participatory processes set in motion. Many member

states in the South are wary of the domination of corporate finance in global economic development decision-making and in undemocratic governance systems. This is nothing but corporations complying with their bottom lines which, in practice, by-passes issues of human rights, citizen participation, transparency, accountability and real demonstrable evidence of progress.

These negotiations are complex, particularly due to sharp differences and disputes among UN member states. Taking this political reality into consideration, the way forward for ICN2 must ensure that the concluding negotiations are much more inclusive, transparent and accountable. In the final days and even hours of negotiations, the chronic resistance by some of the most powerful countries to agree on substantive language on human rights and on the means of implementation of significant nutrition action will continue to be publicly denounced.

Public interest civil society organisations working together with social movements will create space before and after the ICN2 for analysis on issues of conflict of interest and other public interest safeguards. This should in the future help to avoid stalemate in debates and – most importantly – failure to agree and enact sensible policies the present time calls for that are truly in the interests of the people of the global South.

Development team note:

This report is made with guidance from leaders of public interest civil society organisations engaged in discussion with UN agencies and representatives of member states. The *WN Development* team, and Urban Jonsson and Claudio Schuftan, give special thanks to Stefano Prato of the Society for International Development, Flavio Valente of FIAN International, Stineke Oenema of ICCO-Co-operation, Lida Llotska of the International Baby Milk Action Network, Alejandro Calvillo of *El Poder del Consumidor*, colleagues at the Third World Network, and many others. A number of aspects of the International Conference on Nutrition are contentious, and *WN* welcomes further debate to begin in December after the ICN sessions are concluded.

Urban Jonsson, a Swedish citizen living in Tanzania, was Chief of Nutrition of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) between 1990 and 1994, the period in which the first UN International Conference on Nutrition took place. Claudio Schuftan, a Chilean, German and US citizen living in Vietnam, a member of the *WN Development* team, has been global co-ordinator of the People's Health Movement campaign for the right to health.

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