

Foreword

The World Nutrition Congress held in Rio de Janeiro in April 2012 was a landmark meeting. It was the first major international nutrition meeting run successfully without any funding from conflicted industries. Critical funding for the congress came mainly from the Brazilian Ministry of Health, in addition to support from many other Brazilian government agencies. Eighteen hundred participants from 50 countries came together to discuss the big challenges in global public health nutrition and, more importantly, to move beyond a description of the problems to a discussion of concrete actions to be taken to address these challenges. To enable this discussion, the meeting encouraged exchange and active participation and debate and sharing of experience of what works and what does not work. The aim was to enable us to improve nutrition related health and well-being in the worst affected people.

The abstracts contained in this volume reflect the breadth and quality of the inputs to these discussions. Many of the abstracts are in Portuguese, reflecting that the meeting was held in Brazil and most participants spoke Portuguese as their first language. As a deliberate policy the congress as far as possible was bilingual in all its discussions (aided by brilliant translators). We wanted to make sure that all voices could be heard and that participant's ability to engage would not be reduced even if they did not have English as their first language. We wished we could have been more inclusive and offered simultaneous translation in other languages as well. It also reflected the reality that the world has much to learn from how Brazil has achieved the progress that it has in reducing childhood stunting, in organising the health system, or on how it has been able to bring together food security and nutrition issues in a wider perspective in high spheres of the government, with a crucial participation of the civil society. Some of the key lessons are that addressing the underlying social and political structures is crucial. It is not simply about telling people what to do, but engaging with people in an appropriate and respectful way, empowering them, communicating and promoting their rights, building proper partnerships, creating mechanisms to ensure their participation in policy making processes, and not just implementing top down strategies. The experience of Brazil also shows that the approach to address undernutrition does not assure that overnutrition will not occur. Rates of obesity have been rising in Brazil and in most countries around the world in the last ten years or more. This highlights the challenges of ensuring that both the quality and quantity of the food supply must be right, and that nutrition initiatives alone are not sufficient to address the totality

of the problem. Instead, we need to move forward in multisectoral coordinated initiatives.

Many low and middle income countries are now struggling with the challenges of the effects of both over and undernutrition simultaneously. Dealing with the double burden is placing a considerable financial and social burden on these resource-poor countries. Another lesson from Rio 2012 is that it is not just up to individual countries to try to cope; the causes and thus solutions often lie outside the control of any individual country, let alone the people that live within that country. Increasingly, global food supply is controlled by a few transnational food and beverage companies. These global companies either control world markets for, and thus prices of, staple food crops, or make most of their profit from the marketing and sale of ultra-processed products that are almost completely artificially constructed cocktails of chemicals, some of which were originally derived from foods. It is clear that under the guise of public private partnerships, supposedly aimed at improving nutrition, many companies are actually using the increased access to markets in low and middle income countries to boost their profits by the sale of unhealthy ultra processed products, and to introduce such products earlier and earlier in life. These changes in the food supply also highlight the loss of what was good about traditional food practices and culture: eating locally available foods in season, cooking and eating together. It should not be an inevitable consequence of urbanisation that people leave behind their traditional ways of life and move to a homogenised fast food culture with all that brings. On the other hand, it is not to say that we should abandon all the comforts of modern life to go back to growing our own organic food. It is about finding a balance, and fighting to preserve traditional values and practices and re-incorporating them into more modern lifestyles.

The abstracts from the congress contained within this volume also show that our traditional view of what constitutes evidence in public health nutrition is out-dated. It is no longer sufficient to assume the only suitable evidence upon which to make policy decisions is derived from traditional epidemiological quantitative studies. These abstracts show that much can be learnt that is crucial to developing and implementing effective policies from scholarship based on real implementation examples, listening to the community, trying things out, applying common sense and collective wisdom. Sometimes the obvious just needs to be said loudly and clearly. For example, do we really need a randomised controlled trial to show that ensuring young girls (and boys) are properly looked after so that when they become pregnant they are well nourished and better able to cope for themselves and

their baby? The challenge surely is to not prove this assertion, but to work out how to deliver the action required to ensure the basic human rights of people are assured and preserved. The right to food, clean water and care do not need to be tested by research, they need to be delivered. Thinking about and sharing experience about how best to do this was one of the most exciting aspects of the congress, which accepted abstracts not only in the research category, but also experience reports and videos sharing lessons learned and initiatives that are working at the local level.

If you were not at the congress you will not have experienced the energising enthusiasm and passion of so many young (and some old!) people. Videos of the main sessions of the meeting are available on the congress website (www.worldnutritionrio2012.com) and the World Public Health Nutrition website (www.wphna.org), although these do not cover the oral communication sessions.

The Congress also showed that even when we know what we should do, doing the right things is a challenge.

Repeatedly it was shown that a major constraint to effective action is a lack of capacity, of people, of systems and structures. Political commitment and sound governance are crucial, but without people to shape actions and to implement and evaluate policies and programmes, progress will be too slow. Training and supporting people, building sound institutions, including strong civil societies is critical to both the delivery of programmes but also to hold governments to account- to make sure they deliver their promises.

We hope that the abstracts here will be useful to indicate the way forward and to inspire us to act in that direction. The next World Nutrition Congress will be in Delhi in November 2016. We will be judged by what progress we have made from Rio 2012.

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