

# Challenges to building capabilities in the field of food and nutrition in collective health: preliminary notes

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## Introduction

This document is a summary of the debate panel *Desafios para a Capacitação no Campo da Alimentação e Nutrição em Saúde Coletiva* (Challenges to building capabilities in the Field of Food and Nutrition in Collective Health) held at the Federal University of São Paulo, Santos Campus, in November 7, 2011 in partnership with the Graduate Programmatic Board of the Thematic Group on Food and Nutrition in Collective Health of the Brazilian Association of Post-Graduate Education in Collective Health (GT ANSC-ABRASCO). The event aimed to debate the educational demands of nutritionists in Brazil and contribute to the discussion of the challenges that permeate the activities in the field of collective health, particularly of SUS, the Public Healthcare Service in Brazil.

This debate was assumed as one of the front lines of the GT ANSC-ABRASCO due to the complexity of the existing epidemiological and social conditions, which require a shift of the educational programs designed to work in healthcare under the perspective of interdisciplinary and network activities that integrate universities, healthcare services and other sectors.

## Procedures

This study was developed based on the material resulting from some online interviews and key informants, from which it was possible to think on the proposed theme in view of the respondents' expertise of on this field<sup>1</sup>. Under this perspective, the selection of the key informants was based on the relevance of the professional background of the subjects and the institutions they represent in the field of Food and Nutrition in Collective Health (FNCH). To achieve the best representativeness for the discussions on training and competencies-building, nutritionists, teachers and researchers with recognized contributions in the country were selected, to whom the following question was sent by e-mail: "According to your professional experience, what are the main challenges for the consolidation of FNCH today?"

Responses to the e-mail came from the following institutions:

- Annes Dias Nutrition Institute (INAD), a body of the Rio de Janeiro City Administration, responsible for the coordination of the Food and Nutrition Policies in the city.
- Institute of Nutrition, State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).
- Federal Fluminense University, Center of Medical Sciences, Department of Social Nutrition.
- Ministry of Education, National Fund for Education Development.
- Federal University of Santa Catarina, Center of Health Sciences, Department of Nutrition.
- Brasilia University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nutrition, Observatory of Policies on Food Security and Nutrition of the Center for Advanced Studies and Public Policies of the Brasilia University (OPSAN/UnB).

The responses were systematized under two distinct and complementary perspectives. One focused on experiences in Social Nutrition and Food and Nutrition Policies in Primary Care and other were oriented to experiences on Nutritional Education and Clinical Education. So, the panel consisted of an analytical summary of the statements and subsequent reflections. The statements were grouped into categories and because they were summarized excerpts from the responses have not been reproduced.

## Results and discussion

What follows is a description of the topics that emerged from the analysis of the responses.

### a. Field definition

The field definition was a common concern of the respondents. The definition of the nutritionist's duties requires a delimitation of the work process starting with its conception, going through planning and monitoring and ending with the evaluation of impacts with emphasis on the need for corrective actions.

According to the statements, changes in the population's nutritional and dietary profile in the past decades and the reality experienced by nutritionists in the professional practice produce distress due to the complexity of the most diverse problems, especially obesity. This is because in the daily work it became clear that the solution of nutritional issues is beyond the individual's technical performance and becomes part of living and working conditions, of human relations, and involves, among other aspects, psychosocial issues. Although it is part of the nutrition agenda, sectorial actions are considered insufficient to meet the demands, which require inter-sectorial actions and mobilization of the society to cope with them.

It was mentioned the great effort that the academics should have in recognizing and showing the urgency of multiple interventions consistent with the severity of the problems, such as the high rate of obesity and its consequences: because it is a complex branch of knowledge, included in the health science but with interface with human and social sciences, the food and nutritional theme “ends up being part of one science and the efforts of the academy are enormous to show its broad dimension and its multiple interventions in the reality”.

Still resulting from the difficulty of field delimitation, it was mentioned by the respondents the precarious position that nutritionists have in society and its relation with other professionals, whose recognition depends on the problems of the diverse work settings and the actions to be taken to solve them.

In this aspect, it is worth noting that the constitution of the public health field in Brazil is still recent, part of a historical moment of social mobilization, as a response to the privatizing logic of the national health policy imposed by the military government (1964-1984). As a broad field of knowledge and practices and essentially interdisciplinary, collective health depends on the

knowledge on biology, epidemiology, planning and management in the three levels of care, health education and in the matrices of thinking of the social sciences to meet the health needs of the diverse population groups.<sup>2,3</sup> This is the reference from which the field of FNCH has been formatted and resulted in the social commitment of the universities with a global and critical education.

## b. Traditional education *versus* new educational demands

What could be inferred from the statements in an effort to build the field was the divergence about the traditional education and a more comprehensive education, interfering on the effectiveness of the FNCH actions. It was mentioned the timid interlocution between the nutritional programmatic actions and the policies of foods production, distribution and marketing, the economy, environment and sustainability, in addition to social and cultural issues. Consequently, it became clear the low incidence of fundamental aspects of the Food System on the agenda of healthy diets as an obstacle to be overcome.

If, on one hand, the limitations of sectorial visions were revealed, on the other hand emerged the need for technical improvement of the nutritionists' specific responsibilities. The healthcare matrix model of the Center of Support for Family Health (CSFH) and the tendency of the Primary Care to move to the residences have resulted in the need for additional training of nutritionists in issues only found before in the level of medium and high complexity. Chronic diseases and their complications are the responsibility of all levels of healthcare, and nutritional actions of high complexity are no longer exclusive to the hospital care. Therefore, besides ensuring the reference and counter-reference flows, it is crucial to overcome the traditional segmentation of the areas of Social Nutrition and Clinical Nutrition.

In line with the above challenge, other aspects that were highlighted, when observing the still incipient presence of nutritionists in Primary Care, were the political and institutional issues. According to the respondents, nutritionists need to understand what SUS (Brazil's Public Healthcare Service) is, not just from its theoretical frameworks, but under the perspective of management, resources policies, financing and organization in network services, topics still not appropriately addressed in the professional education.

## c. Knowledge-related demands

The SUS' building process of integral care and teamwork and the articulations toward integrated actions to cope with food and nutritional issues have forced the expansion of FNCH analytical repertoire.<sup>4-6</sup> Today, the universe of theoretical or applied concerns is made up of issues

such as territory, communication, citizenship, equality and human rights, culture and anthropology, among other key contributions, to understand and work with the object in its totality.

For this reason, the need for the expansion and integration of knowledge, and, concurrently, the definition of the nutritionist's scope of work (actions, duties, etc.) are paradigmatic. However, according to the respondents, it is necessary to ensure consistency between theory and practice. Interdisciplinary theoretical contributions are crucial to think over such problems, but they must result in actions that will actually solve them, so that examining concepts means thinking of the link between theory and practice. Although the explanation and resolution of food and nutritional problems are included in a more comprehensive domain, the professional practice is specific and delimited in different sectors.

According to the respondents, it is necessary to join efforts to discuss concepts, activities and the assignment of skills in the field of FNCH. This means articulating areas of management of public policies, food and nutritional monitoring, primary care, food and nutritional education, food and nutrition at the workplace and schools, as well as nutritional epidemiology and nutrition in human and social sciences.

#### d. Need for indicators and evaluation of results

The demand for building indicators in the field of FNCH was accompanied by the required field delimitation. One of the interlocutors put the following question: do the FNCH actions change the reality? What and how they change it? Such questions expressed the urgency to produce results and identify what actions should be taken to achieve them. If one of the problems is obesity, then it is necessary to map the scope of every activity of the nutritionist in the FNCH and establish goals and indicators to evaluate its impact.

In this regard emerged the unique character of the FNCH field research, given by the articulation between investigation and intervention. Alongside the methods of nutritional epidemiology appeared the urgency of making use of elements of the social sciences research that would ultimately result in operational researches and in the conversion of knowledge into actions.

Proper nutrition available to everyone, as a respondent warned, is the key objective. However, by taking this as the major goal it is necessary to discuss how the actions communicate in each sphere in order to make it happen. In short, the field delimitation needs to be translated into practical actions and the establishment of indicators to monitor these actions without restricting the professional performance to the sheer execution of programs. Programs are not a reference by themselves; on the contrary, they only make sense when understood within a broader theoretical framework.

Finally, it is worth noting that this summary document is the beginning of a reflection on how to build capabilities or competencies that the Graduate Board of the GT ANSC-ABRASCO sought to trigger with the event, in an attempt to, jointly with diverse ongoing initiatives and within the scope of knowledge production and political action, collaborate with the consolidation of the Food and Nutrition in Collective Health in Brazil.

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