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Editorial

UN Standing Committee on Nutrition: Is it necessary to re-invent it?

[Access the pdf of the related May editorial here from www.wphna.org](http://www.wphna.org)

The UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) is of great interest and concern to Association members, many of whom have been involved with the SCN, some for many years. So here is good news. Association Council member *Denise Costa Coitinho* is the new SCN executive secretary. This follows the promising appointment of Alexander Müller as SCN chair in December 2008. More good news is that the SCN Secretariat is doing a great job, as anybody who accesses the SCN website knows. So now is a good time to take a look at the SCN, and to look forward to what it should and hopefully can recover, become and achieve.

We support the UN and the SCN

The Association website carried comments on the SCN in an editorial last month, and this month **World Nutrition** carries a response from *Alexander Müller*, in which he invites us to remain friendly appraisers of the SCN. We gladly accept, and we invite responses to this editorial from readers, including Association members.

As a declaration of faith and as an evidence-based judgment, we can safely say that the Association and *WN* believe in and support the United Nations system. For all its shortcomings, without it we might now mostly be dead or unborn. The main

problem with the UN and its agencies is enfeeblement. They have been starved of unrestricted funds, subjected to unwarranted and even outrageous pressure and meddling, and in this century have been undermined by the most powerful member states. The accusing finger does not point at the UN system. The United Nations can only be as good, in any sense, as the great powers are prepared to let it be.

The signals from the US State Department during this Obama administration now indicate renewed respect for the UN and also for other member states, including those who remain dependent on foreign support. In this issue of *WN* we carry an edited version of a speech by *Secretary of State Hillary Clinton* which indicates an easing of the use of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) as a tool of 'soft' imperialism. It is still early days, and the government of the USA at all levels is now suffering a reactionary backlash. The time of rejoicing will come only when impoverished countries that have been and are still being robbed of their treasure, are released from their external debt burdens. But so far, so fairly good.

Members of the Association are also likely to be united in support of a representative and accountable SCN. Set up in 1977 as a deliberative and the harmonising body for UN food and nutrition policy, the SCN can also only be as good as the UN agencies who fund and control it are prepared to let it be. Now we must be circumspect. Some Association members, including members of the *WN* editorial team and our advisors, have inside knowledge of and strong views on the SCN. So the remarks here about its governance will be confined to what is already publicly known.

The 'big 4+1' who call the shots

People who encounter the SCN often say that if it did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. A total of over 20 UN agencies with a few other bodies, are SCN members. In practice, and with time passing, its shots have been mostly called by 'the big four+one'. These are the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) of which Alexander Müller is an assistant director-general, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Programme (WFP) – these four, together with the 'one', the World Bank, which to many peoples' surprise or amazement, is classified as a UN body. Other agencies such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), UN-Habitat (concerned with cities), and the International Labour Office (ILO) have no real standing within the SCN. They should have, irrespective of inability to stump up substantial funding.

The UN family is perhaps as quarrelsome as any family. Some of the reasons for its differences of view are different and sometimes conflicting philosophies and

programmes. WHO, whose work corresponds to that of national government health ministries, is mostly concerned with the prevention and treatment of disease, within a broadly medical framework. FAO, whose remit is much the same as that of national ministries of food, agriculture, fisheries and to some extent development, focuses more on food production and supplies. UNICEF and WFP have similar missions, which include special attention to crises and emergencies, particularly among vulnerable populations. UNICEF also has a tradition of championing breastfeeding, and with WFP works closely with donor countries, also known as 'bilaterals', of which the richest is the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

So on some basic issues, the 'big four' agencies are bound not to agree. One clear example is becoming evident in the pages of *WN* this month. UNICEF, and to a less dogmatic extent WHO, are committed to programmes designed to prevent and alleviate undernutrition that are quasi-medical, using supplements in effect as 'magic bullet' drugs. FAO is committed to agriculture- and food-based programmes that are meant to be sustainable. These positions are bound to clash. This is one compelling reason for the SCN. But much depends on how reasonable and accommodating its heavy-hitters, and also their bosses the heads of their agencies, are prepared to be.

A dark decade

The 'four+one' agencies have a dominant majority on the SCN governing body, its 'steering committee'. Here there has been and is more trouble. Of the five, three (UNICEF, WFP, the World Bank) have chief executives whose appointment is controlled by the US government. This fact of itself does not vitiate the proper purpose of the SCN. But it is evidence-based to judge that during the dark eight years of the administration of the younger George Bush, contemptuous of and sometimes virulently hostile to the UN system, abuse of US power did mess up the SCN, as well as the UN itself.

Much of what goes on the world depends on the mood of the US government. The younger Bush administration appointed two Republican politicians to head UNICEF and WFP (one is still in post), and another, Paul Wolfowitz, a US imperialist notoriously contemptuous of the UN, as head of the World Bank. Successive appointments to the post of US ambassador to the UN were at least as outrageous.

Worse yet for us concerned with international public health food and nutrition policy and practice, the US administration, directly or through surrogates, chose as two successive chairs of the SCN two US citizens, Republican politicians loyal to and dependent on the Bush regime, who both became notorious for their – well, let's just say shortcomings – when in post. Deliberately or not, and notwithstanding the

impressive stamina and patience of Association founder member Roger Shrimpton, Denise Coitinho's predecessor as SCN executive secretary, the SCN was damaged, some thought beyond recovery, during this period.

A changing profile

In its first decades, the SCN was more or less a UN closed shop. Its inner circles included academics, some from the UN University (UNU) and also others well known to and trusted by the agencies as regular insider expert advisors. Some of its products were highly influential: one example being the 'Beaton report' on vitamin A supplementation (1) cited by Michael Latham in last month's *WN* commentary.

Starting around the turn of this century, the nature and mood of the SCN changed, for two separate and opposing reasons. It had always included some 'bilaterals' – usually representatives of aid and development agencies of donor countries. Starting with the annual week-long meeting held in 2000 in Washington DC, civil society organisations emerged as numerically large. The 'CSNGO' constituency had – and has – practically no formal say in the SCN, but gained a considerable amount of informal influence. A lot of its members were – and are – people who are well networked within the UN system, and some of these know how to make policies that can work at least as well as anybody else in the SCN. The CSNGOs are a loose grouping of academics, non-profit while commercially-friendly aid organisations, and 'activist' groups, notably those concerned with breastfeeding and also with human rights. Its chair and the bilaterals' chair are members of the SCN steering group.

Problems of privatisation

The opposing driving force in the 2000s has been part of the general move to privatise public health. The UN agencies have little disposable money and, whether they like this or not (some don't, some do) have promoted 'public-private partnerships'. These are supposed to involve all 'stakeholders', but are really set up to attract and engage the food, drink and associated industries. As part of this new deal, which has also involved big new outside players, notably the Gates Foundation, in the 2000s successive chairs of the SCN pressed to have 'the private sector' admitted as a fourth constituency. This proposal has been consistently resisted by the bilateral and the CSNGO group, and by some of the UN agencies and, as *Alexander Müller states* in our letters pages this month, has not – or not yet – been agreed.

Most reasonable people probably agree that industry must be involved with the SCN. This is certainly the view of the *WN* editorial team. The problem is that what 'industry' in practice means, is Big Food and Drink. These are the very powerful

transnational food and drink manufacturing and allied industries, whose commercial interests conflict with those of public health, who are united in their determination to thwart any curb on their freedom to make money any legal way they want.

It is one thing to invite the transport, energy, insurance and even banking industries to be part of the governance of the SCN. It is one thing to invite a range of food producers, distributors and retailers, or even the whole range of the food and drink industry, as long as the appropriate people are chosen by the SCN itself. It is quite another thing when as it turns out, 'the private sector' means Big Food and Drink, and also Big Snack, Big Fat, Big Sugar and Big Salt – companies such as Nestlé, Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Co, Kraft, Unilever, Kellogg, McDonald's and Yum! Brands, also united in their determination to penetrate their brands deeper into lower-income countries. And it is another thing when such companies are free to send who they like to meetings, and the people who turn up are not main Board directors with direct decision power, but corporate affairs and public relations people charged to spin and limit damage – the general experience of 'public-private partnerships' so far.

Here is the nettle that Alexander Müller must grasp. We wish him well.

Two scenarios

The SCN is now in the process either of being reformed, or re-formed. Radical reformation, which we understand is favoured by certainly three of the 'four+one', would revert the SCN to being a practically exclusive UN group, free to draw on outside experts and to gain outside funds, from foundations and perhaps also from industry, as it chose. This involves kicking out the bilateral and civil society groups as constituencies with their own identities, and abolishing the working groups involving all constituencies that deliberate on issues such as human rights, breastfeeding, and the nutrition-infection nexus. The only non-government organisations to be individually admitted would be those that 'paid their way' with subscriptions, as well as paying for their expenses, skills, and time. This scenario is also favoured by a number of academics who anticipate being in the inner circle. These include some, jocularly known as 'the Boston Stranglers', who are associated with the 'business interest NGO' (BINGO), the *International Life Sciences Institute*. This journal will remain hostile to this scenario.

Careful re-formation of the SCN, of what organically grew in the 2000s, would make for a closer and more collegiate relationship between the three UN, bilateral and civil society constituencies, always accepting that the SCN is a UN body. This can include industry as a new group, but with meticulous exclusion of conflicted industry, who may however be informally consulted. Re-formation is favoured by the bilaterals and

the civil society group, and also – we must be circumspect here – by some UN members of the steering committee, including some with substantial influence. No names! This journal will remain a champion of this scenario.

Reasons to be cheerful

We also sense the beginnings of a sea-change in our world and the world, away from greed, towards solidarity. Honest people are gaining heart. With the SCN, one reason to be cheerful is that Alexander Müller's day job is with a UN agency committed to the food-based approach to nutrition and health, and in his previous work as a Green politician in Germany, he does not need to be taught about the social, economic, political and environmental dimensions of food systems and food policy. Also, he is proving to be resilient, patient, positive, and, let it be said, rather brave.

The appointment of Denise Coitinho as the new executive secretary of the SCN, given that she is entrusted within reasonable constraints to get on with the job, is another good sign, for the SCN, for the UN, and for world public health food and nutrition policy and practice, as well as for the Association.

Denise is not the first woman to have this central position within the SCN, but remarkably, following a Brit, a Canadian, and a Brit, as a Brazilian she is the first from the South. She is well qualified. She recently served as the WHO head of its nutrition department. As such she was for a while vice-chairman of the SCN. She then worked with the UN World Food Programme in Rome, setting up REACH, the intra-agency UN agency initiative supported with outside money notably from the Gates Foundation, whose purpose is to end child hunger and undernutrition. She also has strong academic, government and civil society organisation experience.

As head of the food and nutrition policy unit within the Brazilian federal Ministry of Health, she was also a professor of nutrition at the federal university of Brasília. Much of her time in government coincided with the period when José Serra, who probably will be President of Brazil as from 2011 for four or eight years, was Minister of Health. Guided by his leadership, she became a leading representative of Brazil in some tough World Health Organization debates, notably on infant and young child feeding in 2001-2002. He also entrusted her with the administration of the vast *Bolsa Alimentação* (food basket) programme. Her long-standing civil society engagement and sympathy has been and is notably with the breastfeeding and human rights movements, in Brazil and globally. As a Brazilian unelected politician, she knows that politics in Brazil is very 'political'. Her task now, working with Alexander Müller, is to identify the principles to stand by that are beyond politicking. In this task she needs friends, and many are here, within this Association. .

Acknowledgement

A substantial number of Association members have been involved with the SCN, or served on its working parties, some for many years. While the views of some of these are known to the drafters of this editorial, the usual policy of WTN is that while editorials are the responsibility of the editorial team, reviewers are named, and it seemed appropriate not to ask any of them to be reviewers. Responses are as always, welcomed.

Reference

- 1 Beaton GH, Martorell R, Aronson KJ, Edmonston B, Ross AC, Harvey B, McCabe G. *Effectiveness of vitamin A supplementation in the control of young child morbidity and mortality in developing countries*. Toronto: CIDA, 1993. ACC/SCN Nutrition policy discussion paper 13. (online at http://www.unscn.org/layout/modules/resources/files/Policy_paper_No_13)

Request

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