

CARTAS AL EDITOR

Malnutrition and education: a discrepancy?

Gentlemen:

May I refer to the article "The political economy of malnutrition: generalization from two Central American case studies" by T. S. Bodenheimer, (Arch. Latinoamer. Nutr. 22: 495- 506, 1972). In this paper the adequacy of education as a significant and effective measure against malnutrition had been questioned. I disagree with some of the expressed views. The development and utilization of modern techniques and equipment to augment both crop yield and production of animal protein leads to an increase in availability of foods, an increase in the budget of the family due to newer knowledges and skills and is thus responsible for better "purchasing power". Hence the availability, distribution, and ingestion of foods within the family may improve usually leading to better nutritional status. All of these factors have education as a common denominator and their imbalance is closely related to the etiology of defective food intake.

Of course, poor hygienic and sanitary environmental conditions are of paramount importance. Once again however, education here is basic. The development and implementation of public health programs depends upon the quality of the men in executive positions and the capacity of the local sanitary authorities within the country. The personal motivation of the technical personnel involved, toward the welfare of their own land plays in addition a very important role. These must be highly trained and well aware of the real necessities of the country; politicians do not always meet these requirements. Politically oriented public health programs can frequently be counter productive.

The nutritional problems of the developing nations should be faced and solved by technologists born in the country, preferably with an academic degree from a credited institution of a more industrialized nation but not over-specialized in

their training. That this can work and well is shown by the existence of the Instituto de Nutrición de Centro América y Panamá (INCAP) in Guatemala, Central América, in which the scientific staff and the majority of the auxiliary personnel have received further training abroad.

Another aspect involved in the causation of malnutrition not considered by Bodenheimer, is the exodus of the rural population to the large cities. They hope for wealth and a better life but frequently end in squalor in overcrowded shantytowns where malnutrition, especially in the children, becomes rampant. The reasons for the occurrence of this exodus can be very different, the progressive deterioration of proper living conditions in the countryside could be a factor. Sometimes due to political reasons, the plain rural worker is fooled and convinced to leave the land for the city. Mostly however they relate primarily to a lack of proper education.

Finally, the author should remember that actual world conditions (1970's) differ markedly from those that existed during the great Mayan Empire. One can not just by-pass the modern living comfort, the advantages (and disadvantages) of modern life on the one hand and then on the other ignore the fact that the demographic density of Central America in 1974 differs from the one existing hundreds of years ago. Nowadays the transmission of knowledge is just a matter of a few seconds, even in the most isolated village. A land reform program carried out in a hasty way would bring on unfortunate consequences for the country and even perhaps for the borderline territories.

Sincerely,

JOSE FELIX CHAVEZ
División de Investigaciones
Instituto Nacional de Nutrición
Venezuela.

Present address:
Food Science & Nutrition Department
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Mass. 01002 USA.