

Out of the Box

This column comes from Chennai after the 30th session of the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) held in March. The SCN (formerly the Administrative Coordinating Committee, Sub-Committee on Nutrition of the United Nations) is meant to co-ordinate the strategic thinking of all relevant UN organisations on global food and nutrition policy, working with governments in their role as bilateral partners, and with non-governmental scientific, professional and civil society organisations.

Recent influential SCN reports^{1,2} have been organised by SCN Technical Secretary Sonya Rabeneck, who has marshalled a balanced steering committee in pursuit of rational, progressive action plans designed to promote the human right to secure and adequate food and to healthy nutrition throughout the life-course. Up to now the SCN has taken a cautious view of the prevailing enthusiasm for privatisation of public health.

The SCN 30th meeting was hosted in Chennai (formerly Madras) by the MS Swaminathan Foundation. The great man, whose life's work is to ensure Indian self-sufficiency in food and thus Indian independence³, has been an inspirational presence.

The UN and the USA

The Chennai meeting has taken place at an interesting time. Out of session we watched India's progress to the semi-finals of the cricket World Cup, and joined in the week-long Chariot Festival in which the gods are brought to the people from the Kapaleeswar Temple. We also watched the US juggernaut finally preparing to roll into Iraq.

Is the SCN, a UN body, insulated from US pressures? How could it be? Control of food systems has been an integral part of political, economic and military conquest throughout history⁴. The current scramble for political and economic control of the Middle East and the Asian republics of the former USSR is a replay of the Great Game played by former imperial powers, in which Afghanistan and what is now Iraq are key pieces⁵.

It may be prudent, now, to assume that the first loyalty of any senior international civil servant who is a US citizen is to the foreign policies of the US government.

Fortified bread and electric circuses

To adjust the famous saying of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin⁶, the fate of nations is determined by what they are given to eat. Thus, a presentation at Chennai made by Rolf Carriere, Director of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), was revealing.

Dr Carriere explained that the aim of GAIN – 'saving and improving lives through nutrition' – will be achieved by using its donation of US\$50 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to bring fortified foods to the starving hundreds of millions⁷. He saw this as a 'public-private-people partnership' of UN agencies, national governments, food and drug manufacturers, and impoverished communities.

In response, Arne Oshaug and David Sanders, members of the SCN Steering Committee from governments and non-government organisations, condemned the ignorant arrogance of GAIN in suggesting that quick fixes could solve world malnutrition; these are often grossly inappropriate⁸, have limited application and success⁹ and swamp sustainable community-based programmes¹⁰. Perhaps this is their unstated intention? Your correspondent suggested, not just in jest, that GAIN might be seen as an aspect of a Pax Americana in which the circuses are on Fox TV and the bread is fortified.

Of rats and men

For me another reason for coming to Chennai was that Sir Robert McCarrison formulated his grand hypotheses in South India, as Director of the nutrition unit of the Pasteur Institute in Coonoor¹¹. He bred successive generations of rats that became stronger and healthier, or else more feeble and diseased, by feeding them chow whose nutritional profiles matched those of the strapping Pathans or else of the puny Madrassis. These epic experiments have never been refuted or replicated.

On return to Britain in the mid-1930s, McCarrison proposed that the common people were degenerating on monotonous staples of sugared tea, white bread, cakes, biscuits and margarine. He believed in strong nations fortified not with pills and potions, but by 'the unsophisticated foods of nature'. He gained the attention of a British government aware of the need for working classes fit to fight a second war of national survival¹².

So we took the train from Chennai to Coimbatore, and then the Swiss-built rack-and-pinion narrow-gauge steam railway from Metupalaiyam up 5000 ft into the Nilgiris. We were shown the rooms where McCarrison worked, but there is no trace of him in Coonoor; after he retired from service in India, his laboratory was removed and became the beginnings of the National Institute of Nutrition in Hyderabad. It would have been good to find a plaque inside the Pasteur Institute commemorating his work.

Reasons for railways

One justification given for international aid programmes is that government in impoverished countries has broken down. Foreign visitors, seeing filthy streets, small thin people and lots of poverty, may think that India as a country is helpless and so needs foreign aid, even at a high price. I disagree. I suggest that India works, differently from Europe and north America, in some ways worse, and in some ways better.

One theme of the SCN meeting has been the thesis of the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen that famines do not occur in democracies¹³. This claim is supported by history, researched by Sen and others¹⁴, showing that while drought is an immediate cause of famines, their underlying and basic causes are typically not natural, and include tyranny. So, what about the people who are starving now in Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar? The general view I heard¹⁵ is that this suffering has as its basic cause, reckless felling of forest cover, and does not amount to a famine.

Do the people of India need shipments of fortified Uncle Bill burgers and softies? No. Thanks in part to the life work of Dr Swaminathan, who acknowledges Mahatma Gandhi as an inspiration, there is plenty of surplus food produced and stored in India.

Can India distribute its surplus food efficiently? Yes. This was explained to me on a trip from Coonoor to Udthagamandalam (Ooty) by Dilip Jawalkar, an official of the Southern Indian Railway. In India the railways are publicly owned, employ 1 500 000 people, and are financed and managed for social as well as economic benefit.

Together with cricket, the railways unify India. Overall the policy is to break even. Profits on freight subsidise passenger transport. Freight itself is differentially priced according to its social value. And the 10-tier passenger fare structure that bewilders tourists, with its 30-fold difference between the most expensive and cheapest seats, for instance enables people to travel 3000 kilometres for 186 rupees (roughly US\$4).

Surplus grain and other basic commodities are stored in godowns (warehouses) by railway sidings all over India. At times of need the Food Ministry in Delhi purchases transport at cost price, to move surplus food to where it is needed. The overall policy is to relieve food shortages while avoiding perpetuation of dependency and distortion of local markets. So what about the starving people of Orissa? The problem, which is indeed one of democracy, is that the system can be and sometimes is compromised or subverted by inefficiency, incompetence or corruption. But in general it works.

There is now intense pressure to privatise the Indian railways. Investors are telling government, railway officials and trade union leaders that a privately run system will be faster, cleaner, safer, cheaper, and that they personally will

get rich quick. Experience in Britain indicates that a privatised system in India would indeed create a few multi-millionaires, would throw maybe a million people out of work, would scrap all unprofitable branches, would increase fatal accidents, and would price tickets beyond the reach of ordinary people. It would not be used as a public good, could not ensure food security, and would be a basic cause of future famines, and perhaps even the Balkanisation of India and thus its destruction as a nation. India, beware!

Behind the curtain

Many decisions at Chennai were taken behind the scenes, as is usual with such meetings. The new Chair of the SCN is Catherine Bertini, formerly of the World Food Programme and the US Department of Agriculture. The SCN Chair has extraordinary powers. She appoints the steering committee members who report to her, and so can personally control SCN working groups and the SCN overall strategic plan.

By convention and practice, the one senior full-time SCN staff member, its Technical Secretary, is entrusted to develop policy proposals in consultation first with the steering committee, and then with the whole SCN body.

On the morning of the fourth day at Chennai, Dr Bertini called an unscheduled meeting. Representatives of UN agencies present, including WHO, FAO, UNICEF, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Bank, attended. Members of the steering committee from the bilaterals and from civil society did not receive invitations. At the meeting the position of Technical Secretary was made vacant with immediate effect. I hear that in the future the SCN Secretariat, and also those responsible for its scientific direction, will be located in the USA.

Readers who value the SCN may like to write to bertini@un.org. If you want your views known, copy them to me at the email address below.

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