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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Public Health Nutrition around the world is not going through its most glorious times

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As a postscript, I am the author of a weekly blog called the Human Rights Readers (HRR). I have widely written about these food and nutrition issues over the years. You can find these pieces at www.claudioschuftan.com (see Human Rights Readers Nrs. 46+47, 103, 197, 232, 334, 418, 480, 491-91, 527,532-33 and 556)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this letter is to elicit your response as a reader to the thesis I present here below. The topic is indeed sensitive and calls for concerted new efforts worldwide. You can send your reaction to be published in the next issue of this journal and I will be glad to respond.

We are reaching the end of the United Nations Decade of Nutrition and have little to show for its achievements.¹ True, the COVID pandemic and natural and man-made disasters set us back, but still, seen from the global perspective, the progress has been scant, if any.

Let us look at the roots of my pesi/optimist outlook in terms of expected future nutritional outcomes and processes currently under way.

Outcomes:

OBESITY, ACUTE AND CHRONIC MALNUTRITION
Obesity is taking over our professional worries over acute and chronic malnutrition.² To succeed in this domain, we face a more than uphill battle with Big Food and Big Soda operators. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are dangerously on the rise and we still try to throw public health solutions on its way --a surely futile effort.³ Corporations are desperately trying to tell us that the problem is one of personal choices --a sheer nonsense that insults us public health nutrition (PHN) professionals. Moreover, since ultraprocessed (junk) edible products are more and more falling in disrepute, industry is now selling to us 'reformulation' of the same as a solution. This tactic simply cuts salt, sugar and eliminates transfats from these products --but this is simply a clear whitewash since the problem of being hooked to their ultraprocessed products remains unscathed.⁴

HUNGER, CHRONIC MALNUTRITION AND CONFLICT

To address hunger in the world, we still try to improve the global food aid outreach with humanitarian food and nutrition interventions (add water and sanitation to this, but seldom strong reinforcement of breastfeeding). The World Food Program is badly overdrawn. The problem is that the causes-of-the-causes of both hunger and chronic malnutrition receive much less attention in our efforts and (mainly) PHN interventions. I ask: Are we PH nutritionists politically afraid to call a spade a spade? ...and if we do, are we ready to spend more time in the struggle to address the causes-of-the-causes? (For instance, are we doing what is needed to proactively address the international forced displacement of people that, as a last resort, forces them to migrate more often than not due to man-made disasters...?)⁵ More and more, some of our colleagues are beginning to rightly talk about the social determination of (mal)nutrition.

Processes:

We have been cursed by, among other, two inroads made by the private sector into the food and nutrition affairs. I refer here to the SUN Initiative and the UN Food Systems Summit (FSS) --both case studies for the proliferation of worrisome public-private partnerships (PPPs) and multistakeholder platforms. Despite aggressive opposition by public interest civil society organizations (PICSOs) and social movements, struggles to oppose both were lost --and look what SUN and the FSS have to show

for results today: more hype than impact. (I hear that SUN is suffering from private sector donor fatigue, a fact that does not surprise me). Most depressing to me is the fact that key UN agencies endorsed both SUN and the FSS! I ask: Where is this worrisome precedent of UN corporate capture going to take us into the future...?^{6 7}

I am an active member of the Civil Society and Indigenous People Mechanism (CSIPM) of the Committee on Food Security (CFS) of FAO (Representing the People's Health Movement, www.phmovement.org). We had great hopes when, as social movements, we uniquely gained voice in a UN venue as the CFS. But after years of struggling, we still see the powerful member states (MS) in the CFS calling the shots. We have long been left to struggle as PH nutritionists to oppose the power of these powerful member states in the UN. Mind you, we are not naïf; we see the deceitfully hidden hand of TNCs in lobbying the Northern governments --this resulting in a mockery of participatory and transparent governance. naïf; we see the deceitfully hidden hand of TNCs in lobbying the Northern governments

Let me get back shortly to the Decade of Nutrition coming to an end. The World Public Health Nutrition Association (WPHNA), of which I am a member, is holding its quadrennial conference this June in London. Its theme: a critique of the Decade's achievements and non-achievements over nine years. Much of what is said here will be actively discussed there. (www.wphna.org)

Now for the optimist's view:

Good things have indeed happened in the last nine years. I will not delve in them with as much detail. Among other, and in no specific order, I can think of the growing emergence of the NOVA classification of foods⁸, the battle against UP products gaining strength, the food labeling and taxing of sweetened beverages initiatives, the treatment of acute malnutrition and, of course, I am forgetting other. The readers here are invited to expand this list.

To conclude, I stop here with this birds' eye review of the current situation that is brief to the point of a caricature. There is enough food for thought here for our readers to react. You can write to the editor at l.smith@eu.esmed.ne and I'll be glad to respond to letters received.

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