

WN *Editorial*

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The Anthropocene

The beginning of a new world

Understanding requires judgement. We do not know the future. But we may not understand what is happening now. We may all sense that the human species is headed towards catastrophe. We may know that signs of collapse are disruptions of agriculture, food and water systems and supplies, which increase insecurity and starvation. Hunger breeds anger. On 3 April World Bank President Jim Yong Kim warned that gross inequities are very dangerous, because access to media creates and magnifies rage and violent reaction of dispossessed and alienated populations. We are in a new world. But what sort of new world, and what is our part in it?

This time period now is identified as the Anthropocene, following the Holocene that began at the end of the Ice Ages about 12,000 years ago. The term means that the fate of the planet is in human hands. The prospects are not good. Projections are that human overuse and abuse of resources, causing climate change and other malign phenomena, has made a 'drain' down which the Earth's human and other living populations spiral in a vortex of disturbance, destruction and eventual collapse.

When food systems are disrupted, food and nutrition security is jeopardised. More populations and communities fall into misery and become dependent on foreign food 'aid'. Governments of the more vulnerable and fragile countries become increasingly unable to provide basic services. Forced migration to cities and other countries increase. Civil disturbances and riots become common and can lead to wars. This is not theory. It is all happening now, and it looks as if the disruption now is not just frequent but systemic. For example, fluctuation in the price and availability of basic staple foods, in part caused by the activities of commodity speculators, is one reason for chaos in North Africa and Syria, just as rocketing price of bread triggered the uprising of the common people that turned into the French Revolution.

So yes, the disruption and then destruction of societies is relevant to public health nutrition professionals – and all professionals, citizens and parents. No doubt you the reader still have a plentiful supply of food in your supermarket, and money to pay for the foods that are the basis for healthy diets. But more and more people do not – including in your own country, and in the city you live in or that is nearest to you.

The big issue is food

The magisterial Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) last month in its meeting in Yokohama made a big decision. For some time the mood of the IPCC has approached despair. The public mood on climate change, influenced by industry-friendly ‘deniers’, has shifted from alert alarm to resigned despondency or indifference. So the IPCC has switched its focus and is giving top priority to food. Climate change is reframed as above all an issue of food and nutrition security, for us all. The World Bank agrees. On 3 April, Bank president Jim Yong Kim said

Fights over water and food are going to be the most significant direct impacts of climate change in the next five to ten years. There's just no question about it.

Shrinking glaciers in the Himalayas are reducing water supplies to vast areas of South Asia and China. Rising sea levels in Asia are making rivers salty, which wrecks rice production. Production of heat-sensitive grains such as wheat and corn is already faltering. New types of drought are devastating harvests in Africa and also in the Iowa corn-belt, and some of what has been rich farmland in Russia and Australia is reverting to aridity. So prices of staple foods are rising and fluctuating everywhere, including in the supermarkets of policy-makers and citizens in Europe and North America, and will continue to do so. We need to join the dots.

The big issue of inequity

Disruption is one thing. Destruction is another. Are prophecies of massive societal collapse merely the ravings of wild-eyed fringe doom merchants? Not now, no. In mid-March [*Modeling Inequality and Use of Resources in the Collapse or Sustainability of Societies*](#), a paper from the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center at the Universities of Maryland and Minnesota, was made available. This foresees collapse in global industrial civilisation later this century. The causes identified are unsustainable exploitation of resources, a familiar reason; and inequitable distribution of wealth, an unusual diagnosis. ‘The process of rise-and-collapse is actually a recurrent cycle throughout history’, the paper points out. We may believe that

Modern civilization, armed with its greater technological capacity, scientific knowledge, and energy resources, will be able to survive and endure whatever crises historical societies succumbed to. But [an] overview of collapses demonstrates... the extent to which advanced, complex, and powerful societies are susceptible to collapse. The fall of the Roman empire, and the equally (if not more) advanced Han, Mauryan, and Gupta empires, as well as... Mesopotamian empires, are all testimony to the fact that advanced, sophisticated, complex, and creative civilizations can be both fragile and impermanent.

Humans have always been predators, with the living and physical world as prey. But humans also prey on one another. Slavery and extermination of the original American peoples are recent examples. Now, humans are separated into a small number of wealthy and powerful ‘elites’, the predators, and the ‘99 per cent’ of

impoverished and helpless 'commoners', their prey, who like all other resources are overused and abused, and like the Roman plebs are distracted, not with bread but burgers, not with circuses but video games. The greater the inequity between elites and commoners, the greater is the danger of societal collapse.

Given economic stratification, collapse is very difficult to avoid...The Elites eventually consume too much, resulting in a famine among Commoners that eventually causes the collapse of society... the Elites, due to their wealth, do not suffer the detrimental effects of the environmental collapse until much later than the Commoners. This buffer of wealth allows Elites to continue 'business as usual' despite the impending catastrophe. This...would help explain why historical collapses were allowed to occur by elites who appeared to be oblivious to the catastrophic trajectory.

A new world order

This analysis is frightening and also enlightening. It explains a mood of resignation to disaster. It sees a future where our grandchildren will despise us for our failure to see and act. But it also indicates what is to be done, and by whom.

Current political structures, in which elected 'leaders' are in reality the creatures of corporations that have vast power without any social responsibility, are merry-go-rounds to hell. But new leaders have almost miraculously emerged, and their significance needs to be recognised. José Mujica, the president of Uruguay, drives a beaten-up Beetle and lives with his wife in a simple farmhouse. Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, was elected as a consequence of riots against transnational corporations trying to grab ownership of the country's water. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, when elected as Pope, explained why he has adopted the name of Francis of Assisi the lover of nature, gives a lift in the PopeMobile to an old chum he sees in the crowd, lives in a hotel, answers the telephone, and lets it be known that he is being advised by champions of the oppressed such as liberation theologian Leonardo Boff.

Also, the armies that can lead and guide and be guided and led, already exist. Farmers in the Sahel, Colombia and India know more about what is happening in the world, than do the plenipotentiaries assembled at Davos or G8 meetings. They must rise up, as many have done, such as in Mexico's impoverished state of Chiapas.

There is a chance for a new world that makes sense. The future is with courageous social movements, established like Greenpeace, recent like The People's Health Movement, La Via Campesina and the Slow Food Movement, and spontaneous like Act Up!, Occupy!, and the manifestations against the invasion of Iraq and world trade deals. Such movements must consolidate, become more compelling than current political parties, and begin to make democracy meaningful. Then there is a real chance of a new age in which new types of leaders are elected, looking to a future in which our grandchildren and their grandchildren may be proud of us.

The editors