

Guest Editorial

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development: A more holistic approach for public health nutrition?

From 26 August to 4 September 2002, world governments, United Nations (UN) Agencies, Civil Society organisations, multilateral financial institutions and businesses debated the problems of global poverty, ecological decline and underdevelopment during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa¹. This Summit followed the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The focus in Johannesburg was on strategies and plans for implementation (mainly through partnerships) of existing agreements as described in Agenda 21, the key outcome document of the Rio conference.

Participating governments regarded the Summit as a success, but some Civil Society organisations described it as a missed opportunity to come up with real, new commitments, concrete time frames and targets, as well as funding to implement Agenda 21. It seems as if governments are hesitant to sign commitments which they know they are unable, for various political reasons, to implement.

Nevertheless, the WSSD resulted in two outcome documents and several partnership initiatives that may be important for public health nutrition. The first document, a 'Political Declaration' expresses and reaffirms commitments and directions for implementing sustainable development, addressing issues of poverty eradication, cultural diversity, patterns of production and consumption, health, armed conflict, globalisation, gender equity, financing development, and others.

The second document, a 'Plan of Implementation', is a negotiated programme of action that should guide government activities. It consists of reiterations of earlier commitments, with new targets concerning basic sanitation and destructive fishing practices. The document is divided into several chapters, each addressing a specific area with many practical recommendations, which, if implemented, could affect nutrition and health either directly, or indirectly. The vicious circle of poverty, underdevelopment and malnutrition is acknowledged. Several of the document's recommendations on international trade, alleviation of poverty, utilisation of natural resources and biodiversity, good governance and responsible consumption and production patterns aim to break this vicious circle and to protect the environment while developing the South.

These two documents are referred to (by UN Agencies) as Type I outcomes. The third outcome, a Type II

outcome, is the voluntary and non-binding agreements between partners such as governments, business and Civil Society. These initiatives, leading to orientated programmes, are seen by many as ways to deliver without committing governments to hard action¹. However, only time will tell if partnerships forged in Johannesburg will be able to implement Agenda 21, contributing to development and conservation of the environment.

The relevant question for public health nutrition, after Johannesburg, is whether any of these outcomes will influence the way Public Health Nutritionists think about nutrition or facilitate their roles in advocacy, policy formulation and programming to promote better nutrition for all. Perhaps trends observed in two other documents generated before and during the Summit may answer this question. Both these documents contain elements of a more holistic approach, almost a paradigm shift, in which key nutrition issues and challenges are integrated in sustainable development action recommendations. It seems that what public health nutritionists have known for years is now recognised on other levels.

The first document is the detailed preparatory document, 'A Framework for Action on Health and Environment' developed by a UN working group under the leadership of Louis Gomez-Echevirri². This document (used for formulation of implementation plans) focuses on five key thematic areas integral to a coherent international approach to implementation of sustainable development, namely water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity and ecosystem management. In the section on 'Health and the Environment' the challenges of reducing poverty, malnutrition and related infectious diseases, as well as controlling, eradicating or preventing non-communicable diseases, are addressed in well-defined action areas, indicative targets/milestones and examples of activities in which nutrition programmes in integrated, multisectorial interventions play a major role.

The second document, the 'Indaba Declaration'³ was generated by a group of stakeholders from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, North America and the United Kingdom, representing governments, industry, academia and Civil Society during an Implementation Conference immediately before the Summit at the Indaba hotel and conference centre in Johannesburg. Geoffrey Cannon, who facilitated the process that created the declaration, adds some comments in a Commentary that follows this Editorial⁴. This consensus declaration also

illustrates the more holistic approach. It emphasises that “the nature and quality of food systems, and therefore diet and nutrition, are fundamental determinants of human health and welfare, and that of the whole living and natural world”. ‘Food systems’ is defined as an holistic concept including the whole process of production, manufacture, distribution, sale and consumption of food and drink, taking into account issues of climate, terrain, history, tradition and culture. The document applauds the decision of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences to set up a special task force on eco-nutrition and that nutrition and the environment will be a key theme in the next IUNS International Congress of Nutrition to be held in Durban, South Africa in 2005. The emphasis in the document on the coexistence of under- and overnutrition in developing countries and the recommendation that holistic strategies addressing all forms of malnutrition should be promoted also illustrates the shift to a more holistic approach.

There were many during the WSSD who voiced concerns about the worsening situation and inability of governments and UN Agencies in preserving the environment and developing the South through implementation of Agenda 21. It seems we agree on

what should be done. One way forward, after Johannesburg, is to promote the formation of the already mentioned partnerships in which public health nutritionists can ensure that nutrition and health play its role in the sustainable development of individuals, communities and populations.

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References

- 1 World Summit on Sustainable development (WSSD) Johannesburg, August 26 – September 4, 2002. <http://www.world-summit2002.org> (accessed 23 September 2002).
- 2 WEHAB Working Group. A framework for action on health and the environment. Unpublished preparatory report for the World Summit on Sustainable development, Johannesburg, 2002: 5–35.
- 3 The Indaba declaration on food, nutrition, health and sustainable development. *Public Health Nutr.* 2002; **5**: 711–3.
- 4 Cannon G. Commentary: The big picture. *Public Health Nutr.* 2002; **5**: 709–10.