

International Symposium
*Research in Applied Nutrition in Developing Countries:
Challenges and Expectations*
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Round Table: Challenges and Expectations. Synthesis

by

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The symposium speakers have been asked to complete their scientific presentation with a short statement on their perception of the difficulties they are facing and on their expectations as researchers in applied nutrition in a developing country [1]*. These contributions were distributed in advance to the Round-Table members.

The Round Table was introduced by Professor Ruth Oniang'o from Kenya. Then the other panel members made brief comments, and a general, very lively discussion with the audience followed.

The paper by Dr Oniang'o and the contributions from the speakers and the panel are the basis for the synthesis presented below. The consistency of this material — among people coming from widely different places and situations —, its depth, and its articulateness, are quite remarkable.

This synthesis is divided into two sections, following a scheme adopted by quite a few contributors: the first is on challenges and expectations of researchers in developing countries in general, while the second is specific to research in applied nutrition. A few items below do not explicitly list "expectations" as such, when these were not mentioned by the contributors. The reader will infer the author's expectations from his diagnosis of the problem.

1. Research in Developing Countries, in general

The difficulties and challenges faced by researchers in the South can easily be grouped under five headings, the first three of which are recurrent in the participants' contributions.

* The number in brackets [] refers to the note, p. 134.

1.1. ISOLATION

- Insufficient access to information:
 - Articles, journals,
 - Internet,
 - Sources of funding.
- Lack of forum for sharing experiences, results and difficulties;
- Lack of assistance in the planning and implementation of research, in the analysis of data, and in the competitive writing of articles.

1.1.1. Expectations

- Easier access to scientific literature;
- Networking: within countries, between countries, and with international organizations;
- Tutoring, coaching by senior researchers from the North or from the South;
- Provision, in projects, for mutual visits.

1.2. LACK OF ADEQUATE RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

- Lack of an institutional framework for research;
- Excessive dependency on the North;
- Shortage of trained and motivated researchers (due partly to the lack of recognition).

1.3. LOW COMPETITIVENESS IN GETTING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

- Funds are in the hands of a few people: there is a monopoly of a very few who have the right contacts;
- Difficulty, lack of assistance in writing grant requests;
- Sometimes researchers from industrial countries are required by funding agencies to be partners.

1.3.1. Expectations

- Support, coaching in getting access to sources of funding;
- Special privileges (positive discrimination) for researchers from developing countries.

1.4. RESEARCH PRIORITIES OFTEN ESTABLISHED IN THE NORTH

Researchers in the South are unable to establish their own priorities.

1.4.1. Expectations

- Research subjects should be problem-oriented, chosen and defined by the researcher, and not donor-driven.

1.5. DIFFICULTIES IN DISSEMINATING, POPULARIZING AND ESPECIALLY OPERATIONALIZING RESULTS

- No forum where results can be shared, and then applied;
- Operational agencies are not generally committed to using research results;
- Shortage of instruments to evaluate research impact.

2. Research in Applied Nutrition

2.1. POOR UNDERSTANDING AND/OR LACK OF RECOGNITION OF APPLIED NUTRITION RESEARCH

- Research in applied nutrition is not recognized, more generally nutrition is not sufficiently recognized;
- Researchers in fundamental or clinical nutrition are seldom engaged in applied research;
- Health and nutrition personnel are not interested in research;
- Research projects are not perceived as an opportunity for training operational personnel (managers, staff) and therefore as an opportunity to improve the operations.

2.2. SHORTAGE OF RESEARCHERS TRAINED IN APPLIED NUTRITION RESEARCH

This also applies to researchers in fundamental nutrition.

2.3. THE RAPIDLY CHANGING SCENE IN NUTRITION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Examples given were:

- The consequences of early weaning (and inadequate child feeding) because of AIDS;

- The rise in chronic non-communicable diseases linked to nutrition;
- The increased consumption of processed food.

2.4. DIFFICULTY (AND ETHICS) IN STUDYING PEOPLE IF THERE IS NO INTERVENTION TO ASSIST THEM

- Research “fatigue”;
- Ethical obligation of assisting people when studying them: earmarking additional funds for meeting some of their basic needs;
- Need to motivate communities, offering them something meaningful, using local manpower when possible, and involving them;
- Poor availability of already collected data.

2.4.1. *Expectations*

- Need for more contribution of social sciences and of social communication to improve the interface with people;
- Research budgets should include funds that would help motivate the communities;
- More participation of the study population in applied research.

2.5. DIFFICULTIES IN APPLYING RESULTS

- Insufficient coverage of health services, in addition to the issues raised above, concerning the lack of understanding and recognition of applied nutrition research.

2.5.1. *Expectations*

As one of the contributors pointed out: we need “more the introduction of sustainable ways of managing malnutrition, and less of *nutritional studies*”.

NOTE

- [1] Written contributions were received from speakers and from other guests: Francis Byekwaso, Martin Kimanya, Patrick Kolsteren, Herman Lanou, Stephen Mbithi, Theo Ntambwe, Ruth Oniang’o, Armando Pérez-Cueto, Leonor Pacheco Santos, Shafiqul Sarker, and Wim Van Lerberghe.