

Introduction to the third issue of World Nutrition for 2022

The late Hans Rosling (the founder of <https://www.gapminder.org/>) was my officemate at Uppsala University for many years. He was a brilliant pedagogue. He would simplify information, almost alarmingly, in a way that was a bit shocking (often a bit humorous) so that one had to overcome an initial feeling of disbelief before realizing the truth of what he said. An example: the day I started work (in 1985, as full-time nutrition advisor to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), he said, “Ted, du måste förstå att Sidas jobb är att bli av med pengarna utan att komma in i tidningen.” Development cooperation donor agencies’ actual job is “be relieved of their money” in ways that don’t make any waves in the mass media. A deep insight I would increasingly appreciate during my 19 years working with them.

Hans’ PhD research was based on a mysterious epidemic of permanent partial paralysis that occurred overnight in 1981 in a village in northern Mozambique, a huge geographical area where he was the only practicing physician. Suspecting, after interviewing the old people in the area, that there was a dietary cause to the epidemic, he had to learn research and dietary methods en passant so to speak. (He eventually showed that it was due to cyanide poisoning from poorly processed bitter cassava, naming the disease konzo.)

Based on having struggled learning those things himself, he enjoyed shocking fellow physicians (used to being given positions of leadership in research and nutrition settings), suggesting they leave both to actual experts. “After all, we doctors only have a bachelor’s degree,” he’d say. “And diet and nutrition are far too complex to be understood by the likes of us.”

This all leads me to the fact that, given diet is undoubtedly the single most important underlying factor in global health subject to intervention, dietary research has been incredibly neglected because of its complexity and high cost (and perhaps its high measurement error margins). I spent a lot of time at FAO headquarters in 1977 and was saddened to learn that so much of the overall cost comes after data collection that the filled in but unanalyzed questionnaires from a national dietary assessment for Zambia still languished on shelves in Rome years after the survey was completed.

This fact in turn leads me to note that we are now in an era where we have a chance to correct this imbalance to some extent due to computerization and all the time it can save in dietary research. The current issue of World Nutrition includes a case in point. It is a study from India based on dietary research so detailed and complex that it would have been almost impossible to do at all in years gone by. Using software developed by Save the Children, [Dash et al.](#) were able to design diets at various levels of healthiness and cost them using local food prices (the healthier the diet, the more it cost); then, based on local incomes, to calculate that over half the population could not afford the healthiest alternative; then to examine how the universal implementation of already available nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programs would impact family food expenses. Benefiting from all eight programs would reduce by 30% what families with an average of six members would have to spend to achieve the healthiest diet. In addition, providing iron/folate pills only to pregnant and breastfeeding women would reduce those average family food costs by another 4%.

This issue of World Nutrition includes three other research papers and three commentaries. In a qualitative study, [Uprety et al.](#) examined why Nepali mothers overwhelmingly prefer receiving information about young child feeding utilizing actual local foods as props rather than via printed materials. [Celebi et al.](#) found a positive correlation between the results of an insulin resistance test and the total amount of added sugar from the beverages consumed by adult women in Turkey ($r=0.297$ $p=0.043$). [Daphale et al.](#) found 40% prevalence of vitamin D deficiency among adults attending the pathology department of a hospital in Maharashtra, India over a two-year period. There was more deficiency among those residing in urban areas.

[Mark Wahlqvist](#) provides a deeply thought through analysis of the links between food, nutrition, energy, and ecology. He concludes that “The social momentum and appropriate technology for energy conservation, renewability and personalisation is now available for mobilisation to address our food, nutrition, and health insecurity.” [George Kent](#), in his Good Question column, discusses the thorny issue of who benefits from hunger. Having written about this over a decade ago for the UN, his meaning was misunderstood and he has been harassed about it ever since. Now he sets the record straight. Finally, one of the leading experts on food as a human right, [Claudio Schuftan](#), provides questions and answers on the concept, one we all need to grasp and promote. He also provides descriptions of some of the major grassroots organizations campaigning for the right to food around the world.

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