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Creative thinking as an innovative approach to tackle nutrition in times of economic crises: “let’s cook something up” (the 20th International Congress of Nutrition).

Roos Verstraeten Martin Caraher and Karl Raats

**On behalf of the ENLP:, José Penalvo, Filomena Gomes, Rosalind Miller, and
Christophe Matthys**

Martin Caraher

Professor of Food and Health Policy

[Thinker in Residence Deakin University, Melbourne]

Centre for Food Policy

City University

London EC1V 0HB

m.caraher@city.ac.uk

+44 (0)20 7040 4161

Roosmarijn Verstraeten

Nutrition & Child Health Unit

Institute of Tropical Medicine

155, Nationalestraat

2000 Antwerp

Tel: 0032 (0)3 247 62 98

Mobile: 0032 (0)484 931 931

ENLP conference Group

José Penalvo

Karl Raats

Filomena Gomes

Rosalind Miller

Christophe Matthys

The International Union of Nutrition Societies (IUNS) 20th International Congress of Nutrition, Granada Spain, 15-20 October 2013

An interactive session organized by the European Nutrition Leadership Platform (ENLP – www.enlp.eu.com) during the International Union of Nutrition Societies (IUNS) conference in Granada, Spain, showed how an innovative approach to parallel sessions can be a meaningful tool in formulating solutions to current nutritional challenges.

The key objective of the parallel session was to provide a proof-of-concept that even in the context of a massive conference (4250 participants) one can utilise more modern and active techniques to get a message across and work towards solutions rather than the “chalk and talk” method (i.e. teaching with a passively listening audience). There is huge potential for these conferences to be innovative and to create an environment that encourages interaction by breaking down the boundaries of authority and placing a focus on sharing knowledge with enjoyment. However, remaining engaged puts a greater level of responsibility and requires creativity, experience and a high input from all of us.

In a time of global financial austerity where the poor are more likely to go to bed hungry, nutrition and public health face huge challenges. One billion people will go to bed hungry tonight. In America 60 million people, mainly women, will go without a meal today, in the European Union this figure is 44 million with a further 80 million at severe risk. As food, fuel and housing costs rise, incomes remain stagnant thus placing great pressure on households to economise and food is one way that this can be done (The International

Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2012). But what has the profession of public health done to reflect the global austerity which has occurred following the 2007 global financial crises (Caraher 2011)? Is the best that public health nutrition can offer simply that of managing on a restricted income? Or can and should we go further in taking up our responsibility in our daily work and life? Gathering 4250 people from academia and industry with an interest on nutrition with an average estimated cost of €6,162,500 (€500 registration fees, €450 accommodation and €500 transport) is a major success in this age of austerity and offers huge potential! Nevertheless, the majority of people attending such conferences are besides the conference often engaged in (i) project meetings, (ii) job-related issues, and (iii) exchanging ideas by networking (if they are stimulated). As such, it is not a surprise that when they have to present research or project output they generally follow standard procedures. The question rises how can we touch base with this broad and complex public health issue at a conference and move away from traditional methods? More than ever leadership, working in trans/inter/multidisciplinary teams and – above all – creativity are required in addressing the problems we are confronted with. Creativity may be directed not only to find the best solution to a problem, but also to see the emerging opportunities and as such could give another dimension to our current approaches when solving a problem (ref).

Building up on previous experiences from the ENLP in the context of international nutrition conferences (e.g. IUNS or FENS) we aimed to develop an innovative parallel session. An introductory lecture by Professor Martin Caraher from City University,

London – an expert in public health policy – was combined with a creative thinking session facilitated by Karl Raats – a specialist in creative thinking. The unique and innovative aspect of this session was that Professor Caraher provided the audience with challenges, after which hands on techniques on creative thinking were used to formulate solutions. The ENLP set up this session for two reasons, firstly to bring the issue of nutrition/food security during economic crisis across the participants of the session and secondly to create an interactive session where new methods were proposed to solve the challenges that were provided by the first speaker.

Professor Caraher highlighted that the world we live in is one with dominant influences on food choice by trade, economic trade liberalization and profit (Monteiro and Cannon, 2012; Carolan, 2013). As such our current world is built on a model of increasing food production for health, whilst sustainability and equity are not central to this model. This productionist paradigm sees human health best served by an efficient and productive food chain built on a model where the drive is one of profit and the growth of corporations. The proponents of this model claim it addresses food security, but this is only valid in terms of the production of the total amount of food produced and the claim does not address issues of access or rights to that food (Sen, 1997). This is also underpinned by a global inequality which a productionist model will not address and may even widen inequalities in a world where: 5% of humanity consume 45% of all meat and fish, while the poorest 20% consume only 5%.

After introducing this productionist model Professor Caraher highlighted the concentration of power for the majority of foods grown and processed in Europe. The power and control are located with the supermarket “buying desks” that determine the range, type and price of goods that eventually appear on the supermarket shelves. This has implications for growers and the consumer with what is called the funnel effect, with this process of concentrating power being repeated globally with respect to most commodities. It results in a concentration of buying power, with fewer buying desks and fewer outlets and less power in the hands of the grower (Monteiro and Cannon 2012). This results in the growing and production of more food albeit that it is not distributed equitably or accessible to all.

Globally power is concentrated in a small number of companies; it is estimated that 20 major companies control up to 80 per cent of the global food trade (Lang et al. 2009). This concentration of power can be further represented by a North/South divide with the major international companies being based or originating in the rich North, controlling those who produce food and influencing the choices of those who consume (the industry calls this latter phenomena choice editing). Hence, key impacts of globalization of the food system include: (i) Development of huge multi-national companies who control what is grown, where it is grown/distributed, prices, (ii) Loss of biodiversity, (iii) Homogenisation of culture, and (iv) Less emphasis on public health.

Clearly the problem becomes one where public health nutrition concerns are subservient to those of business and trade. On the other hand, there are also problems when nutrition policy ignores or neglects to account for wider impacts such as those on the environment. All this reflects a paradox in food policy which is left to our own devices: we will eat virtually all of what we like ‘a lot’, about half of we like ‘a little’, and almost none of we like ‘at all’ – this probably holds true at a nation state as well as global level. This results in a narrower range of food and a loss of biodiversity as a smaller range of crops are cultivated.

Professor Caraher used the example of Tortilla production in Mexico to help explain this system. In the 1960s there was a move from handmade to technological processes encouraged by the World Bank, industrialisation and big business. Tortillas are traditionally made from hand pressed wet maize but industrialisation of the process meant a move to a dry corn flour base leading to what some have called ‘a desecration of the tortilla culture’. In the 1980s, to appease the peasantry, the government and the major producer of tortillas moved to subsidies for corn. This subsidy went to the producers and large-scale producers of corn; so small scale traditional maize producers went out of business. The economic liberalisation of trade barriers through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) resulted in Mexico being flooded with cheap corn from the US. A subsidy to poor families was meant to help poor families buy tortillas. But, this shift in spending went to American companies who were at the same time taking control of the grain industry. The result? Riots in 2007/8 and food insecurity leading to political dissatisfaction (Colombo and Onorati, 2009).

Food insecurity

Food poverty and insecurity in Europe is rising. In 2010, nearly one quarter of Europeans (116 million) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This is about 2 million more than in the previous year and the first figures available for 2011/12 confirm this trend. Within the framework of its Europe 2020 strategy, the European Union has set itself the objective of reducing by at least 20 million the number of people in or at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2020 (Eurostat, 2013). So the general trend is getting worse!!! The share of the Union population unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day – something which is defined as a basic need by the World Health Organisation – was 8.7% in 2010, i.e. more than 43 million persons and the first figures available for 2011 indicate a worsening trend.

This inequity is global with the newly emerging economies facing a double burden of disease with want (hunger/stunting) existing side-by-side with abundance (diseases of lifestyle/obesity). If we think of the world as a global table with ten people sitting down for a meal; organised by nation 2 are Chinese, 2 are Indian, 1 is from NE, S and Central Asia, 1 from SE Asia and Oceania, 1 from Sub-Saharan Africa, 1 for the remainder of Africa and the Middle East, 1 for Europe and the last for S, central and North America. Yet if organised by nourishment one is hungry, two are obese, more than half eat a mainly vegetarian diet, with strict vegans occupying one seat, organised by consumption America occupies 3 seats (taken and adapted from Safran Foer, 2009).

Like earlier movements in public health on tobacco and alcohol the focus has got to move to looking at the power relationships of big food producing companies (Tansey and Rajotte, 2008). For too long public health nutrition has focussed on the food products not the food chain or relationships of big food to supply/demand and health outcomes (Moss, 2013). Policy is not a logical process dictated by knowledge but a process subject to lobbying and power influences and big food producing companies are good at this (Moss, 2013).

So where does this leave us?

So the tension for food policies is to find a space between the issue of protecting the environment and contributing to health providing a just and fair food system for citizens while recognizing that the food industry seeks profits. Often this means finding solutions to the current dominant vertical global food supply system by looking at domestic production with more than an economic lens. More and more this perspective is finding a voice in the growing food sovereignty and democracy movements (Wittman et al 2011).

Le Gross Clark and Titmuss said in 1939:

“There are only two further ways of making food more available. The first is to lower the prices of foodstuffs upon the retail market; the second is to provide food to certain sections of the community through the medium of the social services. There is no reason, of course, why these methods should be mutually exclusive (page 166).”

Creative thinking

Classic problem solving suggests three approaches

- Business as usual -stick to health eating messages and not get involved in these wider debates!
- Ameliorate existing conditions by giving people knowledge and skills? But not change much about their social and economic circumstances?
- Focus on preventing future problems and become more concerned with the social determinants that influence healthy eating?

What is our role as public health nutritionists/industry and how can we use the economic crisis as a leverage for change? The last part of this session was addressed by using individual and collaborative creative thinking techniques. The creative thinking concept challenges our current way of thinking. If we are to connect the dots, we need to first understand that everyone's knowledge, insights and experiences are the dots. This concept aimed to connect our unique, yet isolated ways of thinking, in order to create the critical mass in thinking power needed to confront and solve 21st century problems and challenges associated with nutrition.

Based on the challenges at hand, participants experienced a new and far more productive way to formulate, share and enrich ideas into collectively supported solutions. In three steps participants: (i) learned how to reframe the challenge in order to reframe their thinking about it; (ii) were able to give constructive feedback on ideas, regardless of their basic opinion about its quality or perceived validity; and (iii) were challenged to voluntarily support and commit to their peer's ideas. Each of these steps were made possible by means of precise, tangible and reproducible instructions and/or tools presented in a booklet, shared with all participants. As such, participants could fall back on these techniques, throughout the session, but more importantly in their daily lives.

Our session showed that within the limits of a conference, parallel sessions can be organized in a different and productive way. On average 140 people (with a constant amount of 120 people and the remainder being a flow of entering and leaving) participated in the ENLP session. Participants were surprised with the concept, generally in a positive manner, but sometimes with a negative connotation. Based on the feedback that the organizers of the session received, one could deduct that the negative connotation originated from participants' dislike regarding the interactive aspects (including participation, sharing thoughts, expose themselves to others). They preferred the classical ex cathedra colleges in which room for debate or interaction is much smaller. From the positive feedback it was noticed that the majority of the participants appreciated the new approach because (i) it was a good learning opportunity, (ii) a surprise session, The objective of this session was to construct knowledge within the individual and not just transferring knowledge. We aimed to activate the participants in the process of creative thinking by offering tools and methods which the participants needed to control and apply.

Provide more detail of what Karl done so participants were challenged to consider issues by....

Few felt that business as usual was an option, ADD MORE on the solutions proposed.

Maybe do this under general headings as opposed to specific feedback

So

Some were confused by what they could do in a global system

The majority focused on ways at a local, national or regional that they could influence the system.

Etc etc

Even though the ENLP strongly believes that these kind of sessions would be of benefit for future conferences, more proof-of-concepts are needed. To be successful, knowledge about the barriers and levers of these kind of sessions needs to be gathered

Conclusion

These nutrition-related issues are trans-disciplinary, and clearly cross-talk between different professionals is needed to achieve a comprehensive approach to such complicated issues. Creativity is fundamental for problem solving, and can be trained and facilitated. The creative thinking concept can connect people (e.g. industry with research), visualizes new solutions, creates a comfort zone for sharing, agreeing, and putting ideas into action.

ENLP aimed to provide proof-of-concept for an innovative approach to parallel sessions. We showed such an approach can be a meaningful tool in formulating answers to current nutritional challenges. We encourage other initiatives and would particularly suggest that conference organisers take up their responsibility and reorient nutrition conferences.

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Further information about ENLP can be found on www.enlp.eu.

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