

# Malnutrition and Intellectual Development

by

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*A review of this book in West Africa (19 March 1973) encouraged me to send for it. When it had just reached me I showed it to an African neighbour, an academic economist. His reaction was impatience: "Another problem panacea for outsiders to wish on Africa". Provisionally I could feel a certain sympathy for this point of view. After all, so many clever people have given so many expert pieces of advice to Africans for so long from safe financial distances as part of what can sometimes seem complacently unreal exercises in Aid-budget fulfilling. But I do not think after reading the book that it is just another piece of expert's window dressing or self-congratulatory empire building. It reads well and it makes sense.*

*One fundamentally attractive element in the book is its combination of realism with humility about real solutions and means to solutions. Latter day "realism" can so easily become cynicism or harshness in Aid discussions. And "humility" in the absence of realism can so easily become sentimental vagueness, bureaucratic euphoria and rhubarb, escapism from the constraints of facts. This collection of papers admirably avoids these faults.*

*As I am not a nutritionist the book has special interest to me from the point of view of pure information as well as of insights into strategies for publicising nutritional matters and setting up campaigns to improve nutrition. It is true that I had become increasingly aware at a generalist level of the importance being given, in theory, to issues of nutrition in national and personal wellbeing. The details both of problems and solutions were not at all clear however.*

\*An appraisal of the Book: Nutrition: A Priority in African Development; Edited by Bo Valquist of The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden.

*In theory, there is obviously increasing agreement in the United Nations' agencies, in bilateral Aid projects and in national development plans all over the world that nutrition is in fact an issue of priority importance in social and economic progress.*

*From personal experiences I have known something of the suffering to children being weaned, through kwashiorkor. I have seen cases. I have also noted the swollen bellies and listlessness of children both before school and in school and have connected both with a degree of malnutrition. I have also heard doctors describe high rates of child mortality and of mothers' debility associating them with inadequate and improper nutrition. And, of course, I have observed the extraordinary survivals of the prejudice that grown men need choicer and more protein-rich diets than children, pregnant women or nursing mothers. These are matters of common observation requiring no great expertise to interpret. What I had not known was the scale and complexity of damage to human beings resulting from malnutrition, the dilatoriness of attempts to mount coherent solutions to it, the difficulties in the way of co-ordinating programmes to overcome malnutrition at official levels, the lack of concerned awareness and of publicity to remedy this both in populations at large and in official circles supposedly committed to public health and social and economic development.*

*I learn from this book that malnutrition is not to be seen only as an acute episode, for example of famine or of specific malnutritional disorders (such as kwashiorkor, marasmus, beri beri, pellagra, scurvy, rickets, anaemia), but to be understood as a high contributory cause in much more complex features of unhealth and weakness. I had guessed that malnutrition had an effect on physical development, but it shook me to learn that intellectual development can also be impaired by it. I also had no idea of the paramount importance both of breast milk to the nutritional status of the infant, not just the infant's happiness or immediate satisfaction but his long term developmental health, and of the dangers of malnutrition to the health of expectant and nursing mothers as well as to their children. Malnutrition as an element in lack of learning capacity in school children and of lack of productivity and consistent effort in adult workers may become obvious once one thinks about it. I have to admit that this book both turned my thoughts in that direction and gave me convincing details of such hazards. One contributor suggests that schools and trained teachers may be largely a waste of time if the children are not healthy enough to learn or energetic enough to apply what they learn with intelligence. It is the interconnection between nutrition and intellectual energy as well*

*as physical energy that makes the problems of malnutrition, in terms of quality of food far more than quantity, so alarming.*

*The problems of educating communities to self help in nutritional matters are as grave as those of affording official projects at national levels to aid progress in this field. Traditional ways of consuming, preparing and storing food have considerable bearing on communal health and on communal ability to realise the existence of nutritional features in that health and to accept the need and forms of change to improve communal health. The problems of education and publicity and relief or developmental initiatives in nutritional matters impinge on intimate communal attitudes and attempts at improvements may have to be highly localised and tactful in their approaches. Pure objective scientific rational approaches may be actually counterproductive if they do not tactfully take into account local attitudes and beliefs, taboos and prejudices, and if they try to rush results. Sometimes very careful publicity and persuasion have to be employed for some considerable time before even already available high-protein and high-calory diets prove acceptable within communities. The problems of introducing new elements, new methods of preparation, new packaging and storage procedures, are another thing again. The concepts of the balanced diet and of the nutritional utility of variety in eating habits may have an uphill battle to fight in communities where staple crops and dishes are not only available but highly valued according to tradition. Here the spread of local food industries and improved distribution and marketing systems, with official checks on the nutritional calibre of the products, can contribute much in raising nutritional standards by appealing to consumers prestige within the cash economy. Advertising propaganda may in other words be sometimes more effective in changing consumer habits than more direct and official appeals. Official bodies interested in improving nutrition in conservative but not entirely impoverished communities may find strategies of using established and entrepreneurial commercial initiatives more productive, as well as considerably cheaper, than mounting their own nutrition campaigns. What is certainly needed is to check on the quality of the commercial product and to insist on its being high. If Guinness is good for you, then the Guinness distribution network, both as advertising communicational means and as supplementary circulation means, could perhaps by agreement be used to carry official advice and recommendations about nutrition, about diets, food preparation. Clearly the same can apply to other popular items such as tea, sugar, salt, flour, bread, milk, oil, soft drinks,*

and their distribution networks. Special problem attach to the design and marketing of specific local nutritional responses to deficiencies such diets and minimal school meal services. Much research has been done both into real priorities in various communities all over the world and the possibilities with respect to nutrition. Local communities, needs, problems and possibilities seem essentially to demand local responses and initiatives. The overall keynotes are flexibility, realism, non-bureaucraticism, interdisciplinary approaches and avoiding grandiose pretensions in order to keep close to actuality in terms both of needs and solutions. Informal small groups of activists, with connections high in the administration, pushing for nutritional awareness campaigns and improved local feeding habits may be much more useful than formal interdisciplinary committees which may rapidly become bogged down in verbosity and impracticable "recommendations" which get unrecognisably attenuated, or even lost, in bureaucratic procedures. The characteristic conservatism and prestige plant-mindedness of Ministries of Health make them quite often unpromising allies in active efforts to combat malnutrition. In the interests of action in this area, several countries have found that individual enthusiasts, with good lobbying potential and persistence in the face of formal discouragement, from the most disparate professional and official and commercial backgrounds, in informal problem-defining and problem-solving groups have been most effective in rousing concern over nutrition and campaigns to tackle local forms of malnutrition.

As in so many aspects of public health, prevention is better, as well as cheaper, than cure. The problems, in the case of individual nations and sectors within nations, include diagnosing the real local problems, establishing priority focuses for attention, devising programmes to improve matters (often most importantly though not always most obviously concentrating on the most vulnerable populations: young children and mothers) and training inexpensive contact-level local staff to publicise nutritional matters and to introduce remedial campaigns.

One thing that disconcerted me in the book was to be told how little governments seem to appreciate the seriousness of their own national nutrition problems. After all, government personnel receive good salaries and can afford to eat well. Research into the contribution of malnutrition as a factor in public ill-health, lack of productivity, mortality, is not well developed in most countries. It is easy to find other causes for those things and to play down the nutritional factors involved, partly

through ignorance, partly through a desire not to multiply complications in planning decisions, already hard enough to implement, for counter-measures. Malnutrition is both hard to isolate as a factor in sickness, debility and dying, and hard to treat in any but a curative hospitalising sense. But this book shows that the problem is so vast in some countries that such comfortable brushing of the nutrition-factor aside in the interests of avoiding difficulties of diagnosis and therapy cannot continue. Of course the groups in the population most affected by malnutrition are precisely the poorest and most backward, whose voice in calling attention to their plight may be politically minimal. But such groups are numerous and increasing.

It is suggested for one African country that returns on the statistical incidence of morbid levels of malnutrition derived from hospitals and clinics are and must be gross underestimates of the real situation. This is because of both the admitted shortage of formal health facilities and the poor utilisation of formal health services by large numbers of people most at health risk, the poorest and least self confident and most ignorant. A Ghanaian expert puts it: "It is well known that the clinical cases are just a fraction of the total number of cases requiring attention." He goes on to estimate that 40-50% of the population of children under 5 years of age in "much of Black Africa" are suffering from malnutrition to the point that severe retardation of growth, and impairment of general health, intellectual as well as physical, occurs. "It is such terrifying statistics that have to be put before national policy-makers to enable them to assess critically the importance of malnutrition."

I hope I have written enough to give some idea of the importance and fascination of the contents of this book. I believe that it treats what is indeed a most urgent issue for national social and economic progress. The exploratory and tentative, and varied, hypotheses of analysing and treating malnutrition seem thoroughly sensible and useful. The range of expertise, from economists to paediatricians and marketing consultants, is impressive. The material is presented most readably, for such busy but interested generalists as myself. The chapters (each by individual contributors) cover general issues, analyses of problems, suggestions for solutions, policy recommendations, informal approach recommendations, case-studies of individual nations (Ghana, Tanzania, Nigeria, India). The contributors come from many countries as well as disciplines. I found the book equally impressive and stimulating. There is material in it for relatively easy adaptation for mass media dissemination and for educational purposes both in school courses and in adult

education. But its point of immediate and urgent impact must be on high level policy makers in countries where nutritional problems exist whether they are experts in the subject or not. It seems to me indispensable as an introduction to a very serious matter for men of authority and of good will towards their poor, sickly and badly nourished fellow countrymen.

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