

Eat. Think. Solve.

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Key messages

- > Malnutrition has many faces and takes many forms.
- > Addressing complicated global health issues such as the double burden of malnutrition requires more people- and community-centered approaches.
- > Curated discussions in relaxed settings – such as around the dinner table – can help raise awareness of problems and solutions at individual, community and national level, and can set the table for change.

They say you shouldn't talk politics at the dinner table.

We beg to differ.

Between the rise in 24-hour news cycles and click-bait culture, it's difficult to escape the daily onslaught of politically charged and outrageous information that is conveniently available in the palm of our hand. But despite this unprecedented increased access and subsequent attention given to 'problem' information, we seem to have ever fewer opportunities to translate our knowledge, outrage and passion into positive action. The reality is that it's easier to click on the next news story (if it doesn't automatically load) than it is to stop, think, digest, discuss, solve and act together. Our environment isn't overly conducive to actioning the change we want to see in the world.

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The dinner table (if, indeed, we are lucky enough to sit down at one each night) is perhaps one of the most nourishing polit-



Passionate young minds gather for a picnic and policy discussion in Melbourne, Australia

ical settings in our everyday lives. From the meal itself, which is a product of countless social, environmental and logistical processes, to the way we purchase, prepare and share food, and the unique opportunity for discussion and debate provided by an often relaxed and reflective environment – where better to discuss the politics of food and cook up solutions for a healthier future than over a meal?

We've inherited a messy world, and it's time we talk about it. The purpose of this article – maybe to the dismay of the reader – is not to provide a foolproof 10-step plan for a healthy future for all. Rather, it is to challenge and change the way in which we define this future and the programs and policies that will set up the world so that we can be our best, most healthful selves.

Who should be involved in creating a more nutritious future? How can we meaningfully engage people in positive change – moreover, how do people want to be engaged in positive change? What existing settings and communication channels can be harnessed by all people wanting to involve the masses in nutrition politics? Asking these questions, and involving the diverse views and voices of everyday people in the cocreation of solution generation can be unfamiliar and, frankly, quite scary. In doing so, we give up control; but we become so much more empowered and successful if our aim is to truly create appropriate, impactful and sustained positive change. After all, food is something that everyone knows and cares about because we all eat – so why not expand our definition of 'expert'?

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Digesting our messy world

Before we can action change, we must first take stock of the problems of the present. As far as ‘messy’ problems go, the double burden of malnutrition is a particularly egregious one. For much of the 20th century, the message on global malnutrition was clear: malnutrition (erroneously associated exclusively with undernutrition) is a symptom of extreme poverty – a problem captured by images of starving children in somber public fundraising campaigns or aid mobilization efforts. This clear message demanded a clear solution: dedicate more funds towards nutrition programs that address stunting, wasting and other complications of undernutrition. Malnutrition, it seemed, wasn’t a direct problem for developed, wealthy nations, where people were more likely to suffer from complications associated with eating too much rather than too little. That was something different altogether, and a problem that warranted wildly different solutions.

Now, firmly into the 21st century, the malnutrition message has grown murkier as the problem has expanded. Worldwide, 1.9 billion adults and 41 million children under 5 are overweight or obese. Rates of diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are soaring, with 10% of the population in the U.S. and Western Europe¹ living with type 2 diabetes, and heart disease taking the title of ‘world’s biggest killer.’ Despite a chronic overconsumption of calories in many countries, high rates of anemia² and micronutrient deficiencies in high- and low-income countries alike show that the food we consume is not fulfilling its most basic function: nourishment. All the while, improvements on undernutrition indicators have not come fast or far enough.³ Globally, 155 million children are stunted, 52 million children are wasted and 462 million adults are underweight.⁴ This contradictory, messy picture is known as the double burden of malnutrition – an increasingly pressing problem for individuals, households and countries.

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We now know that malnutrition has many faces and takes many forms, affecting one in three people globally. We have also come to learn that the pervasive, ubiquitous nature of this prob-





Diners discuss food systems over a delicious vegetarian dinner

lem shifts the malnutrition narrative away from ‘us’ and ‘them’ (based on country income classification), and requires increased collaboration, knowledge-sharing and the identification of solutions with cobenefits for over- and undernutrition; people and planet; rich and poor.

Most importantly, faced with these seemingly overwhelming tasks, we are slowly learning that traditional methods for generating solutions – most notably, the power dynamics of solution generation – must be reimagined to deliver on our bold nutrition goals outlined in the Decade of Action on Nutrition, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Noncommunicable Disease Action Plan 2013–2020. It is of course the global nature of these agenda-setting initiatives that makes them so inspiring, but also means they must take broad approaches to policy and program recommendations – something which can be particularly problematic when applied to such complicated issues as the double burden of malnutrition. Properly examining and addressing the underlying causes of nutritional shortcomings requires a more tailored approach based on individual needs, local and national budgets and capacity for change within the community. Irrespective of context, addressing the determinants of malnutrition – in all its forms – will only be achieved by championing people- and community-centered approaches.

Take a seat at the decision-making table

When it comes to food, there is a tension between our agency and the structure and choices we are offered. This juxtaposes the (incorrect) notion that individuals are solely responsible for their dietary behaviors and subsequent health outcomes. Although we disagree with this oversimplified and often stigmatizing focus on individual agency and the failure of willpower, we have taken inspiration from the idea that individuals are

powerful, and if the ‘menu’ determines our choices, then it’s time to rewrite the menu.

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NCDFREE’s Feast of Ideas campaign puts power back on the plate and in the palms of individuals all over the world. The concept is simple and requires minimal resources, meaning it is highly adoptable and adaptable. Via social media, newsletters and in-person outreach events, we pose the big, messy health challenges that urgently require solutions as food for thought alongside directed questions to spark dinner-table discussion. We then ask individuals to turn a regular dinner with family and friends into a Feast of Ideas where they spend the evening eating, thinking and solving problems – together. The final step requires individuals to invite the rest of the world to their table (virtually of course) by feeding back their conversations and solutions via social media. Based on this crowdsourced information (which we collect through following the campaign hashtag – #feastofideas), NCDFREE creates a ‘Menu for Change’ and shares this with leading thinkers, innovators and policymakers around the world. From the comfort of their own homes and with a little help from the same technologies that often distract and click-bait us, everyone gets a seat at the decision-making table and the opportunity to contribute to positive change.

This isn’t a silver-bullet solution for citizen engagement, but the results are overwhelmingly positive. In 2016, 3,000 diners in 56 countries welcomed the challenge of discussing and debating our food system, the double burden of malnutrition and noncommunicable diseases – and everyone had something to contribute. We learned that some people were upset that their government hadn’t introduced taxes on unhealthy products, while others questioned where this new revenue would be allocated; many young people were actively adhering to and promoting plant-based meals/diets while others pointed out that similar approaches in different settings were not culturally appropriate and therefore required tailor-made solutions; and that people increasingly want nutrition policies and programs to include the key ingredients flavor and enjoyment, not just nutrition.

A recipe for success

Whether you’re an academic, a policymaker, or a member of civil society, people should be at the center of our work, and online crowdsourcing activities are a great way to involve diverse audiences on their terms. Let’s embrace rather than shy away from

meaningfully engaging people in the cocreation of health policies and programs.

To get you started, here are some tips for facilitating your own Feast of Ideas at home on any topic of your choosing:

1. Challenge your palate. “A table companion with alternative ideas [offers] stimulation through new materials.”⁵ When inviting family, friends, or colleagues to join you, embrace a diversity of opinions and experiences. A varied guest list will contribute to lively, productive discussion.

2. Encourage curiosity. Your guests may come to the table with different levels of knowledge and discussion skills. Ensure you facilitate and explore your guests’ questions and inputs – you never know where they’ll lead. Remember, when it comes to food, we can all be ‘experts.’

3. Walk the talk. Bold, innovative discussion is best paired with a healthy, sustainable meal. Serve the change you want to inspire.

4. Pass the plate. Share your ideas and solutions with NCDFREE and the world through social media to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard.

Yes, we are *what* we eat but we are also *how* we eat. Around the dinner table, we are one. The circular fashion in which we sit, the equal height of our chairs, the common platform off which we enjoy our meal – the table for powerful change is set. Pull up a seat and enjoy.

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