WN *The issue*

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Big Food Watch
Need to go global



Top row: Fabio Gomes, Juan Rivera, Alejandro Calvillo on Mexico; Philip James on agriculture; Geoffrey Cannon on history, Barrie Margetts on David Barker; Claudo Schuftan on The Lancet
Bottom row: People in the issue – Big Fooders, a president, a child, scholars, our Feedback editor

Editor's note

In this issue *WN* goes global. Its main theme as seen on our cover is *Big Food Watch*, whose network is convened by **Fabio Gomes** (top left above). In *Update* he tells the story of the new Mexican tax on sugared soft drinks and snack products and of the Mexican public health heroes Juan Rivera and Alejandro Calvillo (next to him above). Other contributors in this issue are (next four pictures top), **Philip James** telling how intensive animal breeding began in his *As I see it* column; **Gyorgy Scrinis** on margarine, butter and the *trans* fat fiasco; **Barrie Margetts** on his mentor David Barker in the *Inspiration* series; and **Claudio Schuftan** criticising the *Lancet* maternal and child nutrition series in *Feedback*.

The second row of pictures is of people featured in this issue. In *Big Food Watch Update* are Martina Gmür of the World Economic Forum, forecasting gloom and doom in 2014; Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto and a Mexican child drinking Coca-Cola; and visionary agriculturalist Kenneth Blaxter. Next is David Barker, originator of the fetal origins of health and disease theory. Then Robert Skidelsky, the historian of John Maynard Keynes, the economist who believed in equity, celebrated by **Geoffrey Cannon** in his *What do you think?* Column. On the right is our *Feedback* editor Isabela Sattamini.



Big Food Watch

Editor's note

Like all contributions to *WN* (unless otherwise stated) *Big Food Watch* is not an official Association initiative. As in this issue, *Big Food Watch* raises issues that need exposure, examination, discussion, and debate between those of varying views. Isabela Sattamini our Feedback editor invites responses, to wn.letters@gmail.com



Abu Dhabi, November. World Economic Forum. Martina Gmür, head of the 'network of global agenda councils'; Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard president. Meanwhile the street fighting continues

Big Food Watch convenor Fabio Gomes writes: This issue of *World Nutrition* includes a number of contributions identified as *Big Food Watch*. Our news section, *Update*, in which we keep *WN* topics current, is all *BFW* stories. Of these the first is on the new World Economic Forum report *Outlook on the Global Agenda 2014*. This predicts growth in inequity, despair, disturbance, cynicism and corruption.

Martina Gmür (above, left), is head of the WEF network of global agenda councils. Of the *Outlook* report she says: 'Our experts overwhelmingly agreed that rising societal tensions in the Middle East and North Africa will be the defining trend of 2014, alongside increasing inequality and unemployment. Respondents also showed their dissatisfaction with the state of global co-operation on… climate change, youth unemployment and poverty'. These are all phenomena caused in large part by the political and economic theories and practices championed by the WEF, and by the transnational corporations whose executives are in the majority at WEF meetings.

The second *Update* story is so far good news. The work done by public health champions like Juan Rivera and Alejandro Calvillo in Mexico has now culminated in laws agreed by the national senate and by president Enrique Peña Nieto, which will tax sweetened soft drinks (soda) and other ultra-processed products. The third *Update* tells a strange tale of what seems to be a very special private-public partnership between the transnational corporation Coca-Cola and the government of Spain.

Box 1

Going global



BIG FOOD WATCH

Big Food Watch convenor Fabio Gomes writes: Why *Big Food Watch*? Why the apparent preoccupation with transnational food and drink product corporations? What does this have to do with public health nutrition? And why does this matter in the global South, such as in India and China, and in Africa and the Middle East as well as Latin America?

The answer to the second question is easy. Big Food consists predominately of transnational corporations. These are colossal businesses. They operate globally. They source their human and material resources wherever in the world is most easy and cheap, preferably in countries whose government are amenable. They work to undersell or overwhelm other including national and local industries, or to take them over or drive them out of business.

In the global North where food systems are already dominated by processed products, the impact of Big Food is least obvious, except inasmuch as rates of obesity and diabetes continue to rise. But in the global South, in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and elsewhere, traditional food systems and dietary patterns are often still largely based on freshly prepared dishes and meals sourced from appropriate sustainable agriculture. These are now being rapidly displaced by energy-dense ready-to-consume often intensely palatable fatty, sugary or salty branded ultra-processed products, on which the profits of transnational corporations depend, and rates of obesity and related diseases are rocketing.

The case against Big Food will not be proved by randomised controlled trials, We are not faced with a technical issue. The pandemic of obesity is out of control and needs to be countered by radical action led by elected legislators at head of state level, working together. It is imperative that all who uphold public health and public goods resist the growth of Big Food, which includes Big Soda, Big Snack, Big Sugar and Big Alcohol. So the first question is we hope answered. It is hopeless to face transnational corporations on a national basis. They have to be confronted by global networks working in the public interest. *Big Food Watch* is small. But its initial members, announced in the next issue of *WN,* are collectively influential. We need to be transnational too, but in the reverse sense, of pooling all the best human and material resources in the interest of public health and public goods.

For any readers who still have doubts, here is what World Health Organization director-general Margaret Chan said in June this year, at a global public health conference. 'It is not just Big Tobacco anymore. Public health must also contend with Big Food, Big Soda, and Big Alcohol. All of these industries fear regulation, and protect themselves by using the same tactics . . . These . . . include front groups, lobbies, promises of self-regulation, lawsuits, and industry-funded research that confuse the evidence and keep the public in doubt. . . . This is formidable opposition. Market power readily translates into political power. Few governments prioritize health over big business. As we learned from experience with the tobacco industry, a powerful corporation can sell the public just about anything'.

For references relating to points made here please see the commentary in this issue of WN



Big Food Watch













Big Food Watch convenor Fabio Gomes writes: In the last issue of *WN* we worried about the conspicuous presence of Big Food at the 20th International Congress on Nutrition held in Granada, Spain in September. Here above is an extract from the official congress website showing the Platinum sponsors who paid €75,000 each. Gold and silver sponsors included Danone, Mondelēz (ex-Kraft) and General Mills.

For this issue of WN we asked nutrition scientists and other participants who spoke at the congress what they felt about all this. On the whole, those who spoke at Big Food-supported sessions felt that the association with industry is harmless or constructive. Thus, Martin Yeomans of the University of Sussex in the UK gave a talk on 'Sensory-enhancement of appetite and satiety', in a session sponsored by Ajinomoto, the world's biggest manufacturer of aspartame. He told us: 'Purely publically-funded meetings could end up overly politicised and not meet the objectives of changing international nutrition in an effective way, which can only be achieved by partnership with those producing and providing foods and drinks. Many multinational companies are better placed to achieve this, if directed appropriately by unbiased evidence-based science'.

Those who spoke independently, on the whole felt that conflicted industry support is harmful and destructive. Thus Stuart Gillespie of the Washington DC-based International Food Policy Research Institute, spoke on 'Securing and sustaining the political momentum for addressing malnutrition' with no support from industry. He told us: 'The International Union of Nutritional Sciences needs to explain why it continues to accept sponsorship from companies whose practices and products have consistently been shown to damage human health and nutrition. Why spend so much time and effort organising yet more scientific sessions on the drivers of the obesity epidemic when some of the main causes are sitting in the audience?' Read on!

Inspiration: David Barker
The origins of health and disease



Epidemiologist David Barker (above) is best known for the generally accepted 'Barker Hypothesis', a basis for the Developmental Origins of Health and Disease (DOHaD) organisation and journal

The WN editors write: *In Inspiration this issue,* Association president Barrie Margetts writes an appreciation of his mentor at Southampton University David Barker. In it Barrie tells how as a young researcher he made history. 'In 1986 David recruited more staff and asked some of us to scour the country for birth records. He had just published his first paper showing close links between infant mortality in the 1920s and subsequent deaths from heart disease half a century later in the same county. This was new'.

'But this important study was based on whole populations, and associations were not possible at the individual level. As a leading epidemiologist David was well aware that such associations could not be adequate evidence for a causal link between intrauterine events and subsequent risk of heart disease. In the UK parish and other local county records may be held for hundreds of years. David wanted to get hold of comparable data on a lot of individuals so we could follow them up through the National Health Service (NHS) central register to see if the association really was there. For several weeks we drove around the country. We focused on Hertfordshire, searching county archives, churches, charities and any other places that might hold records. One Friday afternoon, on my last call, I visited the Hertford County Archive. We had been there before and spoken with the county archivist and had been told that they had no relevant records'.

'When I called again that Friday I spoke to an assistant, and after a few moments she said to me quietly "the archivist told me to throw some records out, but I decided not to, and put them in the cellar", and she asked if I wanted to see them. I did indeed! In the cellar were rows of large ledgers. These were health visitor books, which seemed to run from around 1910 when the health visitor services were started up in Britain, to about 1930. On each page were the names of children, their birth-weight and weight at 1 year, and other information about breastfeeding and illnesses and other events, all handwritten'. These formed an early part of the basis of what has now become a generally accepted theory, of the fetal and early life origins of health and disease.

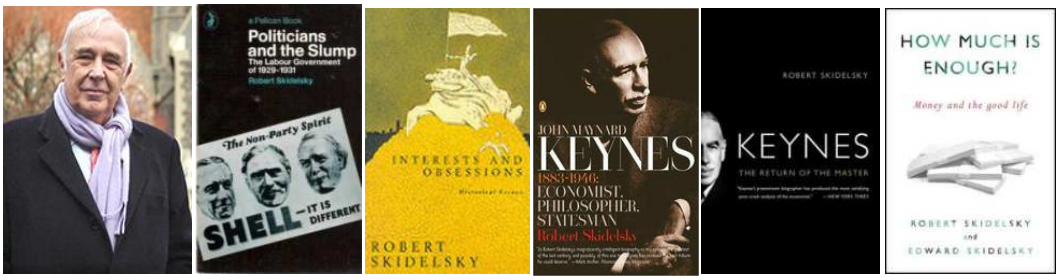
Nutritionism. Butter, margarine and trans-fats

The trouble with margarine



Spirals: Van Gogh's sky; earthworks; a caduceus; a nautilus; Klimt's Hygeia. The living world abounds in spirals. There are no straight lines in nature

Geoffrey Cannon writes. In most of my *What do you think?* columns, *as in this issue of WN*, I include spiral shapes, like those above here. They are not just decoration. Like, the World Health Organization has a reason to use the caduceus of serpents twined round a staff (centre, above) as its logo and as its symbol of health and healing. Spirals show us something we need to see and know. They tell us something we need to know about what 'progress' and 'development' mean, or should mean. There are no straight lines in nature. Even the horizon is curved. The linear ideology of progress which can be expressed as 'every day in every way, things are [or should be] getting better and better', which frames 'development' in terms of more and more material growth including increased gross national and personal getting and spending, is a delusion, as well as being wrong and doomed.



The historian of modern politics and economics Robert Skidelsky and five of his books, which go to the roots of values that should matter most to us now

My hero in my column this issue is the political and economic historian Robert Skidelsky. He is the biographer of the economist, philosopher and statesman *John Maynard Keynes*, in three volumes published over nearly 20 years between 1983 and 2000, and then in one condensed 1,000+ page volume. He is a scholar of deep knowledge, humanity and wisdom who we need to hear and learn from now. In championing the fundamental compassionate philosophy of Keynes, he is one of the public intellectuals most needed now, to escape out of the mad folly and misery of casino capitalism which, among other evils, continues to wreck public health and cause food and nutrition insecurity, worst of all in Asia and Africa.

WN

Normal service

Editor's note





The tropics seethe with life, including insects that carry serious and even lethal diseases (a dengue mosquito, left) and also fruits, nuts, seeds, and greens from the garden (right)

Geoffrey Cannon writes: Readers will be aware that this issue of *WN*, on-line for December, is nominally for October-December. We have missed two issues. Readers may also know that much of the editorial work is done in Brazil, where I live. Well, dear readers, living in the tropics is wonderful in many ways. But here the ants are the size of rats, the rats are the size of dogs (I jest), and some tropical diseases are fearsome (this is not a joke) and I have been unwell for a couple of months (many thanks for many kind enquiries; better now).

Above left is a dengue mosquito after having had its dinner of blood. You can tell a dengue mosquito by its striped legs, a bit like a footballer's socks. Dengue, once known as break-back fever, is epidemic in Brazil, and has increased worldwide by a factor of 30 since 1960. It prostrated a *WN* editorial colleague this summer, and the deadly haemorrhagic version killed a healthy member of my Brazilian family in October. One theory why I have been unwell is various insect toxins. Armed with Nevin Scrimshaw's classic 1968 *Interactions of Nutrition and Infection,* my treatment remains naturopathic – at right you can see the size of the leaves of *couve* (a kind of kale) we grow in our garden and enjoy at lunch. Meanwhile we are building up the *WN* editorial team. More of this in the January issue of *WN.*

Status

This issue is reviewed by members of the editorial team. Readers may use material here if acknowledgement is given to the Association, and *WN* is cited. Please cite as: Anon. Big Food Watch. Need to go global [*The issue*]. *World Nutrition* October-December 2013, **4**,8, 590-596. Obtainable at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/ Contributions to *World Nutrition* are the copyright and responsibility of their authors. They should not be taken to be the view or policy of the World Public Health Nutrition Association (the Association) or of any affiliated or associated bodies, unless this is explicitly stated.