

WN Editorial

World Nutrition Volume 5, Number 9, September 2014

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association

Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/

Nutrition and public health

The time to hesitate is ended

The only choice now, a colleague has said, is between being an advocate or an activist. There always come times for those concerned with public health or public policy generally, when conscience compels commitment. That time has come for us now. It came some while ago. We must all be citizens now, in our everyday as well as professional lives. In this we need humbly to accept that immiserated, oppressed and attacked people and populations are rather likely to have a better sense of what is going on in the world and what is being laid up in store, than do those of us whose material lives are comfortable.

The choice can be widened, to between advocacy, or activism, or agitation. This is a good time to recall the origin of the term 'agitator'. It was first used in 17th century England to identify elected representatives of Oliver Cromwell's New Army, whose task was to understand the realities of those days, so as to urge their fellow soldiers to stand up for their own rights, to shape what they were fighting for, and to work towards a just society. These first agitators were democrats, radicals in the proper sense of digging down to the roots of issues that confronted them. They have something to say to us now.

What will our grandchildren think of us?

In his wish for the Oxford meeting on 'Building healthy food systems' taking place this month, published in this issue, Fabio Gomes of the World Public Health Nutrition Association and of *WN*, hopes:

That like the previous *World Nutrition Rio2012* conference, it is a beginning. That like *Rio2012* its participants are dedicated to *knowledge-decision-action*. And following what we have learned since Rio, that we all come away in solidarity, knowing that in our work and lives we continue to do our best in the face of unique challenges and obstacles.

He goes further in thinking about living in the wider world, and ends with a guiding and moving idea of persuasive power:

That everything we do makes some contribution to the human rights of impoverished people in Africa and Asia and also in our own countries, cities and communities. That we all commit to open our minds and hearts to learn in the new world in which we live now. That we rejoice in our duties and responsibilities.

That we are prepared to put our careers on the line. That mentoring and inspiring young professionals is for us a sacred duty. And finally, I hope that when our grandchildren, living in the world that comes to pass, listen to our story, that they are proud of us.

The *WN* cover this month shows four smiling hopeful little children from the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. We believe that their futures, and those of the billions of children now alive and soon to be born, should be the principal concern of all wide-ranging public health initiatives. It is also time that we all stopped being self-centred, making ourselves and our own generation the focus of our thoughts and work. Further, we should no longer put humans first, for the sake of our own species as well as of all other and of the natural world and the biosphere.

Crisis of confidence

Barrie Margetts, prime mover of this month's Oxford meeting, rightly says:

It will only be by concerted, collective, global public action that we can positively shape future food systems so they are driven by what is best for the health and well-being of the planet and its people.

The meeting is being held two months before the UN International Conference on Nutrition, whose purpose is to convene member states to agree and act on agriculture, food and nutrition policies and programmes fit for our age and for the foreseeable future – let's say, to 2030.

One aim of the Oxford meeting is to bring together professional and public interest organisations and social movements, to advise and warn UN officials preparing for the Conference. The outlook is rather ominous. As stated in the Association's submission to the UN secretariat responsible for the draft Conference Framework for Action, a crisis of confidence is evident. Commenting on all submissions from civil society:

The most substantial comments made at all stages so far have come from representatives of large international or national civil society organisations. They and other submissions are similar in that they express varying degrees of concern ranging from disappointment to denunciation. The overall concern is what is seen as an inadequate draft, reflecting lack of capacity and avoidance of uncomfortable truths.

This is not a callow comment. Many civil society leaders have held responsible positions in the UN system, other international organisations, national governments, and many are scholars. Collectively they may well have more capacity than their counterparts now working for relevant UN agencies. The comment continues:

The strongest criticism comes from organisations that represent the interests of vulnerable populations and groups living in poverty, whose basic need is means to become sufficiently empowered and resourced, so that they can look after themselves. Instead, the Framework largely perpetuates the assumption that impoverished and disadvantaged populations need aid in the form of money, goods or interventions of types that by their nature are not sustainable or, worse, mystify or invalidate the people they are supposed to help.

Another hope for Oxford, therefore, is that it is a meeting of minds and of hearts, in which those outside and inside the UN system seek solutions in the public interest. Our world will be watching.

Building up our own capacity

Barrie Margetts, who is founder-editor of the journal *Public Health Nutrition*, and founder President of the Association, has dedicated much of his professional life to the cause of building professional capacity. Thousands of colleagues have been supported in their work and careers by *PHN*. He is right to emphasise capacity.

We at *WN* have a parallel responsibility, and we have now made moves in that direction. This month we publish news of a development that has been some time coming. Twelve more people join the *WN* editorial family. Some come by application, others by invitation. All are contributors to *WN*. They are nationals of Tanzania, Nepal, Peru, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, the UK, Germany, France, Belgium, Australia and the US. They work in universities or research centres, national governments, UN agencies or civil society organisations, or have done so. Some are early in their careers, others are distinguished scholars.

Our readers – and the *WN* editorial family – include professionals in UN agencies and national governments, public interest organisations and social movements, and academia. There is general agreement that our species is now faced with a blatantly obvious crisis. This tells anybody willing to think, that human impact is gradually moving towards the destruction of much of life on earth. It was not part of the plan to make a planet in which ants are emperors, but this could happen.

It is the job of a journal, when needs arise, to point such things out, as we do here. Journals may also define their times, rally support, identify solutions, and breed leaders. For all this, vision and principles guiding mission and work are needed. So now we mention an uncomfortable word and process, which is revolution.

This is not meant in the sense merely of a turning, nor in the sense which involves murder. Let's think of the revolution that is needed now, as revolving to revelation. This is of a new world guided by principles of harmony, balance, and tolerance. To this great end, advocacy, activism, and agitation, are all in order.

The editors