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Original Article

Food Security and Child Food Poverty in Peru: Analysis for Public Policy Design Toward 2030

Seguridad alimentaria y pobreza alimentaria infantil en Perú: Análisis para el diseño de políticas públicas hacia el 2030

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ABSTRACT

Food security is one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, particularly with regard to the child population. This article analyzes the situation of food security and child food poverty at the global, regional, and national levels, with an emphasis on the Peruvian case. Through a review of current data, it examines the prevalence of food insecurity, which affected 51% of Peruvian households in 2021, and its evolution through 2023. The data reveal that globally, 181 million children under five years of age live in conditions of severe food poverty, while in Peru, 56.5% of households with children under five experience food insecurity. The analysis identifies three key structural factors: poor food environments, inadequate feeding practices in early childhood, and low income levels. The findings show that more than 54% of children living in severe food poverty belong to middle- or high-income households, indicating that the problem goes beyond traditional economic barriers. Specific recommendations are proposed for consideration in the implementation of Peruvian public policies aligned with the 2030 Agenda, including the transformation of food systems, strengthening of health systems, activation of social protection mechanisms, and improvement of data systems to achieve continuous monitoring.

Keywords: Food insecurity, child food poverty, early childhood.

RESUMEN

La seguridad alimentaria constituye uno de los desafíos más apremiantes del siglo XXI, especialmente en lo que respecta a la población infantil. Este artículo analiza la situación de la seguridad alimentaria y la pobreza alimentaria infantil a nivel global, regional y nacional, con énfasis en el caso peruano. A través de una revisión de datos actuales, se examina la prevalencia de la inseguridad alimentaria que afectó al 51 % de los hogares peruanos en el 2021 y su evolución hasta el 2023. Los datos revelan que globalmente 181

millones de niños menores de cinco años viven en situación de pobreza alimentaria grave, mientras que en Perú el 56,5 % de hogares con presencia de niños menores de 5 años presenta inseguridad alimentaria. El análisis identifica tres factores estructurales clave: entornos alimentarios precarios, malas prácticas alimentarias en la primera infancia y bajos niveles de ingresos. Los hallazgos demuestran que más del 54 % de los niños en pobreza alimentaria grave pertenecen a hogares de clase media o alta, indicando que el problema trasciende las barreras económicas tradicionales. Se proponen recomendaciones específicas para tomar en cuenta en la implementación de las políticas públicas peruanas orientadas a la Agenda 2030, incluyendo la transformación de sistemas alimentarios, el fortalecimiento de los sistemas de salud, la activación de mecanismos de protección social y la mejora de los sistemas de datos para lograr un monitoreo continuo.

Palabras clave: Inseguridad alimentaria, pobreza infantil, primera infancia.

INTRODUCTION

Food security and child food poverty are complex and multifactorial problems that affect millions of people worldwide, with direct implications for human development, health, and social well-being. In the Peruvian context, these challenges have intensified in recent years due to a combination of structural, economic, social, and environmental factors that affect the country's regions in different ways.

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the situation of food security and child food poverty in Peru, identifying underlying causes, contextual factors that intensify the problem, and selected international experiences that offer valuable lessons. Based on this analysis, specific recommendations are proposed for the design and implementation of sustainable public policies aimed at guaranteeing the right to adequate food by 2030.

Food insecurity is not limited to a lack of food, but also involves restricted access to diverse and nutritious diets that meet the specific requirements of early childhood. This phenomenon has profound consequences for children 's physical and cognitive development and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty and exclusion. Therefore, understanding its multiple dimensions is essential for formulating effective interventions tailored to Peru's cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics.

Likewise, the situation of child food poverty is exacerbated by deep inequalities between urban and rural areas, as well as by gaps in access to basic health, education, and social protection services. The analysis of these factors shows that there is no single cause of the problem, but rather a complex web of determinants that require intersectoral and coordinated solutions. The complexity of the issue demands moving beyond fragmented or isolated approaches toward comprehensive and sustainable policies.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that fulfilling the 2030 Agenda and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger (SDG 2) require concrete and sustained commitments from the State, civil society, and the private sector. International experiences have shown that it is possible to significantly reduce child food poverty through the implementation of strategies adapted to the Peruvian reality, ensuring the right to adequate food for all children in Peru.

DEVELOPMENT

Food Security

Food security, according to the definition established by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 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 life" (FAO, 2024). This multidimensional concept is based on four fundamental pillars that interact in complex ways to determine the nutritional status of populations.

Food availability constitutes the first pillar and refers to the quantity of food available at the national, regional, and local levels. This dimension is related to having an adequate food supply to meet population requirements and depends on local, regional, and national production or food imports (FAO, 2024). As noted by Peru's Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS), determining factors include the productive structure (fishing, agriculture, industry), marketing and distribution systems, productive resources (land, credit, water, technology, human resources), ecosystem conditions (climate, biodiversity), production and trade policies, and sociopolitical conflict (MIDIS, 2024).

Access to food represents the second pillar and refers to households' ability to obtain food in sufficient quantity and quality to meet nutritional needs. Access can be achieved through direct purchase, social assistance, donations, or self-production (MIDIS, 2024). The main determinants of access include income level and distribution, food prices, primary production, and the coverage of food-related assistance programs (FAO, 2024).

Food utilization constitutes the third pillar and refers to the ability to effectively use the nutritional potential of consumed foods. This dimension depends on factors such as culture, the level of food and nutrition education, and access to basic goods and services for food preparation. Effective utilization requires appropriate food storage, processing, and preparation practices, as well as access to clean water and adequate fuel (MIDIS, 2024).

Finally, stability represents the fourth pillar and refers to consistent and reliable access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food over time. This dimension includes factors such as stable food production, efficient distribution systems, sustained access to markets, and the capacity to withstand and recover from crises that may threaten food availability and access.

Child Food Poverty

Child food poverty, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), is defined as "the inability of children to access and consume a nutritious and diverse diet in early childhood, that is, during the first five years of life" (UNICEF, 2023). This condition is characterized by the lack of access to a diverse diet that includes at least five of the eight essential food groups necessary for healthy development.

The eight food groups required to achieve minimum dietary diversity include: breast milk, dairy products, meat and fish, eggs, legumes and nuts, vitamin A–rich fruits and vegetables, other fruits and vegetables, and cereals, roots, and tubers. Children who consume only zero to two food groups per day are considered to be in

severe food poverty, while those who consume three or four food groups per day are considered to be in moderate food poverty (UNICEF, 2024).

The measurement of child food poverty uses the minimum dietary diversity indicator developed by UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO). This indicator assesses dietary diversity among children aged 6 to 23 months and extrapolates these data to the population under 5 years of age. The basis of this measurement is that dietary diversity is associated with micronutrient adequacy and is a reliable indicator of diet quality in early childhood.

The consequences of child food poverty are profound and multidimensional. In the short term, it increases the risk of infectious diseases, micronutrient deficiencies, and even child mortality. In the long term, it compromises physical development, reduces school performance, and severely limits economic opportunities in adulthood, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle of poverty (UNICEF, 2023).

Global Overview

The global situation of food security presents an alarming picture that has deteriorated significantly in recent decades. According to the report The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI 2023), moderate or severe food insecurity affected between 1.5 and 2.0 billion people worldwide prior to the pandemic. In 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 29.4% of the global population (2.307 billion people) experienced food insecurity, a figure that remained around 29.6% in 2021 and 2022.

In terms of undernourishment or hunger, the situation worsened considerably after the pandemic, increasing from 621.8 million people suffering from hunger in 2019 to more than 700 million in subsequent years, with an estimated 733 million people affected in 2023, nearly 10% of the world's population (WHO, 2023), a level similar to that observed in 2008 and 2009. This trend indicates that the goal of eradicating hunger by 2030 (SDG 2) appears increasingly unattainable, with projections estimating that around 600 million people will still suffer from hunger by that date.

In the specific context of child food poverty, UNICEF data reveal that globally 181 million children under the age of five (27% of the world's early childhood population) live in severe food poverty, with no significant change since 2020. This crisis disproportionately affects South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which together account for more than two-thirds (68%) of affected children. In Somalia, 63% of children suffer from severe food poverty as a result of droughts and floods, while in the Gaza Strip, 90% of children survive on only two food groups per day (UNICEF, 2023).

A particularly revealing finding is that more than half (54%) of children suffering from severe food poverty belong to middle- or high-income households. This evidence shows that the problem does not stem exclusively from income shortages, but also from factors such as nutritional misinformation, inadequate cultural practices, and easy access to unhealthy foods.

Panorama in Latin America

Latin America presents significant particularities in terms of food security. By 2022, it was estimated that 36.4% of the population of South America was exposed to moderate or severe food insecurity, while 12.7% faced severe food insecurity. It is important to note that most countries

Table 1.
Relevant Factors That Impacted Progress or Setbacks in Food Security

Factor	Impact: Progress / Setback	Scenario
Integrated interventions	Progress: 50% reduction in child food poverty in Burkina Faso.	Programs combining agriculture, health, and social protection.
Climate crises	Setback: Crop losses.	Droughts in Somalia (63% of the population affected).
Armed conflicts	Setback: Collapse of food systems.	Gaza: 90% of children with insufficient diets.
Poor-quality diets	Setback: Obesity and undernutrition	East Asia: 45% of children experiencing food poverty due to excessive sugar and salt intake.

Source: UNICEF. (2024).

in the region do not have systematic measurements of food insecurity and therefore rely on estimates produced by international organizations.

Regional comparisons reveal substantial disparities among South American countries. Uruguay shows the lowest estimated prevalence at 15.2%, followed by Chile at 18.1%, Paraguay at 25.9%, Colombia at 30%, Brazil at 32.8%, Argentina at 36.9%, and Ecuador at 37.3%. In absolute terms, Brazil exceeds all other countries in the region, with an estimated 70.3 million people experiencing food insecurity, followed by Peru with approximately 16.9 million affected individuals (FAO, 2023).

The region has faced additional challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, and economic crises. According to the World Bank, the pandemic led to a significant increase in informal employment and a reduction in working hours, with direct effects on declining labor income. The percentage of households experiencing food insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean nearly doubled, rising from 12.8% in 2020 to 23.9% in 2021 (World Bank, 2021).

Analysis of the Situation in Peru

a) Evolution of Food Insecurity

Peru presents the most critical case of food insecurity in South America, according to the results of the study Emergency Food Security Assessment (ESAE) 2021 (MIDIS, 2023). The findings revealed that moderate or severe food insecurity affected 51% of Peruvian households, representing the highest estimated prevalence in the region.

This first measurement coincided with the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period characterized by significant increases in the prices of basic food items, low labor demand due to the economic effects of the pandemic, and restrictive mobility measures that caused massive job losses, particularly in the informal sector.

The results of the ESAE 2023 show some evolution in the situation, although

specific prevalence figures are not fully detailed in the available documentation. However, it was identified that 56.5% of households with children under five years of age experience food insecurity, a particularly alarming figure for the most vulnerable population group.

b) Contextual Factors That Worsened the Situation

The post-pandemic period in Peru was characterized by improved economic performance, with growth of 2.7% in 2022 compared to the previous year. However, monetary poverty remained high, affecting 27.5% of Peruvians in 2022, while inflation reached its highest level in the past 26 years at 8.6%.

Additionally, the country faced multiple simultaneous crises that exacerbated food insecurity. Social protests (with more than one thousand collective protests recorded in early 2023), political instability evidenced by eight changes in leadership at the Ministry of Agrarian Development and Irrigation during 2022, and adverse climatic events such as the worst drought recorded in 50 years, frost, high input costs, and fertilizer shortages significantly affected agricultural production.

The international context also negatively impacted Peru's situation. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia led to increases in the prices of oil, grains, wheat, and cereals, influencing higher transportation and food prices. Particularly relevant was the fact that 80% of fertilizers were imported from Russia, with urea being the most widely used; its imports declined by 84% during the first quarter of 2022 (MIDIS, 2023).

c) Demographic and Geographic Characteristics

The analysis of food insecurity in Peru reveals significant disparities based on demographic and geographic characteristics. At the geographic level, differences among natural regions (coast, highlands, and jungle) and between urban and rural areas show distinct patterns that require differentiated interventions.

The methodology used in ESAE 2023 applied the Consolidated Approach for Reporting Indicators of Food Security (CARI) of the World Food Programme (WFP), which evaluates three main indicators: food consumption, economic vulnerability, and livelihood coping strategies. This methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of the multiple dimensions of food insecurity.

The study covered 4,700 households distributed across the country's 25 strata (23 departments, Metropolitan Lima, and Lima Provinces), with national, urban, rural, and geographic domain representativeness. Data collection was conducted between March and July 2023 through structured telephone surveys.

d) Structural Factors That Perpetuate Food Insecurity

- **Deficient Food Environments**

Food environments in Peru exhibit characteristics that significantly contribute to the persistence of food insecurity, especially among children. In rural, remote, and conflict-affected areas, the supply of fresh and diverse foods is frequently disrupted by extreme climatic events, violence, poor infrastructure, or the absence of local markets. This situation creates what are known

as "food deserts," where even when families have financial means, there is simply no physical availability of nutritious foods.

In contrast, urban areas face the opposite, but equally serious problem: an overabundance of ultra-processed foods with low nutritional value. These products, which are often cheaper and heavily marketed, crowd out healthier options. This situation not only reduces dietary diversity but also promotes unhealthy eating habits that persist into adulthood.

The transformation of food systems requires specific interventions to ensure that healthy foods are more accessible, affordable, and attractive. This involves addressing both physical availability and economic accessibility, while considering the geographic and socioeconomic particularities of the Peruvian territory.

Inadequate Feeding Practices

Feeding practices in early childhood in Peru are deeply influenced by cultural, social, and educational factors that often limit the diversity and quality of children's diets. The intergenerational transmission of beliefs and traditional practices, such as avoiding certain foods for fear of allergies or considering them inappropriate for young children, significantly restricts dietary options.

The lack of reliable information, or the presence of misinformation, constitutes another critical factor. Health systems do not always have sufficient resources or adequately trained personnel to provide appropriate and personalized nutritional guidance. Mothers and caregivers frequently do not receive adequate support or training to implement proper complementary feeding practices, which are particularly critical between 6 and 24 months of age.

Additionally, social structures persist that limit women's access to education and decision-making, directly affecting child nutrition. This situation is exacerbated in rural contexts and among Indigenous populations, where cultural and linguistic barriers may hinder access to appropriate nutritional information.

- **Economic Vulnerability**

Economic vulnerability is one of the most significant determinants of food insecurity in Peru. Families living below the poverty line face severe limitations in accessing fresh and nutritious foods. These households tend to prioritize quantity over quality, purchasing calorie-dense but nutrient-poor foods, such as cereals, roots, or processed products, that are more economically accessible.

Foods of animal origin, fresh vegetables, and dairy products are significantly more expensive per calorie, especially in middle-income countries such as Peru. This situation is aggravated by food inflation and upward fluctuations in food prices, along with the absence of adequate social protection networks.

The situation is further complicated by the prevalence of informal employment in Peru, which characterizes a significant proportion of the workforce. Informal workers face income instability, lack of social benefits, and the absence of protection mechanisms against economic shocks. During the pandemic, this sector was particularly affected by restrictive measures, revealing the structural vulnerability of the Peruvian economic system.

Response Systems to Food Insecurity in Peru

a) Food System

The Peruvian food system presents mixed characteristics that require substantial transformation to ensure food security. On the one hand, the country has exceptional biodiversity and ancient agricultural traditions that constitute fundamental strengths. On the other hand, the system faces significant challenges related to productivity, distribution, and access.

Agricultural production in Peru is characterized by marked seasonality and vulnerability to extreme climatic events. The drought, reported as the worst in 50 years, along with frost and other adverse weather phenomena, has demonstrated the fragility of the productive system. Additionally, dependence on imported fertilizers, particularly from Russia, exposes the system to geopolitical vulnerabilities.

Food markets suffer from deficiencies in infrastructure, cold chains, and distribution systems, especially in rural and remote areas. This situation leads to significant post-harvest losses and limits producers' access to markets that value the quality and diversity of their products.

b) Health System

The Peruvian health system faces substantial limitations in providing essential nutrition services, particularly in the prevention and treatment of child malnutrition. The shortage of personnel trained in nutrition, especially in primary health care facilities and rural communities, limits the capacity to deliver high-quality nutritional counseling.

Growth and development programs represent a significant opportunity for early intervention, but they require strengthening in terms of coverage, quality, and follow-up. Integrating nutrition services with other maternal and child health services could optimize resource use and improve the effectiveness of interventions.

Training and supervision of health personnel in infant feeding require substantial improvements. Community health workers could play a key role in nutrition education and follow-up, but they need adequate training and support systems.

c) Social Protection System

The Peruvian social protection system has limited coverage and fragmentation, which reduces its effectiveness in preventing and mitigating food insecurity. Existing programs such as the National School Feeding Program (formerly known as Qali Warma, now Wasi Mikuna) and the National Direct Support Program for the Poorest (Juntos) represent important advances, but they require evaluation and optimization to maximize their nutritional impact.

The lack of coordination among social programs limits the effectiveness of interventions and may generate duplication or coverage gaps. An integrated approach that considers the multiple dimensions of poverty and food insecurity could create significant synergies.

Conditional cash transfer programs have proven effective in other Latin American contexts in improving child food security. However, their implementation in Peru requires adaptation to local characteristics and articulation with nutrition education services.

Successful Experiences and Lessons Learned

International experience provides valuable lessons for public policy design in Peru. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Nepal, and Rwanda have achieved significant reductions in severe child food poverty through coordinated and sustained interventions.

Burkina Faso reduced severe child food poverty from 67% (2010) to 32% (2021) by combining conditional cash transfers with community-based food education programs, in which mothers received training on the importance of dietary diversity and practical techniques for preparing nutritious foods. At the same time, subsidies were implemented to facilitate access to fresh products, and local production networks were strengthened by promoting family farming (UNICEF, 2024).

Nepal reduced severe child food poverty from 20% (2011) to 8% (2022) by developing a national child nutrition strategy that integrated local nutrition surveillance, health services with food interventions, and empowered community promoters to conduct home visits. This community-based care model generated trust and promoted sustainable changes in feeding practices (UNICEF, 2024).

Rwanda implemented a comprehensive approach combining nutrition-sensitive agriculture with community nutrition, investing in infrastructure for water access and irrigation of nutritious crops. School feeding programs not only improved child nutrition but also stimulated the local economy through the procurement of products from local farmers (UNICEF, 2024).

Analysis of these successful experiences reveals common elements that could be adapted to the Peruvian context, including intersectoral approaches, family training and support, direct financial assistance, and promotion of physical and economic access to nutritious foods.

Sustained political will is a fundamental element, reflected in adequate resource allocation, continuity of programs beyond governmental changes, and the institutionalization of intersectoral coordination mechanisms. Active community participation and family empowerment emerge as critical factors for the sustainability of interventions.

Moreover, continuous monitoring and evaluation allow for timely adjustments and generate evidence for informed decision-making. Robust information systems facilitate early identification of food crises and rapid responses to emergencies.

Recommendations for Public Policy Implementation Toward 2030

1. Transformation of the Food System

Diversification and strengthening of local production

Implement programs that promote diversification of nutritious crops, especially those rich in essential micronutrients for child development. This includes the development of household and community gardens producing fruits, vegetables, and legumes, with special emphasis on native varieties adapted to local conditions.

Regulation of ultra-processed foods

Implement strict regulatory policies to limit advertising of ultra-processed foods aimed at children, establish mandatory front-of-package nutrition labeling, and create fiscal incentives that favor the consumption of fresh and nutritious foods over processed products.

Strengthening the food value chain

Invest in storage infrastructure, cold chains, and transportation systems to reduce post-harvest losses and ensure the availability of fresh foods in all regions of the country, with particular attention to rural and remote areas.

2. Strengthening the Health System

Expansion of community nutrition services

Develop a network of trained nutrition health promoters to provide education, counseling, and home-based nutritional follow-up, especially in rural and peri-urban communities where access to formal health services is limited.

Integration of maternal and child health services

Strengthen integration among growth and development programs, immunizations, family planning, and prenatal care to create a continuous care mechanism that ensures timely nutritional interventions from pregnancy through age five.

Specialized training of health personnel

Implement continuous training programs for health professionals and technicians in infant nutrition, complementary feeding, and early detection of malnutrition, with mandatory certification and periodic updates.

Nutrition surveillance systems

Establish a national nutrition surveillance system that enables continuous monitoring of child nutritional status, early identification of food crises, and evaluation of intervention impacts.

3. Improvement of Data and Monitoring Systems

Improvement of Data and Monitoring Systems

Develop a technological platform integrating data from health, education, agriculture, and social protection sectors to generate real-time information on child nutritional status and intervention effectiveness.

Regular food security surveys

Institutionalize food security assessments every two years using standardized methodologies that allow temporal and geographic comparability, with emphasis on early childhood.

Nutritious food price observatory

Create a permanent monitoring system for prices of essential nutritious foods in local markets nationwide, enabling early alerts for price increases that may affect food access.

Policy impact evaluation

Establish mandatory impact evaluation mechanisms for all food security and child nutrition policies and programs, using rigorous methodologies and transparent publication of results.

4. Intersectoral Coordination and Governance

National pact for child nutrition

Promote a long-term political agreement that transcends governmental terms, establishing specific goals, monitoring indicators, and accountability mechanisms to ensure continuity of nutrition policies.

Institutionalized community participation

Establish formal mechanisms for community participation in the design, implementation, and evaluation of nutrition programs, recognizing local knowledge and promoting community ownership of interventions.

Responsible public–private partnerships

Develop strategic partnerships with the private sector to promote the production, distribution, and commercialization of nutritious foods, establishing standards of social and environmental responsibility.

Effective implementation of these recommendations may require a sustained investment estimated at 0.5% of annual GDP distributed among the involved sectors. However, the expected benefits in terms of human development, reduced health costs, and improved economic productivity more than justify this investment. Sustained political commitment, effective intersectoral coordination, and active community participation are essential elements for the success of a transformative agenda that will lead Peru toward food security by 2030.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of food security and child food poverty in Peru reveals a complex landscape that requires urgent, coordinated, and multisectoral interventions. The prevalence of food insecurity affecting 51% of Peruvian households in 2021 (the highest in South America) together with the fact that 56.5% of households with children under five were food insecure in 2023, highlights the magnitude of the challenge facing the country.

The findings demonstrate that child food poverty transcends traditional economic barriers, affecting families living in poverty as well as those from middle- and high-income groups. This reality underscores the need to address deeper structural factors, including deficient food environments, inadequate feeding practices, and fragmented social protection systems.

The situation is further aggravated by contextual factors such as political instability, extreme climatic events, food inflation, and dependence on imported agricultural inputs. These elements reveal the systemic vulnerability of the Peruvian food system and the urgency of developing resilience mechanisms.

Successful international experiences provide evidence that it is possible to significantly reduce child food poverty when there is sustained political will, coordinated intersectoral approaches, and active community participation. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Nepal, and Rwanda demonstrate that well-designed and effectively implemented interventions can generate substantial changes within relatively short periods.

The food security conceptual framework, based on the pillars of availability, access, utilization, and stability, provides structured guidance for the design of comprehensive public policies. However, effective implementation requires adaptation to the geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic specificities of the Peruvian context.

It is also essential to prioritize transformation of the Peruvian food system through diversification of local production, reduction of post-harvest losses, and regulation of ultra-processed food supply with clear and sustained policies over time.

Strengthening health and social protection systems with a preventive and community-based approach is equally indispensable, allowing expanded coverage of nutrition services and improved food education for families, especially in rural areas and vulnerable populations.

A long-term political commitment is required to ensure intersectoral coordination, adequate resource allocation, and active participation of civil society and communities in order to advance toward the eradication of child food poverty by 2030.

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