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NUTRITION EDUCATION AND THE
MASS MEDIA IN DEVELOPING
COUNTRIES

by John Balcomb
Chief, Communications and Information Service
UNICEF, Nairobi

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SOME THOUGHTS ON NUTRITION EDUCATION AND THE MASS MEDIA
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

by

John Balcomb
Chief, Communications and Information Service
UNICEF, New Delhi

I

Choosing a Message for Mass Media

A couple of months ago, we sponsored a small artists' workshop in New Delhi to explore characters and stories that might be suitable for children's television. There is only one TV station in India now, located in Delhi, but the Government has ambitious plans for expanding television coverage in the next five to ten years, including relay transmission from a satellite in geostationary orbit beamed at selected rural areas. It is UNICEF's hope to stimulate some good programming for young children, combining entertainment and simple instruction, and we figure the lead time is just about right to get started on it.

One of the things we should like to promote through children's television is better nutrition. The objection has been raised that children don't determine their diet their parents do. Our counter-argument is that children's preferences make some difference; that children grow up quickly and that the best time to start their nutrition education is when they are young; and that, anyway, grownups watch children's programmes.

"Well", the artists asked us, "what's the specific nutrition message you'd like to get across?" This led to a bit of head scratching on our part - my own in particular. Protein-calorie malnutrition, iron deficiency anaemia, and Vitamin A deficiency are considered the most widespread nutritional problems in India. What kind of message directed primarily at children, and preferably disguised as a story, could have any conceivable impact on any of these problems in a country where some 200 million people live below the absolute poverty level?

The solution I proposed was to concentrate exclusively on "greens" and forget about everything else. Drumstick leaves (*Moringa Oleifera*), amaranth (*Amaranthus gangeticus*), agathi (*Sesbiana grandiflora*), turnip greens (*Brassica rapa*), and spinach (*Spinacea oleracea*) are commonly found in rural India and they are cheap. One ounce a day of any of these will supply all the Vitamin A needed by a young child at a negligible cost. They are also a good source of iron.

Vitamin A deficiency, of course, causes night blindness and can eventually lead to the destruction of the cornea. It is estimated that ten to fifteen thousand children go blind from this cause every year in India. We devised a story about a king whose little daughter, the apple of his eye, is fed exclusively on rich, refined foods, with never a thought to such common things as turnip greens or drumstick leaves. She begins to stumble at dusk. The best physicians are called in. They further restrict her diet, and her sight worsens. Finally, an old hag, the gardener's wife, who lives in a hut beneath a drumstick tree, comes to the king "Your Majesty, I can restore your daughter's sight".

Each of you can write the rest of the story for himself, I am sure, basing it on his own culture and on some cheap source of greens available in his own country. In northern India, stories about the emperor Akbar are still a popular form of village entertainment. We are setting the "Drumstick Tree" story in the court of Akbar and we are making a puppet script from it. The Literacy House puppet troop in Lucknow is going to stage the story and we shall see how it goes over. If it doesn't go over, we'll try a different story, but we'll keep on plugging greens, in any event.

I am starting in this anecdota vein because I think our workshop experience in New Delhi illustrates a very important point there are things the mass media can do and there are things the mass media can't do. One of our artists suggested a story-board based on the message "Good food makes you strong - eat more of it". Well, everybody knows this. One presumes that people eat as much of what they regard as good food as they can get. Nutritionists in India now seem to be coming around to the conclusion that the celebrated "protein gap", in this country at least, is largely a "calorie gap". People don't get enough calories, so the proteins in their diet are metabolized to produce energy. You are not going to overcome a calorie deficiency in people's diet by telling them to eat more food. The Green Revolution has got to be pushed even farther, and while this is going on it may be necessary to continue free distribution of supplementary foodstuffs to low-income, vulnerable groups for a considerable period of time. So far as the ultimate beneficiary groups are concerned, nutrition education via the mass media can do no more than to help them make better use of the foods available to them.

II

A Patent Media Selector

The nutrition educator is not, of course, concerned merely with teaching the public at large to make better use of foods currently

available to them. He is also concerned, among other things, with influencing national nutrition policy, with the mobilization of informed public opinion in support of various production and distribution programmes, and with the very important task of training extension workers. And the mass media - by which we usually mean the press, radio, TV and films - are just a few of the communication tools at his disposal.

Let us make a list of some of the sets of people the nutrition educator may wish to reach, arranged in ascending numerical magnitude, and let us make a list of some of the communications media that might be available to him, in ascending order of costliness and sophistication.

Target Groups

One or more key persons
Small group of key persons
Several key groups
Restricted professional community
Extension trainees
Informed public opinion
Mothers' clubs, youth' clubs, etc.
Readers popular vernacular press
School children
Theatre cinema audience
Potential TV audience
Mass radio audience

Media of Communication

Conversation
Chalk-talk
35 mm slide lecture
Article in Professional Journal
Articles in "egg-head" newspapers
Articles in popular press
Prepared film strips
Printed flip charts
Printed posters
Film strip with synchronized sound tape
Integrated curriculum materials for schools
Radio talks for "egg-head" audience
Radio shows, entertainment format
16 mm training or motivational films
Live TV (studio based)
35 mm cinema short subjects for theatre exhibition

To keep unit costs in line, it is obviously desirable to use the cheaper, more intimate media for small audiences and the more expensive media for large audiences. If we plot our target groups along the vertical axis of a simple graph and the media along the horizontal axis, and then draw a diagonal from the lower left hand corner to the upper right, we get a very crude, but useful, media selector (Fig. 1).

I have made no attempt to scale this thing accurately, but both the x and y axis can be thought to be graduated along roughly logarithmic scales. I have plotted a point for each medium indicating what might be considered a suitable target group for that medium, taking into account unit costs, technical feasibility, etc.

I am obviously thinking of a developing country with wide radio listenership, with good prospects of extensive TV coverage in the next decade or so, with 35 mm cinema in most crossroad towns, but with a relatively small newspaper readership, which, owing to newsprint shortages and low adult literacy, will probably not increase very much in the immediate future.

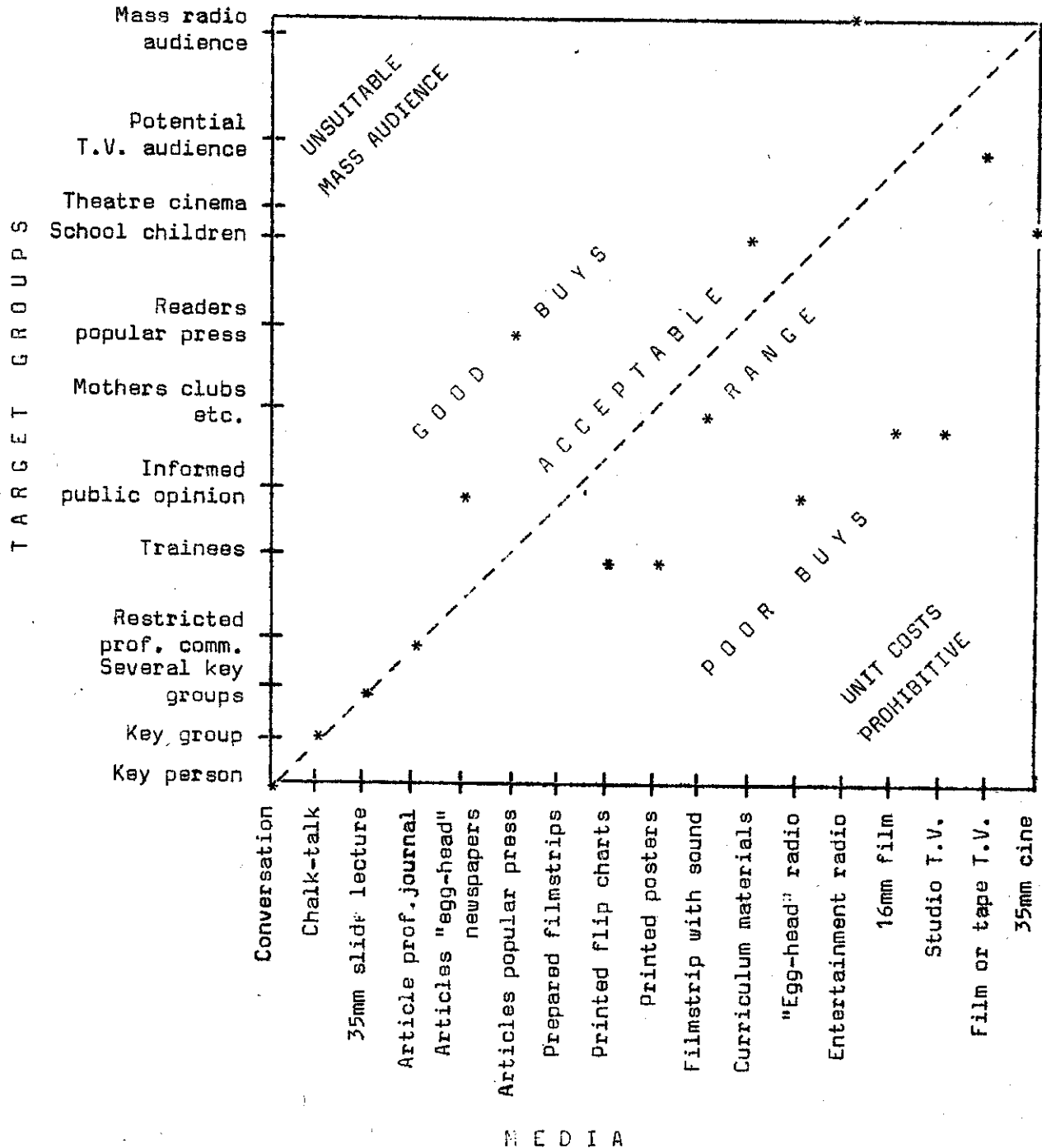
Now, of course, we can plot a number of additional points on the graph. There is no reason why you can't have school radio broadcasts, for example; and there is no technical reason that prevents you from making a 35 mm musical comedy to influence one person. In general, points lying on or near the diagonal are acceptable media choices in terms of unit costs. Those lying well above the diagonal are bargains. Those lying well below the diagonal are poor buys. Radio messages incorporated into an entertainment format (like a soap opera, say) are a very good buy. Radio talks on technical subjects are probably a poor buy, on the whole. Even with restricted readership, newspaper articles and feature stories are a good buy since they reach important groups at a low unit cost. I have plotted circles for 16 mm films and TV broadcasts for mothers' clubs, not because the unit costs are favourable, but because I consider them such an important target group for the nutritionist. (Children's TV, which I am so interested in myself, might claim a similar dispensation.)

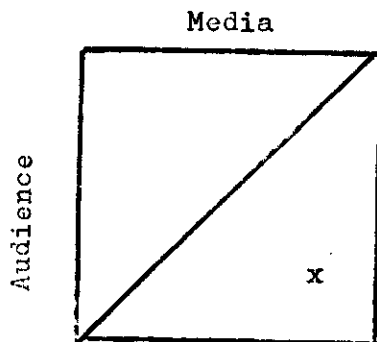
Crude as it is, a simple media selector like this helps us avoid certain pitfalls and helps identify certain promising possibilities in communication. Consider, for example, a proposal that's very commonly brought forward

"Let's make a 16 mm film to show to key people."
Okay, let's plot it.

"BALCOMB'S PATENT MEDIA SELECTOR"

Cost-Effective Media Selection
in Indian PSC Campaigns

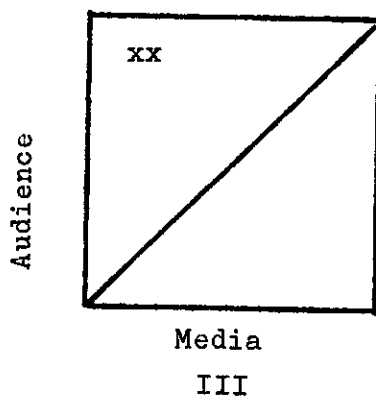




It's way off the curve, of course. A good 16 mm colour film will probably cost around \$20,000. If it's the only way to reach a small group of key people, it might be worth it. But a good slide talk, followed up with a series of personal appointments, might do the job better. For small groups, the personal touch does something the most sophisticated medium in the world can't do.

Engineers say "You don't use a steam crane to pull your trousers up. It's a good saying to keep in mind when considering any medium-audience combination that falls in the lower right-hand corner of the chart.

On the other hand, take a look at the audience of school children. Film strips and posters are usually prepared with the idea of using them in mothers' clubs and other places where extension workers operate. But if we could arrange to use them in schools, as well, we would be getting a real media bargain, which would show up on the chart like this



Some Modest Proposals

I have dwelt so far (perhaps inordinately) on two points because I think they are important (1) selection of the right message for a given medium, and (2) selection of the right medium for a given audience. My object has been to caution against the misuse of the mass media in nutrition education and to call attention to some of the

other media that can be used. Nutrition education has things it can do and things it can't do - it can't make it rain, for example, and it can't solve the problem of rural poverty; and drought and poverty are serious contributing causes of malnutrition. And each of the various communications media has things it can do and things it can't do.

Now I'd like to make a few suggestions as to better use of existing mass media, for, in spite of all I have said, I consider them very important.

Working with the Press. The state of the press varies greatly from country to country in the developing world. In some it is free government censorship and control; in others it is an official branch of the government. Many countries have a dual press - an egg-head press, often published in a foreign language (English or French), and a popular vernacular press. Regardless of the situation, the press is influential. It reaches, at the least, the group that accounts for informed public opinion, including leading figures in government and industry, and it may reach a much wider group as well. The Minister of Agriculture may not get through the mimeographed documents in his in-tray, but chances are he reads his morning paper pretty carefully over his breakfast coffee. At the other end of the scale, if one person in a village subscribes to a regional language newspaper, everybody in the village probably gets the news passed on to him in one form or another.

In January, 1971, we tried an interesting experiment in India. We subsidized a four-day nutrition seminar for journalists at the National Institute of Nutrition in Hyderabad. Sixteen senior journalists from important English and regional-language newspapers all over the country attended. Dr. C. Gopalan, Director of the Institute, and his colleagues arranged a first-rate series of lectures, discussion sessions, and field trips for the journalists. Almost all participants filed feature stories on the seminar for their papers. This immediate publicity was not our principal object, however. We hoped the participants would go back to their papers with a keener interest in and a keener eye for nutrition subjects. I think this happened. More well-informed nutrition clippings now come across my desk than a couple of years ago.

Another experiment we tried, in early 1970, was a collaborative reportage scheme with one newspaper, The Hindu, of Madras. Mr. Kasturi, the editor, assigned a senior reporter to work under our guidance for a month studying various programmes for young children in the four southern states of India. Nutrition was one of the most important aspects of all these programmes, of course. The Hindu then published the reporter's findings in a series of four articles in their weekend

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edition. The articles were extremely well-balanced; they criticized some programmes, they praised others, and in general they highlighted the need for an intensification of nutrition work directed at the 0 to 6 age group. I think their educational value was considerable.

The press has been widely criticized in some countries for an undue ~~pre~~occupation with politics and for a lack of "development consciousness. I think you will find that many editors admit that there is some justice to this criticism and are eager to do their bit in matters like nutrition education. The thing, really, is to get them involved. Understandably, they prefer to publish material written by their own reporters as against press releases and handouts. After all, they are paying their reporters to write for them.

Taking advantage of the entertainment media. Along with food, shelter and sex, entertainment seems to be one of the human animal's categorical, basic needs. People listen to radio, watch television and go to see films primarily to be entertained. Long before these media existed, people listened to stories and watched puppet shows for the same reason.

Persons who seriously concerned about development have a regrettable tendency to preach "Work harder, follow our advice, do this and that". The public in most developing countries has been preached at almost constantly for the past twenty years and is sick of it. Simple exhortation is well to avoid in the entertainment media.

The thing to bear in mind about the popular entertainment media is that they are so powerful that they can change people's attitudes and behaviour simply by example. About twenty years ago a popular male star was featured in a Hindi movie set in a monsoon-drenched village. He played his part with his trousers rolled up a notch or two. Within days of the film's release, the young blades of Bombay and Delhi were going around with their trousers rolled up, even though there was no rain in either city at the time. Advertising people call this the "soft sell". If the same film star had been shown munching a carrot, the young blades might have thought it smart to go around eating carrots, too.

All things considered, I can't think of a better message-entertainment format than the old-fashioned soap opera. Imagine, for example, a family audience programme to be broadcast or telecast daily or on alternate days throughout the week. It would follow the lives of a small group of characters experiencing the usual "heartaches, cares and joys" of village life. In its own way, it should be as corny, sentimental and low-brow as the American soap opera (so-called, because they were generally sponsored by soap companies) radio serials of the 1930's. Development content could be included in a number of ways

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once a format with strong audience identification was established. Dramatic serials of this type move from personal crisis to personal crisis. Crises could be chosen according to the message one wished to dramatize. Illness in the family is always a good crisis, so the opportunities for soft-sell health and nutrition messages would be abundant.

I'm sure any of you, once you accept the idea of communicating through an entertainment format, will be able to come up with a variety of other ideas as well.

Multimedia and Multidisciplinary Angles. Multimedia and multidisciplinary are the kind of words \$100-a-day consultants use. Actually, the concepts involved are fairly simple, and I wish there were simpler words to express them.

The multimedia approach usually means not putting all your eggs in one basket. Professional advertizers find it profitable in a mass campaign to hit people in as many ways as they can with the same message - through similar advertisements and slogans disseminated via posters, newspapers, radio, television etc. Marshall McLuhan to the contrary, many ideas are suitable for several media. Popeye the Sailor man started out in the U.S. as a comic strip character but graduated without difficulty to radio and film. He probably did more for the consumption of spinach than all the nutritionists' more formal propaganda laid end to end.

The multimedia approach can also mean addressing different, but logically related, messages to different audiences through different media. For example, in many countries a radio or TV campaign to popularize pulses and beans would be completely fruitless without a person-to-person and newspaper campaign to induce the "decision makers" in government to implement suitable beans. This seems very obvious, but it is surprising how often the obvious can be overlooked.

The multidisciplinary angle is simply this once you have got people's attention, try to get several related messages across to them. Many countries have quite distinct health information services, family planning information services, and nutrition information services - each handing out its own press releases, each putting out its own extension materials, each trying to obtain the maximum radio and TV time for itself. There are good reasons to suppose that this sort of arrangement is inefficient, not only in terms of time and resources, but in terms of audience response as well. Ordinary people have to cope with many related problems in their daily lives. Moreover, they get tired of hearing the same particular message repeated endlessly. Health, nutrition and family planning naturally complement one another and can usefully be combined in a communications programme. The

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difficulties of doing so are largely institutional - in other words, they are formidable - but the job is worth tackling.

IV

Concluding Thoughts The Country Approach

Software vs. Hardware

Though almost all my field experience has been in India, I have tried to keep my observations general enough to apply to a variety of countries. A general approach has its limits, however - since in the matter of nutrition, circumstances alter cases very radically.

Anyone wanting to get ahead with the job of popular nutrition education in a particular place must adopt a country approach. The country is X. What are its outstanding nutrition problems? To what extent are they the result of poverty, poor production patterns, faulty nutrition habits, or what have you? To what extent can malnutrition be overcome through popular education? What are the communications media available, or in prospect, for nutrition education? What influential groups, in addition to the masses, must be reached? These questions must all be answered, at least provisionally, before you can go about framing a reasonable nutrition education programme for country X. Much of the information is probably available and merely needs to be done.

Last year I had the pleasure of visiting the Carribean Food and Nutrition Institute in Jamaica for two weeks. I was surprised at the rather special country situation which confronts nutrition educators in Jamaica itself. American-based international food companies have heavily penetrated the Jamaican market with the aid of massive advertising in the press and on radio and TV. Their aim has been to sell "the American way of eating" to Jamaica's very conspicuous affluent classes, but in doing so they have created a highly unfavourable climate for simple, do-it-yourself solutions to nutrition problems - solutions which, otherwise, the low-income groups might be persuaded to adopt. As a result, even the poorest mothers try to give their babies breast milk substitutes and formulated baby foods. Since they cannot afford these in adequate quantities, half-starved infants by the hundreds appear daily in all of the island's clinics and hospitals.

Owing to the heavy advertising by the food and vitamin companies, there is probably a fairly wide degree of nutrition consciousness of pseudo-scientific kind in Jamaica. How does the nutrition educator deal with this situation? Can he capitalize on it in any way, as by saying, "Vitamins and minerals are good for you; they give you vitality ... we all know that. And if they come from fresh foods grown in your own kitchen garden, they taste yummy, too - better than any synthetic product. Be sure baby gets some. They're especially good for him".

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I don't know Jamaica well enough to propose a serious answer, but the situation there dramatizes the importance of the country approach.

Before I left Jamaica, Derrick Jelliffe, who was then the Institute's director, showed me an equipment list for a small nutrition education unit the Institute was thinking of establishing. It included some cameras, slide making equipment, and a motion picture unit. I suggested to him that he should hold off on the equipment until it was decided just how it was to be used, since in Jamaica at least, there were fairly good private facilities for producing slides and 16-mm films.

"If you start with the equipment", I said, "you'll find pretty soon that the equipment is running the programme".

My remark may have been a bit glib, but I think it contained the kernel of a valid idea. The biggest hangup facing the nutrition educator - or the health educator or the family planning promoter - who wants to take advantage of modern media is not hardware but software. "Software" is a currently fashionable neologism that means, roughly, what you do with your hardware - your intellectual and artistic throughput. It takes a long time to develop good ideas for something like mass nutrition education because it has to be collaborative effort. You need a nutritionist to keep you from making a fool of yourself scientifically; you need somebody who understands popular culture and psychology to help you present your message in a way people will accept; you need media experts to counsel you on technical feasibility. And you need creative people artists, script writers and the like. You need them all, and they all have to be in on the act from the very start.

International aid in the field of communications has been rather heavily weighted in recent years on the hardware side. The standard package given a developing country still tends to consist of a lot of hyper-modern motion picture and TV equipment with an array of experts to train local technicians to handle it. Lots of impressive facilities are going up which will be largely used to show dignitaries cutting ribbons, well-intentioned development experts reading prepared speeches, and old movies*. The way things are going, I think hardware development is way ahead of software development, and this is why I urge all of you to concentrate on the latter first.

Besides, if you get a good nutrition story worked out and you find that television still hasn't come along in your country, you can always stage it as a puppet show. The puppet shows will be around for a long time.

* In India, the old movies will be Hindi love stories and mythological dramas. In countries without a motion picture industry of their own they will be old Westerns and gangster films.

Note

The opinions expressed in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the United Nations Children's Fund, though I hope we are not far apart. I should not claim, however, that all or even a small part of the ideas brought forward are my own. They are the result of long conversations and sometimes heated discussions with a number of people, among whom I should like to mention Ken Nelson, my colleague in New Delhi; David Henry, a former colleague of mine in New Delhi, now with UNICEF in Lusaka; Mrs. Vijaya Mulay, of the Indian Ministry of Education; Vijay Parulkar, of the UN Development Support Communications Service in Bangkok; and Jonathan Weinberger, freelance photographer and filmmaker par excellence. For my own nutrition education, such as it is, I am most grateful to Dr. C. Gopalan, Director of the Indian Institute of Nutrition; Dr. Derrick B. Jelliffe, formerly Director of the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute and now at the University of California at Los Angeles; to Dr. L.J. Teply of UNICEF; and to Dr. Max Milner of the Protein Advisory Group.



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