

## WN Editorial

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## Global Nutrition Report Development as fighting for freedom

[The Global Nutrition Report 2015](#), released in September, is a massive production of the official, mainstream international nutrition networks. The contributors include close to a hundred experts from international institutions, national governments, foundations and universities. The report begins with pages of rave previews from distinguished or celebrated people. This epic undertaking will surely shape policy and priorities to be agreed at the 2016 Nutrition for Growth meeting in Rio de Janeiro. With such great influence comes great responsibility.

Here we, young members of the *WN* editorial team, have evaluated the report in the context of *WN*'s mission and scope. To make tangible and sustainable improvements in global nutrition, duty-bearers must work to ensure that programmes are well-functioning and effective in local contexts; that negative forces are contained; and that community empowerment is supported and sustained at local level. We find that the Report meets these needs in some respects, but not in others.

### Messages

Good nutrition is not just about avoiding vitamin deficiencies or stunting. Well-nourished people and populations are able to function, create, solve problems and seize opportunities at full physical and intellectual capacity. Nutrition is thus a driver of human development. The report acknowledges this:

Without good nutrition, human beings cannot achieve their full potential. When people's nutrition status improves, it helps break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, generates economic growth, and leads to a host of benefits for individuals, families, communities, and countries....Good nutrition is, in short, an essential driver of sustainable development.

But how to improve nutrition status? And what is the role of Big Food? Manufacturing and catering corporations whose products are unhealthy, and that relentlessly maximise their profits and their share value on the international money markets, impede such development. Their methods include funding and shaping public health conferences and other events, thus orienting discourse, and lobbying for policies such as corporate-friendly land acquisition that damage public health and public goods. The report sounds an equivocal note of caution:

Like other actors, businesses make choices that may lead to both positive and negative outcomes for nutrition...Mechanisms exist for making businesses more accountable... However, given the relative capacities of some governments and large corporations, implementation of these mechanisms is likely to be weak

### ***Context***

Effective nutrition interventions strengthen and empower communities and local populations. Creating or reinforcing resilient 'grassroots' movements with the active agreement and participation of the people most affected themselves, is essential for sustained progress. But this is not a theme in the report. It maintains the establishment paradigm that big public and private organisations and their experts are and should be the dominant actors in nutrition progress, with its repeated lists of 'stakeholders' that include 'governments, international agencies, civil society organizations, and businesses'. What about the people themselves?

The report self-admittedly 'contains a lot of numbers'. These amount to an awe-inducing quantification of the nutrition status of billions of human beings. Crunched numbers and pooled data help to understand general trends, but over-simplify complex realities. The quantities in the report do not address qualitative factors such as social, cultural, environmental and psychological contexts. The implication is that these are insignificant or non-existent. The consequence is that policy-makers are once again given leave to persevere with one-size-fits-all, top-down programmes of the type which are now proved usually not to have much effect, or to make problems worse.

### ***Systems***

Towards the end of the report, the conditions under which food is produced, promoted and distributed are touched upon. These and all stages in food supplies are manipulated by Big Food for its commercial interests. Corporations need to be curbed. But how? Policy-makers who work independently from industry are usually clear that statutory including fiscal regulation is essential. The report is also rather vague here:

Moving business activity toward more positive nutritional outcomes will require a number of elements [including] greater transparency of actions by businesses and those working with them, a more robust evidence base about the influence of different types of businesses on nutrition outcomes, metrics and criteria to guide decisions about appropriate engagement of governments and international agencies with businesses, stronger government frameworks for regulating businesses, and stronger accountability and enforcement mechanisms.

The rapid rise of obesity and diseases such as diabetes is a vast crisis, which cannot be effectively addressed by strategies developed for prevention and reduction of hunger and stunting. A basic cause of chronic non-communicable diseases is the activities of transnational and other powerful corporations, who by their nature cannot be part of any 'cure'. The report hints at this:

Decisions about improving food systems depend not only on technical considerations, but also on the political economy of food systems.

It does include some points on negative aspects of industrial food systems, such as excessive meat consumption. But it refers to ultra-processing haphazardly, and falls back on the rather empty term 'packaged food'. It also fails to highlight the value of traditional food systems. In its chapter on food systems, the classification of agriculture systems as 'emerging', 'transitioning' or 'mixed' to us implies that natural evolution means more industrialisation. The indicator chosen to evaluate agricultural productivity is the World Bank's 'value added per worker', meaning that the fewer workers a system has, and thus the more mechanised, the better.

### ***Democracy***

In one of the many commissioned side-bars in the report, former UN rapporteur on the right to food Olivier de Schutter quotes Amartya Sen as stating: 'Famine does not occur in democracies'. We ask: do obesity epidemics, resource exploitation and inequities merely 'occur', as if these are accidents of nature?

The report ends with a call for action towards sustainable development and nutrition improvement. We read this as 'nutrition interventions as usual'. But up to now, the usual strategies have generally had little good effect, or have failed. We do not think that success will come simply by 'scaling up' with more imported money, directors, managers and technicians, as the report implies and its sponsors advocate. Top-down strategies keep the bottom down.

On behalf of young professionals, we ask those who are controlling the *Global Nutrition Report* to insist on a genuinely democratic, empowering and decentralised approach to nutrition at the Nutrition for Growth meeting in 2016. Authentic power must come from claim-holders, the people most immediately and crucially affected.

What the malnourished need today is not more experts prescribing powdered nutrients, vitamin pills, and corporate-friendly deregulation. The real need is for human and material investment in locally-led empowerment. This should enable currently marginalised, impoverished and vulnerable populations to improve the conditions essential for their own nutrition. In so doing, they will be citizens united against oppression and invasion by all types of force, transnational, national or local, that impede their rights and freedoms, and able to be builders of more representative systems of governance. Such community leaders should also be prominent among the shapers and authors of the next *Global Nutrition Report*.

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