

Letter to the Editor

SIR,

At the closing of the century, the central question I think we (international health and nutrition professionals) are not often enough asking ourselves is this:

If we are trying to insert health and nutrition interventions in the developing world more in the realm of sustainable development, why is so much that has been said, written and spent on this having so little effect on the problems that our actions are actually seeking to address?

The answers to this question lie in various fronts, among them, more often than not:

- following Northern-led approaches, our praxis has become professionalized and, in the process, we have devalued and demoted the role of popular knowledge in our fields of expertise;
- our prevailing values and attitudes as researchers and practitioners in this field have prevented us from acting as equals with our national counterparts in the developing world;
- we still control knowledge as part of the élite, and thus fail to get a deeper understanding that will guide more appropriate actions; the latter can only come from a process of genuine popular participation.

The root of the problem is that sustainable development is about processes of popular enrichment, empowerment and participation that our technocratic project-oriented view has simply failed to accommodate.

Also contributing to the irrelevance of many past and current approaches is the fact that overall development education has continued its traditional conservative role of transmitting society's values mostly as they are perceived in the North. The time has come to demand profound changes that accommodate more multi-centric new approaches.

Those who teach (or taught) us, inevitably teach us part of themselves and the frame of values that is part of their background. The context any teacher comes from has its own frame of assumptions about what is real, what is unshakeable and what is safe. The problem is that sometimes these contexts become cages, especially in the type of international work we do in health and nutrition. The time has also come for new frameworks to break the old thinking patterns

and make health and nutrition work more genuinely participatory.

Unfortunately, difficult problems have the power of leading us to focus on their more manageable components thus totally avoiding the more complex, underlying and basic, structural questions. This is known as 'the exclusion fallacy' in which what we choose not to discuss is assumed to have no bearing on the issue¹.

We cannot, therefore, continue supporting an outlook on the future that is partly based on presumptions and forecasts rooted in desires from outsiders (no matter how well intended); we need facts about the whole picture, not only about health and nutrition. But an uncritical, repetitive reliance on the same old shallow facts in the interpretation of unresolved issues – i.e. not considering ill health and malnutrition as outcomes of complex social and political processes – has equally foreseeable conservative consequences. Outlooks stemming from such a vantage point particularly suffer from an inexcusable narrow understanding of the nature of control processes in society (both in the North and in the South).

The predominantly functionalist theories of development we mostly still fall back on, see society largely as an organic whole that is normally in equilibrium; dialectical theories view society as a complex of forces in tension and conflict by reason of the divergence of interests behind them. The functionalist theories, which I criticize, assume that conflicts are resolvable within the existing social system. In dialectics, conflicts are supposed to lead to systemic change, to a more fundamental break with the existing order².

Among the most prominent newer components of functionalist theories are all sorts of 'multidisciplinary approaches' to solve the problems of, in our case, ill health and malnutrition. There is nothing terribly wrong with this concept, only that it gratuitously assumes that looking at the problems at and from a 'wider', 'pluridisciplinary' perspective is going to automatically lead us to the better, more rational and equitable solutions. Just by putting together disciplines and putting together brains 'sown' differently – without considering where these individuals are coming from ethically, ideologically and politically – has not, is not and will not, by itself, make a significant difference in the outcome and in the options chosen. (For sure so if, additionally, we do not actively incorporate beneficiaries in the decision-making process.)

The need for a more critical and visionary attitude

Our failure to reach Health-For-All and succeeding in halving the global 1990 PEM rate by the year 2000 has been more than a wretched fact in history. As far as I am concerned, it has been an ice age in our thinking on how ill health and malnutrition are deeply linked to an overall unsustainable development model. Now, we need to think what ought to follow during the current thaw. (To use a cliché: if we know what we are looking for, we are more likely to get there and to know when we do.)

In this endeavour, opposing the old ways is not enough; we have to set out a counter-concept. The present moment is still full of promise, because the old conceptual clarities are breaking down; an era is expiring. Openings are being followed by partial closures.

Debates about past historical rights and wrongs are to guide us to come up with more cohesive propositions for tomorrow. If there is no cohesion in our vision, the campaigners will weary and the campaign will perish; we thus need a vision firmly embedded in a practice. To walk away from these debates is a luxury we cannot afford. We need to wedge open a space for the larger discussion of what ought to follow, a discussion that looks at all levels of causality of ill health and malnutrition in poor countries – from immediate to basic causes. Yes, this will mean changing the terms of the discussion, because a vision is not much good if it simply stays in the air as something devoutly to be desired; a vision of that sort is a mirage: it recedes as you approach it. To be of use, the vision has to suggest a route, and this requires that it take into account a lot of unpleasant realities.

A vision is of no use unless it serves as a guide for effective action. These actions will, once and for all, have to be biased towards the oppressed, because it is their rights that are being trampled upon. We ought to express and manifest solidarity towards the oppressed, because only then will our (joint) vision gain weight and credibility in its commitment to equity and justice. We can no longer abandon the have-nots to the dollar-dispensing Northern bilateral or multilateral agencies. The moment cries for us to press for more. Windows of opportunity have a way of slamming shut³.

I am aware it is still very difficult for some of us to maintain our political agility in a hostile environment. But the role of an avant-garde is to cause fermentation. We cannot fall into the trap of believing someone else is going to take care of these things for us; we have to get active. A strategic overhaul of our actions requires nothing less than a crisis in our thinking and if by now there is no such crisis on the horizon, we have to perhaps create one.

The future of our work in health and nutrition

cannot be a simple extension of the past. If we try to pursue a path of business-as-usual we will find some altogether unusual consequences. However much we may engage in fine-tuning the engine, this will not suffice unless we redesign certain sizeable parts of the motor itself⁴.

The future will have to inevitably differ. It is of unpostponable critical importance to deliberately concentrate on neutralizing the known social forces that are propelling us professionals in the rather hopeless direction we are moving, both at the national and international level. Changes as fundamental as the ones at stake here can only be promoted by people who have no vested interest in the survival of the non-sustainable development system as it operates now to the detriment of the dependent countries and their poor^{5,6}.

The brick wall of political will (the lack thereof) is best tackled through practical actions that take into account who will win and who will lose. A new professionalism will emerge only if we are explorers and ask, again and again, who will benefit and who will lose from our choices and actions in our work in health and nutrition. New professionals 'who put the last first' already exist; we still are a minority. The hard question is how we can multiply and, most importantly, how we can interact, coalesce and organize dynamic networks among ourselves and between us and grassroots organizations.

In sum, I reiterate that a mere extension of what most of us have already been doing in public health and nutrition is now powerful enough to really achieve the goal of inserting health and nutrition more in a sustainable development path. Not only do we need to come up with conceptual breakthroughs, but also to provide blueprints for the needed institutional changes that will support the new arrangements.

We need to act as what Antonio Gramsci called 'organic intellectuals' – intellectuals whose work is directly connected with the popular struggle. 'Orthopraxis' (right acting) is ultimately more important than 'orthodoxy' (right doctrine) . . . even if it means temporarily retreating for tactical reasons: one who stands at the edge of the cliff is wise to define progress as a step backwards . . .

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PS: Making prescriptive recommendations on what each of us needs to do to contribute our individual grain of salt to making health and nutrition interventions more effective and sustainable would be pre-emptuous on my part (although I have attempted

it elsewhere)⁷⁻⁹. This letter has no such intention. It is just a wake-up call for some and an always timely reminder for others. It is about being more critical about what we do and see. This, as a basis for each of us to develop our own (new) vision for the future: a vision that fits our own specific situation, one that we commit ourselves to share, and one that we are willing to implement working with others.

References

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