

Afterword: Now is the Time



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Does the world really need this book? Do the shelves of analysts and policy-makers need the weight of yet another compendium of ideas, statistics and rhetoric?

The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is yes. Such a book is needed now, more than ever, because it reflects the rapid convergence of opinion around priority problems and likely pathways towards solutions.

The 2008 Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition highlighted what was then called the “fragmented and dysfunctional” state of the international nutrition system.¹ That “the system is broken” became an oft-repeated mantra of the late 2000s, a signal that perhaps the biggest challenges to be faced came from within. Progress towards common purpose in nutrition had long been plagued by poorly articulated technical definitions, nutrient-centric debates, and competing institutional mandates. As a result, donor funding dedicated to nutrition was scarce, national governments chose to focus on other priorities offering more obvious gain, and science paid more attention to demonstrating the efficacy of narrowly defined interventions than to explaining how to make policies and programs work.

The calls have been heard

A mere half decade later, things are starting to look different. Calls for more resources, for greater political prioritization, and for more effective implementation of nutrition actions are being heeded. There is still a long way to go, no doubt, but the calls are being heard in the grand halls of governance, as in the corridors of academia and under the shade trees of civil society. Commitment to change is growing rapidly among developing-country politicians, donor funding has risen, scientists are sheathing their swords, and even private industry is sometimes invited to the table of global debate.

The 2013 Lancet series² update on maternal and child nutrition only used the term “dysfunctional” once, and then to describe how things were, not how they have become. Instead, the new series focused on the importance of accelerating evidence-based actions at scale, the essential complementarity offered by nutrition-sensitive programming that address underlying determinants, and on the need to sustain all initiatives (politically as well as financially) by shaping effective policy processes.

These changes in the tone of global discourse, linked to widespread adoption of a common lens through which to scrutinize what we do and how, represent a pivotal moment in humanity’s recurring war on want. There is a sense running throughout this book that the attainment of sound nutrition for all people everywhere is no longer a fantastical dream, but a genuine possibility.

It is imperative that we act

If accepted as truly possible, it is imperative that we act in ways that make it so. The foregoing chapters articulate that great progress has recently been made in reducing prevalence rates of stunting; but 165 million children are still affected.³ Wasting has fallen globally, but only slowly and not much in Africa. Most micronutrient deficiencies remain poorly measured and hard to uncouple from the poor diets and poor health that continue to blight more than a billion people. Obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases are spreading rapidly – now manifest as much in developing, as in industrialized, countries. Thus, the world cannot afford to treat one problem at a time. Improving nutrition in all of its forms is a massive unfinished social, economic, political and humanitarian agenda. Progress is still not fast enough or far-reaching enough to prevent the deaths and blighted lives of many hundreds of millions of people, including those still to be born in the coming decade. It has to be accelerated, made fully inclusive, and sustained.

None of which is easy. The task at hand is complex, so the solutions are anything but simple. Evidence-supported actions are needed on a wide scale to address the very specific requirements of adolescent girls, pregnant women, mothers and their infants, and children as they grow and develop into productive adults. Some actions must be pursued with universal coverage, but others must be targeted at the most urgent cases first. Some must prevent, protect and promote, but other actions that save and treat and make whole again are equally relevant to the common goal. Appropriate policies are needed to enhance the nutritional resiliency of individuals as well as of entire populations. Disasters that all too often erode past gains must be anticipated so that effective responses can be prosecuted with necessary vigor. And carefully designed activities supportive of agricultural and income growth, social protection, quality education and health represent essential contributions to the solution set. A critical component of all of the above is the generation of high-quality empirical evidence of what works best in what context.

This book captures the fact that there has not been a time in recent decades when so many people agreed on what needs to be done or why. The momentum has to be maintained. The next decade of the 21st century should be focused squarely on a global effort to get it done well, while documenting how. Unless coherent, cost-effective actions with measurable impacts quickly emerge from the current cresting wave of goodwill toward nutrition, the wait for another may be far too long. Now is the time.

References

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