Visions for this century (5)

Brooke Aksnes writes:
In the last four issues, WN editorial family members write about the state of the world now, and their visions for the future. See above. We will continue to publish Visions throughout 2015, as Updates, and as letters in our Feedback section.

Cecilia Castillo

Martin Luther King declared: ‘History will record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition’ (then in the US to civil rights for blacks) ‘was the appalling silence of the good people’

What mainly determines population well-being, health, and disease?

The model and development of any society or country, determines its population’s state of general health and degree of well-being. A democratic society that ensures education, food, healthcare, basic sanitation services, decent housing, and jobs, can achieve a good quality of life for all. Conversely, societal models based on ever-increasing consumption and profit, where basic rights and common goods are considered private property, lead to segregation, discrimination and inequity. These societies, like serf systems, prevent the establishment of adequate and fair welfare and health, including nutrition.
What mainly determines good population nutritional status?

For any population to have good nutritional status, sufficient healthy foods must be available and accessible. But this is not enough. Clean water, adequate sanitation and other public health measures, which include vaccination programmes and regular general health examinations, are also essential, not in isolation but all together. Public policies and actions must be integrated. The same applies to good nutrition, which cannot be secured in isolation. For example, nutrient supplementation programmes delivered in impoverished countries as emergency measures, when carried out separately from all that determines states of health and disease, are obviously inadequate. They do not address the underlying and basic causes of malnutrition.

The political will of governments to protect population nutrition is also an important factor. In middle-income countries, the increased buying power of households is an opportunity to increase consumption of healthy foods and improve nutritional status. But in many of these countries, government actions to agree policies and enact regulations that encourage healthy eating are very limited. More and more ultra-processed food products are manufactured, accompanied by intensive unchecked marketing campaigns. These products, attractive because they are formulated to be super-delicious and habit-forming, are available everywhere at low prices. They displace traditional food supplies and dietary patterns, and generate obesity and serious chronic diseases such as diabetes.

How useful are the current nutritional sciences?

The sciences related to nutrition have shown a huge development in recent years. Knowledge of previously unknown aspects of many nutrients including their effects in the human body, and their benefits and risks, is now well understood. The development of the sciences of genetics and molecular biology, together with new analysis techniques and other advances, are impressive. But these are usually not properly reflected in public policies and nutrition programmes.

Are enough governments and official agencies making real progress?

If only! Real progress would make the life of public health professionals and citizens a lot simpler and easier. The facts are though, that governments and official agencies so often succumb to the influence-peddling of wealthy and powerful transnational corporations and other commercial organisations. These conflicts of interest impede governments and may even stop legislation designed to improve the quality of population life, including its nourishment. One example is the blockade that some governments in Latin America have suffered from corporations and their front organisations when they have decided to enact laws to identify unhealthy food products and thus guide customers to make better choices. There is an issue of sovereignty here – who rules, elected governments, or commercial corporations?
Are current dietary guidelines and nutrition education programmes effective?

Dietary guidelines as a means to educate populations to make healthy food choices are a fine notion. But a narrow view of nutrition that neglects other disciplines such as anthropology and psychology has prevailed, so that dietary guidelines do not induce motivation to change. Also, in many countries dietary guidelines have been distorted as a result of pressure from food product corporations. Brazil is now a remarkable and encouraging exception. There, the new dietary guidelines have captured and summarised the available relevant scientific information and have incorporated all aspects of good nutrition, not only mere nutrients.

What types of civil society groups are most responsive to the big issues?

Civil society movements are essential to bring about positive change, but I cannot identify specific groups. They arise from needs and demands according to the realities and contexts of the communities, regions and nations where they are active.

Name up to three inspiring leaders likely to be active to 2030, with reasons

We will see. These leaders will rise up on the wings of civil society.

Identify up to three of your greatest fears, with reasons

All of my fears can be summarised as one. I fear that governments will lose their sovereignty and ability to represent their people and will surrender their responsibilities to the power of corporations, and a resulting pseudo-democracy that limits civil rights and freedom of expression in which people are no longer citizens.

Identify up to three of your greatest hopes, with reasons

That countries move towards real democracy and thus freedom and fairness. That education and health will be seen as public goods to which all have a right. That everybody will have universal access to safe water and healthy food. Once realised, these hopes will enable countries to work in the framework of justice and dignity.

Make any other remarks as you may wish

We must not remain silent. Martin Luther King rightly said: ‘History will record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people’.

Castillo C. Development. Visions for this century: 5 [Update]. World Nutrition April 2015, 6, 4, 260-262