

Food security: post-pandemic situation in Latin America

Segurança alimentar: situação pós-pandemia na América Latina

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According to FAO¹, food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their daily energy needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life². Therefore, the higher the population's need to have sufficient food available and accessible for long-term use to ensure a healthy life, the higher the rates of food insecurity.

The arrival of COVID-19 in 2019 and its rapid spread in the world meant a great risk for the population mainly in Latin America² where corrective actions were included for the cessation of contagions, which implied restrictions in food supply chains, alterations in food environments and the closure of economic activities in Latin America, mostly of lower-middle income and upper-middle income³, leading to negative repercussions in terms of food security.

These actions caused that, in 2021, 40.6% of the population in Latin America will experience food insecurity and, in turn, widespread impoverishment⁴. In this sense, there was a disruption in trade, together with a labor contraction that meant an unemployment rate of 11.8% and 8.1%, for women and men, respectively, in addition to a decrease in household income that affected the most vulnerable sectors, making economic inequalities between population groups more evident⁵.

The constant fear of contagion led the population to adapt new restrictive measures, so that there were changes in the selection and demand for food. These trends were observed in the population's consumption patterns, with a preference for processed foods and a decrease in the consumption of fresh and nutritious products. Food selection was

influenced by food availability and economic access; therefore, people selected foods based on their price and availability and not on their nutritional value⁶.

The decrease in the consumption of fresh foods, such as fruits and vegetables, was due to disruptions in the agri-food sector, which implied alterations in production, labor, closure of local stores and markets, in addition to price volatility. Meanwhile, the increase in processed products was due to their low cost, greater availability and easy storage. This situation highlights a serious situation, the lack of access to products with nutritional quality and increased access to inadequate food^{7,8}.

In attempts to recover from the impacts on the food sector brought about by the pandemic, since 2020 there has been a growing inflation in the price of food in Latin America due to market demand, the increased value of agricultural production due to the use of fertilizers and fuels⁹, fluctuations in supply chains and climate change¹⁰.

Consequently, we observe that the situation has repercussions on the state of nutrition, since inflation raises the cost of a healthy diet, which, together with inequality in economic income, increases the gap in access for the entire population, both to basic foods and to foods of better nutritional quality.

According to state of food security and nutrition in the world, the highest food inflation rate reported at the end of 2021 was in Latin America and the Caribbean at 23.5%⁴. Based on the acquisition costs, the basic food basket, in Brazil by the end of 2021 it increased to 8.3%, in Colombia it increased 3.5%, in Chile increased by 4.5% and in Peru by 4.3%, according to global data from the World Bank¹¹. The quality of the food consumed, as we know, is closely linked to food security and nutritional health, so its relationship with the incidence of hunger, malnutrition, nutritional deficiencies, obesity and overweight is equally understandable. As long as there is a decrease in the purchasing power of nutritious and safe food, these indices will increase.

Considering that Latin American countries are developing countries, it is understandable that there is this inequality to recover significantly in the face of alterations in their food and social environments. According to⁴, these countries experience slower rates of economic recovery to their pre-pandemic states and in the food sector it becomes even more devastating for the economically poorest and socially vulnerable groups.

In Latin America we observe large numbers of such groups having difficulty rising above the economic crisis as women, youth, natives, low-skilled workers and individuals with informal jobs due to high unemployment rates. The latter, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin American countries, represented the main source of income for a high percentage of these groups⁷, impacting their purchasing power and generating greater food insecurity.

Recovering from a health crisis in Latin America meant a new challenge for the population because the necessary conditions were not in place to ensure food accessibility, especially for the most vulnerable groups. These social strata were affected by a socioeconomic inequality gap that manifested itself in high levels of hunger and malnutrition.

Finally, it is understood that interpreting the shortcomings of a region such as Latin America is crucial for an adequate approach. As for food policies, which proved not to be resilient in Latin America in the face of the COVID-19 health crisis to guarantee food security, the need to reformulate such policies according to the socio-demographic conditions of each country is evident, in order to comply with the competent dimensions of nutritional health, food production and purchasing power while considering the sustainability of food security.

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