The Nutri-Pak
Experience with an Indigenous Supplementary Feeding Intervention in the Philippines

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The subject of this paper is the Philippine nutrition intervention known as Nutri-Pak, but it is impossible to discuss Nutri-Pak without describing the context within which it was developed. I shall therefore preface my discussion of Nutri-Pak with some comments on the Philippine Nutrition Program (PNP), which is the programmatic expression of two entities: the National Nutrition Council (NNC), and the Nutrition Center of the Philippines (NCP). The former is a public body composed of the heads of more than a dozen ministries and professional organizations, responsible for formulating nutrition policy and coordinating implementation of all government nutrition activity. The latter, a private sector counterpart of the NNC, plays a supporting role. Both bodies were established in mid-1974, the NNC by President Ferdinand E. Marcos, the NCP by the First Lady, Mrs. Imelda Marcos. Such high-level political support for nutrition makes the Philippines something of a rarity.

Three imperatives faced the nascent PNP: to create an organizational infrastructure, to increase popular awareness of malnutrition, and to articulate a coherent nutrition program. The first task, that of building an organization, was accomplished by replicating the NNC at the regional, provincial, municipal, and village levels. A hierarchy of nutrition committees was thus formed that reached down to the lowest administrative level. The nutrition committee of each barangay, as vil-
lages are called in the Philippines, spawned a barangay network that had one unit leader for every 20 families. At each level, the nutrition committee was composed of representatives from all the public agencies involved in nutrition-related activities and was headed by the appropriate executive official. The organizational effort was diligently pursued and highly successful. Within two years, committees had been formed in all 12 regions of the Philippines, in all but one of 76 provinces, in almost 75% of the 1500 municipalities, and in about 40% of the 42,000 barangays (1).

The second task facing the NNC/NCP, which was to make the populace aware of the extent and seriousness of malnutrition, was undertaken concurrently with the organizational drive. Principally, it was accomplished via the massive Operation Timbang, or OPT, in which more than four million preschoolers (about half of the 0- to 6-year-old population) were weighed and classified according to the Gomez scale. This mass mobilization itself alerted the public to malnutrition as much as did the aggregate results: over 30% of these children were suffering from second- and third-degree malnutrition. OPT also served to locate and identify the malnourished.

The third task—that of articulating a national nutrition program—also proceeded quickly. The plan drawn up by the NNC/NCP called for interventions in five broad areas: food assistance, health protection, food production, family planning/nutrition information, and education. These schemes were aimed particularly at the following priority groups: infants and preschool children, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and school children.

Other tasks, only slightly less pressing, also occupied the NNC/NCP in its formative stages. These included training personnel, setting up a monitoring and reporting system, generating publicity, and doing research on food and nutrition. This is not the place to elaborate on these aspects of the PNP, but they bear mention to underscore how active it was in its youth.

Having provided, albeit briefly, the context into which the Nutri-Pak fits, I propose next to address the intervention itself, presenting in some detail its origin, evolution, and current status. Following that review, I will raise what I consider the most interesting questions emerging from the Filipino experience with Nutri-Pak. The genesis of what later became the Nutri-Pak concept occurred early in 1974 in the province of Laguna, southeast of Manila. The staff of the Laguna Provincial Nutrition Program set up a production system for converting inexpensive, locally available protein sources—small shrimp and fish—into finely ground protein powder and sealing it in small plastic packets.