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Nutrition Planning Is Alive and Well, Thank You

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Rejoinder

Nutrition planning is alive and well, thank you

Alan Berg

This article is a rejoinder to an article by John Osgood Field which discussed the failure of multisectoral nutrition planning. The author argues that, although nutrition planners may have been overly optimistic in their hopes that political systems could be made responsive to the problems, significant advances have been achieved. He outlines many of the successes of nutrition planning and the importance of multisectoral work. Malnutrition is a problem that escapes all the standard programmes, and cannot be tackled through the health and agriculture sectors alone.

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The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.

Mark Twain (cable from London to the Associated Press, 1897)

Moved by John Osgood Field's recent *post mortem* for multisectoral nutrition planning,[1] I went in sadness to the funeral parlour to pay my last respects. What a shock to find that the coffin was empty. Just as puzzled were the many progeny of nutrition planning who were milling about. There were also a number of close relatives, who looked a lot like nutrition planning but whose names were different – nutrition surveillance, food security studies, 'adjustment with a human face' probes, living standards measurement studies, social marketing analysis in nutrition. There was no mistaking the stock from which they came.

Professor Field's provocative announcement of nutrition planning's demise richly chronicles the negative side of the experience. It offers some criticism that is deserved, but much of his argument is based on information that is out of date, out of touch, and out of context. His article oversimplifies grossly. Most important, it stops giving answers at just the point where readers start asking questions.

Among this reader's questions is what exactly Professor Field is attacking – is it nutrition planning, to which he repeatedly refers, or is it the much narrower area of *multisectoral* nutrition planning that his title proclaims? Even if it is only the latter, has that been the hapless odyssey he describes? And is the solution, which he proposes, simply to get 'on with the job of making nutrition an integral part of agricultural development and primary health care'?

The article is lax in using the terms 'nutrition planning' and 'multisectoral nutrition planning' interchangeably. To damn all nutrition planning for the performance of one strain is a bit like damning all music for the performance of Boy George. Presumably the author's tirade is directed at the ambitious excursion into multisectoralism. In his wording, however, he makes a general indictment of the broader concept of nutrition planning, as in 'nutrition planning's unfounded assumptions' and 'nutrition planning's obtuseness'. In all, the phrase 'nutrition planning', *sans* 'multisectoral', appears 55 times.

If readers came away with the impression that Professor Field's

[1] John Osgood Field, 'Multisectoral nutrition planning: a post-mortem', *Food Policy*, Vol 12, No 1, 1987, pp 15–28.

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attacks apply to all nutrition planning, it would indeed be unfortunate. What, after all, is nutrition planning? Most simply put, it is the process of thinking systematically about solving a nutrition problem rather than not thinking systematically. As the distinguished US planner Alice Rivlin has put it, 'It is better to have some idea where you are going than to fly blind.'

Though this may seem patently obvious, one need only recall the world of nutrition before the advent of nutrition planning. Projects, in those good old days, generally came into being because someone came along with an idea – a fish protein concentrate, a single-cell protein concept, a chain of mothercraft centres, a synthetic lysine, a commercially fabricated and marketed weaning food. The idea commonly reflected the background of the advocate; thus the food technologist saw solutions quite differently than the clinician did. More often than not, adoption of nutrition activities depended on the persistence and persuasiveness of the project advocate rather than a thoughtful look at nutrition needs and alternative ways of meeting them. Such efforts may or may not have been useful in isolation. Generally they were not.

The revolution wrought by nutrition planning grew out of the realization that technical fixes may apply to certain specific deficiencies but fail to deal with the major issue – energy–protein malnutrition. Planning demanded careful definition of nutrition problems, objectives and target groups. Once the problem was defined, analysts began tracing the most important pathways and knots in the food and health systems. They also looked systematically for other causal factors and relations that might expose useful points of intervention, many of which the conventional approach to nutrition would never have encountered. The international nutrition community started to realize that a slight shift in price policy, for example, might in some instances have greater impact on nutrition than all of the technical fixes combined. Nutrition planning tried to open up the world of nutrition.

The idea was to have an analytic framework comprehensive enough to capture not every determinant but every significant determinant. (There will always be some guesswork; nutrition planning just tried to remove some of it.) Those interested in diminishing malnutrition would then be in a better position to deal with policy makers to explain, to advocate, and, if successful in getting the right decisions, to lay the groundwork for implementation of programmes.

It may be true that nutrition planners were overly optimistic in their hopes that political systems would be made more responsive to the problem. That they failed in some countries may say more about the politics of poverty than about the intellectual appropriateness of the framework within which they were trying to improve the understanding of the problems of malnutrition.

But has nutrition planning been the debacle described in Professor Field's article? In a number of countries and in a number of development assistance agencies, nutrition problems and their solutions are today being looked at very differently than before all this started. And different kinds of people with different backgrounds and disciplines are working in and studying nutrition. It is now respectable, for instance, for economists to work on nutrition consumption issues, which simply was not the case a decade ago. Even if nutrition planning achieved nothing else (but there is much else), such contributions may have justified the journey.

Let them eat plans

Multisectoral nutrition planning is, I suspect, the main object of Professor Field's guillotine. He correctly and quite eloquently (and perhaps more openly than any previous writer) captures its intent:

> The early proponents of multisectoral nutrition planning clearly defined protein–energy malnutrition as a structural problem embedded in poverty and underdevelopment; they recognized that multiple changes in socioeconomic conditions would be necessary to alleviate malnutrition and ultimately to eradicate it; they perceived a need to adjust existing government policy and to initiate new policy on a variety of fronts in order to achieve these changes; and they believed it essential to formulate a comprehensive strategy as the basis for mobilizing different agencies of government in a well-coordinated plan of attack. Not only were these insights and inferences not trivial; they were radical in conception, intent and design. Multisectoral nutrition planning sought to go beyond technical fixes . . . in favour of . . . changes going to the heart of a country's development effort. The original objective was not solely to serve the malnourished; it was to purge the total environment of those conditions disposing to and sustaining nutritional deprivation.[2]

Professor Field goes on to make a number of criticisms – certain of them having a ring of validity – suggesting that nutrition planners made an unholy mess in their effort to pull this off. There is no question that some people were carried away in a kind of planning mania. (This, after all, was the era in development when anything that smacked of 'systems' and 'models' seemed profound.) The infatuation with elaborate planning endeavours may have been at its peak in 1978 when, as Asok Mitra reported at a UN Protein Advisory Group meeting, the design and procedures set forth in one UN agency's planning manual would have required the full-time effort for two years of the entire staff of the Indian Planning Commission. 'If nutrition planners have to dig for root causes', the former Secretary of the Planning Commission said, 'they should take care not to wind up in a hole so deep they can't climb out of it.' In the discussion, Sol Chafkin (chairman of the group) led the charge to 'decomplexify', and Karl-Eric Knutsson of Sweden (now deputy executive director of UNICEF) called for a moratorium on all systems diagrams. Almost everyone accepted the notion that causality can be dissected as endlessly as a frog can, but it too dies in the process and the remains are discouraging to any but the scientific mind.

Professor Field's description of planning run amok only applied to part of the work in the field. Nutrition planning is no more monolithic than any other field, and some nutrition planning miscreants, even those associated with multisectoral planning, warned from the beginning that an overly complicated approach was doomed to sink of its own methodological weight. Professor Field unfortunately relegates his acknowledgement of this school to a footnote, quoting from a 1973 publication:

> Systems practitioners tend to produce flow charts reflecting the relationships of everything to everything, the result being something more akin to a Jackson Pollack canvas than to a useful planning chart. Comprehensiveness is desirable, but it becomes counterproductive if it focuses time and attention on tertiary variables or strives for precision that may be spurious because of limited or inaccurate data.[3]

Nonetheless, those who had begun the nutrition planning movement were embarrassed by the excesses to which some of its advocates had

[2] *Ibid*, pp 16–17.
[3] *Ibid*, p 20, from Alan Berg, *The Nutrition Factor*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 1973.

taken the idea, and there were *mea culpas* all around. But it was a decade ago that the need to advocate simpler questions and simpler actions was recognized, long before Professor Field tried to take the starch out of the movement. As a day-to-day worker engaged in searching for solutions to malnutrition, I find his description of multisectoral nutrition planning unrecognizable as a process practised today. It is an interesting historical description of an antique no more useful than a moustache cup or a buggy whip.

The frequent references in the *post mortem* to obsession with and reliance on new and 'abundant data' and holding 'modest decisions hostage to elaborate manipulations of data' go too far. It is true that some multisectoral nutrition planners were disposed to a seemingly endless acquisition of data. Presumably it is they Professor Field is characterising and caricaturing. But they were the exception rather than the rule. Their work was never accepted as operationally credible and there is no evidence that as a result of their influence major resources were ever diverted from investments that would otherwise have had positive nutrition outcomes.

Just as it did not take long to show how wrongheaded the complicated systems charts were and that it was impossible to collect all the data the charts required, it did not take long to see that some good indications of desirable direction could be obtained without elaborately detailed studies. From the early 1970s, governments were, in fact, advised that in the quest for the perfect model, nutrition planning could be so overdone that it became a straitjacket to operational movement. Nutrition planning should not be pursued at the cost of operational delay. New actions could be initiated on the basis of preliminary analysis and best judgements while more elaborate studies were under way.

In fact, this is what commonly happens. A few years ago in Zimbabwe, for instance, where current data were lacking, emphasis was placed on obtaining 'best judgements' from knowledgeable observers. Agricultural extension field staff were asked in brief five-point questionnaires for their views on the sufficiency of food in their areas, the variation in seasonal needs, and the causes of poor nutrition. Similarly, government health staff stationed in the field and doctors of religious missions and other non-governmental organizations working at village level were asked for their rough estimate of the prevalence of specific nutrition deficiencies in the area ('often', 'sometimes', 'seldom', or 'never'). Thus it was possible in short order to begin drawing a goitre belt, for example. In addition, medical students were sent around the country to make spot nutrition surveys, and questions on food consumption and nutrition status were added to surveys already planned on agricultural production and income. Also, the nutrition data collected in the agricultural surveys were analysed and compared with information that had been compiled at the time of independence.

In a month a fairly good picture could be assembled of nutrition needs, what caused deficiencies, and what might be done to relieve them. Such data may never stand up in an academic court and are clearly inappropriate for publication in professional journals (hence academic analysts of nutrition planning are not likely to be aware of their existence), but taken together they can go a long way towards providing timely judgements. Data are increasingly being collected and used in this way.

Even more formal data collection efforts need not paralyse action. In

Mexico, practical efforts to measure the effects of the current economic crisis on the food consumption patterns and levels of the urban population produced useful and timely (and unexpected) results in eight weeks. And in the first major effort of the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Surveys – in Cote d'Ivoire – reports were on the desks of key government officials 60 days after the data were collected.

In sum, the *post mortem* again falls short. Professor Field has some basis for his skewering of overly elaborate multisectoral nutrition planning but he is beating a dead horse. The extreme permutation of multisectoral nutrition planning that he pictures held fascination for some people a decade ago. But it is not a current issue. Professor Field apparently felt it necessary to exhume the dead horse, prop up its carcass, and perform a belated autopsy. His concerns could as easily have been levelled at other elaborate multisectoral efforts, such as the big agricultural sector models, which followed a trajectory similar to that of multisectoral nutrition planning. If, for example, 'agriculture and rural development' or 'urban development' were substituted every time Professor Field's *post mortem* reads 'nutrition', most of his conclusions would be unchanged.

Few persons active in multisectoral nutrition planning ever expected that governments would do all of the things laid out. While the aim was to encourage multisectoral nutrition planning, according to James Pines (who perhaps has done more nutrition planning in more countries than any other practitioner), it was clear from the start that what was more likely to emerge would not strictly follow the blueprint. But what did emerge, he reports, benefited from the blueprint.

Multisectoral analysis and multisectoral implementation are very different; in the *post mortem* they are lumped as one. The fact that there are multiple causes of malnutrition (inadequate food supply, wrong prices, sluggish marketing and distribution, an unconducive health environment, damaging behaviour – the entire constellation of factors which have an impact on nutrition status) does not mean that all those causes must be addressed within a single instrument. Clearly some are more important and some more actionable than others. Most people working in nutrition planning now recognize the importance of understanding not only how things are braided and connected but also which strands are strong and likely to endure, which likely to fray, which are dispensable and which indispensable.

There is no *prima facie* case for ruling out multisectoral operational efforts if they make sense. Nutrition work in Indonesia – a country that takes its nutrition seriously – is as multisectoral as you can get. And the Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Project, which is cited with increasing frequency as a large-scale model of a successful nutrition intervention (including 9000 villages), is unquestionably multisectoral.

Today's nutrition world has been heavily influenced by the concepts of multisectoral planning. At or near the top of the list of important work now going on which affects the nutrition of large numbers of people are the multisectoral analyses of the nutrition consequences of economic stabilization and structural adjustment programmes.[4] And the food security studies that are being undertaken in a number of countries cut across organization charts just as they cut across disciplines.[5] The value of nutrition surveillance – looking at everything from the growth of crops to the growth of children – is increasingly recognized. The 1987

[4]Giovanni Andrea Cornia, Richard Jolly and Frances Stewart, *Adjustment with a Human Face: Protecting the Vulnerable and Promoting Growth*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987.

[5]Shlomo Reutlinger and Jack van Holst Pellekaan, *Poverty and Hunger: Issues and Options for Food Security in Developing Countries*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 1986.

annual meeting of the ACC Sub-Committee on Nutrition, the focal point of nutrition for the UN system and bilateral assistance agencies working in nutrition, assigned great importance to this work.[6] The impressive body of nutrition studies undertaken for planning purposes by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) is nearly all multisectoral,[7] as is the body of work of leading scholars such as Michael Lipton and Shlomo Reutlinger. Further, the Living Standards Measurement Surveys being undertaken in a number of countries are highly multisectoral.[8]

Clearly the multisectoral nutrition sector work undertaken in 20 countries by the World Bank and the Situational Analyses undertaken in several times that number by UNICEF had their roots in multisectoral nutrition planning. Even the important movement that passes under the label of 'social marketing' cuts across sectoral boundaries and is itself multisectoral nutrition planning of a sort. Marcia Griffiths, one of its leading practitioners, reports that in social marketing

> we follow the same type of planning procedures that combine national priorities with community needs. Our research may point to the need for legislation, a consumer subsidy, sanitation infrastructure and an intensive education effort to improve household practices. Often we cannot implement the entire package. But at least we understand the context and the priorities and are guided accordingly. The end product is no longer a poster or a nutrition talk promoting the four food groups.

What is there operationally to show for all this? In addition to the projects in Tamil Nadu and Indonesia, large-scale multisectoral nutrition activities are under way in places as diverse as Morocco and Papua New Guinea. Mexico's food and nutrition policy serves as the framework for a sizeable multifaceted programme reflecting extensive multisectoral nutrition planning. Colombia's ambitious multisectoral nutrition programme – based on multisectoral nutrition planning – had its teething problems and disappointments (parts of it were prime casualties of the conservative government's austerity drive) but, according to both Per Pinstrup-Andersen's and Janet Lowenthal's studies of the programme, it was not without contributions.[9] Contrary to the impression conveyed in the *post mortem*, parts of the Colombia programme did well – water supply, small-scale food production, a much strengthened primary health care system – and the new government elected in 1986 is reinstituting other key portions of the plan.

The current concern that vulnerable groups do not bear a disproportionate share of the consequences of structural adjustment is leading to increasing use of targeted food programmes, which reflects the hand of multisectoral nutrition planning. In both Tunisia and Morocco, for example, structural adjustment programmes have recently been examined for their nutrition consequences – something that would never have happened in the past. While nutrition planning units in Mocorro and Tunisia have not reached the scale and scope envisioned, they have done a great deal to sensitize the government. As a result there are people in those governments now who better understand the direct relation of inflation, devaluation, and other economic phenomena to the nutrition condition of low-income groups.

UNICEF's heavily marketed GOBI strategy (the combination of Growth monitoring, Oral rehydration, Breast feeding and Immunization to enhance child development and chances for survival) would not have happened – or at least not in the way it did – without the systematic

[6]'Report of the thirteenth meeting of the United Nations ACC/Sub-Committee on Nutrition (SCN)', 2–6 March 1987, Washington, DC. See also John B. Mason, Jean-Pierre Habicht, H. Tabatabai and V. Valverde, *Nutritional Surveillance*, World Health Organization, Geneva, 1984.

[7]See, for example, Per Pinstrup-Andersen, 'Assuring food security and adequate nutrition for the poor during periods of economic crisis and macroeconomic adjustments: policy options and experience with food subsidies and transfer programs', paper prepared for the Second Takemi Symposium on International Health, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, May 1986; and Eileen T. Kennedy and Bruce Cogill, 'Income and nutritional effects of the commercialization of agriculture: the case of Kenya', IFPRI Research Report, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC, forthcoming.

[8]Ramesh Chandler, Christiaan Grootaert and Graham Pyatt, *Living Standards Surveys in Developing Countries*, World Bank Living Standards Measurement Study Working Paper 1, Washington, DC, 1980.

[9]Unpublished studies prepared for the government of Colombia.

analytical approach to multiple casuality used in nutrition planning, the collection of data that the planning effort stimulated, and the sensitization to nutrition issues. It is true that scientists may have long been familiar with the health and nutrition activities that the UNICEF programme combines. But the policy implications of a coordinated programme probably would never have been investigated or arguments marshalled as they were without the nutrition planning experience.

To take just one element of GOBI, what is more multisectoral than efforts to promote breast feeding? The issue came to a head when analysis showed that inadequate breast feeding was a major cause of infant malnutrition and that there were a number of reasons behind this. Finding a solution for the problem has involved many sectors – ministries of health, industry, education, social welfare, labour and communications. A prime example of the multisectoral approach is Brazil's national programme which involves five ministries.

Even non-governmental organizations have been moving increasingly to adopt the principles of nutrition planning to rationalize and undergird their operations. The breadth of analysis now prepared by CARE, for instance, bears little resemblance to the planning practices of that agency in earlier years.

The changes brought about by multisectoral planning are important and cumulative, but they should not be magnified out of proportion. Many mistakes were made – just as mistakes have been made in other aspects of development. This was, after all, an experiment, one marked with more than a modicum of idealism. It involved an approach that had never before been pursued.

Where multisectoral nutrition planning ran into difficulty was in its assumptions and in its tactics. The presumption that policy people would rush to concern themselves with malnutrition obviously was not valid. Also, many of those involved in nutrition planning did not have an adequate sense of management, and they failed to anchor nutrition programmes or policies in established interest groups or ministries. Further, although Professor Field's charge that 'nutrition planning [was] largely insensitive to clients, treating them as objects to be manipulated for their own good' is overly strong, it is now clear that in the early days the ultimate clients did not receive the attention they deserved.

But lessons have been learned and improvements have been made.[10] In some instances, the promise has been greater than the delivery; in others, complicated methodological devices have fallen of their own weight. Those working in nutrition have learned from experience that they have to take smaller bites, that they cannot do everything at once, that there have to be priorities and phasing. The Tamil Nadu project, for example, is a culmination of that kind of experience. The project, which appears to have reduced severe malnutrition by about 50%,[11] enjoys strong support in the responsible Department of Social Welfare and in the state government. It pays a great deal of attention to training, motivation and support for local workers. According to David Dapice, who is completing an economic evaluation of that programme, it is well focused, modest in cost and effective. It appears to reach and engage villagers. Perhaps Professor Field owes multisectoral nutrition planning a better judgement than he gives it.

Political agendas

Professor Field reports that nutrition planning appealed to basically

[10]Alan Berg, *Malnutrition: What Can Be Done? Lessons from World Bank Experience*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 1987.

[11]Reynaldo Martorell, 'Impact evaluation of the Tamil Nadu integrated nutrition project', Consultant's Report to the Government, 19 June 1987; and Berg, *op cit*, Ref 10.

conservative governments and was used by them as an excuse for inaction. What is the evidence that its use was limited to such governments? It is true that over the years nutrition planning has tended to be done somewhat more by less progressive governments than others. But some very interesting nutrition planning work has gone on in places like Allende's Chile, Tanzania, the Yemen Arab Republic, Rwanda, Nicaragua, China, India, Colombia (under the Liberal Party regime), and Cuba.

Even in countries where the political climate is not receptive to social change, it is usually possible to identify government officials or staff who can be trained and helped to carry out experiments so that when the day comes that political leaders are more receptive, the country will be in a better position to do something. Just as disciplines such as nutrition planning are not monolithic, neither are government bureaucracies. In Brazil, for example, under the military regime there was no illusion that nutrition planning and modest-scale nutrition projects were going to solve the country's nutrition problems. But pilot efforts were planned and carried out to determine what worked better than what else and, on the return of civilian rule, there were experienced people in positions where they could make a difference.

Even in the Philippines, where a national food and nutrition plan developed during the Marcos regime received largely lip service, nutrition planning helped foster an experiment in consumer food subsidies. The experience (and the plan in general) is now getting considerable attention from the Aquino government.

Is the notion that malnutrition is 'morally unconscionable' so preposterous a banner to work under as Professor Field infers? Do not those in a position to help the poor, even in repressive regimes, have a moral obligation to do what they can? Should professionals, officials and agencies whose work carries some potential for alleviating the effects of poverty refuse to proceed with their second- or third-best solutions because the governments they are advising will not undertake basic reforms?

The role of planners

Professor Field's article resonates with disenchantment with development economists and detailed, top-down planning. There is much to agree with in this argument, but not Professor Field's conclusion that 'national planners have limited political influence, no operational authority and only an indirect relationship to how funds are spent'. This is 'an extraordinary generalization for the Third World as a whole', says Robert Muscat (economic adviser to NSDB, the planning body of the government of Thailand), 'and is so inapplicable to the countries in which I have worked that it suddenly, at the end of a well-written article, raises serious question as to Field's knowledge of the role of government bureaucracies in developing countries.' Perhaps he is drawn into this mistake by confusing plans with planning. Most plans over the years have had much less impact than Hollis Chenery and other early development planners had expected. And probably plans have even less impact in this decade, as unpredictable external shocks in many countries render last month's policies inadequate. But planners, once the ink of their plans is dry, spend most of their time on the continuous policy process. Their contribution comes (it is hoped) from their

capacity to inject a logical process and rationality into policy making, including analysis of the indirect effects of individual policies on realizing general policy objectives.

The basic issue to be addressed by nutrition planning (and in all planning) is how resources are to be allocated among sectors when human and financial resources are limited. Where should resources be put to reach an objective most cost-effectively? If the goal is to have nutritionally healthy people, what is the best way to move towards it? Given limited resources, there has to be some process for allocating them. What tools are needed to do that? Might the synergistic effect from doing things together be more productive than doing things separately? What is the context, what are the priorities, what phasing and sequencing are needed? Without nutrition planning, or planning under some guise, what will be the new strategies? How can they be developed if not through planning?

Not only is it important for a particular government to understand the context within which to plan its actions, it is also important to understand the culture of foreign assistance organizations and the constraints within which they work. There also are competing needs for their limited resources.

In short, though there may not be a need for what were called nutrition planners, there most certainly is a need for people who appreciate the importance of nutrition and know something about it – and who can plan.

An integral part of agriculture and health

Professor Field's punchline is that we should get 'on with the job of making nutrition an integral part of agricultural development and primary health care'. But his buildup far exceeds his answer to how this can be done.

The agriculture and health approaches are important, and strenuous efforts should be made to use them. Even within these sectors, however, nutrition planning will be needed. Without the tools provided by nutrition planning, the kind of building of nutrition into health and agriculture that Professor Field supports would not have been possible.

But to improve nutrition significantly will require more than working within the health and agriculture sectors – even if those sectors were to give high priority to nutrition, which they mostly do not. To confine nutrition – and nutrition planning – in this way ignores the reality that malnutrition is a problem that escapes all the standard programmes. An earnest attempt must be made to discover why and how nutrition concerns so often fall through the cracks. There is still a need to understand what the linkages are.

Seemingly unrelated policy decisions – on exchange rates, trade, fiscal cutbacks on government services, wages and prices – impinge on nutrition in ways that might never occur to decision makers. Field workers in health and agriculture are generally powerless to affect these decisions. All they can do is mop up after them, using up limited resources to do so. Those who can affect these decisions must be made aware of their relation to nutrition concerns. Where is the impetus going to come from to do this kind of work?

It is not enough to take scattered shots at malnutrition. Efforts in the health and agriculture sectors are necessary but they are not sufficient.

Nutrition planning ambitions may, as Professor Field suggests, have been naive, but to expect agriculture and health to carry nutrition's flag reflects a naivety about values, drives, inclinations and reward systems of people working in those fields. Health officials, for example, commonly believe the solution to malnutrition falls outside the ministry of health's jurisdiction, or that including nutrition in health programmes makes them unmanageable or that their preoccupation with family planning or immunization or, now, AIDS regrettably robs nutrition of the attention it deserves. Agricultural specialists generally assume that the way to address malnutrition is to increase food supply; they regard more complex nutrition issues as social welfare problems outside their domain. Or they claim that they do not have the expertise, or because of pressing priorities the time, to deal with nutrition issues.

Agriculture and health cannot do the whole job. Those concerned about nutrition should not attempt to supplant them but to help them do better what they can do and then to do those things that health and agriculture cannot do. Professor Field advocates an 'intrasectoral approach'. But an 'intrasectoral approach' does not deal forcefully with poverty.

Finally, Professor Field makes a strong pitch for bottom-up planning, in contrast to top-down planning. This is not the either/or situation he makes it out to be. Clearly local-level planning and action are important and should not be overshadowed by top-down planning. But it would be planning myopia to assume that local-level planners can affect changes in consumer prices, buffer stocks, export and import policies, cash crop versus subsistence crop issues, and so on. The best-laid plans at the local level can go awry because of higher-level policy changes. Balance is needed, just as in the issue of intersectoral versus intrasectoral planning. Both are important. Again, each can do only part of the job.

Post mortem to a *post mortem*

Professor Field's description of what he sees as a botched-up romance with nutrition planning or multisectoral nutrition planning is at places anorexically thin.

Many of us who were involved in nutrition planning did at times become entangled in our own schemes; our zeal sometimes outran our judgement, and delivery fell considerably short of the intention and the potential. But to say that 'a little critical thinking' would have set a different course is unfair. There was a lot of critical thinking by a lot of concerned people in a lot of countries. And there still is. To suggest that nutrition planners 'moved blindly' is to ignore much of the literature. A number of cautions – some of them very early – make it clear that practitioners were not oblivious to the bureaucratic constraints and political realities Professor Field now identifies.

And it would be cruelly wrong to suggest that no progress has been made. The legacy is more than, as Professor Field states, 'a series of diagrams and flow charts'. Years ago planners started moving away from that whole business. Nutrition planning may have borne fruit of a different sort than some of its early advocates envisioned, but there is no question that it bore fruit.

The issue is whether nutrition planning has influenced the way people think about nutrition and the way they analyse problems. And about this there can be no doubt. Nutrition has come a long way from the days

of fish protein concentrate and lysine fortification as miracle solutions. Nutrition planners did create the recognition that there were interdependent relationships. This was an important advance, which broadened the vision of many who were thinking only in one dimension. Before this, who ever heard of nutritionists talking of commodity prices and consumer food subsidies? In the process, the nutrition planning effort has created a new cadre of people working at country and regional levels, with a different view of nutrition problems and how to solve them.

Finally, as Sol Chafkin reminds us, Professor Field practically sweeps aside the history of the consequences of inattention to adequate food–nutrient intakes, especially for vulnerable groups. He should know better than to throw out the baby because he doesn't like the bath water.

Nutrition is an unruly topic and not an easy subject for planning and policy-making officials to grasp. This problem is exacerbated by a lack of consensus in the nutrition community, ranging all the way from whether certain foods have good or bad effects to the way that nutrition interventions can best be undertaken. Slowly, with the advent of nutrition planning, respect for nutrition has grown in some development circles and it has become a legitimate subject for inclusion in the policy discussions of planning councils of many governments. What is not needed at this stage is yet another change in signals, particularly if the signals are based on out-of-date and incomplete information. Perhaps these responses to Professor Field's article will help to tow back to shore and to resuscitate those about to drown in the sea of doubts he has raised.

Nutrition before nutrition planning was largely confined to laboratory research, local-level demonstration projects, home economists' four-food-group type of education run out of extension departments, and miracle technological fixes. None of these efforts had much prospect of solving the major nutrition problems or reducing child mortality. Nutrition planning established the utility of a more systematic approach. It made sense to map the types of malnutrition and of people suffering from them. It made sense to isolate the major causes of malnutrition and examine policies that might attack them, even when actions would cut across sectors. It made sense to take nutrition issues to a national level, both for the required sophistication of the analysis and the magnitude of resources or types of policy changes needed. All of these elements of multisectoral nutrition planning remain intact.

So, Professor Field, nutrition planning is alive and well. It is true that there were mistakes, some of them significant. But they were recognized long ago, and changes were made. Prophecy is a risky business but it would not surprise me, once the air clears, to find those who are truly interested in nutrition hailing the folks who rode in and raised all that ruckus that put nutrition on national agendas.

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