

The United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition and the instructive lessons that can be drawn from FAO's 1960s Freedom from Hunger Campaign

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As a global socio-medical problem, nutrition has had a complex history. Since the humanitarian discovery of hunger in the nineteenth century, through the rapid professionalization of the science of nutrition in the twentieth century, to its subsequent incorporation into the global policy agendas, nutrition has, until recently, been regarded as penury's sibling. The concept of malnutrition is commonly used to refer to undernutrition caused by deprivation. However, this is changing. The global explosion of obesity and overweight is changing the face and profile of malnutrition, which now runs the gamut between feast and famine. Recent global expert reports indicate that global hunger continues to rise, with the number of hungry people now standing at an alarming figure of 821 million (one in every nine people).¹

In recognition of these dynamics, in 2016, the United Nations launched a [Decade of Action on Nutrition \(2016-2025\)](#), based on the recommendations of the [Rome Declaration](#) and the accompanying [Framework of Action](#).² These were the logical outcomes of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), which paved way for the inclusion of [Sustainable Development Goal 2](#) in the global [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). The implementation of the Decade of Action on Nutrition, a co-responsibility of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), as well as other partners, is unfolding apace, and a lot has been achieved. For example, one latest milestone is the convening in October 2018, of a nutrition experts meeting in London, UK, through the joint efforts of WHO and the Wellcome Trust. Themed [Transforming Nutrition Science for Better Health](#) the meeting came up with a couple of projects that will explore various ways of advancing nutrition science in order to deal with global nutrition challenges.³

However, although the search for solutions through scientific enterprise is eminently necessary, galvanizing local community networks and grassroots nutrition movements, is lacking in current global nutrition agendas. In places such as Africa, translating commitments made through forums such as the 2016 Accra meeting on [Achieving a Nutrition Revolution for Africa, the Road to Healthier Diets and Optimal Nutrition](#)⁴ requires the thoughtful mobilisation of global, society-wide partnerships. In this piece, I draw attention to the implementation of the Freedom from Hunger Campaign in then Rhodesia and Canada during the 1960s to illustrate the potential value of inter-sectoral and society-wide global mobilisation models used then.

Catalysing a society-wide movement

In a flyer promoting the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition, the co-implementers of the project, FAO and WHO, state that:

*If executed thoughtfully, catalysing the efforts, resources and voice of the vast nutrition community, the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition has the potential to propagate a society-wide movement, leading to national policy change and ultimately to the end of all forms of malnutrition.*⁵

The Freedom from Hunger Campaign seems to have played the role of catalyst and mobiliser very well. Launched in 1960 by Dr. Binay Ranjan Sen, the Indian-born Director General of FAO (1956-1967), this Campaign had two main objectives:

- (1) To “create a world-wide awareness of the problems of hunger and malnutrition”.
- (2) “To promote a climate of opinion in which solutions to these problems can be organized both on a national and on an international basis”.⁶

Moreover, Sen’s FAO sought to educate and inform, to do research and, most importantly, to inspire action. The model of operation for this Campaign was its replication and local adaptation through national mini-campaigns across the world. Each country was required to form a national committee to spearhead the necessary initiatives based on local conditions and requirements. Although a veritably global initiative, it was not envisaged as a one-size-fits-all type of initiative. Two examples of the Campaign’s implementation are instructive.

Vertical partnerships and legacy creation

Arguably, the colonial Rhodesians used this progressive global idea as an accessory of colonial welfarism and soft power. However, the model of implementation used then carries valuable historical lessons for current initiatives. Not facing urgent food shortage at the time, the Rhodesians decided to concentrate on “hidden hunger” – malnutrition – and its health dimensions. Both undernutrition (especially among children) and the groundswell of neo-Malthusian debates about the African population explosion, framed their thinking and focus.

A national committee was formed in 1964, which then spawned provincial and district committees across the length and breadth of the country. These committees comprised a diverse range of local experts representing farmers, health professionals, social clubs and associations, social workers, educators, churches, and other voluntary associations. The national committee mobilised funds from local and global donors, coordinated awareness campaigns, and used various media to orchestrate public debate about nutrition and health.

On their part, the local actors implemented and monitored projects such as vegetable gardening, poultry, rabbit keeping, and piggery, among others. These projects were carried out at homestead level or in community institutions such as schools, churches and clubs. As the then Chairman of the Campaign, L. T. Tracy, said, “Local problems could only properly be tackled by the people closest to the problem”.⁷ Small-scale farmers and cooperatives also received technical and financial support. The international Shell film, *Food or Famine*, was screened in many locations across the colony to raise awareness.

With initial funding of approximately £6 million from the UK Freedom from Hunger Committee, and additional funding from organisations such as Oxfam, the Rhodesian Campaign managed to launch many new initiatives such as the well-baby clinics, community-nursing programmes, school feeding schemes, and the promotion of protein-fortified foods such as skimmed milk, pronutro and other food additives. Not only did the Campaign help popularise the notion of [“marriage of health and agriculture”](#), but it also helped raise the profile of child welfare, nutrition and home economics.

Fig. 1: Rhodesia Freedom from Hunger Campaign donation event, 1971.



To be sure, African liberation movements opposed these initiatives because of their questionable motives, promoted as they were, by a settler state that was swimming against the tide of decolonisation. However, the Campaign served as a catalyst for newly emerging ideas about nutrition, health and food supplements. These would continue as priority areas even after the attainment of independence by Zimbabwe in 1980.

In Canada, the work of [Matthew James Bunch](#) provides useful insights on the achievements of the global campaign in that country. Canada's apparently productive nationalism of the 1960s seems to have produced the outcomes envisaged by Sen and FAO. According to available research, Canadians were generally receptive of the innovative developmental ideas promoted by FAO. Consequently, Canada became a hive of activity as industry, organised groups, NGOs, individuals, and government departments actively participated in local projects inspired by the global Campaign.

According to Bunch, in Canada the global campaign helped to catalyse "*the kinds of relationships among governments, governmental organizations, NGOs, and other organizations and agencies taken for granted today*".⁸ Globally, the public attention, debates, and activities galvanised by the Freedom from Hunger Campaign led to the successful convening, for the first time ever, of the first World Food Congress, in 1974, whose immediate backdrop was the devastating famine in Bangladesh. A memorable outcome of the Congress was the adoption of the Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition.

Conclusion: The FAO archive as an evidence base for new policy

Using one set of experiences as a paradigm for another can be problematic if it robs them of their contextual uniqueness. The world of the 1960s is quite different from that of the second decade of the new millennium. However, bringing them into close comparative analysis might be a useful way of broadening the cumulative evidence base that is useful in the continuing search for solutions. The co-implementers of the Decade of Action on Nutrition need not go further than FAO's archival vaults to get a useful evidence base for modelling a visible global action plan that has the potential to mobilise our collective knowledges and resources for the common good. According to one of the relevant documents, "The UN Decade of Action on Nutrition offers a unique opportunity to all countries and stakeholders to unite around a common framework and to increase the visibility, coordination, efficiency and effectiveness of nutrition action at all levels across the world."⁹

This noble vision is yet to be achieved. The novel campaign spearheaded by FAO during the 1960s – the UN's first "decade on development" – arguably carries instructive lessons on how to galvanize a variety of actors, leading to the creation of productive global-local partnerships, the mobilisation of communities, and the catalysing of legacy-creating initiatives.

¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2018. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018. Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition. Rome, FAO. Available from: <http://www.fao.org/3/I9553EN/i9553en.pdf> [cited 2018 Dec 12].

² FAO and WHO. 2016. United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, 2016-2025. Towards Country-specific Smart Commitments for Action on Nutrition. Available from <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i6130e.pdf> [cited 2018 Oct 17].

³ Expert consultation accelerates advances in nutrition science. London: Wellcome and WHO; 2018. Available from <https://wellcome.ac.uk/news/expert-consultation-accelerates-advances-nutrition-science> [cited 2018 Nov 27].

⁴ Covic, N. and S. L. Hendriks (Eds). 2016. Achieving a Nutrition Revolution for Africa: The Road to Healthier Diets and Optimal Nutrition. ReSAKSS Annual Trends and Outlook Report 2015. International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). Available from <http://ebrary.ifpri.org/utils/getfile/collection/p15738coll2/id/130756/filename/130967.pdf> [cited 2018 Nov 27].

⁵ FAO and WHO. United Nations decade of action on nutrition, 2016-2025; 2016. Available from https://www.who.int/nutrition/decade-of-action/info_flyer.pdf?ua=1 [cited 2018 Oct 17].

⁶ Editorial. World campaign against hunger. The UNESCO Courier. 1962 July-Aug. No. 7-8. Accessible from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000063738> [cited 2018 Oct 18].

⁷ Murray CA. Report of the Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture (Rhodesia) for the period 1 Dec 1963 to 30 Sept. 1964.

⁸ Bunch MJ. 2007. All Roads Lead to Rome: Canada, the Freedom From Hunger Campaign, and the Rise of NGOs, 1960-1980. PhD thesis. University of Waterloo. Available from: <https://uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/3134/ALL%20ROADS%20LEAD%20TO%20ROME.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [cited 2018 Oct 17].

⁹ FAO and WHO. 2016. United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, 2016-2025. Towards Country-specific Smart Commitments for Action on Nutrition. Available from <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i6130e.pdf> [cited 2018 Oct 17].