WN *Editorial*

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The state of our world
Time to cultivate virtue

The *Guest editorial in this issue* of *WN* is by the moral philosopher *Thomas Pogge*, director of the Global Justice Program at Yale University. It is disturbing. He has examined official estimates of the very many millions of undernourished (food-insecure, often hungry) people in the world. These figures seem to show that this vast outrage is being resolved. He finds that any such comfortable conclusion is wrong. The figures evidently are an artifact of statistical manipulation. He says:

> The FAO's new methodology vastly understates the number of chronically undernourished populations and people. This produces a much-too-rosy trend picture. And this is not an isolated case. There have been various other changes in definitions and measurement methods associated with other MDG targets which have also resulted in rosier trend-lines. It is improbable that this is just a random coincidence.

Nice numbers

This seems to mean that officials at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization have 'cooked the books', just as corporate accountants 'massage' sales and trend figures to give legislators, speculators and shareholders a sense of well-being. This is common practice. A joke statisticians are fond of is 'if you torture the data long enough, they will tell you what you want to know'. Thomas Pogge goes on to say

> FAO official decisions may well be driven by the best intentions. Like with other UN agencies, top officers of the FAO serve at the pleasure of politicians and get funding from politicians; and may have to help politicians defend their policies, notably their grand globalisation project. If I were an FAO official, I might give politicians nicer-looking numbers and trend figures in exchange for greater support for FAO's work.

Massaging information is duplicitous. It also may be discovered. Two examples are the 'intelligence' briefings that were 'sexed up' to 'prove' the existence of 'weapons of mass destruction', the pretext for US and UK armies to invade Iraq in 2003; and the 'optimistic' corporate accounting that led to the US, UK and then global banking and financial crises starting in 2007.

Manipulation of the numbers of hungry people in the world is also serious, and also is storing up trouble. Further, the state of nutrition in general, as professed and as practiced, does not look good. In 2006 *Barrie Margetts published a scorching editorial* in *Public Health Nutrition,* 'Stopping the rot in nutrition science'. Thus:

> As editor of this journal, my conclusion is that the opportunities for venality, corruption and fraud in nutrition science are now too manifest, and the guards against them too casual… The indictment is less of individuals, more of a culture that puts much temptation in the way of researchers who, seeing the rewards of greed all around, think of cooking their books, padding their bank accounts or modifying their opinions, do so once, and have reason to believe that the risk of discovery or even of criticism is slight.

Shades of grey

A sense of proportion is needed. Most people at all levels in nutrition and allied disciplines surely do the best they can. Professionals engaged with impoverished communities to resolve food insecurity and who revive malnourished children deserve special respect. All sources of funding are shades of grey. It is wrong to see individual bad acts as typical. All this said, the pressures and temptations to bend and twist ethical standards are ever-heavier and more alluring. For instance, corporations tout job prospects to young professionals at nutrition conferences, which now look like trade fairs, and offer lucrative salaries and pensions to distinguished or influential people in public life with excellent contacts and flexible opinions.

One dictionary sense of 'corrupt' is 'Make mouldy or rotten; turn from a sound to an unsound condition'. In this sense, how corrupted is nutrition? A list of types of bad or wrong practice and behaviour could and should be made. It would not be a short list. Meanwhile here are just some examples from this month's issue of *WN*.

General indictment. The WN Project Phoenix series continues with the indictments (not judgements) that conventional nutrition science is impotent, complacent and venal. The charges made, followed in our next issue with positive recommendations for rebirth, are supported by other contributions in this issue.

Complicity with vested interests. In *Update*, the *International Baby Food Action Network* makes a pungent critique of a WHO report meant to be a plan to end childhood obesity:

> Promotion of multi-stakeholder approaches [is stated] as a 'requirement' with no evidence for this conclusion and with minimal reference to their risks… Minimal reference is given to the need for governments and UN bodies to have strong conflict of interest safeguards in place to ensure that policy-setting processes are free as possible from commercial influence so that appropriate and effective regulations can be adopted.

Bad science. In this month's commentary 'The "eat chocolate, get slim" sting', *John Bohannan* shows that nutrition journals as well as media reporters are wide open to publish and promote nutrition research that is flimsy, slanted or phoney:

> People who are desperate for reliable information face a bewildering array of diet guidance – salt is bad, salt is good, protein is good, protein is bad, fat is bad, fat is good...

> But science will figure it out, right? Now that we're calling obesity an epidemic, funding will flow to the best scientists and all of this noise will die down, leaving us with clear answers to the causes and treatments…. Or maybe not.

Control by industry. In *Update*, *US biochemist Fred Kummerow* outlines his discovery dating back to the 1950s that *trans* fats are toxic. Ignored and marginalised for decades, his cause was taken up by Walter Willett at the Harvard School of Public Health, and at long last the US regulators have in effect banned the partial hydrogenation process that generates industrial *trans* fats. Why the delay? Fred Kummerow says laconically:

> The industry told the health authorities that *trans* fats were not dangerous. The industry liked the properties that *trans* fats bring to their products. *Trans* fats add a pleasant texture and extend the shelf life of their products that the public liked.

There is a cosy context here that is easy to ignore and hard to admit. Policy makers in the UN, governments, and the medical and nutrition professions, usually – not always – conform with what corporations want and ask. Now with the rapid growth of 'public-private partnerships' in which all too often transnational corporations set agenda and call shots, this is much more troublesome than previously.

Comfort and conscience

The profession of science may be comparatively ethical. But as *Pope Francis* points out in this month's *WN*, we all now live in a world whose still-dominant political and economic ideology breeds greed for money and power. In scholarly as well as commercial and political life, it is evident that the race is usually won by the ruthless.

We all know, or at least sense, that too many prosperous and powerful people are immoral. We all live in a corrupting culture. Specific bad acts, ranging from oblivious, careless or selfish, to greedy, venal or vicious, run along the lines of least resistance. It is also hard to stay steady and to hold fast to that which is true. Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and Presbyterian minister *Chris Hedges*, says:

> We refuse – because we cannot think, and no longer listen to those who do think – to see what is about to happen to us. We have created entertaining mechanisms to obscure and silence the harsh truths, from climate change to the collapse of globalisation to our enslavement to corporate power, which will mean our self-destruction.

Comfort eases conscience. So many pliable people succeed, that upright people may be seen by others and by themselves not as wise, but as foolish or losers.

The 2006 *PHN* editorial ends with a quote from the poet Samuel Butler (1613-1680):

> Vices, like weeds, grow by being neglected. Virtues, like herbs, degenerate and grow wild, if there be not care taken of them. . . Many virtues may become vices by being ill-managed.

Now is the time for rebirth, and for the careful, constant cultivation of virtue.

The editors