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Issues On Food Sustainability In Australia – Part 2

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Past Editor Nutridate

Food, Health And Inequality

The world is experiencing what is called the ‘nutrition transition’ (Caballero and Popkin 2002; Popkin 1998; Drewnoski and Popkin 1997) with changes in diet leading to diseases, such as obesity and type 2 or late-onset diabetes, previously associated with middle age and lifestyle factors, now skipping a generation and occurring amongst younger members of society. The nutrition transition is also occurring in the developing world with diseases of under-nutrition existing side-by-side with non-communicable diet related diseases. The eating habits of whole populations are changing fast. Globalisation of the food chain introduces more opportunities for breakdowns in the safety system and for more people to be affected by any such lapses (WHO 1998). The nutrition transition is driven by urbanization and the increasing supply of ready processed and energy dense foods in the diet. It also has inter-related cultural and structural elements so changes in eating out have both cultural and technology elements. Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world and this has impacts on the way in which food is produced, stored and delivered. For example, with urbanization there is an increase in the consumption of processed food, eating out and the consumption of fast-food. Fast-food is fast thanks to modern technology and it suits modern lifestyles (Schlosser, 2001). The transition has taken place over 40 years in Australia. China and India are experiencing many of these developments and experiencing them at a pace and rate previously unimaginable (Guldan 2000). So what is happening in these new emerging economies is a clash between the old and the new. In the first stages of the change, the major differences emerge between urban and rural areas with the rural areas holding onto traditional eating patterns while the urban areas adopt what is called a ‘western’ style of food consumption. Over time these differences narrow as technology spreads to rural areas.

For the Australian consumer there are many health and food labelling initiatives to aid choice. But, fixing and fiddling with ingredients in processed foods will do little to address a major problem in the Australian diet, that is, the lack of fresh, minimally processed foods, especially fruits and vegetables. Nor will it address the pressing diet-related problems in Australian indigenous populations (Leonard 2003). These are mainly problems of poverty and access to good food. Cosmetic changes to food will not address the environmental problems that are created in Australia by conventional food systems (Coveney and Santich 1997). Introducing health claims will of course require

a raft of new national legislation to regulate the food industry. Moreover, the necessary and ongoing ‘policing’ of health claims through government regulation – so that the food industry does not overstate or exaggerate the benefits of processed, fortified foods – raises serious questions about the appropriate use of public funding which might be better spent subsidizing access to fresh foods for low income or disadvantaged groups.

Food Inequality And Food Access

Food inequality is generally experienced through hunger. Globally there are some 842 million people suffering under-nourishment in a world that currently grows enough food to feed the world’s population (Ziegler, 2004). In the UK, Australia and other affluent countries people go hungry and adults and children eat nutritionally poor diets as nutritionally sound diets cost more (Smith and Booth 2001; Köhler, et al 1997). Food security, as the right of individuals and communities to an adequate, culturally appropriate diet, is another of the neglected issues in food policy and public health nutrition. The emergence of ‘food deserts’ – or perhaps more appropriately titled ‘retail deserts’ – provides one example of a new view of food insecurity, poverty and inequalities in developed countries (Dobson, et al 1994). Food deserts is a term used to describe the idea that in an affluent country like the UK there are areas where affordable and healthy food is not available but affordable unhealthy highly processed food is.

Australian Food Insecurity

In Australia much of the focus has been on Aboriginal communities and the problems they face in accessing a healthy diet, however the problem is not confined to them. Many of the problems Aboriginal communities face are unique and tied up with a long-term approach to welfare, alcohol and living in remote areas (Leonard 2003; Sutton 2009). Huntley’s (2008) book on food and equality in Australia highlights the fact that many other communities and families face similar problems. This has been supported by work in Melbourne (Reidpath et al 2002; Kavanagh et al 2007) and Queensland (Turrell and Giskes 2008). Small farmers and their families are also under threat from poverty and ironically, food poverty.

We are seeing a new class of food poor emerging (Caraher and Carr-Hill, 2007). These are the working poor who are food compromised and nutritionally insecure. These are groups who may have enough and often surplus to eat (calorie wise) but

may have a lack of key nutrients in their diet. This leads to the growth in so-called diseases of lifestyle such as diabetes and coronary heart disease. While recently working in Australia the increase in the work of foodbanks was starkly evident with schools using food from foodbanks to set up breakfast clubs as more and more pupils come to school hungry. In Germany changes in welfare provision have led to more and more of the population seeking food relief through foodbanks a situation repeated in Canada (Riches, 1997).

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Provide a definition of each of the following key terms used in this article. Complete the definition as you read through the article.
 - Nutrition transition
 - Globalisation
 - Urbanisation
 - Processed food
 - Developing nation
 - Food inequality
 - Food poverty
 - Undernourishment
 - Food desert
 - Food bank
 - Fair trade practices
 - Free trade
 - Staple food
2. List the impact of nutrition transition on the health of communities in
 - a) Developed Nations
 - b) Developing Nations
3. What has been the impact of urbanisation and cultural aspects on diet in
 - a) Australia
 - b) China and India
4. What is the major problem with the Australian diet? Use information from the section headed 'Food Inequality and food access' to expand on your response.

Local Food Environments As Contribution To Poverty Alleviation?

In some recent work in London and Preston (a northern English city) we found:

- More take-away food shops than shops in some areas.
- Complete meals from take-aways were sometimes cheaper than the cost of the raw ingredients from local shops.
- Healthy food options were not always available locally.
- Food prices varied from area to area often in small distances.
- Members of ethnic groups could not always buy a culturally appropriate food, locally.
- Cars were necessary to access healthy options in supermarkets, which were not located in local areas. (Bower et al, 2008; Caraher, Lloyd, Lawton et al, 2010)

Many of the above problems are a consequence of the 'free market' being left to its devices. There is a case for regulation and directing the food industry to provide services and food to those in need. Instead food policy seems to focus on self-help and education, certainly necessary but on their own insufficient to address the problems of inequality. This raises the question of what a food system might look like to which we now turn to offer some answers.

It is important to remember that there are potential winners in the increase in food prices, for example wheat growers who have in recent years sold their crop at barely subsistence levels are now commanding prices of up to three times last year's prices on the world market. But in reality the big winners are not the farmers but the producers and manufacturers of food products. But bread prices have risen, rice is in short supply, and key groups are feeling the pressure. Look at the number of food riots and social unrest that has arisen around the world because of increases in food prices.

Discussion

With respect to the food system Figure 1 shows what a healthy food system might look like with the concerns of nutrition, food safety and environment (sustainable food supply) being the pillars on which the system is built (WHO, 2002). In reality the systems are much more complex and can include issues such as concentration of power in a small number of companies, cultural dominance of food with appropriation of cuisines from one area as marketing devices and the McDonaldization of cuisine (Ritzer, 2000).

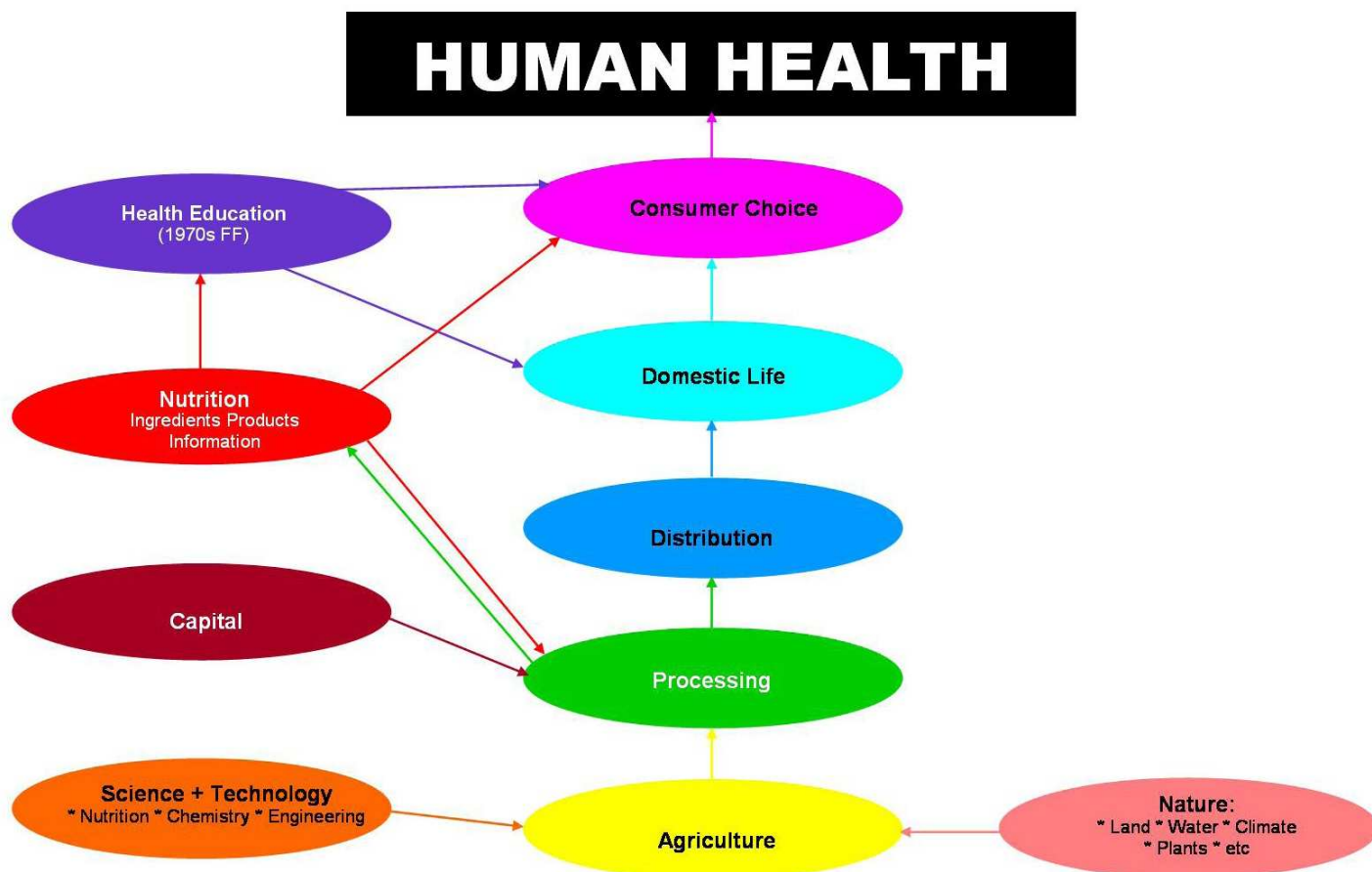
Figure 1: The Three Pillars supporting healthy food and nutrition policies



The three pillars of nutrition, food safety and environment (sustainable food supply) were developed by WHO as guides for national governments for the achievement of national health and nutrition plans in line with the provisions of the International Conference on Nutrition (WHO/FAO, 1992).

The key point is that cheap food is an illusion especially when the costs such as damage to the environment and transport are factored in. The costs are absorbed by someone, somewhere in the food chain whether the coffee grower in Africa who receives 9p per kilo (15 cents Australian) for a product that eventually sells for £17.11 per kilo (\$A27) (in the UK high street or the loss of local diversity, or the increase in food miles and pollution that the consumer eventually picks up in other areas (Oxfam ND). We need to leave a greater amount of money at the farm gate; this is equally true for Australian farmers. Policy makers tend to approach the three pillars in silos (separate

Figure 2: Impacts on Human Health: Martin Caraher



entities) rather than as aspects of a total food economy, which meet and intersect at different points.

Globally increases in the price of food stuffs has made most people more price conscious and undermined some of the gains made on sustainability and fair trade concerns with the consumer becoming more price conscious as opposed to ethically driven. The decrease in sales of organic produce and the shift by consumers to cheaper retailers (that are called the 'hard discounters' like Aldi) are some immediate indicators of this. The consequences of cheap food may be good in terms of outcomes for the consumer but bad for producers as they are the ones who absorb the lowering of costs. Such increases across the globe have potentially catastrophic consequences. In developing countries there is an over reliance on staples (such as rice or wheat) as the mainstay of the diet and increases in food prices result in food insecurity with up to 80 percent of daily income having to be spent on food.

The economic arguments over who benefits from trade are rife. The advocates of globalisation claim that free-trade benefits all, while those who view the issue with a public health lens are more sceptical. There is a battle going on with the tensions being those of profit and health. The trick will be to integrate the three pillars and see food as occupying all areas.

The flows of money, ideas and health benefits, favours the developed over the developing world. For public health nutrition the consequences of globalisation of the food system and the nutrition transition means:

- Older and fatter populations with more people living longer and more people becoming overweight and obese.

- While there is some narrowing of disease patterns between the developed and developing worlds, although the greater burden lies with the developing world, alongside this are degradation of natural environments and pollution and ecological costs to the developing world.
- Increases in relative poverty in countries and between countries -food security.
- More uniform cultural behaviour with respect to food.
- Power moves from national or government agencies to trans-national corporations (TNCs).
- Capital in the form of money flows out of the country and within countries from rural to urban areas.
- Local food systems and small holdings developed over centuries are replaced with larger units, fewer working the land and implications for fall back (food security) in times of scarcity.
- There is a food war going on represented by two dimensions which can be seen in Figure 2 above.

So what can we do? As individuals we can act as if our decisions make a difference, but think of scaling up your decisions about food, frame your thinking of food in the concept of the journey from paddock to plate. Ask questions in your school, community or shops about food. Don't just leave it as an individual choice. Ask your supermarket to stock local foods and support local growers. Think about making your food system local. Local farmers, locally owned shops and local (or regional) food are a good combination. Places such as the Northern Territory may very well have to import food from the south of the country but there are compromises and some sacrifices to be made. They could do more to promote

tropical produce when it is in season. When buying food, buy Australian, buy local, ask how and where the food has been transported from, eat seasonal and less processed foods. Insist on action. Solutions such as less meat and local may be better but perhaps not acceptable for many Australians. We need to consider the cultural aspects of eating. So rather than promoting vegetarianism think of meat free days or meals (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/may/13/ghent-belgium-vegetarian-day>) and having less meat on the plate. Start with your own practices, then those of your family, community and neighbourhood while thinking of the larger food system.

But most of all enjoy food.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

5. Why is having enough to eat (calories) not always a measure of a good diet?
6. A free market may lead to inequality when it comes to food supply. Provide examples of the outcomes of a market in which regulation is not applied.
7. Explain the term 'leave more money at the farm gate'.
8. What are the advantages of paying producers a fair price for their produce in developing nations?
9. When viewing the concept of free trade through a public health lens, many negatives are identified.
 - a) Make a list of the negative aspects created by globalisation of food systems in a free trade environment.
 - b) In your view, which countries are most affected by these negative consequences, developed or developing?
 - c) Justify your response to question (b)

Going Further

1. Write a persuasive article to influence individual food purchases and choices. Include in the article reasons and also ideas which may assist an individual to make choices which will reduce food inequality and food insecurity.
2. The article states that a major problem in the Australian diet is the lack of fresh, minimally processed foods such as fruits and vegetables.
 - a) How might the floods (January 2011) and cyclones contribute to this problem?
 - b) Discuss some initiatives retailers and government health departments might take to prevent many more Australians consuming nutritionally poor diets.
 - c) Brain storm the impact major supermarkets might have on food insecurity in Australia if they import more fruit and vegetables from countries like China and the USA> Find media articles that support some of your suggestions.

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