

Challenges for Pacific nutritionists

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Introduction

Pacific nutritionists face challenges both now and into the next decade. While the challenges are numerous and many are interrelated. The interrelationship stems from the system of government and the economic developments Pacific countries have adopted since the colonial era.

Nutritionists working in the Pacific need to maintain a balance between focusing on NCD (non communicable diseases) or lifestyle diseases on one hand, and programs designed to eradicate deficiency problems on the other, given the scarce resources of the region. While diabetes, obesity, hypertension and heart disease have increasingly become public health problems diseases like STD and AIDS and nutrient deficiencies like anaemia and protein energy malnutrition (PEM) are still prevalent.

Countries have scarce natural resources and fragile economies. They are experiencing urban drift and brain drain, as educated nationals move to metropolitan countries. Therefore most of the Pacific governments lack the economic resources and depth of skilled people to engage in both curative and preventive health strategies. This forces most of the countries to rely on overseas aid.

Working in such an environment can be very stressful and demoralizing, especially when one is the only nutritionist in a particular country or organisation. To attempt to cover the many areas of nutrition-related health problems alone, is not an easy task. Under such trying conditions nutritionists need to have broad based competency, a clear sense of direction,

adequate resources, and be particularly dedicated and determined to persevere.

Pacific nutritionists need to be aware of global issues that impact on the small and vulnerable ecosystems of the region. Decisions made in North America, Europe, Asia, New Zealand and Australia have an effect on Pacific lives. Ozone depletion and global warming, food security issues, the dumping of nutritionally dubious products, not saleable in

more controlled markets, on to the less regulated Pacific shelves, and foreign notions of development are but a few examples. Development is often not locally sustainable, is ecologically unfriendly and can be socially disruptive. We no longer live in isolated islands but in a world that is literally shrinking, especially if you live on a low lying coral atoll with the rising sea level. Soon the atolls

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will besurfing the Internet as well as the tide.

International aid

Most Pacific countries do not have economies capable of supporting the present outcomes of development. This means that governments have increasingly become dependent on overseas aid. Unfortunately aid donors come with their own agenda and many if not most are economically driven by donor self-interest. Gone are the days of genuine altruism. Aid typically comes with long strings attached. Also unfortunately the typical aid experts from metropolitan industrialised countries believe they have the magical solutions to Pacific problems. Albeit they have unresolved third world problems in their own countries. It is also unfortunate that in the main, Pacific governments have in the past been only too eager and uncritical in accepting such aid. There was little proper critical scrutiny of the objectives of these aid programs for fear of offending the potential donor, or worse still, driving them away. What has haunted our response to offers of aid has been the belief that “beggars cannot be choosers”. The Pacific people do not wish to appear ungrateful, just more careful and discriminating. In other words, we need to be better stewards of other countries taxpayers’ generosity.

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Regional governments often allow projects to continue because outside funding is available. Unfortunately, in some cases we are unable to sustain many aid projects when the outside funding ceases. As a consequence, many projects die from funding malnutrition. It is not that we are irresponsible, but so often projects have not been designed to be locally sustainable. In this way, the benefits of many aid projects disappear as outside funding dries up. I am not saying that the notion of transferring funding responsibility onto regional governments is a bad strategy. What I am saying is that the reality is often different. Regional governments tend to be driven by political agenda that are different from those proposed by outside aid experts. This is a real dilemma and aid donors need to be more sensitive to this problem.

I believe that governments of the Pacific must learn to be more discriminating when accepting aid and nutritionists have a part to play by assisting in three ways: i) to encourage them to stick to health priorities rather than politically expedient agenda; ii) to accept aid that is consistent with national health goals; and iii) to accept those projects that are sustainable when aid donors pull out.

Government policies

Because of the nature of Pacific economies, government policies have generally emphasised the desirability of cash cropping. In the past nutritional considerations have not figured in national development planning. The challenge for nutritionists is to convince policy makers that good nutrition is associated with community health, and that good community nutrition and health are important prerequisites for sustainable development. If the ultimate goal of 'development' is to improve the quality of life then nutrition should now become an essential input for national development.

In some quarters development is seen as a prerequisite for good nutrition and health. This seems to be an assumption driving many of the developmental recommendations made by the World Bank.

However, there is evidence that prior to Western intervention and economic development with an emphasis on cash cropping, the Pacific had good nutrition. Therefore it is debatable as to which comes first: development or good nutrition. I suggest that one of the outcomes of current government policies driven by Western economic imperatives has seen a deterioration in the nutritional status of many Pacific countries. Where there is an emphasis on the generation of cash wealth, whether by cash crops or wages, it is evident that unanticipated and undesirable outcomes result. One of these is a deterioration in the nutritional status of populations. Planning by Pacific governments and aid donors need to take this into account.

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Governments must address food and nutrition issues. Policy makers need to understand the issues, acknowledge the need to address them, have the political will to develop appropriate food and nutrition policies, and allocate necessary resources. There is a need to coordinate the roles of various government departments to ensure that policies are effective in providing adequate food for all. Nutritionists are challenged to act as initiators, motivators and advisors to governments on these matters.

Nutritionists are in unique position to contribute to the development of their respective governments' national Plans of Action for Nutrition. To do this requires an understanding of national planning, economic and social issues as well as food and health considerations. Nutritionists in the Pacific should provide professional input into this important process. This is a challenge which should be used to bring the skills of the profession more to the fore.

The culture of Pacific families

Pacific nutritionists are well placed to educate families to recognise the need for a sensible balance between two competing demands in today's difficult economic situation. One is to provide for immediate family food needs. The other are the demands made on the family by culturally-determined extended family obligations to provide large quantities of food and other wealth for special occasions. A great deal of friendly rivalry and competition takes place during these functions. Unfortunately, in today's world this can stretch family resources beyond reason and in a manner that is nutritionally damaging.

Family members who move into towns often have no land and possess few or no marketable skills. This means they easily become part of a low income, or unemployed relations-dependent group living off the generosity of others. Usually their diet is determined by cost and a lack of ready cash. These people are also more likely to be those

who adhere more closely to customary practices and obligations associated with weddings, funerals and other important cultural milestones. An absence of traditional family support in many urban areas often means that money for cash contributions or for buying special-occasion food or traditional wealth often has to be borrowed. Everyone wishes to contribute the best and the most to these common but unplanned obligations, and this disturbs family budgets. This can impact drastically on family food which is reduced in terms of variety, quantity and quality.

Nutrition education

Nutrition education at all levels presents another set of challenges. Appropriate nutrition education for the community is crucial. Nutritionists need to improve their communication skills in English, French and/or in the local vernacular, and utilise all communication channels (village meetings, newspapers, radio and TV where possible) if nutrition education is to be effective.

The education challenge for nutritionists is to help people make positive changes to their attitudes to food. For example, the current high consumption of refined carbohydrates by Pacific people need to be reduced and consumption of traditional high fibre food needs to be effectively encouraged. The importance of appropriate infant feeding and weaning food must be emphasised. Some cultural attitudes towards food also need to be changed. For example, it is desirable to assimilate other cultures' foods to widen the variety of food eaten. It also means changing traditional habits of over providing in case of unexpected visitors; or always giving the best and largest quantity to some household members and not others, and so on.

Throughout the region literacy levels can vary considerably and this makes communication and nutrition education most problematic. Education materials need to be well designed, durable and printed in the vernacular for better understanding. The geographical nature and characteristics of the Pacific countries add a further dimension to the problem of education. For instance, in outer island communities, radio programs may be the best or only means of contact. However, it may also require a program to be presented in more than one vernacular, and thus it is important for some nutritionists to be multi-lingual.

Because food is a very important part of our culture, 'food' rather than 'nutrition' is better understood by Pacific peoples. This means that the approach to nutrition education may need to be changed and to revolve around the concept of food. Thus I strongly believe that the conventional approach to the study of nutrition, which most of us have experienced in our training, needs to be modified to suit the Pacific.

Educating the decision makers

Educating the decision makers and politicians about nutrition and its effect on health of the nation is another challenge. Although most Pacific countries have now developed some form of nutrition policy, its priority on the political agenda is usually low, is not coordinated, and generally not adequately resourced.

Politicians are usually busy people, often change, are mostly male, and in the Pacific more than a little chauvinistic; getting them to listen is a real problem. Their perception of the place of female nutritionists is "in the kitchen". Their understanding of food is limited and they do not see it as an important topic for discussion at a national level. Unless the decision makers are convinced by nutrition workers that food and nutrition is a national concern, little can be achieved. We need to be more active and purposeful in bringing nutrition to the attention of politicians and decision-makers. To achieve this, nutritionists need to be more confident in themselves and be more assertive in discussing professional matters with the decision makers. Perhaps more male nutritionists should be trained!

Educating the professional

In the past, nutrition professionals who worked in the Pacific have been expatriates from New Zealand, France, Australia and the United Kingdom. They have done much to establish the playing field in which we find ourselves today and we acknowledge their contribution. As professionals, Pacific nutritionists are challenged to build on and improve what our expatriate predecessors started five decades ago. While we may have the capabilities, we must also have the will and the commitment to do so. We need to shoulder this responsibility and not wait for others to do it for us.

Most nutrition and health educators in the Pacific recognise a need to streamline training programs and to make nutrition education in the Pacific better coordinated and more relevant. Collectively we should do what we can to encourage and ensure official linkages between programs in nutrition and dietetics training offered by the two tertiary institutions,

namely the Fiji School of Medicine (FSM) and the University of the South Pacific (USP). A negotiated agreement on cross-credits would enable diplomats from the FSM to progress more economically toward a Bachelor of Science degree (with majors in food and nutrition) at

the USP. Although discussion has been held on the matter there has been no official agreement to date. I believe that part of the problem lies in the fact that the two institutions are 'owned' by very different bodies: FSM by the Fiji Government, and USP by thirteen independent Pacific nations.

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We should also broker a link between the various certificate programs in nutrition currently offered by the FSM (Certificate in Applied Nutrition), the South Pacific Commission's Community Education Training Centre (Certificate in Community Education), and the USP (Community Nutrition Certificate). The issue of program duplication also needs to be examined. This will not be an easy task because the

development of these programs by the different bodies was made for different reasons with different target groups in mind. In addition, the institutions need to have the will to come together.

Senior nutrition and health educators in the Pacific also recognise the value of outside exposure. While we believe in and encourage relevant local nutrition training in our institutions, we also believe that locally trained nutritionists should be encouraged and be given opportunities for overseas attachments to broaden their experience. While local Pacific training is valued, we are at the same time conscious of not wishing to become parochial and too inward looking.

Nutrition as a profession

Nutritionists are challenged to improve everybody's understanding of the importance of nutrition in life and health. This means battling against a prevailing disinterest, or worse, negative attitudes. This applies equally to the medical profession, decision makers and the public. Nutritionists need to strive to improve professional status by making meaningful contributions outside the normally busy but narrow work platform.

Unfortunately many governments in our region have not seen a need for dietitians to be trained beyond a basic Certificate and Diploma. Neither have they seen fit to train more than the barest number. In some countries there are no nutritionist at all. In the latter instance, governments are dependent on expatriate volunteers who come in the country for a short period of time and then depart. In the allocation of scholarships for degree studies, nutrition does not usually feature. Professional development is not seen as a priority. Yet nutrition is no different from other professions. It requires constant updating if it is to remain effective. To improve professionalism we have to update our knowledge, and develop a clearer sense of professional identity and confidence.

Over regionalization

It is all too tempting to regard small Pacific nations as a uniform group with identical problems. This is a superficial assessment and an over generalization which typically trivialises important country differences. From a nutritionist's perspective this over regionalization is not helpful because the nutritional problems differ between countries. For example, atoll communities have nutritionally different problems from volcanic island communities; cash crop dependent communities are different from subsistence communities; coastal

communities are different from hinterland communities.

A typical aid scenario goes something like this. A project is funded to develop a set of "standard" materials in the English language for the whole Pacific region. These are then distributed and each country is expected to modify the material for their own use. The problem with this is that unless the countries have resources specifically dedicated to this task, the materials even though relevant, simply gather dust in offices and are not used. In other cases they are inappropriate, but are still used in a mechanical and ineffective manner. In yet other instances the materials may be appropriate but require translation into the vernacular.

This work requires money and linguistic skill which may not be available. Translating nutrition concepts can be difficult because most terms may not have vernacular equivalents.

For example, there is no equivalent Fijian word for 'nutrition'.

For many health departments this all seems too difficult and it is shelved in "the too-hard basket". If they are lucky some new expert or aid donor offers to develop a whole new set of materials just for them. After development, they are in turn inflicted on yet another "grateful" recipient country on the ground of good deeds and economies of scale, and so the silly cycle continues.

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Working in isolation

A support organisation is seen as very important especially where there may be a single person battling with government bureaucracies. Furthermore, this lone person can easily be out of touch with the rest of the world and out of date! For this individual to continue, she/he needs to know that they are not alone and can share the problems with others. The formation of the Pacific Island Nutrition and Dietetics Association (PINDA) is an attempt to bring together all the professionals within the Pacific under one organisation capable of giving professional support to its members. One of PINDA's aims is to act as an information gathering and clearing house on Pacific nutrition matters.

In most Pacific countries there is very limited opportunity for a structured career path because there may be only one or two nutritionists in that country. This can be demotivating and demoralising. PINDA hopes to support its members by providing a network via newsletters, meetings, conferences and opportunities to visit other professionals.

The need to remain abreast of professional changes and developments has already been referred to. This applies to a wide range of local and international issues which are important because one individual may be expected to deal with a wide range of nutrition problems as previously outlined. Because these problems may be the result of a trickle down effect from decisions made at an international as well as a regional level, and tend to be multi-factorial in nature, a Pacific nutritionist needs to be well informed about contemporary issues, new methods and evolving strategies. The best means of doing this is probably to attend professional meetings, and subscribe to professional journals such as Pacific Health Dialog. Furthermore, PINDA could adopt a journal like Pacific Health Dialog as its official organ and medium for professional communication and continuing education.

Conclusions

Nutritionists face numerous challenges, which at times seems insurmountable. For example, the paradox of malnutrition co-existing with the nutritional diseases of affluence; the difficulties of having to cope with scarce resources for both curative and preventive strategies; rural isolation and the urban drift; the brain drain of our reliance on overseas aid and experts; an inability of our governments to sustain aided projects; development projects that over emphasise the generation of cash wealth with out proper assessment of

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social impact; a lack of understanding of nutrition by decision makers; a lack of political will by governments to address food and nutrition issues adequately; insufficient and probably inappropriate nutrition education programs and activities; the lack of proper co-ordination of nutrition training programs for the professionals in the Pacific; the lack of co-ordination of food and nutrition-related activities between government sectors and as well as between government and non-government organisations; a low priority placed on food and nutrition (and therefore the profession) by governments; over-regionalisation which trivialises important country differences; working in isolation; and the impact of global issues represent some of the problems.

Clearly, Pacific nutritionists have a great deal to do. They have many roles to play. They can act as advisors, advocates, co-ordinators, innovators and watchdog for food and nutrition in the Pacific. They have skills; they know the Pacific situations; know the people, cultures, values and what is needed and how the decision-makers think. Nutritionists can make a difference, but they must have the will, and work together and support each other as co-professionals.

References

Available from the author on request. □

... women's time, energy and devotion ... are a cornerstone for any programme to improve not only infant and child nutrition but the quality of life of the whole family.

Kesaia Seniloli

Co-ordinator, Population Studies, University of the South Pacific, at the 33rd SPC Conference, 1993.