

A homage to Dr Jose María Bengoa: the world's conscience of community nutrition

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Dr Jose María Bengoa, 88 years old, was designated as one of the Public Health Heroes of the Americas by the PAHO, last February in Caracas (Venezuela). His own words referring to this distinction were . . . " My only merit has been having reached an old age after working for 65 years in public health!! There have been more people that have deserved it as well..". His work is an example of what Margaret Mead said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world".

Dr Bengoa is considered the world's conscience of community nutrition, because of the emphasis he has placed on the social causes of hunger and malnutrition. He went into exile to Venezuela in April 1938, as a consequence of the Spanish civil war (1936–1939). From 1938 to 1940 he worked as a rural doctor in the villages of Sanare and Cubiro (Lara State), where he acquired important experience in community problems, especially nutritional problems "...In a period when the problem of hunger was a surprise for me (sic), something I had never thought about before...". As a result of his professional activity there, in October 1940, he published a monographic book entitled *The social medicine in the Venezuelan rural environment*, in the Venezuelan Journal of Health and Social Assistance. From 1940 to 1955, Dr Bengoa developed activities related to nutrition at a national level in Caracas and founded the National Institute for Nutrition as well as two journals on this topic. From 1955 to 1974 he worked for the Departments of Nutrition at the PAHO and WHO and wrote several papers and books about community nutrition.

In a conference by Dr Bengoa in Mexico DF, in April 1991, entitled "Nutrition in local health systems" he stated . . . "And the XXIst century, which is just around the corner is going to be a century of social justice and human solidarity, where there will be bread for all . . . And if there isn't bread for all there shouldn't be cake for anyone, as the first FAO Director stated 40 years ago...".



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A Half-Century Perspective on World Nutrition and the International Nutrition Agencies
José Maria Bengoa M.D.¹

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ABSTRACT

Editors' note: As we approach the end of the 20th century, we will, in Nutrition Reviews, take an occasional look back at developments of the last half-century that have established the underpinnings of public health nutrition as we know it and practice it today. This is also a span of time over which this journal, having begun publication in 1942, has addressed important developments in nutrition and health. Our first retrospective is contributed by Dr. José Maria Bengoa, one of the fathers of international public health nutrition. Dr. Bengoa, whose career has spanned more than 50 years, witnessed the origins of the international nutrition agencies and served in leadership roles at the Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization (WHO) from 1955 to 1964, and as director of the WHO Office of Nutrition from 1964 to 1974.

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World Public Health Nutrition Association



An individual member organisation established to improve nutrition related health and well-being worldwide by enhancing the effectiveness of public health nutrition locally, nationally, and internationally.

An association designed to bring people together from all the spheres of work in Public Health Nutrition.

To move from evidence to action: to identify and apply solutions to maintain and improve nutrition related health around the world.

Background

José Maria Bengoa is credited with the first use of the term “public health nutrition” during the 1940s. Since that time many researchers and practitioners have achieved notable success in areas such as promoting food security and more recently helping prevent diet related chronic diseases.

Public health nutrition research and practice are informed by ever expanding theoretical and evidential foundations. In addition, there is a variety of conferences and courses for advanced level training and practice that are driving a burgeoning public health nutrition workforce around the world. A particularly relevant milestone was the 1st World Congress of Public Health Nutrition held in Barcelona in 2006 where the plans for the association were first discussed.

Public health nutrition faces new opportunities and challenges. Conventional nutrition science perspectives need to be extended in order to account for

emerging social and environmental challenges, including increasing health inequalities and the lack of sustainability of food and nutrition systems. The determinants of and solutions for these challenges are found in a combination of local national and international settings. Training, research, policy and practice agendas will benefit from a professional and collegial association for the field that is international in scope. Such an association will help: stimulate collaborative ventures and exchange programs/programmes: share ideas, knowledge and skills; assist in harmonizing competencies; and build the capacity of the workforce to engage with contemporary and future challenges.