CARTAS AL EDITOR

CONSORTIUM OF SCIENTISTS: AN ALTERNATIVE WORKING APPROACH WITHIN THE UNU WORLD HUNGER PROGRAMME

The United Nations University (UNU), established in 1975 for the purpose of contributing to the solution of pressing global problems has several unique features. Because it does not work directly through governments or ministries as other United Nations or International Organizations do, individuals or institutions have the opportunity to interact directly with it. Certainly this is a needed alternative for scientists who often are not connected directly with governmental organizations and do not have many opportunities to receive financial support for research. A second very important feature of the UNU is its stimulation to development of academic communities everywhere, particularly in the developing nations, with the objective of establishing a worldwide network of institutions working together to solve problems of mutual concern.

The UNU does not have a campus, faculty or students, but it facilitates communication between institutions, faculties and students. It does not award degrees to its fellows because many other institutions already give this opportunity to their students, but it offers them the opportunity to work in institutions where local personnel have experience in solving pressing global problems.

My personal experience with the UNU has been in my capacity as member of the Advisory Committee of the World Hunger Programme (1976-1978). Therefore, I would like to discuss herein some of UNU's activities and approaches to the solution of problems.

The first two institutions to be associated with UNU are well known and recognized organizations: the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP) in Guatemala, and the Central

Food Technology Research Institute (CFTRI), an Indian Government Institution. The Nutrition Center of the Philippines, also a government institution, was the third to join the initial group. The seccond group of associated institutions included the Institute of Nutrition and Food Technology of Chile, the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Investigation, and the Tropical Products Institute of the United Kingdom, the latter being the first institution from a developed country to join the group. Later, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard University as well as the Laval University in Canada also joined the network. The National Food Research Institute of Japan and the Institute for Animal Nutrition Research, in the Netherlands, will be participating in the UNU programme in 1979, in addition to the University of Ghana and the Colombian Foundation for Superior Education. There is no doubt that a world-wide network has already been formed, and that other institutions will be added to it in the future. The idea of establishing consortiums of individuals or institutions, however, a serious consideration since the very beginning of the creation of UNU, has not yet been achieved. I consider the establishment of consortiums of scientists to be one of the most challenging and creative ideas often discussed at several UNU meetings.

It so happens that in several developing countries there are a few institutions which already have people trained abroad, a fair amount of equipment, and modest research and training programs going on despite the difficulties involved. It is also true that these institutions and their scientists by themselves are not able to solve food problems at the community or national level. I believe this is also "helped" by the individual international training and pressures to carry out research "for the sake of research".

Considering that the UNU Programme is aimed at the solution of practical field problems through the academic communities, it would be useful and worthwhile for UNU to set up pilot programs to test different ways of accomplishing this objective. One approach is to support institutions which are already well established in developing and developed countries, as is now being done by UNU. Another possibility would be to create new institutions, which is also an objective of UNU. A third, still untested way, would be to deal with individuals or groups of individuals instead of government bodies or institutions, which is also one of the objectives of UNU. Several groups of individuals from different institutions could join together to form a nation-wide consortium.

It is understood that this is not an easy task, but the reality is that, in a country like Brazil –and I believe that this is true in other countries– we do not need to endow the half a dozen existing nutrition laboratories with more equipment, or with more training programs to send personnel abroad, nor provide them with a few more thousand dollars to carry out research projects. An alternative possibility to solve our pressing hunger problems would be to provide some financial support to coordinate the local personnel by forming a national consortium which would be led by a steering committee. We believe that a program of this type would constitute a real breakthrough worthy of UNU support. The consortiums would be composed of scientists who are already well trained and know the problems of their country, with financial support from an organization such as UNU for meetings, for the training of local young scientists, and for discussions of local hunger problems. Such consortiums could really initiate new food and nutrition programs. Because of their association with UNU, these scientists would obtain additional financial support and prestige within their own institutions, thus being able to obtain economic support for collaborative work within their own country or with outside groups. Of course, the presence and advice of foreign consultants would be of great help for this type of local work. What needs to be emphasized is that scientists from developing countries sometimes need more support to stimulate local personnel rather than additional funds for training abroad, or for acquiring expensive equipment which oftentimes is not properly operated or serviced, due to lack of supplied and trained technicians.

In Brazil and in other developing countries, the scientists and the equipment needed to carry out work aimed at solving local nutritional problems are already available in different laboratories. Many of these individuals are willing to work together but there is no local money available for such a program. The prestige afforded through the approval of their project by an international organization such as UNU, would eventually be more important than the acquisition of new equipment, or even a large amount of money.

It is our hope that the idea of a consortium of knowledgeable individuals already at work in different institutions, such as in Brazil, should be given the opportunity to be tested by the World Hunger Programme. Such an experience should not be linked to previous or new research projects. Rather, it should offer the pos-

sibility of collaborative work by individuals pooling their experience and willingness to solve hunger problems through local planning. In a new and dynamic organization such as UNU, this concept should be considered as an alternative approach to those which already support institutions, training programs, research projects and workshops.

The suggestion herein presented, if adopted, will undoubtedly increase and improve the interaction of scientists in a given country, which constitutes the first and most important objective of the United Nations University for the solution of the pressing problems of the world.

J. E. Dutra de Oliveira
Professor of Nutrition
Medical School of Ribeirão Preto
Brazil