

World Nutrition

This pdf is currently a free service offered by the Association

Please access our website at: www.wphna.org, renewed every month, for:

All our world news, information, discussion and services

Complete monthly issues of **World Nutrition**

Details of how to join the Association and to contribute to our work

Volume 3, Number 5, May 2012

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association

Published monthly at www.wphna.org

The Association is an affiliated body of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences

For membership and for other contributions, news, columns and services, go to: www.wphna.org

Editorial. Rio2012. What next

Who do we think we are

The motto of our *Rio2012* conference is 'knowledge-policy-action'. This means that the work starts when the conference ends. During the conference, knowledge – which includes science and goes further – will be presented and discussed (or will have been, depending on when you read this). The conference sessions are all interactive, and their conclusions are a basis for the final political document, the *World Nutrition Rio2012 Declaration* on the nature, purpose, vision, mission and work of public health nutrition now and in future. Then comes the action. Hence the theme of this issue of **World Nutrition**, *Rio2012. What next*. There is no question mark, because what is next, is where the action is and will be.

This editorial is written before *Rio2012*. So what's here does not include judgements. Let's see what emerges from the conference. What's here are some observations and recommendations contained in our website and in *WN*, this month and last month.

Witnesses and testimonies

Our first witness is a towering figure in the world public health and nutrition movement. He is one of the *Rio2012* opening and closing plenary speakers. This is Renato Maluf, who this month of April as we write, stepped down as president of CONSEA, the Brazilian Council for Food and Nutrition Security, an organisation

which in many ways defines the commitment of the Brazilian government to participatory democracy. He gives us a very broad challenge:

Box 1

Rio2012. What next. Renato Maluf



Renato Maluf says: I hope and trust that the conference will face two challenges, and that its participants will continue after the conference to address them. The tasks are to face the global food crisis as a systemic crisis in order better to evaluate its impacts and the opportunities to change the world food system. Also, we need to surmount the institutional limits of the health sector in order to achieve and implement intersectoral actions on food and nutrition.

A second opening and closing plenary speaker is Philip James, an Association Council member who for more than 30 years has combined being an academic, a campaigner, and a crucial leading advisor to the United Nations and before that to the UK government. He also writes the WN commentary in this month's issue. He says that we have a vast task to take on:

Box 2

Rio2012. What next. Philip James



Philip James says: Here is my modest proposal, which will come to something only with the sustained and energetic support of colleagues... Within the Association we agree that nutrition has social, economic and environmental dimensions, as well as biological and behavioural dimensions. We also agree that disease, health and well-being have basic and underlying as well as immediate causes. This is further good reason for us all to agree that public health nutrition is a crucially important part of the whole public health profession and movement ... I therefore propose that under the general banner of **Rio2012. What next**, a number of working groups are

convened by the Association, whose collective responsibility will be to set a whole new agenda for nutrition and public health in this century, or at least for the next two or three decades, say until 2040.

The commentary in last month's issue is by Geof Rayner and Tim Lang. Tim is the one and only professor of food policy in the world, as far as we know. He is also, with Michael Pollan, the author most often recommended by our 29 commentators this and last month. Geof Rayner and Tim say that we have to think big:

Box 3

Rio2012. What next. Geof Rayner and Tim Lang



Geof Rayner and Tim Lang say: In this period now, the place of nutrition within public health is weak and confused, although it has been, and always should be, central and crucial. The fact to face is that public health nutrition these days, like clinical nutrition of which it is not a branch, has largely become reduced to a technical craft. Is that what public health professionals want, to be mainly or even only technicians? If yes, the whole profession becomes – or remains – a bit-player that occasionally enters the stage, laments, and exits, in a colossal epic drama enacted by social, economic and political forces not aligned with health improvement....

In the past, nutrition was a strong force for public health. In the 19th century, European nutrition scientists were at the centre of public policy planning and action, as they were in the early and mid 20th century. Even before the modern public health movement was first created and aroused, in the industrialising Britain of the 1840s, nutrition was at the heart of arguments about health and social progress. It was well understood that food and nutrition shapes life and health.

You may well say now, and rightly, that while these four distinguished scholars and thinkers deserve our attention, they are all male, white, and um, *senior*. Very well. Fair enough. So now let's see what others say, in effect on the theme of *Rio2012. What now*. Association Council member Reggie Annan, third of the four opening and closing plenary speakers, a young man from Ghana, a very different part of the world, says that we have to face the underlying and basic causes of disease:

Box 4

Rio2012. What next. Reggie Annan



Reggie Annan says: As the congress theme states, I hope that *Rio2012* will end with concrete policies that can be translated into specific measurable actions and activities to address malnutrition globally and in Africa. When I leave Rio, I want to be able to say that I am going to implement this and that, and expect to achieve this and that. We all know that much as overnutrition has become a major issue in Africa, undernutrition remains with us.

Unless policies and actions address the underlying causes of food and nutrition insecurity they may not achieve much. These underlying causes include poverty, lack of education, poor status of rural African women, political instability, poor governance and corruption.

One of the most passionate and experienced workers in the field of nutrition and public health is Association member Claudio Schuftan. With Reggie Annan and Geoffrey Cannon, he is one of our website's columnists. His main commitment is to the People's Health Movement. Here is what he says. His comments here are addressing the question, what advice will you give to a young professional in our field? He here addresses issues of equity and justice:

Box 5

Rio2012. What next. Claudio Schuftan



Claudio Schuftan says: You are aware I trust, that knowledge in the sciences that deal with the social determinants of malnutrition, is already more than a sufficient basis to solve the major nutrition problems worldwide. But you must surely also be aware that the divide between that knowledge and the policies we read about, and commensurate actions, is still so wide. How much, do you feel, are your elders responsible for this lamentable and disgraceful state of affairs? Are they

sufficiently committed to issues of rights, equity, justice? And if you feel they are not, what are you now going to do about this?

You are aware of the ongoing financial, food, energy, climate crises. You surely must know that impoverished countries are mostly victims of these crises, to which they have not contributed. Plus they have (and have had) little power to resolve them. The situation changes rapidly both in the interplay of these crises and how they affect poor countries, poor people and our own work in public health nutrition. Expose yourself to wider realities. Explore realistic ways to address and resolve these crises in the crucial years to come. Keep an optimistic outlook.

Boyd Swinburn from Australia (and originally from New Zealand) is an inspiration to us all. Like Philip James and other senior Association members, he is a scholar and also a campaigner, within the public health movement, specialising in nutrition and in his case the global fight to protect vulnerable populations against ‘diabesity’ – the combination of obesity and diabetes – and the underlying and basic causes of chronic diseases. In answer to what next, and also to the question ‘when you are optimistic, what is your vision?’ he engages us with the great challenges of our age:

Box 6

Rio2012. What next. Boyd Swinburn



Boyd Swinburn says: Four of our major planetary challenges are entwined with food and nutrition. These are population growth, climate change, increasing inequities, and the enormous burden of chronic diseases. I hope that *Rio2012* will be able to focus food and nutrition within these global issues. But more than that, there is an onus on big picture conferences like *Rio2012* to clearly articulate the solutions – who should be doing what and when?

Constitutional optimism is a requirement in public health, so I am optimistic most of the time. My vision in my most optimistic periods is for a global wave of food democracy, where information access and levers of influence shift away from the big players of governments and food corporations and towards the public. Increasing monitoring and accountability mechanisms can hopefully contribute to this shift in power.

So many men! The fourth opening and closing plenary speaker at *Rio2012* is

Association founder member Marion Nestle. Her book *Food Politics* has redefined the nature of our work. With Association founder member Walter Willett she is the most influential nutrition scientist in the US. She looks at whole food systems:

Box 7

Rio2012. What next. Marion Nestle



Marion Nestle says: I am perennially optimistic and am thrilled beyond belief by the power and excitement of today's food movement. This movement takes many forms – agricultural sustainability, small farming, urban farming, animal welfare, worker rights, food safety, and promotion of organic, local, and slow food – all aimed at creating a food system that is healthier for people and the planet. As more and more people join one or another aspect of this movement, I am more and more optimistic.

There still are centres of academic excellence in Europe that attract students from all over the world. One is Southampton University, where our president Barrie Margetts is professor of public health. Thanks to him a number of Southampton students are active in the Association, most notably our general secretary Sabrina Ionata. Another is our new member Barrie's PhD student Asma Ali, who this month addressed the question *Rio2012. Where next*, very directly. Her voice also for us, speaks for the many students who come into public health or nutrition with high ideals, vision and hopes and who, up to now, are so often disappointed by the realities after university. She asks for a Declaration and an action plan.

Box 8

Rio2012. What next. Asma Ali



Asma Ali says: I am so motivated to learn from *Rio2012* the root causes of the projected rise of the diet-related diseases from the worldwide view. So I am excited to see the topics of the plenary sessions especially Plenary 1 'How to assure human rights and equity in health and nutrition', Plenary 2 'Biosphere to values: what determines our food systems?' and Plenary 3 'From traditional foods to ultra-processing: policies for healthy eating'. And once again, I do hope that from *Rio2012* that we can come up with a *Rio2012 Declaration* and action plan and task forces.

In response to Asma Ali's challenge: Yes, we can, and yes, the climax of *Rio2012* is a political Declaration. The duty of those working to develop the Declaration, supported and guided by special reporters of all the sessions, is to speak for the cause of public health and of nutrition. It is also to be an inspiration to participants at *Rio2012*, and to all present and future Association members. But far more than that, our Declaration is designed to state our nature, purpose, vision, mission and work, as professionals dedicated to the preservation of the world and the biosphere. This is a grand theme and a big picture. But the testimonies we quote here, and which can be accessed in full in last month's and this month's *WN*, make it very clear indeed that our field is wide.

Nutrition is like money, important in itself, and also in all it touches and affects. So back to the title of this editorial. Who we think we are, is now emerging. One thing is clear. What we will say, in the Declaration, and in our work as an Association, will be very much more ambitious than what any professional group formed a generation or even a decade ago would have said. This must be so whether we like this or not. As a profession we are challenged by circumstance. What goes down now and in this decade will determine the nature and quality of the lives of our children and grandchildren, and also – let us always remember – those of all other species who until now we have dominated and destroyed. We have an immense responsibility. Will our current leaders be a beacon for our future leaders? Better had be.

Acknowledgement and request

Readers may make use of the material in this editorial if acknowledgement is given to the Association, and WN is cited. Please cite as: Anon. Rio 2012. What next. Who do we think we are. [Editorial] World Nutrition, May 2012, 3,5, 172-178. Obtainable at www.wphna.org

*The opinions expressed in all contributions to the website of the World Public Health Nutrition Association (the Association) including **World Nutrition**, should not be taken to be the view or policy of the Association, or of any of its affiliated or associated bodies, unless this is explicitly stated.*