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Article

Exclusion, poverty, and hunger

By: Alejandro Narváez¹

Hunger and food insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) increased in 2016 for the first time in the last 20 years. Likewise, the number of overweight and obese people has grown considerably, becoming a public health problem because of its great impact on the health and well-being of millions of people. If this trend continues, neither the goals included in the Hunger-Free Latin America and the Caribbean 2025 Initiative (IALCSH as for the Spanish version of the acronym) nor the goal “Zero Hunger” of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development would be achieved. Reversing this situation requires renewed political commitments throughout the region that include the powers of the State, business sector, civil society, academy, church, etc.

New state policies are urgently required to assist families living in the most backward territories in terms of hunger in the region: an agenda based on consolidated institutional and regulatory frameworks, which must include the combination of production and social programs, accompanied by major investments and capacities according to the dimension of the challenge, in addition to other measures aim at mitigating the effects of climate change, considered one of the causes of hunger.

Over the past few years, the outbreak of poverty and hunger has aroused growing concern of the State and different sectors of the Peruvian society. At the same time, this new reality has led to the development of research work to find out the real causes of the problem and propose strategies to grapple with it.

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Social exclusion, poverty, and hunger

We are witnessing times of unusual changes and social transformations throughout the world. The economic and financial crises in 2008, the globalization of economies and markets, and the rapid technological changes, above all, would be to a great extent the causes of these economic, social, and cultural changes. One of the most relevant features is the speed with which changes occur. We hardly realize them. We struggle to assimilate them. Even human relationships have changed considerably, becoming more complex in a new equally complex reality. We live in times where the only constant is change; the rest fades away.

As expected, in this new scenario,

the concepts of poverty, hunger, and inequality have evolved and must be redefined because they no longer comprise the new realities. Otherwise, other concepts that involve these more complex and changing realities must be developed. In modern and complex societies like the one we live in, inequalities come hand in hand with various causes, which are triggered through mechanisms, such as poverty, disability, unemployment or job insecurity, illiteracy, race, age, etc.

In this context, the term poverty, defined as a situation of insufficient access to an income that guarantees a decent standard of living, does not cover all those realities that involve new inequalities; therefore, a new term that refers to those realities is

“We live in times where the only constant is change; the rest fades away”



Job insecurity in the streets of Callao. Lima, Peru
Photography: JNF / Le Cordon Bleu University

introduced: social exclusion. Despite poverty is considered one of the main causes of social exclusion, being poor does not necessarily mean being socially excluded. A few years ago, there were many poor people; however, they received help and support, built up by the bonds of the community in such a way that it was unlikely to be excluded from the community. Social exclusion means breaking with those bonds and being left out from social relationships; it entails entering a difficult-to-break cycle and becoming “invisible” to the rest of society.

This new concept of social exclusion is taking place at a specific historic and social moment, in which we are going through a series of socio-economic and cultural changes and transformations that are completely changing the structures of today’s society.

According to the professor Zygmunt Bauman (acknowledged with the 2010 Prince of Asturias Award), the poor, for the first time in history, are a concern and a nuisance since, as they are not needed as work-force, they have nothing to offer society. In this situation, all the resources used in them, deprived, lazy people, crooks, misfits, etc., will be wasted resources that will promote this type of behavior and ways of living, which is not fair for those normal people that do strive, and that (although it is left unsaid) are essential for the consumerist system to continue and for

the powerful people to keep securing these privileged positions in society, increasing their fortunes day by day (businessmen, politicians, figures from organizations like the World Bank, etc.).

About hunger

Hunger is a word that has numerous meanings and none of them is positive. It means also having appetite every now and then. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), hunger is caused by insufficient consumption of calories that are necessary for satisfying physiological needs and conducting a physical and mental activity². Hunger is felt by people that do not eat enough for having a full life, a decent life. This scourge condemns millions of people to live worse, to depend on others, to get sick, and finally to die of hunger. According to the Royal Spanish Academy (in Spanish Real Academia Española, abbreviated as RAE), hunger is the shortage of basic food, which causes famine and widespread misery. If this definition is related to the concept of food security, hunger, in this sense, is more visible, more urgent. Without a doubt, the fact that it affects biologically and psychologically the person and his/her offspring is understood.

The great paradox is that hunger is not only a problem of food shortages in Peru, nor in the world, if it ever could have been. FAO estimates that 1.3 billion tons of food in the world ends

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²FAO 2018. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World

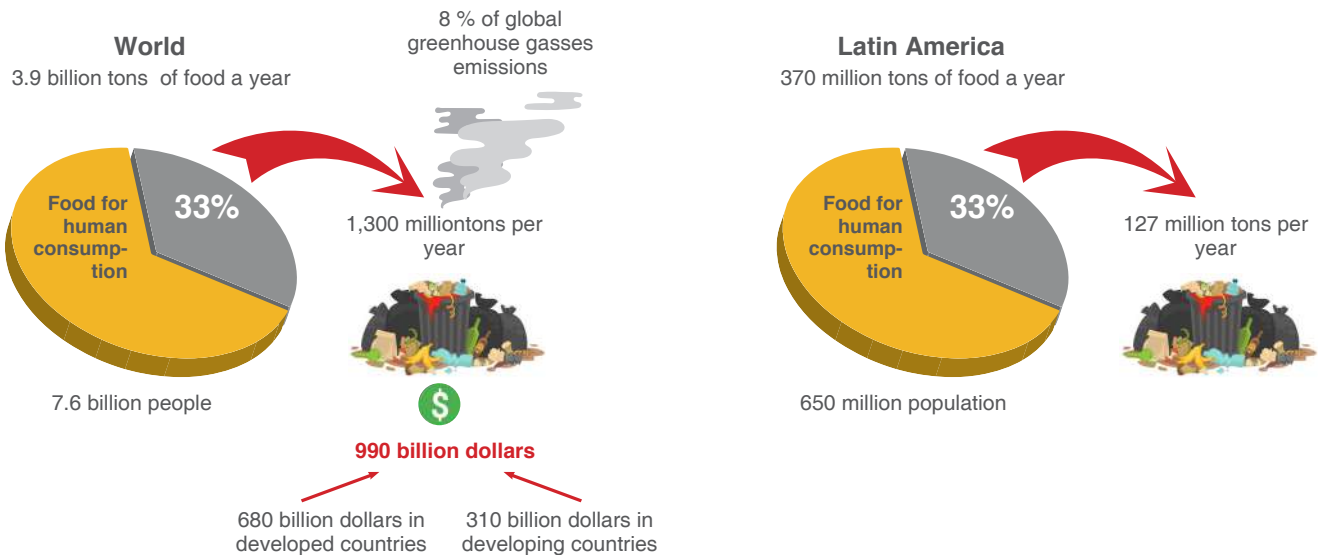


Food shortages in markets

Photography: JNF / Le Cordon Bleu University

up directly in the garbage every year, which symbolizes a third of the food produced for human consumption. This represents approximately 680 billion dollars in developed countries and 310 billion dollars in developing countries. Moreover, FAO states that, in Latin America, 34% of the available

food is wasted, which equals 127 million tons per year. Finally, when food is thrown away, the waste management process has a negative impact on the environment. It is estimated that this process is responsible for generating 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions.



Source: The author

Hunger in the world

The latest FAO report, published in September 2018, reveals that there are 821 million people on the planet suffering from hunger (12% of the world population), and more than 150 million children are stunted because of malnutrition (there were 815 million hungry people in 2017). The following conclusions are drawn from the report: a) The number of hungry people in the world has increased in the last three years, returning to the levels from a decade ago. b) The Sustainable Development Goal

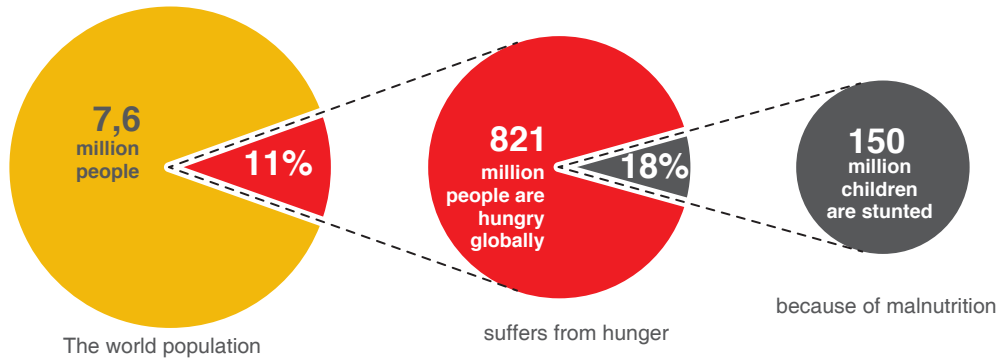
2, aim at reaching Zero Hunger by 2030, is far from being achieved. c) In Africa and Latin America, hunger has expanded enormously.

More specifically, in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), for the third consecutive year (from 2015 to 2017), the number of people suffering from hunger mushroomed, going from 40 million to 42.5 million.³ The rise in undernourishment has been especially significant in South America, caused probably by the economic slowdown, rising unemployment, the inefficiency of national

“More than 150 million children are stunted because of malnutrition”

³FAO. Panorama of Food and Nutrition Security in Latin America and the Caribbean 2017

Hunger in the world



social protection programs, or climate factors. The nations with the highest undernourishment rates are: Bolivia 19.8%, Nicaragua 16.2%, Guatemala 15.8%, Venezuela 11.7%, and Peru 8.8%.⁴ Meanwhile, the severe food insecurity rates jumped from 7.6% in 2016 to 9.8% in 2017. A critical situation arises in Haiti, where almost 47% of the population, which represents 5 million people, suffers from hunger.

Unfortunately, many of us who have the privilege of imagining and promoting gastronomic delights, ironically every time more sophisticated, gourmet, lighter meals, live as if hunger does not exist. How is it going to exist, if the media turns a blind eye? Except for when FAO and some NGOs like Oxfam International speak out from time to time. It seems that the scourge of hunger is no longer news for the press.

“Only a few decades ago, the governments of the region joined forces

to fight against acute malnutrition, chronic malnutrition and micronutrient deficiency, today they must also fight against overweight and obesity”, FAO reminds us. Thus, we face a several public health problems that require urgent state policies to stop their advance.

Peru, a rich country of many poor and hungry people: the great paradox

One of the most outstanding aspects of the National Household Survey 2017 (in Spanish Encuesta Nacional de Hogares, abbreviated as ENAHO), is the deterioration of poverty indicators and, in particular, the increase in the number of poor people in Peru, which did not occur since 2002. Among other causes, the weak expansion of formal activities that generate less productive jobs can be mentioned, that is, the activities that are more focused on meeting domestic demand. On the contrary, El Niño Costero seems not to have had a significant impact

⁴The world ranking that includes the percentage of the people most affected by hunger can be found in The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018, by FAO.

⁵National Institute of Statistics and Information (in Spanish Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, abbreviated as INEI). National Household Survey 2017 (ENAHO, for its acronym in Spanish)



on the growth in the number of poor people in 2017.⁵

Indeed, in 2017, the number of Peruvians in poverty increased to 6.9 million, a rise in 375,000 people compared to the previous year, which means that the monetary poverty rate increases by one percentage point until reaching 21.7% of the population (2016: 20.8%).

Additionally, the poverty gap, which measures the average difference between the income of a poor person and that income level that would allow him/ her to stop being poor, also widened: from 5.0% in 2016 to

5.2% in 2017. In other words, not only grew the number of poor people in the country, but also those poor people face a harder struggle to get out of the poverty situation in which they find themselves.⁶ Meanwhile, the total number of people suffering from hunger in Peru reached 2.5 million on average in the period 2014-2016, that is, 100,000 more people compared to the previous measurement (2013-2015)⁷, representing a setback in the fight against hunger that had been taking place in the country.

According to the Global Hunger Index 2017 (GHI), Peru is ranked 38 out

“We face a several public health problems that require urgent state policies to stop their advance”



87-year old woman dedicated to recycling on the streets of Lima

Photography: JNF / Le Cordon Bleu University

⁵The evolution of monetary poverty 2007-2017 appears in INIE Report from April, 2018.

⁷See Panorama of Food and Nutrition Security in Latin America and the Caribbean 2017, published by FAO and Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

of 119 qualified countries. A report stated that, between 2000 and 2017, the level of hunger would have been reduced, going from the serious to low category. The results were obtained using four indicators: malnutrition, infant wasting (low weight for height), delayed child growth, and infant mortality. However, these results are contradictory to the numbers determined by FAO, which were based on statistics provided by the National Institute of Statistics and Information.

In spite of the apparent improvement reflected in the GHI, the structural inequality gaps are widened. According to a series of studies, for example, children living in rural areas are three times more likely to suffer from chronic malnutrition than children living in urban centers. In this regard, the children of Huancavelica, Cajamarca, Apurímac, Ucayali, and Pasco present the highest rates of chronic child malnutrition, which is easy to corroborate by looking at the statistics collected in the health centers of the different populated regions or peasant communities, and social programs, such as: Juntos, Pensión 65, Cuna Más, etc.

Furthermore, the studies indicate that half of the population living in rural areas is poor, especially in Cajamarca, Huancavelica and Apurímac, which, paradoxically, are the regions with the greatest mining potential in the country. More than a third of its population speaks a

native language, and approximately 60% are farmers and artisanal miners. Overweight in children under five years of age is very close to the LAC average, reaching 7.2%; while chronic malnutrition, despite its significant decline in the last five years, still affects nearly 400,000 children under the age of five (13.1%).⁸ Anemia affects 948,000 children under the age of five.

An interesting research carried out by the NGO Save the Children in 2012 revealed that there was 24% of child malnutrition in Peru, which, in absolute value, represented more than 700,000 children.⁹ Given that, in those years, countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nigeria had similar characteristics to Peru in terms of economic growth, they were selected for the research. At that time, half of the world's malnourished children lived in the five countries. Peru has been classified as the economic "miracle" of Latin America in some sectors because the country had the highest growth rates for several years (6.2% of average GDP between 2002 and 2009). Nevertheless, such growth did not have an impact on all Peruvians.

Although different governments have undertaken social programs, research reveals that there are still hidden gaps in zones far from large cities, where there are malnutrition rates similar to those in Africa. For

⁸See reports of the Ministry of Health (MINSA for its acronym in Spanish) of Peru 2018

⁹See report A Life Free from Hunger: Tackling child malnutrition, by the NGO Save the Children 2012.





Anemia is an unfortunate reality for children living in poverty

Photography: Felicidar (2008)

instance, in some districts of the Huancavelica region, there are up to 73% of children suffering from chronic malnutrition (stunting) and acute malnutrition (low weight for height). Up to now, these numbers have not changed significantly.

In 2017, chronic malnutrition affected 12.9% of children under the age of five, slightly inferior to the numbers in 2016. The highest malnutrition rate was detected in children whose mothers did not receive formal education or received only primary education (27.6%) and in the children under three years of age (13.6%). By region, the highest rate of chronic malnutrition in children under five years of age continues to be reported in Huancavelica (31.2%), followed by Cajamarca (26.6%), Loreto (23.8%), Pasco (22.8%), Apurímac (20.9%), and Ayacucho (20.0%).

Regarding anemia¹⁰, it is estimated that there were 1,350,000 children between 6 and 36 months of age in Peru, in 2017; of this total, 43.6% of children (588,600) developed some grades of anemia. Additionally, there were 600,000 pregnant women, of whom 28% suffered from anemia, which represented 168,000 women in total, 53.3% living in rural areas and 40.0% in urban areas. Regarding the regions affected by this medical condition, Puno (75.9%) appears in the first place, followed by Loreto (61.5%) and Ucayali (59.1%)¹¹.

These numbers have practically remained constant since 2011. In conclusion, social programs aimed at fighting these chronic diseases are not efficient or the allocated resources are not enough. The WHO already advised governments that the reduction of anemia should be a priority in public policies, especially in those territories that had a high prevalence of anemia in the most vulnerable groups.

Clearly, chronic malnutrition and anemia are closely correlated with inequalities and poverty, but a relatively new fact has also emerged: overweight is progressively affecting children in poverty. These Peruvians face conditions of increasing high social and economic vulnerability because they do not have equitable access neither to health services nor to balanced healthy food by any means. In this respect, the current government has set a goal for 2021: reducing anemia from the current 43% to 19% and chronic child malnutrition from 14% to 6.4%.

The true causes of hunger

Do you remember the verge of the financial crisis that broke out on September 15th, 2008 and turned 10 years in 2018? At that time, the financial speculation grew exponentially. For example, on April 6th of that fateful year, on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME), a ton of wheat cost

“Research reveals that there are still hidden gaps in zones far from large cities, where there are malnutrition rates similar to those in Africa”

¹⁰According to the WHO, anemia is caused mainly by the lack of iron, essential element for producing hemoglobin. The risk for developing anemia can be heightened by infectious diseases.

¹¹INEI: Demographic and Family Health Survey (ENDES for its acronym in Spanish) 2017

over 400 dollars. Unbelievably, just five years ago, it cost around 125 dollars. These cereals, which had kept fixed prices (with slight fluctuations) for more than two decades, became more and more expensive during 2006. By January 2007, when their price reached 173 dollars, the inflation had become unstoppable. The wheat exceeded 200 dollars per ton in July, 339 dollars in December, and 406 dollars in January 2008 (see international prices of the Central Reserve Bank of Peru). The same occurred with other agricultural products, such as corn, soybeans, among others. Wheat is the second most consumed product in the world (after milk and dairy products), and its production amounts to 722 million tons per year (FAO, September 2018). Each year, a quantity of wheat, equal to fifty times its global production, is traded on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.

On the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME), each grain of corn produced in the United States, China, Brazil, Argentina, European Union (main producers) is bought and sold, better yet, it is neither bought nor sold; these operations are simulated fifty times. As they say, the great invention of these markets is that whoever wants to sell something does not need to have it physically: promises, agreements, and vague ideas written on a computer screen are sold. And those who know how to do it earn fortunes in this fictional practice (these are the so called “futures contracts and options on food or basic products”). In other words, hunger is also

a consequence of the pure and wild speculation that occurs in these markets (or exchanges), which have no rules or laws to control them. FAO officials are perfectly aware of that.

It is known that ethanol (ethyl alcohol-biofuel) can be produced based on the use of various raw materials, being corn and sugar cane the most common ones. The United States became the world's largest producer of ethanol by using yellow corn. It is followed by Brazil and Colombia, where ethanol is produced from sugarcane. In Peru, sugarcane ethanol production is also developed. The United States is the main corn producer with 357 million tons per year, which represents 35% of the world production (1,031 million tons in the world; Peru produces 1.54 million tons) (see projections of the United States Department of Agriculture, June 2017). According to a federal law of the United States, 40% of corn must be used in ethanol production, aimed at filling tanks of vehicles. It is estimated that filling the tank of a standard vehicle with ethanol in the United States requires processing 170 kilos of corn. If this number is multiplied by the millions of vehicles that consume ethanol, the result is astronomical.

Corn is the other most demanded product worldwide. A hungry child from Africa or Latin America could easily survive for a year with the 170 kilos of corn that “feed” a machine. Nowadays, there is a decrease in the production of white corn because



*Children from the Andes in the
Huacavelica, Peru.*

Photography: Felicidar (2015)

American farmers have changed it for yellow corn, which is the raw material for ethanol. This change has caused an increase in the price of corn flour, which is also a raw material (among other things) to produce the popular Mexican and Guatemalan tortillas, whose price has also skyrocketed. But the problem does not stop there. The rise in corn usage to produce ethanol had also an effect on the price of eggs and chicken meat, whose food is corn.

“Hunger is the most brutal, violent, and intolerable form of inequality”

Unquestionably, hunger originated chiefly from inequality, poverty, speculation, etc. Hunger is the most brutal, violent, and intolerable form of inequality. In 2017, 82% of the wealth generated worldwide ended up in the richest 1% hands, while the poorest 50% gained 0%. “Big corporations and wealthier people are a key factor in this inequality crisis”, states Oxfam International. They use their power and their lobbies to ensure that governmental policies favor their interests and prioritize maximizing the profits of their capitalists above all, even if this implies polluting the environment, evading taxes or paying meager salaries to their workers, etc. Moreover, there is a shameless speculation with the prices of the basic food in the markets of Chicago, London, Sydney, etc. Internal wars, international geopolitical conflicts, extreme weather events, economic crises like the one triggered in 2008, arms sales to poor countries in conflict are also responsible for the death of millions of human beings caused by the lack of food.

No doubts, we live in the era of discord, individualism, “let do and let pass, the world goes on by itself” (Laissez faire et laissez passer), greed for money; which are the true essence of the economic model that reigns in today’s world. Nevertheless, we can build a different economic model that favors all humans, not only the greedy elite; and consequently, remove the inequality and hunger that hit the world.

Consequences of hunger

It is demonstrated that hunger brings about a series of adverse effects, many of them irreparable. Malnutrition during the first two years of life hampers the children’s physical and cognitive development, compromising their future and, by extension, their community’s and country’s future. Hunger reduces physical capacity and causes a serious deficit in learning. Those who suffer from malnutrition have their development stunted. Furthermore, the serious food shortages lead to internal displacement and migration, mainly from the countryside to the city, and globally from Africa to Europe, from Venezuela to Colombia, Peru, Chile, and from Central America to the United States.

Hunger has a negative impact on concentration, knowledge retention, and memory; making the studying process difficult, and therefore, holding up progress in one’s future and reducing the chances to earn a living. The **perverse circle of social**

exclusion, poverty, and hunger represents an obstacle not only to those who suffer it, but also to the following generations. According to Caparrós (2015), an Argentine journalist and writer, hunger is inhuman because it takes away from human beings what belongs to them the most, what makes them really human. Hunger dehumanizes people when, in addition to their health, growth or potential development, takes away their dreams.¹²

I confess that, when I read the book *Hunger* by Caparrós, I felt an emotional pain hard to describe, and understood that the ability to imagine is the privilege of those of us who have the basic needs covered, who have at least a minimum of hope, who make a projection of the future beyond the dichotomy “will I eat or not?”. Therefore, I feel obliged to recommend the reading of Martin’s work, because it recounts and denounces the failure of humanity in its fight against hunger.

How to end hunger and malnutrition in Peru

The available data on poverty and malnutrition, selected according to geographical areas and monetary incomes, reveal

that the majority of hungry people are concentrated mainly in rural areas, where the action of the State is insignificant, as in the high Andean areas of Huancavelica, Apurímac, Huánuco, Cajamarca, Puno, Ayacucho.

We must begin by recognizing that the country faces a setback in the fight against poverty. The alarming increase in anemia, chronic malnutrition, overweight, obesity, etc. is one of the consequences of the rising poverty in the country. Today, 2,500 million people suffer from hunger in Peru, 100,000 more people than in 2015. Moreover, according to the Ministry of Health and the Peruvian Association for the Obesity Study, Peru becomes, paradoxically, the third Latin American country with the highest rates of obesity. The National Institute of Statistics and Information (INEI) states that, in Peru, 36% of people over 15 years of age are overweight and 18% of these people suffer from obesity. Besides, 18% and 11% of children between 6 and 9 years of age are overweight and obese respectively.¹³ In this scenario, the efforts aim at eliminating poverty and hunger are mainly undertaken by means of:

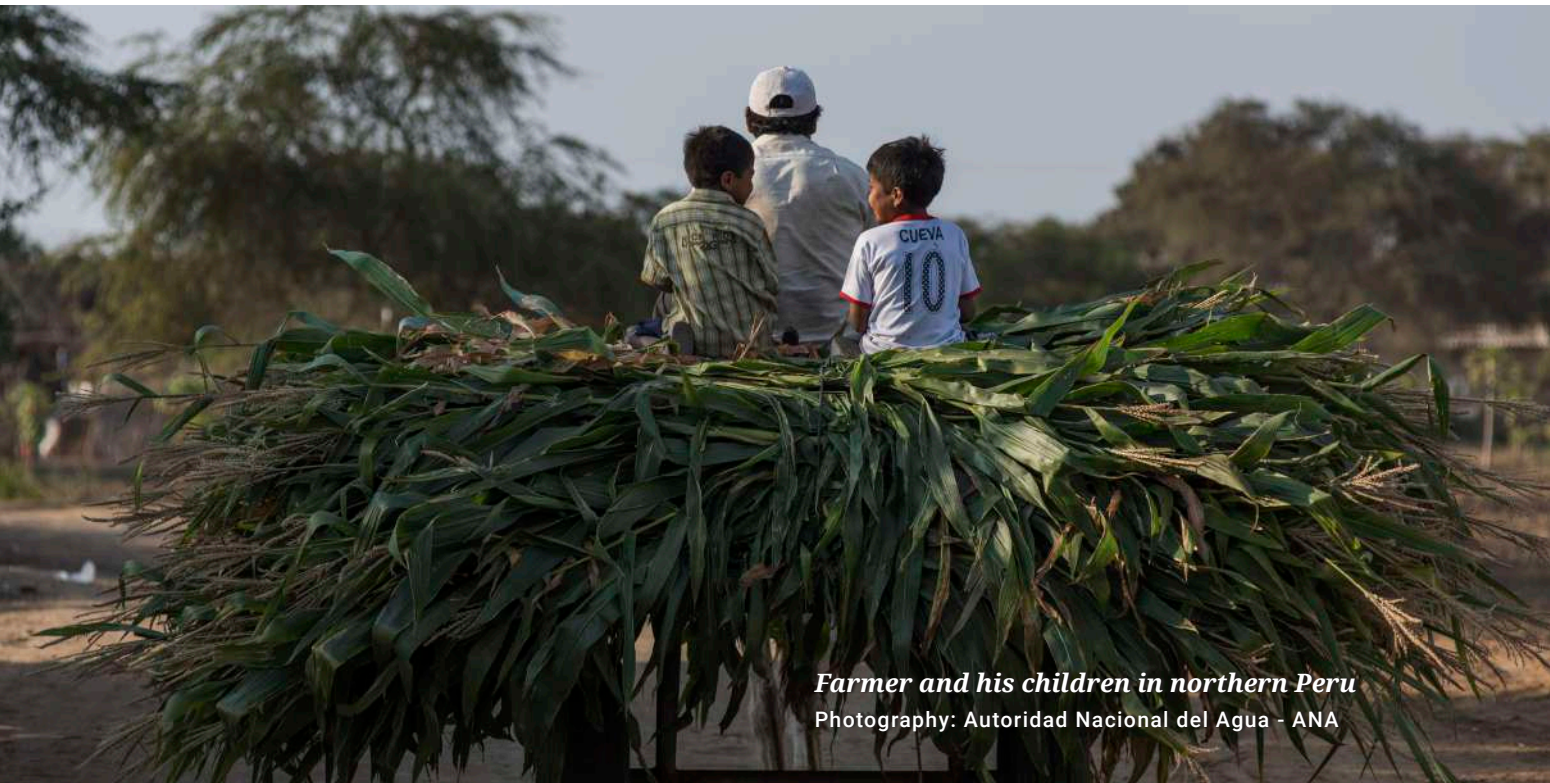
- a) Social protection and support for family farming. According to Graziano da Silva, FAO Director-General¹⁴, the combination of social protection measures and the strengthening of family farming (training, financing, etc.), which generates local development and contributes to the outreach of territories, is crucial to reduce rural poverty and fight the different forms of malnutrition and hunger.¹⁵
- b) Mitigation and adaptation to climate change. Climate change is severely damaging agriculture and livestock farming around the world, producing particularly virulent effects in countries like Peru, which is highly vulnerable to natural disasters as a consequence of droughts, floods, frosts, pests, El Niño phenomenon. There is an urgent need to promote the adaptation of agriculture to the changing climate, especially to protect rural communities where extreme poverty and hunger are concentrated.
- c) Implementation of measures in order to ensure the proper functioning of food markets

¹²Martin Caparrós (2015). *Hunger*. Anagrama editorial, Madrid-Spain

¹³See Report 21 by the Nutrition Department of the Ministry of Health (MINSa for its acronym in Spanish).

¹⁴United Nations Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028)

¹⁵The social spending represents 10.4% of GDP in Peru, 16.11 % in Chile, and 12.6 % in Bolivia (UNECLAC, January 2019).



Farmer and his children in northern Peru

Photography: Autoridad Nacional del Agua - ANA

destined to basic products and their derivatives and to facilitate farmers the appropriate access to information on markets, in particular information on food reserves with the aim of limiting the high volatility of their prices and avoiding excess production, like the overproduction of potatoes.

d) Promotion of food and nutrition education. Food guides have been collected by the National Food and Nutrition Center (NFNC) with the support of FAO. These guides should be widely spread, mainly throughout rural areas where the poorest and hungriest people live. Evidently, this work on food education must be jointly

organized by the different sectors of the State (Ministries of Health, Education, Agriculture, Production, Development and Social Inclusion, and the Ministry of Women).

e) Investment in rural infrastructure and in agricultural research, development, and innovation. Technological development, plant and livestock gene banks, etc., can help improve agricultural and livestock production capacity.

f) Improvement in institutional and legal framework and information systems related to food and nutrition security, prioritizing the development of capacities for the mobilization

and use of resources, and the effective implementation and management of social programs that fight against

poverty and hunger. Fighting food speculation constitutes another means to eliminate poverty and hunger.

Conclusions:

- In 2017, the number of Peruvians in poverty mushroomed to 6.9 million, a rise in 375,000 people. Even worse, the monetary poverty rate increased by one percentage point to 21.7% of the national population (2016: 20.8%).
- The poverty gap, which measures the difference between the income of a poor person and that income level that would allow him/ her to stop being poor, also widened: from 5.0% in 2016 to 5.2% in 2017. In other words, not only grew the number of poor people in the country, but also those poor people face a harder struggle to get out of the poverty situation in which they find themselves.
- Extreme poverty is the main cause of hunger. The number of hungry people reached 2.5 million in 2017, that is, 100,000 more people compared to the previous period, which implies a setback in the fight against hunger that had been taking place in Peru since previous years.
- According to the Ministry of Health and the Peruvian Association for the Obesity Study, Peru becomes the third Latin American country with the highest rates of obesity. 36% of people over the age of 15 are overweight and 18% of these people are obese.
- In LAC, 348,000 tons of foods are wasted every day. There is a need of public policies that promote public and private investment in activities, such as research, development, and innovation aimed at reducing food waste, food recovery and donation, and promotion of responsible consumption habits.¹⁶ Companies that destroy non-marketed food fit for human consumption should be penalized. On the contrary, those companies that cooperate with people suffering from hunger should be given tax incentives. Peru is one of the few countries in LAC that does not have multi-sectoral working groups that promote more efficient and sustainable food systems.
- The impact of the National Plan for Food and Nutrition Security (2015-2021); national food programs, such as Qali Warma, Juntos, HakuWiñay; and new interventions like SERVIAGRO has been insufficient to date. Therefore, their strategies and roles should be reviewed.

¹⁶The existing Peruvian law No. 30498 (2016) promotes the donation of food and facilitates the transport of donations in situations of natural disasters. It is an incomplete norm, as opposed to the norms in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, among other countries.

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