



WN *Development*

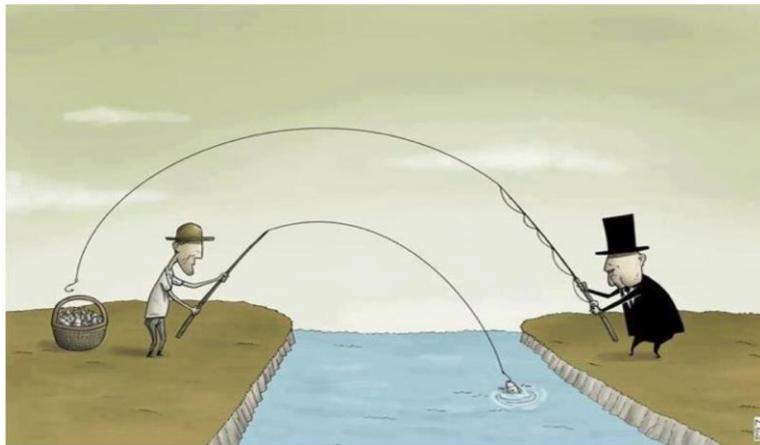
Visions for this century (7)

Brooke Aksnes writes:

In the last seven issues, *WN* editorial family members write about the state of the world now, and their visions for the future. See above. We are now publishing Visions in our *Update* section, with comments as letters in our *Feedback* section



George Kent



In theory, wealthy countries support and nourish impoverished countries. In fact, not so. This cartoon illustrates typical reality. The poor do the work to produce food much of which is acquired by the rich

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

Like most people who read the literature, I got the idea that well-being, health and disease were mainly technical problems. I got the impression that the problems are mainly due to deficiencies in the supply of things such as food, land, water, doctors, knowledge. What was missing was supplies and ‘interventions’ by smart people.

However, after studying the issues, I found no good reason for widespread child malnutrition and mortality. I came to realise that there is not one child who is born into a poor world. Viewed globally, there is plenty of land, water, and sunshine. The main deficiency that matters is the deficiency of caring. What mainly determines health is the degree to which people care about one another's well-being.

What mainly determines good nutritional status in populations?

There is hunger in the world mainly because of widespread exploitation under which many people are not able fully to enjoy the fruits of their own labour. In market-based food systems, locally, nationally, and globally, the poor feed the rich. Food flows toward money, not need. Good-hearted people often encourage more charitable giving to the poor, but a better answer would be to take less from them.

In stable well-functioning communities not exploited by insiders or outsiders, people are likely to have well-functioning food systems and good nutritional status. This is true even if they don't have much money. However, when food systems shift from being driven mainly by the objective of producing basic food to producing wealth for investors, the system shifts to production of less healthy or unhealthy products, on farms and in factories. This shift from myriad pre-industrial food systems towards one global industrial food system brings with it increasing production of unnecessary and unhealthy foods, and non-foods such as fuel and flowers.

How useful are the current nutrition sciences?

Useful in relation what purposes? For those whose main interest is in dissecting carrots to identify their nutritional values and how they vary under different environmental conditions, the science must appear to be useful. But for those who are interested in larger questions such as improving people's health and ending widespread hunger, other tools are needed. In many universities, nutrition science is mainly about optimising diets for livestock production in order to maximise the incomes of the owners of the livestock. Caring for the nutritional health of people, especially people without money, is not high on the agenda. Some universities do train dietitians who will advise individuals and cafeterias, but few prepare specialists to consider the policy dimensions of large-scale nutrition concerns. Where are the university classes on hunger?

Are enough governments and official agencies making real progress?

There are two questions here. Has there been real progress? To what extent should governments and official agencies get credit for it? There has been good progress with for instance the Millennium Development Goals. However, there is little evidence that these gains were due to any specific actions taken by government

agencies. To illustrate, child mortality rates have been declining steadily in most countries in recent decades. Many agencies have been quick to claim credit. However, in most cases there was no acceleration of the decline with the launch of the Millennium Development programme. The charts don't show a Millennium Development 'bump'. It looks like the improvements would have happened anyway.

The child survival programme of USAID (United States Agency for International Development) used to point out that child survival rates improved in many of the countries in which they operated. They did not mention that the rates generally improved just as quickly where they did not operate.

Are current dietary guidelines and nutrition education programmes effective?

Their effectiveness is limited because they focus on persuading consumers to change their choices while doing little to alter food systems and supplies. More should be done to make healthy choices the easy choices. Nutrition educators tend to overestimate the importance of health considerations as a factor explaining people's food choices. For many people, taste, convenience, cost, and body feel (as in energy drinks) are more important. Also, social pressures weigh heavily. People are likely to eat what the people around them eat.

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

Instead of focusing only on issue-oriented groups, it is better to pay attention to the character of local communities and the ways in which they influence our lives every day. Why is it that in some communities people are well-nourished while in other comparable communities they are not? There are studies of positive deviance among individuals. Positive deviance among communities should be studied as well.

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

I put my hopes in young people of the sort identified by and now contributing to *World Nutrition*, the people heard in these pages who have broken free of the narrow confines of conventional nutrition science.

Identify up to three of your greatest fears, with reasons

First, I fear that those who have diverse views of how to address the major malnutrition issues of our times will never talk to each other, and will not formulate serious plans for addressing those problems. Second, I fear that a serious plan for addressing hunger in the world will never be made – I define a 'serious plan' as one

for which the intended outcome can really be expected to be achieved.

Third, I fear that discussions about how to end widespread hunger, which is here and now, will go on being eclipsed by discussions of how 'we' will feed the earth's population in the distant future. Many of these discussions are driven by corporate people looking for new ways to add to their wealth. There is too little caring for people who do not get enough good food now.

Identify up to three of your greatest hopes, with reasons

I hope that we all give more attention to how people can live together well at the local level, in strong communities. If ways are found to live together that are so excellent that others emulate these arrangements, the hunger problem will be solved. from the bottom. I hope that the United Nations Committee on World Food Security will recognise that more attention should be given to the food security of infants, especially in the face of plans by manufacturers massively to increase the consumption of infant formula worldwide.

Make any other relevant remarks as you may wish

I recently spent two weeks in India, which has more than 20 per cent of the child malnutrition and mortality in the world. Its large-scale children's programmes, Mid-Day Meals and Integrated Child Development Service, always underfunded, have now had their budgets cut severely by the central government. These children's right to food, spelled out in national law, has in effect been discarded.

However, as shown in Brazil and other countries, there is good potential for improving infants' well-being by expanding the operations of milk banks. These banks make breastmilk more readily available to infants whose mothers do not breastfeed them. Nationally and internationally, many agencies are exploring ways to promote more effective use of milk banks. Milk banking offers real hope. It should be scaled up to serve not only infants in hospitals, but also other children out in the community.

*Kent G. Development. Visions for this century: 8
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