

A Final Perspective on the Workshop
on Tropical Urban Nutrition

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The publication of the present monograph may be a landmark event for the projection and promotion of the study of human nutrition in the urban areas of developing countries, an area we have chosen to term: "Tropical urban nutrition." It emerged from a satellite workshop held in Brighton, England, in conjunction with the XIII International Congress on Nutrition of the IUNS in August, 1985. It was a workshop hastily organized, not officially entered into the program of the congress, and held in an obscure, difficult to find, upstairs hotel conference room. The turnout of participants demonstrated the true depth and breadth of interest in the nutritional problems of metropolitan populations and represented real discovery and enlightenment for both organizers and attendees. Thus, the workshop set a conceptual tone and asked the question of whether a specific concern for nutrition in urban centers was relevant. The manifestation of interest and the rich contributions of ideas answered that query all at once. Furthermore, the workshop posed the question of the role of scholarship in the development of a consciousness about the issues of tropical urban nutrition and in the solution of the problems. The publication of this monograph is an attempt to seek an answer to this fundamental question. Its reception by you, the readership, will be a partial reply.

Seven individuals presented papers at the workshop. One of the persons on the roster of speakers (Dr. Carlos Monteiro) was a native Brazilian. Two others (Drs. Gross and Shrimpton), although German and British in origin respectively, were full-time residents of Brazil. Dr. Immink and I are long-time residents of

Guatemala in Central America but we hail from the Netherlands and the United States respectively. The Drs. Schensul arrived at the congress en route home from a summer research tour in Sri Lanka. They had previously worked in Lima, Peru. Their final destination, however, was their academic base at the University of Connecticut in the U.S.A. All of the presenters were scholars and academicians. All had received university degrees from an institution in the First World. All had done some of their doctoral and post-doctoral training in a developing country. Only one was a citizen of a tropical nation. In the history of nutrition activities in the Third World, however, this domination by Europeans and North Americans is not atypical. In fact it has been the rule rather than the exception. To this extent, although the urban setting may pose a new paradigm, the pattern of interest and the composition of the scholars are not particularly novel.

At the workshop itself, the audience contained many individuals with origins in developing countries and with direct personal experience in nutrition in urban settings. Most of these were also western-educated. The presentation of ideas by the speakers provoked responses and commentary by the audience that were new and enlightening. It is most unfortunate that a transcription of the discussion was not undertaken as pearls of wisdom were abundant. Experiences were often similar from one part of the world to another, but equally often they were contrasting. The language of scholarship, however, which emanated from the speakers - the same language embodied in the written papers in this monograph - seemed to be capable of conveying pertinent and provocative points to all assembled.

If one thing is certain about the collection of manuscripts in this volume, it is the variety of styles and topics. In my introductory paper, I have tried to summarize the history of nutrition activity in the developing world, to argue that urban problems have been neglected relative to those of rural populations, and to pose a series of reasons for that pattern. I raise the question (implicitly raised by each author) of whether a different

level of complexity exists when cities become the substrate for a nutrition focus in the Third World. The notion of complexity and the theoretical framework is carried to another level in the thoughtful paper by Dr. Gross on the organic and mechanistic nature of the city: nutrition interaction as viewed from the thermodynamic and cybernetic point of view. He cautions us against too much reductionism and isolation in the conduct of investigation in the city. A rural village may indeed be an island, but an urban slum neighborhood is part of a syncitium of the whole urban complex.

Dr. Monteiro contributes real experience and real data to the monograph, but again it is in a conceptual framework: namely, of the notion of pathogen, when transferred from a rural to an urban context. The balance of income and need fulfillment when money replaces land and its produce as the medium for exchange is his theme. He mobilizes findings from survey experience in São Paulo, Brazil - soon to be the biggest metropolis on earth - to test his predictive model of the influence of urbanization on health and nutrition.

Dr. Stephen Schensul provides an outline of the strategies and approaches to studying the city not only from a conceptual point of view, but from the practical realities of the academic from the "ivory tower" trying to derive data that will lead to information about the problems of the urban dwellers and will further lead to the means for solution of the problems. He advocates a patient and participant approach, a standpoint that will violate the research principles of various methodological "purists." The personal experience of the Schensuls suggests that as a strategy it works for gaining entrance into communities and for sustaining a relationship. In the context of the syncitial nature of the urban mass, moreover, how detached and objectively removed can a researcher truly become?

Dr. Jean Schensul focuses on woman and the Third World city and relates a series of credible - but poorly appreciated - truths

about the central role of the woman in the survival of families and individuals in urban slums. On her well-being depends the welfare of the offspring. Unlike the extended family network, and community/tribal network, that acts as a safety net in many rural settings, the urban dynamic is more precarious. In a practical sense Dr. Schensul draws the insights into a model for public health intervention strategies that would impact ultimately on the nutritional status of the urban dweller, showing the interactions that are possible and the sequences that seem to be inherent in the interactions.

Dr. Maarten Immink and his colleagues from Guatemala again provide a data-based contribution. In effect, they isolate one component of the matrix of women's concerns that was discussed in the previous paper. In another sense, they bring home the fact that microbial pathogens are not, as postulated by Dr. Monteiro, only a concern of the rural inhabitant but are a major force in shaping the nutrition of children in Guatemala City. The monetary cost of various combinations of mild and severe respiratory and intestinal infections are analyzed, and a stark portrait of dependency on currency as the medium of exchange is reinforced by the numbers.

Finally, Dr. Roger Shrimpton draws on his experience with UNICEF and on the experience of UNICEF (one of the few organizations that have addressed urban nutritional problems). Their current focus is on reduced mortality rates for mothers, infants and toddlers. Food security is isolated as one of the key strategies for improved survival. Dr. Shrimpton shows how truly contrasting are the underpinnings of food security in rural and urban populations in developing countries. He then outlines a series of actions that must be adapted to the urban realities to attempt to achieve the goal of increased survival in target populations.

With the seven papers we conclude the contributions by the scholars who presented papers at the Brighton Workshop. However, the flavor of that reaction was still lacking from our monograph.

We solicited a review of the papers, the thoughts, the messages, the models by professionals at Centro de Estudios sobre Nutricion Infantil (Center for Studies on Infant Nutrition) in Buenos Aires. This group has recently carried out far-reaching survey work in the metropolitan population of Buenos Aires and represent an active and practicing reflection of the mission of urban nutrition in a developing country. Dr. Esteban Carmuega has provided a sounding board and a reaction. In his thoughtful essay he confirms the utility of some of the content of the workshop papers to the day-to-day practicalities at the CESNI in Argentina. Moreover, he offers some original insights of his own.

The FOREWORD has been composed by Professor John Waterlow. Professor Waterlow was a major organizer and host of the congress at Brighton. He gave direct personal support so that the workshop could be held at all. It was only fitting that he be invited to provide a preface to the monograph. Moreover, in his own career in Jamaica, West Indies, he touched both the rural population and the population of Kingston. His was an early involvement in urban problems of nutrition. His four-decade career spans almost all of the post-war period during which international nutrition has been a recognized public health and scholarly activity.

In retrospect, it is hard to believe that we have been able to develop a monograph publication from the tentative preparations and hasty scrambling that characterized the organization of the parent workshop. It may be testimony to the imperative of the theme of tropical urban nutrition today that the momentum of the original pre-congress idea has carried us this far. Moreover, in ever-expanding circles, meetings and seminars on urban nutrition in developing countries are being organized. The next challenge may not be to stimulate meetings but to provide channels for communication between and among the regional nuclei that are undertaking these activities.

It is with sincere gratitude to the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) (German Agency for Technical Cooperation) for having included this monograph in their series that we disseminate this publication. We hope that the hands that are holding the book now will be hands that will carry the message and the mission further. As the cities grow with explosive expansion so must the forces for adequate diet and nutrition be multiplied. We would appreciate your comments and suggestions on the themes treated in this volume. We would also appreciate your sharing the book and its ideas with your colleagues.