

WN Editorial

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Facing the facts of this century

Interesting times

‘May you live in interesting times’ is said to be a Chinese proverb, which is either a blessing or a curse. Either way, these are indeed times of convulsive and even chaotic changes. Some are benign. Most are disturbing. Some are malign. They challenge nutrition in all its aspects, and also other sciences and modes of thinking, being, and doing. So at the beginning of a new year, how does this journal shape up?

Progress and transformation

Quite well, we believe. From very modest beginnings, we have gradually built up a force of regular contributors, advisors and contacts, apparent from this 146-page issue, with 40 contributors from all continents. *Update* in this issue includes Sara Garduño-Díaz based in Kuwait on campaigns in France, Turkey and China to reduce food waste. Felipe Neves from Brazil reports on the *Rio Doce* catastrophe in Brazil that has devastated local farmers and food supplies. Geoffrey Cannon amplifies investigations by Marie Brenner and Amy Bracken into the exploitation of cane sugar workers in the Dominican Republic, and proposes a new form of global tax on sugar.

Our first commentary is the latest in *The Food System* series masterminded by Carlos Monteiro from Brazil, which began in *WN* with a comprehensive commentary [in 2010](#) updated [in 2012](#). This issue includes the refined and adjusted [NOVA classification](#) on which 17 authors and researchers and many other advisors have worked. The thesis of *The Food System* and *NOVA* is that processing, more than nutrients or foods, drives related states of well-being, health, and disease. *WN* has played a leading part in introducing the concept of ultra-processing, now recognised by UN agencies, and a basis of the new food- and meal-based [Brazilian official national dietary guidelines](#).

Our 19 contributors to the *WN Visions* series convened by Brooke Aksnes from the US and Belgium, [brought together in this issue](#), are from Asia, Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, North and Latin America and Europe, are gender-balanced with ages spanning half a century, and have a range of specialities, attitudes and beliefs. Our third commentary on Indian women protecting their forested land is edited by Brooke Aksnes from reports by Shruti Ravindran and Manipadma Jena.

The 29 pages of letters in our *Feedback* section, developed by Isabela Sattamini and then Maria Alvim, begin with Elisabeth Sterken from INFACT Canada and Sabah Benjelloun from Morocco pressing for power to the people. José Luis Vivero Pol from Spain and Belgium, and former IUNS president Mark Wahlqvist from Australia, China and Taiwan, advocate for aspiration. George Kent from Hawai'i addresses food as a public good. Kaleab Baye from Ethiopia questions overuse of iron supplementation. Ashok Bhurtyal from Nepal sustains our constant commitment since our first issue in May 2010 to food-based strategies instead of vitamin A supplements to protect young children, which *WN* editor Geoffrey Cannon from Brazil says is succeeding.

Looking ahead technically, we will now transform and shape up to this electronic world where nearly two billion people have smartphones with all this implies. Up to now, *WN* has been rather elementary. 'It's excellent' Michael Pollan has said. 'But it's so difficult to access!' He is right. As from May, we will have our own website, as well as a journal. Our designer Daniel Escudeiro is creating a site that is easy to browse, read and study, available anywhere any time on smartphones, tablets and social media as well as on computers. With new design and presentation, all contributions will have the usual immediate reading facility.

Recognition and response

Looking ahead editorially, what are the purposes and the mission of this journal? How can it best face and respond to the known and imminent events of this century? Now, it is more than ever essential to value the past, live in the present, discern the future, and recognise and respond to new realities. These abilities and duties are unique to the human species, now beset by the desolation of human-made crises affecting the whole living and physical world. Examples given within the *WN* [Project Phoenix initiative](#) are:

Climate disruption, population increase, military invasions, mass migration, flight to cities, financial instability, outrageous inequity, gross waste, persistence of hunger, rocketing rates of obesity and diabetes, overmighty corporations, privatisation of public goods, and a dominant political and economic ideology that is unfair and self-defeating.

And as Pope Francis warns in his encyclical [Laudate Si'](#) of the Earth, 'our home':

We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts... is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.

Human activity has overloaded the planet's capacity. [These](#) dreadful and ominous phenomena now threaten the human, living and physical worlds. None will disappear by themselves. How can they be addressed coherently? How best to uphold public health, protect public goods, and preserve the biosphere? Where does nutrition fit into all this? What does it mean now? What are the principles needed to guide its work?

Judgement and decision

Contributors [to our Visions series](#) brought together in this issue of *WN* see these crises as crossroads, needing resolute, convincing and practical decisions, as do members of the

Project Phoenix team. But there are wise guides. One was agreed a decade ago as a result of the meeting responsible for [the Giessen Declaration](#), whose proceedings are a whole special issue of [Public Health Nutrition](#). It was repeated [recently in WN](#):

The human species has now moved from a time in history when the science of nutrition, and food and nutrition policy, has been principally concerned with personal and population health and with the exploitation, production and consumption of food and associated resources, to a new period. Now all relevant sciences, including of nutrition, should and will be principally concerned with cultivation, conservation and sustenance of human, living and physical resources all together, and with the health of the biosphere.

Further than this though, nutrition when properly seen is part of a greater whole, as suggested in a [WN editorial from 2012](#) soon after the Rio environment summit:

Nutrition, the precise discipline, is part of nourishment, a very much broader concept... We may even feel that nutrition, which conventionally is mostly of the body, aches to become part of nourishment, which is of the senses and also of the mind, heart and spirit. Doesn't it seem rather strange that we should by and large focus on the one aspect of nourishment that makes us no more than animals – indeed in some ways hardly more than machines – while we neglect its other aspects that are unique about us as humans?

This is a theme of many *WN* contributions. Another example is our [editorial last April](#):

Public health nutrition... has elements in common with clinical nutrition, just as architects and builders both use steel, but it is an entirely different activity. It is the philosophy, politics and economics of nourishment.

Continuity and exploration

In the last two years, *WN* has developed its own identity and voice, as evident in its editorials and other contributions. Examples are the *Food System* series, which identifies ultra-processing as a crucial determinant of obesity and related diseases; the series on sustainable and unsustainable strategies to prevent classic malnutrition; and reports on the evidence that added sugars drive obesity and metabolic syndrome. These are guided by principles consistent with the original manifesto of *WN*, which states:

The need is for a journal whose contributors have scope to think and reflect on the significance of established and emerging experience and evidence, and on how best to shape policies and programmes that protect the human species, the living and physical world, and the biosphere, now and in future... *WN* respects facts, and at the same time is mainly concerned with ideas that make sense of facts. Debates, commentary, challenges to conventional wisdom – these are the kinds of contribution that *WN* will carry.

Especially since the 1980s, changes in public affairs and in the state of the world have made these approaches ever more vital. Our territory must continue to be defined, outlined, mapped, examined and enjoyed. Professional competence here requires knowledge of biology and behaviour, and also of food science and technology and disciplines ranging from chemistry to evolution. It also needs understanding of well-being and health, not just disease. Full ability involves exploration of vast territories off the map of conventional nutrition science. Examples are the effects of intensive

rearing of animals on climate, and of climate disruption on food supplies and population health, and impacts of technology, money and political and economic ideologies on food production, employment, and sovereignty. Structural territory includes the causes of impoverishment and food insecurity; the privatisation of public goods; the displacement of established food systems by transnational ultra-processed product corporations; balance between the global South and North; and the power politics of nation states, corporations, and UN and other international bodies.

[*Alexander von Humboldt*](#) (1769-1859), a father of the science of ecology, concludes in his great work *Kosmos*: ‘Everything is inter-related’. This global picture also includes consideration of quality as well as quantity, wisdom as well as knowledge, concerning ethics, ecology, and history (including established beliefs, traditions and cultures), and of consciousness, energy, and life itself. Cross-disciplinary teamwork is essential.

‘Willing is not enough. We must do’. Ricardo Uauy, a former president of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS), recalls this saying of Johann Ludwig von Goethe (1749-1843). It makes no sense – nor ever did – for professionals, or indeed citizens, to be detached from relevant social, economic, political and environmental issues. The [*previous WN editorial*](#), ‘Standing up and taking sides’, says:

Conscious people now have a better understanding of root causes of states of health, and so are clearer in their thinking and more radical in their actions. Similarly, events since the 2007-2008 world financial crash and plausible predictions for the next fifteen and fifty more years lay imperative duties on public-spirited publications. These include exposing the political, economic and commercial forces whose ideology and activities are sabotaging public health, public goods, and public life. This is not a time to keep quiet.

As one example here, it is essential to continue to stand up for the human right to adequate nourishing food, now being sabotaged by the currently dominant ideology, strategies and actions of the most powerful nations and corporations.

Expansion and energy

This broad vision is akin to the [*natural philosophy of dietetics*](#) as the good life well led, including nourishment for the body, mind and soul, originally developed thousands of years ago as a defining feature of civilisation and culture. This was foreseen by José María Bengoa (1913-2010), an architect of public health nutrition. His valediction during a momentous world congress in Barcelona held in 2006 concluded:

One can glimpse a great expansion in the horizons of the science of nutrition. The limited area that we had grown accustomed to is expanding. We are getting closer and closer, like a great magic wheel, to the ideas that the Greeks held about dietetics – as the dominion of life itself, both in the biological and social sense. It seems as if we are redefining nutrition as the beginning and end of life itself.

Here is a rich, resilient and rewarding way to think, work and act, in these interesting times, as we all – scholars, legislators, professionals, parents, citizens – face the facts of this century.

The editors