

A tribute to Alan Berg

In these first two paragraphs, Jim Levinson reminds our readers that next month (January 2023) marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Nutrition Factor*, written by Alan Berg while a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. The book was nominated for the National Book Award but, more important, marked a critical turning point in international understanding of the vital importance of nutrition in national development, and the emergence of nutrition programs as essential components of the international development agenda.

Berg, who recently celebrated his 90th birthday, served from 1973 to 1995 as the senior nutrition officer of the World Bank where he was called “*the conscience of the Bank on hunger issues.*” Earlier, during the Kennedy and Johnson years, Berg worked at the White House where he co-chaired a White House Task Force on Nutrition and was actively involved in expanding the scope of the U.S. Government’s Food for Peace program. He then served in India where he headed the U.S. Government’s first international nutrition program. In 2008, Berg was honored as one of the first recipients of the United Nations Achievement Award for Lifelong Service to Nutrition, and was introduced on that occasion as “a global giant in nutrition history.”

A couple years ago, filmmaker Stephen Schear, his son Theo, and Jodie Levin-Epstein made a detailed film about Berg’s work and his influence (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFPMx6QZelo>) in which some of the most prominent people in our field explain the impact Berg has had on them personally and how he pioneered so many of things we now take for granted. As Lawrence Haddad points out, some of Berg’s text in *The Nutrition Factor* is 25 years ahead of what was going on at the time in the field of public health nutrition (actually, then hardly even identified as a field yet). In addition to those you will see in the film, the following have mentioned to me in emails as I planned this piece that Berg and/or his book were seminal in their professional development and many still have their copy of it: Beatrice Rogers (who also took his course at MIT decades ago), Nina Schlossman, Keith West, Claudio Schuftan, Micheline Beaudry, Irwin Shorr, and Boitshepo Giyose. And I refer our readers to the letters to the editor about Alan published in this issue of *World Nutrition* from Soekirman, Andrew Tomkins, and Stuart Gillespie.

Judy McGuire adds the following: “The Book that launched 1000 programs (or a revolution): *The Nutrition Factor* was a revolutionary book at the time of its publication. It made the case for preventing malnutrition not because of compassion, though that clearly was important, but because malnutrition was key to national development. Alan Berg, the author, deftly built the case for nutrition as an objective of national development, as an indicator thereof, and as an engine of development. He cogently tied together academic analysis with practical lessons from real programs. By doing so he took malnutrition out of the laboratory, the medical library, and academia and into the real world. Drawing on lessons from many countries, including India, Thailand, Brazil, Indonesia, and even the United States, Berg was able to show that much could be accomplished with concerted effort and financial support and that the payoff exceeded the cost. The book spoke to politicians about programs that would be popular as well as economically feasible and beneficial. It’s no surprise that it appeared on the desks of prime ministers, finance ministers, and parliamentary leaders. *The Nutrition Factor* built bridges

among decision makers in health, food policy, economic theory, education, and agriculture who previously operated independently and it created a space, quite foreign at the time, for intersectoral analysis and action. Just as importantly, The Nutrition Factor launched national institutions and university programs to train the next generation of nutrition “doers” who would create policies and programs to prevent malnutrition in many different countries and sectors. Berg also used the book to create synergy among donors and institutions as disparate as UNICEF, the World Bank, bilateral donor agencies, NGOs, and universities throughout the “first” and “third” worlds. Today, we take such intersectoral, international, mutual learning networks for granted but it all started with The Nutrition Factor.”

Claudia Parvanta writes:

“I met Alan while serving as the Deputy Director of USAID's "Nutrition Communication Project" (we're talking late 1980-early 1990s) which was managed by the then Academy for Educational Development. Alan included 'mass communication' as a viable approach in The Nutrition Factor, which possibly encouraged USAID to create the "Nutrition Communication Project" along the lines of a precedent program, "HealthCom." He supported NCP's approach of using anthropological research to inform nutrition behavior change programs. And, he (along with his colleague Judy McGuire) was a frequent 'subject matter expert' in advocating for nutrition's inclusion in USAID and related programs when other priorities became more politically desirable. Finally, the Nutrition Factor was a template for future global nutrition policy analysis. Congrats on the 50th anniversary of this seminal publication.”

Like all these and many others in our field, I was inspired by Alan -- indeed electrified as a young master's degree student when he came up to me and personally congratulated me after a presentation I gave at an American Anthropology Association meeting in 1976 about my research on infant food advertising in St. Vincent. Several years later, after I had finished my PhD, he mentored me while I was in a World Bank-funded position in the Ministry of Health in Yemen helping to establish their first nutrition unit. For many years thereafter, he and I had many opportunities to talk about how to further nutrition internationally at the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition annual meetings where he represented the Bank and I, Sida. A good example of how impatient he was to cut through bureaucracy and make things actually happen occurred once in the early 90s when I was Chair of the Bilaterals. As fed up as I was by obstructionism from some other UN agencies, he and the UNICEF representative took me aside and asked how I thought the Bilateral agencies would react if the two of them set up an alternative international nutrition coordinating organization dedicated to actually getting things done in the field, just bypassing the SCN completely. Sadly, I had to inform them that to my knowledge most of the Bilaterals neither prioritized nor understood nutrition adequately to support such a plan. They would simply be confused about how one could pursue an international nutrition agenda while leaving out the normative UN agencies for health and for agriculture!

One of the most amazing things I ever learned about how to do nutrition advocacy came from a talk I had with Alan and his daughter when they visited Stockholm a few years later. She had been worked for the Rand Corporation and as we walked along, Alan got this brainstorm and asked her, “How does Rand convince the US government to fund something like say a new generation of tanks?” She immediately responded, “We don't let them talk about money. The

only issue up for discussion is national security.” This I believe is the genius behind human rights. Eleven decades ago, the now amusing argument in Sweden against giving the vote to women was that it would double the cost of elections. But there is no such thing as a human right that we can access only when and if government officials tell us it can be afforded. Let us hope that some day people will also find it amusing if someone says we can’t afford to prevent hunger.

I will close with a question I received in an email from Marcia Griffiths: “Where would we all be without Alan’s life-long commitment?”

--Ted Greiner, Editor, World Nutrition