

International Symposium  
*Research in Applied Nutrition in Developing Countries:  
Challenges and Expectations*  
Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences  
Nutrition Third World  
Brussels, 3 December, 2004  
pp. 7-9.

## Introduction

by

Ivan BEGHIN\*

The organizers of this Symposium had three purposes in mind when they decided to hold it:

- To make the concept of “applied nutrition research” better understood;
- To show that high-quality research in that area is now performed successfully, in the South, by researchers from such countries;
- To give researchers from developing countries the opportunity to express their perceptions and expectations regarding research.

Applied nutrition research, the main theme of this conference, lies between fundamental research and actions aimed at improving or solving nutritional problems of developing countries. Its goal is to suggest and then to test, in a scientific manner, possible solutions to such problems.

Research in applied nutrition therefore focuses more on *how* to combat or prevent malnutrition, than on generating new knowledge that would tell us *what* to do (although, as experience shows, it also generates new knowledge). In other words, it translates the results of fundamental research into feasible, efficient and acceptable practical action. It builds a bridge between the laboratory or the metabolic unit and intervention programmes.

Applied nutrition research has three major characteristics:

- It is necessarily conducted locally, *i.e.* in the country or the region where the problem lies, preferably with participation of the population;
- It is conducted by researchers trained in research, belonging mostly to universities or research institutes;
- It rigorously meets all the criteria of scientific research, from the points of view of both the concepts and the methods being used.

---

\* Member of the Academy; Managing Director Nutrition Third World.

However, its object is different: it starts from observations and/or results from fundamental or clinical research (conducted in laboratories, hospitals, metabolic units, etc.), and puts hypotheses forward concerning the relevance and the way of applying such results in the field, in order to alleviate or correct nutritional problems. In addition, it puts this application to testing. In the particular case of this Symposium the central theme deals with such questions in countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America, the problems of which are different from those of industrialized countries. Such problems are not only expressions of underdevelopment, but they are also constraints to sustainable development.

In the last ten or fifteen years applied nutrition research experienced a quite promising development, thanks to the increasing involvement of established researchers from both the North and the South in areas such as the prevention and treatment of child malnutrition; micronutrient deficiencies (mainly iodine, iron, vitamin A, and zinc); young child feeding; the “food-based” approach in tackling nutritional deficiencies; the planning and evaluation of nutrition interventions; the promotion of growth and development of young children; maternal health and nutrition; the “nutritional transition” phenomenon, etc.

The Symposium’s second goal was to illustrate with facts that good research in this area is performed in developing countries. The papers presented at the Symposium do indeed confirm this hypothesis and, moreover, that such quality research is the output of researchers from these countries. All guest speakers came from a developing country. Their presentations and contributions to the discussions arouse a feeling of deep respect for those scientists who, sometimes despite strong difficulties, succeed in conducting relevant research of high quality.

The speakers at this Symposium have all published in well-known international journals. Yet, since “applied nutrition” does not have a specialized publication of itself, they are obliged to submit their manuscripts to a wide range of journals: medicine, nutrition, food science, paediatrics, epidemiology, etc. Hence the importance of giving them a chance to present their results and discuss them with their peers, and an additional reason for holding this meeting.

In recent years substantial progress has been achieved in the development of methodologies for studying nutritional problems and for assisting operational agencies: methods for conducting applied nutrition research; for training doctors and other health personnel; for planning and implementing interventions; lastly for evaluation.

The papers presented at this Symposium will provide the reader with a clear illustration of the range of topics understood as “research in applied nutrition”.

The third — but not least important — purpose of the Symposium was to give these scientists the opportunity of expressing their perceptions and expectations regarding the difficulties of research in developing countries. They did so in a lucid, pragmatic and articulate way. Similarly their expectations are realistic, moderately optimistic, yet very much to the point. A synopsis of their points of view is presented at the end of this volume.

An interesting observation is the consistency of these scientists’ remarks and the similarities between the challenges they face, regardless of their place of work or individual speciality. It seems indeed that the hypothesis put forward by the Academy’s President, Dr de Lame, in her welcome speech, when she pointed out that these nutritionists’ remarks do apply to her own discipline, anthropology, and perhaps to other disciplines as well, finds here strong support. In other words, there is here a particular case of development research in general.

Seen in that light the Symposium provides a fresh look at development research and its problems, and offers new insights which will be useful to government agencies, NGOs, foundations, development workers, decision-makers and, of course, other scientists.

Researchers in fundamental sciences should be encouraged to pay more attention to applied research. Operators (governments, NGOs) should be convinced that a little research, properly conducted, might substantially contribute to the improvement of their projects and their services. This Symposium provides them with relevant examples.