

WN Editorial

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Facing the facts of this century What then is to be done?

Nutrition is not only about nutrients. Properly understood, it is about nourishment. This broad concept includes human biology and behaviour, and it also touches all aspects of humanity within the living and physical world. A narrow medical-type concept of nutrition, disconnected from family, society, culture, economics, politics, and the environment, is out of touch with realities. In our work and in our lives we all now have a duty to confront the linked chaotic food, finance, fuel and other resource crises that already convulse life on earth. Yes, big stuff.

The issues are ultimately qualitative and in particular ethical. For professionals who are specialists this is all mentally, emotionally and spiritually challenging. The way forward for everybody concerned with or engaged in public goods and public health, is shown by [Ilona Kickbusch](#) of the Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. Writing in *The BMJ*, she states

Health is shaped ultimately by factors such as ‘the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels’ – all of which can be tackled only in sectors other than health. There is currently a renewed politicisation of health at all levels of governance, from the local to the global – within governments, global institutions, and the private sector, and through civil society organisations... Politics does not just take place in government through elite politicians, it permeates society and encompasses ‘all the processes of conflict, cooperation and negotiation in taking decisions about how resources are to be owned, used, produced and distributed’.

Nutrition, which is part of public health, is political. This is why nutrition is important, and why in the world now and as projected to become, the stakes are high and the dangers are fundamental and elemental. Professionals engaged in public health need to see these difficult realities. *WN* authors this month converge on these points, and also indicate what is to be done. Here are some examples.

Awakening and uprising

In her contribution this month to the *WN Visions* series, editorial team member [Seva Khambadkone](#), now training in the US to become a specialist physician with a keen interest in public health, sees her vocation as part of a greater whole:

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Nutrition sciences are extremely useful, but as a component of a systems approach to understanding and addressing the world... The application of nutrition sciences to real world health and nutrition, or more broadly the application of academic work to real life, must be well aware of socio-environmental context. For example, a recommendation based on the amount of, say, vitamin B1 needed, means little without work to create the structural changes required to make achieving this recommendation possible for a population.

Also in this month's *Update*, [Shannon Hayes](#), who in creating her family's farm in upstate New York exemplifies food sovereignty, sees nutrition as the product of the food produced by agriculture, and thinks ahead:

The earth must be allowed to reclaim its natural productivity. We need local and regional food systems, designed in harmony with local ecosystems.... There is no such thing as a universally applicable production practice, or a universally acceptable diet... This is not to say that we shouldn't be concerned about global starvation. But if enabling everybody to have access to good, nutritious food is really our goal, we need to look deeper than crop yields and feed conversion ratios. Our daily sustenance should not demand excessive fossil fuels for growing, processing, and transporting the food to our tables.

In our guest editorial, [David Werner](#), author of *Where There Is No Doctor*, writing from Mexico with half a century's experience of working with and for impoverished communities, puts the right to food and nutrition security in its political context:

As professionals and citizens we all face vast challenges. The entire prevailing greed-driven economic and political system, that involves agriculture, fisheries and forestry, and dependence on fossil fuel, is a perversion of Darwinism that takes the form of the survival and prosperity of the most savage and ruthless. It must be displaced.

This imbalanced extractive corporate global empire cannot bring either peace or well-being to the world's people or to the planet. Its implosion will cause vastly more people to be food- and nutrition-insecure, and constantly hungry. Then a great awakening and move to collective action will occur and gather momentum. Only then will humanity be able to live in respectful and lasting balance with the natural order of life that nourishes and sustains our species and the living world.

WN editorial team member Claudio Schuftan has a similar fundamental view. Writing from Vietnam, he says in his letter this month in our *Feedback* section:

Change in climate is a cause of food and nutrition insecurity, and thus civil unrest. This should not distract attention from the main cause. This is the insane practice of making food a commodity prey to the 'free market', often by the way of sheer speculation. Most people who have enough money, and who live where food is abundant, fail to realise that fluctuations in the supply of staple foods brings about volatility and artificial rises in their price that creates shortages and continual insecurity where food is most needed. This pushes families, communities and populations living in the margins, below subsistence level, into states of scarcity and, worse, starvation.

But in these days now, impoverished people are not resigning themselves to their fate. They listen to the radio, watch television, use cell phones. They figure out who is profiteering from their children's hunger. So they eventually get very angry and rise up...

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Fights, battles and wars over food and water have already broken out. It would be more accurate to say that these are caused by what is still the standard operation of the 'free market' ideology with, to an important extent, corporations driving climate change, itself a cause of hunger.

[Mark Wahlqvist](#), a former president of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences is also a *WN* team member. In his letter this month from Hangzhou, China, he makes an elemental point:

Climate change in Tibet and the Himalayas is quickening beyond all expectations, even faster than projected in a terrifying official report from Tibet, backed by recent reports from China. All of its seven major rivers will begin to dry by 2050 – in my children's and students' lifetimes – affecting China, South Asia and Indochina... This projection means that half the world's population, in Asia, will be without water, since ground water is also disappearing... Why should nutrition professionals be concerned and engaged? The answer is obvious, however ominous. No water means no food. No food means no nutrition.

Advocacy and activism

Our older generation lived with the threat of the third, final world nuclear war. While very real, and once or twice very near, very few could do anything more than protest.

Now we all live with human-made climate disruption, which with its impacts is happening now, and threatens to end of the world in the form we know it. We can demonstrate, and many do. But unlike the nuclear threat, there is more that we can do. This is because while all we heavy consumers, and our families, friends, colleagues and communities, are liable to remain part of the problem of climate disruption, we can at least in some ways act so as to become part of the solution. *WN* family member [Mark Lawrence](#), writing from Melbourne, says in his letter this month:

The vision to transform nutrition science articulated so cogently in the [Giessen Declaration](#) has stood the test of time. Its visionary aspect has been vindicated, with the escalating social, economic, biological and environmental challenges facing nutrition as taught and practiced, and that face us all as citizens. There is now a need to integrate the new nutrition science into policy, research and teaching activities. This will require new methods and new tools to provide an evidence base to inform decision-making....

As long as decision-making processes privilege a biomedical worldview... over public health interventions, the state of population health will not improve. Decision-makers who persist with nutrient-based analyses to nutrition problems, and technological fixes as nutrition solutions, must be challenged. With the new nutrition science the profession now has a more coherent and 'fit for purpose' disciplinary basis.

New maps are needed. *WN* will continue to treasure rational ways of being, to delineate new territory, to venture into the unknown, and to uncover ancient wisdom. Mark Wahlqvist summarises: 'It is time for us all committed to public health and nutrition to rethink our principles and priorities– and fast'.

The editors