doi:10.1017/S1368980009004893

NS Public Health Nutrition

Invited commentary

What President Obama can do in the world

The arrival of a new, progressive political leadership in any country – let alone a powerful one like the USA – is always an opportunity for optimism. Some caution and realism is also in order. The strength and range of evidence about problems in international food policy, and about the USA's impact on the world's food systems, is inescapable. The challenges now facing international food governance are unparalleled, and will be a leading measure against which current world leaders' political performance will be judged by subsequent generations. Crises loom across the entire food supply chain from production to consumption; in rich and poor markets alike; from the ground level of soil and water to climate change; and in the mismatch between methods of production and their health, social and environmental outcomes.

To make matters worse, the world's economy is moving rapidly into recession. Finance capitalism's 20-year credit balloon is deflating more rapidly even than pessimists anticipated. World leaders are desperately trying to repair an economic model that is broken; but now that factories, jobs and markets are crumbling, room for conventional manoeuvre is severely limited. A reflex is visible which tries to restore the *status quo ante*. In fact, we need an entirely new economic model, a mode of living on Earth which is sustainable, not extractive; that builds consumption around values-for-money, not value-for-money; a policy recipe that judges food by its sustainability (the formal definitions of which include health), rather than just on its supply of dietary energy and its effects on the risk of diseases.

This and other journals have documented and analysed nutrition's role in generating the public health challenges we know only too well, and the strategies that have been agreed[1]. We should never weary of repeating them, for knowledge has not been translated into policies and actions that might enable sufficient population behaviour change, and new political leaders need to be educated and challenged, not just celebrated. The enormous burden of non-communicable diseases, made more crushing by the obesity crisis, continuing food safety issues, and more, place huge social as well as financial costs on society. But all the evidence-based policy reports with their well-founded recommendations have not yet led to tough interventionist policies. Governments worldwide have tended to adopt 'soft' policy options such as health education, labelling, social marketing and targeting at-risk groups, mostly within an individualised rather than culture-wide framework. It's little wonder there are few signs of serious policy success yet. Medical interventions with their 'stomach stapling works' nostrum remain the policy default position.

Must this be so? Even rich societies gulp at the soaring cost of treating non-communicable diseases, while low-income and developing countries find this laughable. So how might President Obama help redress the international food and health policy imbalance, fresh as he is with his delicious, crisp mandate, bearing the optimism of that mighty food producing and consuming country?

If the new US administration commits to the following five courses of action, all of which require insight, President Obama could earn a place in history as a US President who made a difference for the better in the world at an unusually critical time.

Addressing the 'what?' and 'how?' of production

First, there's the question of production. The commodity price spike of 2006–8 reminded world policy-makers that food markets can be volatile. Specialists anticipate a coming population-supply-health crunch[2]. One doesn't have to be a neo-Malthusian to be concerned that food output growth rates have stalled. President Obama in his first term could signal that the world must not aim for 'business as usual' – raising output at all costs to feed 9 billion mouths by 2050. In fact, the nature of production is part of the policy challenge. Care is needed for *how* food is produced – conserving soil, water, energy, biodiversity. Future policy can no longer aim for quantity by whatever means.

Here, the USA could give real leadership, at the UN, in the World Bank, in its own aid programmes, wherever and whenever. US food systems have championed mass, cheap food production, oil-based and export-oriented. The model looked attractive to the rest of the world; it defined what has been meant by 'progress'. But that model's supremacy is now called into question, most recently and most comprehensively by the report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology Development Knowledge project, a welcome collaboration of the World Bank and UN agencies[3].

Leading on dietary change

Second, the USA will have to undertake some soul-searching if it is to play an honourable international role in dietary reform. The baleful ubiquity of US soft drinks has been much noted, but perhaps an even more

important test case is whether the new administration champions a different approach to meat and dairy, products from a notoriously effective, noisy and well-funded lobby in Washington DC. US food policy began the 20th century with Upton Sinclair's exposé of the Chicago meat packing industry; it ended with that industry embedded rather than constrained[4,5].

The 21st century must be about US production championing a new model, focused on better, limited, high-quality meat and dairy products. If people want to eat meat, then just as we humans need to build exercise into our daily lives, let farmed animals take exercise and not live caged, flabby half-lives. Let the animal and dairy industries meet decent thresholds of welfare and sustainability.

The mountains of meat which US manufacturers, caterers and consumers deem to be normal portion sizes come at an environmental, not just health cost. Vast tracts of land grow grain, drawing deep on water and oil/energy reserves, fed to cattle in huge lots. The system produces cheap meat, but for how much longer and at what blindness to sustainability?[6] Meat and dairy are as complicated and contentious for environmental analysis as they are for public health nutrition[7]. Think only of the metaphorical blood spilled over their position in the US healthy eating pyramid[8].

Reforming global institutional architecture

Third, there is a real chance of the USA taking a lead in the creation of a new institutional food policy architecture, fit to address the complex tasks ahead[9]. The global structures we have today were mostly founded in the fallout from World War II. The UN bodies (FAO, WHO, UNEP, etc.) sit uncomfortably alongside the Bretton Woods bodies (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund) and now the World Trade Organization. For too long, a fissure has riven international food policy: trade and money *v.* social and public goods. The co-option of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, jointly run by FAO and WHO, to be the arbiter of standards in food trade disputes, is an example and a symbol of the subjugation of health standards to economic markets[10].

Part of the reason for current policy paralysis is the unwritten rule of the last half century that Bretton Woods bodies take precedence. Nationally, the same rule is still applied: finance, trade and other economic ministries have the overriding power. The requirement that 'developing' countries set aside home production in favour of cash-cropping for export as a condition of loans was a feature of the World Bank's decades-long application of Structural Adjustment Programmes. Yet these were applied when food commodity prices were declining on world markets. Meanwhile US food and particularly soft drink exporters could penetrate foreign markets and win aspiring consumers to the joys of US products. Fast food has become a symbol of US-led globalisation, and rising soft drink consumption is seen as a centrepiece of the nutritional and epidemiological transitions[11].

The mix of US (and UK) championed market rhetoric and neo-liberal ideology has justified the 30-year era of banker power that has delivered the current market mess, and has fuelled the commodity speculation that has sent so many 'developing' countries into crisis. If President Obama now champions moves towards a decent, sustainable, health-enhancing food system[12], this would be enormously important in ending the sacrifice of public health nutritional goals on the altar of narrow neo-liberal approaches to markets.

Engaging with climate change

Fourth, given climate change, the single quickest signal of a commitment to structural change would be for President Obama to make up the ground the USA lost when it refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. Kyoto bound signatories to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in 2008–12 by 5% relative to 1990 levels. The USA under President George W. Bush was intransigent and maintained active support for the oil-guzzling, technocratic approach to economics and the environment: technical fixes in the future rather than altering policies, actions and behaviour now. It's now almost immaterial whether President Obama signs the Kyoto Protocol; its role is nigh over. What matters is active engagement in what replaces Kyoto. This will be finalised at the COP-15 meeting in Copenhagen, on 7–18 December this year. The USA could make or break this process.

Happily, the UK has done something helpful here. The 2008 Cabinet Office *Food Matters* report mapped out a new vision for the UK food system, centred on delivering carbon reduction and nutritional improvements[13]. *Food Matters* has pioneered a pragmatic but still ambitious approach, arguing that the food system must be re-oriented around both health and environmental goals; trade-offs are unacceptable. It encourages other initiatives, notably a process of bringing together scientists, industry and standards-setting bodies to agree how to measure embedded carbon and GHG in foods[14]. This is identified by the EU as best practice so far.

With the food system so internationalised, there must be agreement about not just goals but how to factor carbon reduction into food businesses. Ludicrously, big retailers are allowed by the voluntary standards of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development to minimise responsibility for selling food high in GHG impact; they even exclude GHG emitted by consumers driving cars to shops located where they are only accessible by car![15] Giant US and EU food retailers and traders may be the barons of modern food, but farming is particularly important for its impact on climate change. The Stern Report calculated that agriculture accounts for 14% of global GHG, of which 38% is accounted for by fertiliser

PHN Public Health Nutrition

use; 31 % by animal production; and a further 11 % by wetland rice[16].

Reducing inequalities

Fifth, the new President has already signalled his recognition of the need to lead in reducing food poverty and social injustice. The gap between economically rich and poor nations is outrageous. The commodity price spike threw around forty countries into crisis. Ironically, the collapse of banking supremacy might possibly open up room for tighter, greener, healthy fiscal measures everywhere. Change in tax structures is essential for social and environmental justice alike. The WHO's Commission on Social Determinants of Health has charted another way of thinking, which offers the new President rich suggestions about fiscal reform[17]. To do this at home would be possible if similar reforms are championed internationally.

Delivering sustainable healthy consumption internationally will require confrontation of the US consuming public's aspirations. The 'right' to be obese carries a social and environmental burden. There is an economic lock-in by US consumers to an excessive, oil-dependent 'lifestyle', consigning US impoverished consumers, like the impoverished everywhere, to a marginalised status. Thus far the US public, like consumers everywhere, shows few signs of having an epiphany. People want jobs and secure incomes, not homilies on why the rich consuming classes in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development need to consume less and differently. The need for a Green New Deal – not just a re-run of the 1930s but something radically different with the Planet at its heart – is vital, urgent and essential.

How likely is an agenda such as this?

So what will happen? The policy space is there, clearly, but sceptics are already nervous about President Obama's appointment of former Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack to be Secretary of Agriculture. The Doha trade round has been stalled for over a year, with agricultural reform part of the blockage. Some have pronounced it dead; others think it could be resuscitated. Mr Vilsack has past links with the big business approach to food and farming. He was a leading member of the US Governors' Biotechnology Partnership and the Governors' Ethanol Coalition. But if he gets or is encouraged to get the ecological message, he should know where the reefs are in the choppy seas ahead.

A new era where food must deliver ecological public health, that works socially and environmentally as well as economically and personally, is upon us. The old productionist approach which metaphorically and literally mined the earth is exposed as ruinous and is no longer acceptable. The history of food policy suggests that progress requires a mix of good evidence, public pressure, articulated alternatives and deft political leadership. President Obama's administration must and can address the international crisis at the same time as the crisis within the USA. In this 21st century, national, local and global food policy issues are inseparable.

Tim Lang
Centre for Food Policy, City University
London EClV 0HB, UK
Email: t.lang@city.ac.uk

References

1. World Health Organization (2004) *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health. 57th World Health Assembly. WHA 57.17*, agenda item 12.6. Geneva: WHO.
2. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development & Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2008) *Agricultural Outlook 2008–2017*. Rome & Paris: OECD & FAO.
3. International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology Development Knowledge (2008) *Global Report and Synthesis Report*. London: IAASTD.
4. Sinclair U (1906/1985) *The Jungle*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
5. Rifkin J (1992) *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture*. New York: Dutton.
6. Jacobson MF (2006) *Six Arguments for a Greener Diet: How a More Plant-Based Diet Could Save Your Health and the Environment*. Washington, DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest.
7. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2006) *Livestock's Long Shadow – Environmental Issues and Options*. Rome: FAO.
8. Nestle M (2002) *Food Politics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
9. Lang T, Barling D & Caraher M (2009) *Food Policy: Integrating Health, Environment and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (In the Press).
10. Lang T & Heasman M (2004) *Food Wars: The Global Battle for Mouths, Minds and Markets*. London: Earthscan.
11. Popkin BM & Nielsen SJ (2003) The sweetening of the world's diet. *Obes Res* **11**, 1325–1332.
12. Pollan M (2008) The next Farmer-in-Chief. *New York Times Magazine*, 9 October; available at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/12/magazine/12policy-t.html?pagewanted=1&_r=12008
13. Cabinet Office Strategy Unit (2008) *Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century*. London: Cabinet Office Strategy Unit.
14. British Standards Institute (2008) *PAS 2050 – Assessing the Life Cycle Greenhouse Gas Emissions of Goods And Services*. London: British Standards Institute.
15. Tesco plc (2007) Measuring our carbon footprint. http://www.tesco.com/climatechange/carbonFootprint.asp (accessed June 2008).
16. Stern SN (2007) *The Economics of Climate Change. The Report of the Stern Review*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
17. World Health Organization (2008) Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Report of the Commission. http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/ (accessed February 2009).

PHN Public Health Nutrition