

## Out of the Box

I report here on the Second National Congress of the Brazilian Food and Nutrition Security Council (CONSEA) held in Olinda, Pernambuco; and the Second Assembly of the Alliance for Peoples Action on Nutrition (APAN) and the 31st Annual Session of the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition (UN SCN), both in New York City.

Of these I commend the vision of the Alliance (APAN) assembly, held on the Upper West Side at Teachers College, Columbia University. The founding document says: 'We in the Alliance believe that nutrition strategies should have as their context, the need for food and nutrition security, the life-cycle approach, and commitment to adequate food and nutrition as a basic human right...this means...reshaping economic and political power relations, both at national and international levels'<sup>1</sup>. I hope you agree.

Like money, nutrition is vital not just in itself but also for what it signifies, which includes the relative equity, justice and wisdom of human affairs<sup>2</sup>. When I walk down a city street in my now home state of Minas Gerais and see adjacent hamburger joints and drug stores, when I learn about the continuing struggle of the women's movement to establish the right of mothers to breastfeed their babies at work as well as at home, and when I hear that the President of Brazil said in his speech to the CONSEA congress that any food that supplies calories should be given to hungry children, I don't just think about balanced diets.

Do you, from your experience and from what you see and hear in your setting? I think of the distinction that the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire makes between people as objects or subjects<sup>3</sup>, a variation of the medieval distinction between people as patients or agents. I also think of what Amartya Sen calls, in his defining book<sup>4</sup>, 'development as freedom'.

The nutrition and thus the health, welfare and freedom of populations can be improved and sustained only by actions that start and continue with raised consciousness within communities themselves. As soon as you notice that the drug store and burger joint are adjacent, the less likely you are to let the children in your life be entertained by Ronald McDonald, and the more likely you are to think and act as a citizen.

### Ironies

Phil James quoted from the Quaker 'Faith and Practice' at a special time in his life and mine: 'Only such writings as spring from the living experience will reach into the lives of others'. This came to mind when I celebrated with Leonardo Mata at the 2003 Latin American Nutrition

Society congress held in Acapulco<sup>5,6</sup>, and when at the same time I got to know José Dutra de Oliveira, the distinguished Brazilian nutrition scientist<sup>7,8</sup>.

Dutra, Professor of Medicine and Nutrition at the Medical School of the University of São Paulo in Ribeirão Preto, and a former Dean of the Medical School, is the one Brazilian president of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS). He has an Olympian air, and I had supposed he would be shy of controversy. I was wrong. He is troubled about the ignorance both of physicians and nutritionists. 'Their training is confined to biological aspects only', he says. 'As a result they have a very narrow view and do not see the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of what is going on. This is one reason why there is little input from academia on society as a whole, and why there is so little general understanding that nutrition is vital not just for the health but also the welfare of society'.

His view of UN food aid and supplementation policies as advocated and administered by UNICEF is as sharply critical as that of Leonardo<sup>5</sup>. 'Free food and supplementation creates dependency, and the more dependency, the more malnutrition', he says. 'These programmes don't prepare families or communities to be responsible for their own food'.

He reckons that almost all Brazilian food aid programmes remain paternalistic, and that the *Fome Zero* ('zero hunger') project of the new socialist government<sup>9</sup> is basically futile. He told me that national and international food manufacturers have donated their products, valued at a retail price of 4 million reais (roughly US\$1.4 million) or more, to *Fome Zero*.

With reference to the socialist party (PT) that now governs Brazil, a colleague said to me at the Olinda CONSEA congress, '*Fome Zero* is the PT'. But Brazilian health professionals are angry and feel betrayed, because the PT government, with the personal support of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, for whom *Fome Zero* is a personal test of the integrity of his administration, has done deals with the transnational food manufacturing industry, including Nestlé. The International Baby Food Action Network has calculated that the cost of infant formula in the first year of life amounts to 45% of the minimum salary on which the majority of Brazilian families subsist, and Brazilian research shows that the risk of death in its first year is 14 times higher for the formula-fed infant than for the breast-fed infant<sup>10</sup>.

The first problem with *Fome Zero* is its name. Chronic hunger is uncommon in Brazil. The mass famines that once afflicted the semi-desert *caatinga* regions of the north-eastern states are usually averted by public works

such as reservoirs. The issue in Brazil is not starvation, but food insecurity, which is not at all the same thing. However, in what was selected as an emblematic community in the north-eastern state of Piauí, Lula was filmed for global television handing out baskets of processed products to impoverished families, like a somewhat sweaty and dishevelled out-of-season *Papai Noel*. 'Food aid programmes, whether given as food baskets or as cash, increase the number of poor and underfed communities and populations', says Dutra. 'Instead of learning where to find and cook food, people learn where to get free food'. He adapted a Chinese proverb: 'We are giving them fish, but we are not teaching them how to fish'.

Dutra thinks laterally. He told me that one of the reasons for the evident high rates of iron deficiency in Brazil is that domestic water pipes, once made of iron, are now made of plastics, and cooking pots are now rarely made of iron but instead of steel or aluminium. I was interested in this point, having been taught by Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson of the special heat-retaining qualities of iron, essential in the good cooking of staples like rice and legumes (pulses) and all forms of peasant stews such as my favourite ratatouille<sup>11</sup>. So my iron pots and pans from Divertimenti travelled to Brazil with me, and I have taught the maids in my household to clean them never with detergent and only with water, and then to oil them inside. And I have banned aluminium: anything even faintly acidic cooked in aluminium tastes foul. And yes, I do think it likely that aluminium leached from pots and as added to water supplies as a brightening agent is a cause of Alzheimer's disease<sup>12</sup>.

Dutra takes pride in the work he did over 20 years ago to improve the nutrition, health and welfare of the *bóias-frias* (cold eaters), workers in the sugar plantations of São Paulo state, who left home at 5 am with containers of rice and beans, sometimes with an egg or sardine, that were cold by the time of their meal breaks. With his team he proved by anthropometric and ergometric measurement that their health improved, and their productivity and earnings increased, once kitchens serving varied hot meals were set up by the sugar companies<sup>7</sup>.

To live and work in Brazil is to experience intense contradictions – hope, despair, anger, frustration, affection and commitment, all at the same time. The result can be at best retreat into the pleasures of community and family life, at worst mental and emotional paralysis.

But in his mid-70s, Dutra keeps on keeping on. He is now developing a programme in which community members, especially mothers and older people, are taught or reminded how to grow vegetables and fruits and to rear small animals in home gardens, and with this produce to prepare cheap and healthy foods for their families and to sell locally what they do not need. This sensible and rational approach in a country most of which enjoys abundant sun and rain is also subversive, because it

enables communities to become more self-sufficient and thus more independent, and reduces the need for money with which to buy symbiotic food and drugs. Bad for business!

### Waiting for Lula

At the end of the first day of the congress of CONSEA, its self set up directly to advise the presidential office, the 1200 delegates from all the states of Brazil, together with a swarm of international observers, awaited the inauguration by President Lula, and waited...

After two hours I took off, noting the soldiers with machine guns and what seemed to be a demo outside the doors, and asked the cab driver to find me a Pernambucan restaurant in the inner colonial city of Olinda. He dropped me off at *Oficina do Sabor*, Rua do Amparo 355, complete with guards armed against the *ladrões* (robbers) in the streets and its own website<sup>13</sup>, whose delights I first savoured on my first visit to Brazil in the summer (or I should say winter) of 1999. The speciality of Maercio César dos Santos, the owner and chef, is whole *jerimum* (pumpkin, better known as *abóbora*) with its top cut off and its seeds replaced by seafood – *lagosta* (lobster), *polvo* (octopus), *lula* (squid) or *camarão* (shrimp), cooked in the pumpkin with sauces of *coco* (coconut), *manga* (mango), *marajucá* (passion fruit), *pitanga* or *graviola*. And afterwards, just a hint of *sorvete de menta com liquor de cravo e canela* (mint sorbet with clove and cinnamon liqueur). Much of the Portuguese language is rather grating; not its words for foods, though.

Over my feast I pondered the purpose of the congress, billed as the think-tank for *Fome Zero*<sup>9</sup>. Hunger isn't merely about lack of food; it is also about lack of rights. How can food insecurity be abolished in Brazil, unless its causes, including the dispossession of the poor by the rich and the dispossession of Brazil by international capital, are eradicated? This is why, notwithstanding a per capita gross income of the equivalent of over US\$3500 a year, around a quarter of all the people of Brazil survive on less than US\$1 a day. Actually 'dispossession' is the wrong word, because the poor in Brazil typically have never possessed anything, and Brazil itself has always been possessed, first by the colonial powers and then by big landowners and big business. The total value of the money and goods redirected to the impoverished populations of Brazil by current government programmes is a fraction of the interest on Brazil's foreign debt. So of course the people of Brazil are becoming increasingly impoverished.

I propose Cannon's Law of Specious Gloss, which is: the more shiny of the paper used to print brochures promoting hunger projects, and the bigger the smiles on the faces of the peons on the cover, the more spurious the enterprise. This law has general application; I guess that the brochures for London's Millennium Dome were awesome. Happily the converse also applies. In Olinda

I was most impressed by the home-made exhibitions mounted by dedicated workers from Brazil's 26 states, many of them volunteers who came hundreds and thousands of miles by bus to be in the presence of Lula, the man from the backlands of Pernambuco who survived the 20 years of military rule and ascended as the first common man elected to the presidency, the Brazilian equivalent of Nelson Mandela.

These generous people showed me that whatever are the official politics of Brazil, and despite the corruption of so many politicians, true participatory democracy has flourished at state and municipal level ever since the era of the great populist president Gétúlio Vargas. Can the impoverished people of Brazil gain the freedoms required for and that come from adequate food and nutrition? It is possible, not with money, but by mobilising the people with energy and affection. However, *Fome Zero* now has a new minister, the amiable Patrus Ananias who has done great work in Belo Horizonte<sup>14</sup>, whose presentation the next day ended with a heartfelt quote from the scriptures: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat'. *Fome Zero*, it seems, is staying in the safe space of charity, handouts from Nestlé and all.

Lula turned up around the time I was enjoying my *sorvete*, over three hours late. The police kept him away from 300 *Sem Terra* demonstrators, whose banners said what he proclaimed when out of office: that there can be no end to poverty in Brazil without land reform. Shots were fired, and next day a *Sem Terra* organiser in the Pernambucan backlands was assassinated, maybe by a gunman hired by the local landowners<sup>15</sup>. But it was not the demo that made Lula late. As described to me by an amazed and angry Linda Elswick, a Canadian observer, he was tired and emotional, pushing his luck with his most faithful supporters. He launched into an auto-pilot speech telling of his own hardships, and declaring 'it is sacred to combat hunger... it is more than ordinary politics, it's moral, it's a question of dignity'.

On the theme of impoverishment, Lula seems to think that whatever he came to believe as a young man is right. And yes, he said to the congress that a hungry child should be given whatever food is available. Confronted with the child, there is truth in this; but not on a population basis. Next day's newspaper reported that he had been smuggled into his hotel by a side door, to avoid more confrontations with demonstrators shouting uncomfortable truths<sup>15</sup>. Let's hope that he does earn his place in history as the Nelson Mandela of Brazil, and not its Boris Yeltsin.

### Lies, damn lies ...

Please, I say to myself as I prepare every new column, no more about the hanky-panky of transnational food manufacturers. It is not their mission to poison populations. And like you, I read that company *x* is packaging

its confectionery in smaller sizes, that company *y* has kicked *trans*-fatty acids out of its biscuits, and that company *z* is offering lettuce with its burgers. But then I look a bit more closely, and another rancid item comes to mind.

I am looking at a flyer that fell out of *Veja*, Brazil's weekly news magazine. *Bem estar* (well-being) is its headline, superimposed on the head of a white model, a homely version of Gisele Bündchen, wearing a bikini top and linen trousers, sitting cross-legged in an ocean-side setting, her hands held out in a gesture of supplication, catching what seem to be soapflakes. Superimposed on her left foot is the label *sorvetes Nestlé* – ice-cream. On the back another model wearing jeans is lying on a silver beach, accompanied by blurb about how delicious foods can be healthy also, and you will be surprised at how good for you are – yes, indeed, *sorvetes Nestlé*.

I enjoy ice-cream maybe twice a month. But not the products made by Unilever and Nestlé masquerading under that name, which – like the sweet fat equivalent of Coca-Cola and McDonalds – are now ubiquitous. Do the Nestlé products taste better than the real thing made with Brazilian tropical fruits? No. Are they cheaper? No, in Brazil they are about twice the price. Are they relentlessly advertised, and marketed as lines that can be stocked and sold in supermarkets and any type of shop, with a higher mark-up? Yes indeed.

Of course ice-cream is not a healthy food. You don't need to be a nutrition scientist to know that sweet fat is unhealthy. So how come Nestlé is making claims for a healthy life, and for balanced nutrition, protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals? All is revealed on the inside of its flyer: 'well-being' recipes for ice-cream with kiwi fruit (vitamin C, as well as calcium from milk); ice-cream with pineapple (vitamin C); and ice-cream with banana and cinnamon (potassium). The fruits are not contained in the Nestlé products, whose colours and flavours are mostly chemical: you have to add them.

If cigarette manufacturers could get away with associating their products with iron, zinc and folate, and with the prevention of anaemia, heart disease and cancer, by saying how pleasant and healthy it is to smoke a fag while eating a steak and salad, they would do so, but there are laws against such outrage. Meanwhile there are lies, damn lies, and food claims.

And there is more! The Nestlé flyer invites the reader to access its 'healthy world' website, so I did, to find an array of pictures of beautiful happy active children and young and old people<sup>16</sup>. The site explains that balanced diets are made up from three basic food groups: those supplying energy, including fat and sugar as contained in Nestlé ice-cream, and other carbohydrates; the building foods, such as the dried cow's milk contained in Nestlé ice-cream; and the 'regulatory foods' containing vitamins and minerals, such as the fruits you can add to Nestlé ice-cream.

## Arrogance of empire

The 31st annual session of the SCN was held in the UN building and also at UNICEF headquarters in New York City, directly after the CONSEA congress. In the UNICEF canteen, cards were placed on every table. 'Feed your body, follow your heart. Grab a heart healthy breakfast with Quaker® and Tropicana® and enjoy health benefits that last! ♥Helps reduce cholesterol. ♥Improve cardiovascular health'. And 'See cashier for details'.

The week seethed with this sort of hocus-pocus. Jeffrey Sachs, the economist who as US satrap has structurally adjusted Bolivia and Poland<sup>17</sup>, and who as Director of the UN Millennium Project may now adjust the world, gave an opening keynote presentation of stupefying arrogance and banality, explaining that hundreds of millions of people are 'caught in a poverty trap' and need more aid – US\$125 billion should do the trick, he thought. He commended food fortification, and indicated that he had to leave. On his way out I blocked his exit and asked him if land tenure reform and re-negotiation/cancellation of foreign debt, to which he had made no reference in his address, are on the agenda of the Project. He said yes. He left his email address (sachs@columbia.edu) so, like me, you can write to him for confirmation. I pause, for a reply...

That evening we filed past polite black armed guards to be greeted by The Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, The Honorable John D Negroponte, who – as US ambassador to Honduras in the administration of the elder Bush – made Central America safe for the New World Order<sup>18,19</sup>. He told us how important we were and how important nutrition is. On the other side of the East River a giant Pepsi-Cola sign flicked on, off, on, off. We were positioned as docile dignitaries of some small significance, like sundry priests and scribes from Judaea welcomed into the presence of a man made mighty by Caesar. Having heard what John Negroponte did in Nicaragua I sought him out to ask a question, but with more grace and speed than Jeffrey Sachs, whoosh, he had gone. Now he is US Ambassador in Iraq.

Afterwards Osman Galal, Secretary of IUNS and Professor of Nutrition at the University of California at Los Angeles, who is Egyptian, wrote: 'It seems we all have had a negative reaction from this last SCN meeting. Our generation of nutritionists have failed to solve the problem of malnutrition, even though we inherited vast knowledge. We are – wrongly, I think – trying to stop hunger and poverty so as to prevent malnutrition. The grass roots of the problem we are not addressing. Amartya Sen is one thinker who sees that hunger and famine are not caused by shortage of food. We have seen this ourselves in our studies in Somalia and Sudan. We have to address the inequalities between and within societies'. And as Tom Marchione of USAID (the US agency for 'international development') said in response to Jeffrey Sachs: 'The issue

is not food, but governance. We must get away from the notion that by pouring money and food into any country, we solve problems'.

## People bags

Helpings in Brazilian restaurants are usually more than enough for two, and I asked my waiter in *Oficina do Sabor* to pack the remains of my *jerimum recheado com polvo ao coco*, with an extra helping of *arroz* (rice) and of *farofa* (toasted manioc flour), which he did neatly, in the thick aluminium foil lunch containers kept for this purpose, placed in a branded carrier bag. I stopped the cab on the way back to my hotel and offered the bag to a street child, a pregnant girl aged maybe 15. She looked at me, took it, and went back to sit down and share the food with her two companions.

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