

SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO FOOD SECURITY, FOCUSING ON THE HUMAN RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD



<https://doi.org/10.56238/arev7n1-067>

Submission date: 12/06/2024

Publication date: 01/06/2025

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ABSTRACT

The challenge of analyzing the problem of realizing the right to adequate food persists throughout this century, paradoxically in a scenario in which the country has shown itself capable of producing enough food to feed its entire population. This phenomenon affects a large number of people, and in Brazil and Latin American countries this scenario is no different. This paper surveys legal concepts and analyzes official data from Brazil, variations in groups from Latin America and the Caribbean; Central America; and South America and the world, on issues related to the Right to Food, focusing on the prevalence of undernourishment; the percentage of people experiencing food insecurity; the value of healthy diets by region; and the percentage of people unable to afford them. The fact is that food can be available but not accessible to people, especially the economically weakest, mainly due to limited income for purchasing food and basic services, which is one of the main causes of vulnerability, as it limits families' ability to overcome poverty and food insecurity. It highlights that economic and social circumstances and a market structure that favors low costs for unhealthy foods lead to persistent food insecurity. It also demonstrates that the prevalence of hunger is higher in countries with rapid population growth and little access to health care and education. It points to the clear existence of direct links between food security, nutrition and the health conditions of the population, which, in turn, affect the prospects for economic growth and development.

Keywords: Food Security. Right to Food. Enforceability. Enforcement.

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INTRODUCTION

The challenge of analyzing the problem of realizing the right to adequate food persists throughout this century, paradoxically in a scenario in which it has shown itself capable of producing enough food to feed its entire population. This phenomenon affects a large number of people, and in Brazil and Latin American countries this scenario is no different. The most vulnerable, due to the great inequality in the distribution of income, assets and resources and the lack of effective social protection policies, are the most affected in terms of access to food in adequate quantity and quality, according to the Food and Nutrition Security in the World Report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO (2020). The economic and social situations, the imbalances between production and access to food; a market structure that favors low costs for unhealthy foods; and the population's lack of information about the consumption of these foods lead to the persistence of food insecurity. As reported by The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, SOFI (2017), small farmers and communities that depend directly on the ability to produce their own food are the most affected by such phenomena, and also experience the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, altered environmental conditions and the consequent spread of pests and diseases. With rising unemployment and falling incomes, millions of people are unable to buy enough food, and many others are having to opt for cheaper and lower quality foods, as pointed out by this same organization and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2020).

In addition, the prevalence of hunger is higher in countries with rapid population growth and little access to health care and education. This creates direct links between food security, nutrition and the health conditions of the population, which in turn affects the prospects for growth and economic development (FAO, 2020).

The fact is that food can be available but not accessible to people, especially the economically weakest. According to Pinto (2011), limited income for access to food and basic services is considered one of the main causes of vulnerability, as it limits families' ability to overcome poverty and food insecurity.

In addition, the Brazilian food system is flawed when this discussion involves the various risks imposed on rural workers, the population's access to safe food, the misuse of land, the depletion of natural resources through the appropriation of private capital from global agricultural systems, the risks imposed on biodiversity and the sovereignty and food and nutritional security of the population in all its dimensions (Jacob; Chaves, 2019).

The responsibility imposed by legal means on the Public Authorities, in their three spheres (federal, state and municipal), with the participation of organized civil society, in the formulation and implementation of policies, plans, programs and actions with a view to ensuring the human right to adequate food, in accordance with art. 1st of Law 11346 of 2006, when it created the National Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN). This highlights the shared responsibility between the Government and organized civil society in general for achieving food security and also promoting permanent and equal access to healthy and adequate food.

This article analyzes official data from Brazil, variations of groups from Latin America and the Caribbean; Central America; South America and the world, on issues related to the Right to Food, focusing on: the prevalence of undernourishment; the percentage of people in food insecurity; the value of healthy diets by region and the percentage of people unable to afford them.

It shows that the economic and social circumstances and market structure that favors low costs for unhealthy foods lead to the persistence of food insecurity.

CONCEPT OF FOOD AND NUTRITIONAL SECURITY, BASED ON ITS HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

Food security was undoubtedly the main precursor to the evolution of the human species and the subsequent development of civilizations. Obtaining food in sufficient quantities as the main form of subsistence meant that, in the early days, the level of food security delimited the margin of survival of the species itself, through the highly selective path of the progress of some and the pure and simple elimination of others.

For Alencar (2001), agricultural practices had a decisive influence on future generations, as they stopped depending exclusively on hunting and extractivism to feed themselves and, in addition, the need to preserve and store food led to the development of activities to accumulate existing resources that directly impacted the organization of the first communities. In this way, “with their food security reinforced, man also became less vulnerable, because he was better fed and protected, and he multiplied at an accelerated rate, integrating into larger communities and spreading across various regions of the globe” (Alencar, 2001, p.138).

And so food security was perpetuated as a critical element of a social model, above all elitist, that prioritized the maintenance of power. Sometimes the acute imbalance between the demand and supply of food was not corrected and then nature made its severe contribution.

It was Thomas Robert Malthus who, in 1798, first addressed this problem explicitly by concluding that the uncontrollable growth of the population would be in arithmetic progression while the strength of the earth would grow in geometric proportion. According to Gouvea (1996, p.07), Malthus, a fatalist, “considered poverty to be the inevitable end of man, since the population would grow at a rate greater than the production of means of subsistence”. According to Malthusian theory, it would be impossible for food production to grow enough to meet the growth of the world population, which has been a reality for some time now, especially due to technological developments in agriculture and the Green Revolution, which have surpassed this proposition. However, today, it is natural to question the problems of food production, distribution and access for a world population of over 8 billion people. From a legal perspective, food and nutritional security consists of realizing the right of everyone to regular and permanent access to quality food, in sufficient quantity, without compromising access to other essential needs, based on health-promoting eating practices that respect cultural diversity and are environmentally, culturally, economically and socially sustainable, according to art. 3 of Law 11,346 (Brazil, 2006) with a view to ensuring the human right to adequate food. However, other concepts of food security emerge from new interpretations, such as that of Dutra et al (2014) when suggesting that rich countries, large agricultural producers, tend to impose barriers to imports and artificially raise food prices claiming the basis for food security; and also, a large part of poor countries, governed by populist leaders, use this concept to set prices and impose heavy losses on agricultural producers in order to please their voters. And it also continues to warn against interpretations where FNS is invoked by private interests to promote the destruction of the environment or even the destruction of a people's cultural habits. The concept of SAN is also closely related to that of adequate nutrition. Azevedo (2017) states that the term adequate encompasses aspects of social and economic development based on a food production model that expresses food sovereignty and reinforces the importance of encouraging the revaluation of traditional methods of environmental management and management, based on the accumulated knowledge of local populations in their close coexistence with the natural environment and

the optimization of available resources in different places to meet the needs of biological and social reproduction of human beings.

Another important aspect of adequate nutrition is related to the minimum amount of calories and protein intake to meet the individual's basic needs. This also involves a diversity of foods, including meat, fruits, and vegetables, and it is healthy for meals to be eaten in safe environments.

For the FAO, together with the World Health Organization (WHO), adequate nutrition is achieved when each individual receives a daily caloric intake capable of ensuring the normal functioning of their body, which in an adult, to be considered well-nourished, should be around 2,500 kcal per day.

It turns out that the food context is not limited to calories alone, but also to nutritional and, above all, protein intake. For Beurlen (2008, p.20), "these 2,500 kcal would then be the dividing line for identifying adults who eat more, less or in accordance with what is necessary for the proper functioning of the organism". This representative caloric value corroborated by the FAO has been the target of much criticism and disagreement, since there is a great variation in establishing the amount of daily caloric intake necessary for a healthy human life. Every human being should feel confident about the food they eat, not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of its quality. According to Valente (2003), a diet is adequate when, in addition to a "nutritionally balanced ration", it contributes to the construction of healthy human beings, aware of their rights, duties and their responsibility towards the environment and the quality of life of their descendants.

Regarding health and longevity, "there are moments in a human being's life when the right to adequate food becomes more important, causing malformations capable of harming the full development of their potential in a faster, more severe and irreversible way" (Beurlen, 2008, p. 23), and no less important is that in addition to the existential minimum of each human being, in addition to healthy food, respect for the culture and customs of each people must be preserved.

The right to adequate food can never be thought of as separate from the existential minimum of each human being; it is not enough to provide a daily amount of calories; it is necessary to satisfy dietary needs in a healthy and varied way, with respect for the culture and customs of each people, according to Muller (2014), as stated above.

For Silva (2019, p.180) “food must be safe and, at the same time, healthy”. Food security and healthy food are two sides of the same coin, however, unfortunately, not all safe food is also healthy. It is essential to improve and regulate our food systems: they need to be sustainable and capable of guaranteeing access to quality food for all people.

According to this author, countries have made progress in setting up platforms capable of showing how much progress they make each year in relation to Food Security, and the United Nations (UN) and its development partners have spared no effort to facilitate these mechanisms, establishing monitoring instruments, promoting dialogues on policies and the exchange of experiences between Member States and their partners in search of actions that promote FNS for the people. In line with schools of thought that point to the need to define an adequate diet that goes beyond the caloric quantity, that is healthy and promotes a dignified life, the FAO (2019a) advocates new parameters by defining that for an adequate and healthy diet it is necessary to have less than 30% of fat in its energy value and no trans fats; less than 5% of added sugar; less than 5g of salt per person per day and also a minimum of 400g of fruits and vegetables for consumption per person per day.

The concept of adequate nutrition refers not only to the perspective of individual health, but also to the issue of environmental health. The food production and consumption system has a strong environmental impact, soil erosion, water contamination, deforestation and loss of biodiversity are just some of these impacts (Rocha, 2013). There is a variation of the FNS concept, which is Food Sovereignty, a political aspect, driven by civil society, which emphasizes the right of people to define their own eating patterns. It is considered a right, the promotion of which becomes the object of public policies associated with development and food sovereignty. From the perspective of the Human Right to Adequate Food (HRAF), this has become one of the privileged strategies for promoting development because it should be the right of people to decide on their diet (Rocha, 2013). Freedom to choose the food that suits them, according to their culture and eating habits, is fundamental for food security.

This concept also refers to the preservation of traditional (creole) seeds and agricultural biodiversity, in addition to the appreciation of the culture and eating habits of diverse

populations (Leão, 2013) and is also relevant with regard to the sovereignty of nations and their self-sufficiency in relation to food for domestic consumption.

Food security has the following requirements:

it incorporates the notions of safe food (not biologically or chemically contaminated); food quality (nutritional, biological, sanitary and technological); the balance of diet, information and cultural operations (eating habits) of the human beings in question (Valente, 2002, p. 112).

The food insecurity of the population is a consequence of the failure to realize the right to food in sufficient quantity and quality for an excellent life. For Maluf and Reis (2013), when considering the entire population of a country, food insecurity can express difficulty in accessing food due to lack of work or low income, restrictions on the availability of goods and the sustainability of the ways in which these goods are produced. It is also necessary to consider the global context, in which food insecurity manifests itself in unfavorable trade relations, in fluctuations in the international market and in the actions of large international corporations.

In turn, the concept of Food Insecurity is related to a complex phenomenon with economic, social, cultural and political dimensions of each nation, linked to with situations of social vulnerability, exposure to certain types of risks and a series of factors that reduce the level of well-being of individuals, communities and families (Kepple; Segall, 2011).

The report by the FAO's The Lancet Commission (2019) on the Right to Food and Food and Nutrition Security in the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) provides a general overview of poverty, food and nutritional insecurity in 2013, highlighting the main vulnerable groups and indicating very disparate levels of human development, including countries with a very high index (Portugal), high (Brazil), medium (Cape Verde, Timor-Leste and São Tomé and Príncipe) and low (Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique). Weak social protection or the lack of safety nets contributes to the situation of vulnerability, with the groups most vulnerable to food and nutritional insecurity in CPLP countries coinciding with those groups traditionally most affected by hunger, namely children, women (widows, pregnant women), the elderly, small farmers and the vast majority of them located in rural areas. Poverty, due to limited income for access to food

and basic services, is highlighted as one of the main causes of vulnerability. Difficulty in accessing resources, namely land, water or agricultural inputs, also limits the ability of families to overcome poverty and food insecurity (Pinto, 2011, p. 8). For Brazil, the FAO report on progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) states that the country has already achieved the goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015 (a reduction from 25.6% in 1990 to 4.8% in 2008). Comparing population growth with poverty reduction reveals the scope of these advances more clearly: between 1990 and 2008, while the Brazilian population grew from 141.6 to 186.9 million, the population living in extreme poverty decreased from 36.2 to 8.9 million people. Even so, around 20% of the population lives below the poverty line and 13% are at risk of falling into this situation. The high level of political commitment and the various social programs implemented contributed to this progress. (FAO, 2011, p. 14)

It is clear that hunger and malnutrition are the result of the deprivation of the right to adequate food and affect, above all, the economically weakest and therefore invisible to the consumer market. "The dividing line between 'the haves' and 'the have-nots' is not just a rhetorical cliché or an eloquent slogan, but rather, unfortunately, a substantial characteristic of the world in which we live." (Sem; Kliksberg, 2010, p. 37).

In 2014, the FAO already demonstrated that global agriculture is capable of feeding twice the current population and yet, hunger coexists, affecting around 805 million people in the world, that is, one in every nine.

The annual destruction of tens of millions of men, women and children by hunger is the scandal of our century. Every five seconds, a child under the age of ten dies. On a planet that, however, overflows with wealth [...] in its current state, global agriculture could easily feed 12 billion human beings - that is, almost twice the current population. There is no fatality in this regard (Ziegler, 2013, p. 21).

In this context, the analysis of food systems becomes essential, since only through a systemic view of FNS can it go beyond individuals to meet urgent social interests.

Barraclough (1991), supporting the above thought, also adds that mass poverty and hunger are systemic in nature, and it is possible, in the short term, to obtain improvements in some aspects of food security independently of others; and in the long term, however, all dimensions must advance together, because, otherwise, the food system would become increasingly unstable.

The systemic nature of the reality in which we live is undeniable, and therefore, in the field of SAN, it is essential to identify its interconnected and interdependent components precisely because they are part of a conjecture of systems.

Given the complexity of global phenomena involving interconnected environmental, social and economic issues, a systemic approach to Food and Nutrition Security is proposed, which provokes the perception of problems in an interdependent manner, with a coordinated focus to address hunger and poverty.

One of the major obstacles to the consolidation of actions against hunger is the planning approach itself, which does not consider the problem in a systemic and joint manner, as a complex of manifestations that are simultaneously biological, economic and social, as already highlighted by Josué de Castro in his book *Geography of Hunger* (Castro, 2011).

At the international level, the Panel of Experts of The High Level Panel on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE), in its 2016 and 2017 reports, objectively demonstrates that food systems are at a crossroads and suggests new paths to be followed based on the transformation of agriculture and food systems to achieve food and nutrition security in a sustainable manner that respects human health and the environment, ensuring the production of sufficient food for the entire population and their respective access. The same report subsequently reinforces the systemic vision of food security by pointing out that its agroecological approach is a factor of environmental sustainability and social innovation, “establishing a link between food production and consumption, with special emphasis on solutions adapted to the local context and based on the participation of the local population and their knowledge” (HLPE, 2019, p. 29). International links where systemic interdependence prevails, encompassing issues of agroecological production, distribution and consumption of these goods, are decisive for the design of the food system. The

measures adopted by farmers regarding what to produce are guided by urban consumption preferences and the demands of national and international trade.

For Maluf and Reis (2013), the formation of a global food system has significant repercussions on national plans by revealing the links and growing systemic articulation between the various activities related to food and nutrition. Consequently, a certain pattern of agricultural production and processing of goods is being adopted, with increasing standardization of eating habits and the increasing importance of international trade. In Brazil, in 2004, during the 2nd National Conference on SAN, on the initiative of the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA), the creation of the Organic Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN) was proposed, which was approved after two years of processing by the National Congress as law 11,346 (Brazil, 2006). This proposal clearly demonstrated the tendency to resolve SAN problems in a systemic and coordinated manner.

The first article of this law establishes the National Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN), through which the government, with the participation of organized civil society, will formulate and implement policies, plans, programs and actions with a view to ensuring the human right to adequate food.

This affirmation leads to the conclusion that food security is a shared responsibility, in which the Government at the three levels (federal, state and municipal), regional economic bodies, development agencies, commercial organizations, consumer and producer groups, academic and research institutions and private sector entities must work together.

This collaboration also results from the organization and influence of civil society, to promote permanent and equal access to healthy and adequate food, assuming that “this perspective implies going beyond individual organisms towards social systems” (Maluf; Reis, 2013, p. 46).

The complexity of the hunger phenomenon is linked to the situation of poverty, and it is essential to interface with income generation, especially in rural areas, through family farming that produces food for everyone, and also efforts to reduce social inequalities, so that the economically weakest can have access to food in the hope of achieving autonomy (FAO, 2019).

Public policies aimed at this approach contribute to the effectiveness of the legal-regulatory system, by ensuring that the results and impacts arising from the proposed measures are

consistent with the magnitude of the food insecurity problems experienced throughout the world.

Structurally, the Food System is basically made up of 4 parts, the first of which is the food chain that goes from production to the consumer; the second is the surroundings of the food environment, which is made up of the physical element (supermarkets, street markets, commercial gardens, among others) and the subjective element that refers to income (a determining factor in food consumption) and education (the importance of accurate knowledge about the food to be consumed). The third refers to the standards that regulate food (government laws and regulations). Finally, the fourth part refers to consumer behavior, with their individual preferences that reflect their culture and other value influences, according to the FAO High-Level Group of Experts on Food Safety and Nutrition (HLPE, 2019).

From this, it can be inferred that Food Security encompasses four distinct dimensions, which are: food production and availability; access to food regulated by purchasing power; use of agricultural inputs and artificial products that are determinant for human health; stability or education. eating habits that are strongly influenced by misinformation and propaganda from large corporations.

ENFORCEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD

In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights internationally enshrined food as a fundamental right, stating that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services” (art. 25).

In the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted in 1966 by the UN, the Signatory States recognize the right of every person to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, giving rise to the term Human Right to Adequate Food (HRAF).

In 1999, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights drafted General Comment 12, stating “The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has uninterrupted physical and economic access to adequate food or to the means necessary to obtain it.”

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2002) implemented a set of voluntary guidelines on the progressive realization of the right to food in the context of food and nutritional security, which were only approved in 2004 by the 151 member countries of its council; a pioneering agreement on the human right to food. Brazil, considering the ICESCR, Decree 591/92, recognizes the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living (...) including the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, and establishes the objective of improving the methods of production, conservation, and distribution of foodstuffs through the full use of technical and scientific knowledge, through the dissemination of principles of nutritional education and the improvement or reform of agrarian regimes, to ensure the most effective exploitation and use of natural resources (BRAZIL, 1992). Constitutionally protected, the right to food is provided for in Art. 6, through Constitutional Amendment 64/2010, as a fundamental social right. Even though it was late, it was a strong advance for the topic in the Brazilian legal arena.

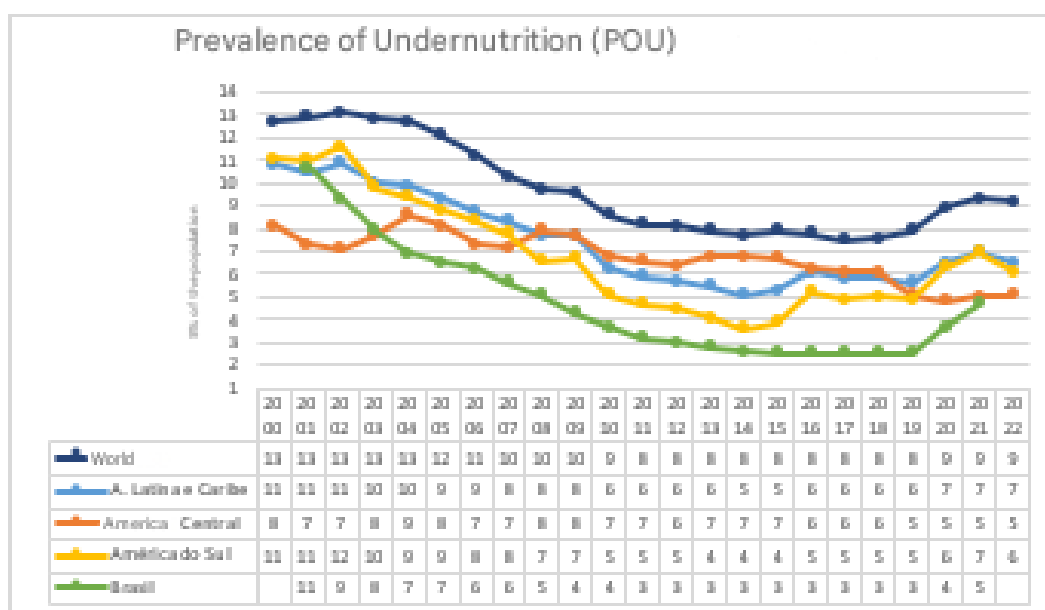
Even in the face of a framework with significant legal and institutional consolidation, Corrêa; Oliveira (2019, p. 27), contrary to the majority view, presents a critical reflection on the theoretical premises of the Right to Food, stating that “the issue of the lack of effectiveness does not arise only from a possible dysfunctionality of the political-legal system, but from the traditional conception of human rights that underlie the debate”. Even though the implementation of this right represents a major political challenge, it is imperative to analyze the theory of fundamental rights critically and reflectively. For Bobbio (1992, p. 24), “the fundamental problem about human rights today is not so much justifying them, but protecting them. This is not a philosophical problem, but a political one”. In Flores's view (2002), the global configuration of Fundamental Rights is simplistic and has serious consequences, as it leads to a decontextualized way of thinking in which everyone, a priori, has rights even before the true conditions to exercise them are offered, distancing the population from the fight for them, given the lack of conditions to move from the mere position of objects of the discourse of Rights to true holders.

OVERVIEW OF HUNGER IN BRAZIL AND IN LATIN AMERICAN GROUPS

For the Hunger scenario in Brazil and in Latin American and world groups, it is important to observe the Prevalence of Undernourishment (Graph 1). Brazil has seen a significant acceleration in the reduction of hunger until 2010, advancing more slowly until 2014, with a sharp increase in undernourishment in 2020, the beginning of the pandemic. The decline

seen in the first years of this graph is attributed to the “Zero Hunger Project – a food security policy proposal for Brazil” initiated in 2002 by the Citizenship Institute and the main government strategy for economic and social policies and in the fight against hunger and poverty from 2003 onwards, with the Lula Government (Silva, 2010).

Graph 1 – Percentage of people with Prevalence of Undernourishment (POU) between 2000 and 2022

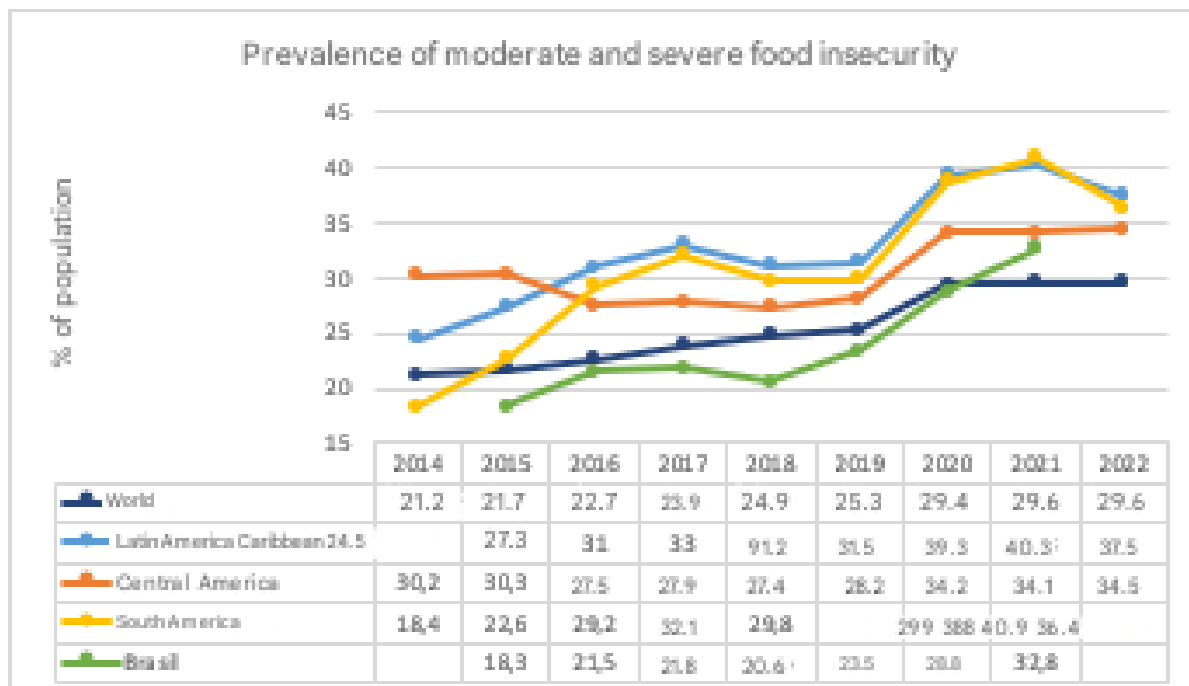


Source: Prepared by the authors with data from FAO (2024).

When we look at the time curve, except in Central America, all prevalence rates of undernourishment decreased significantly until 2014. After that period, there was stagnation, and Latin America the Caribbean, and South America showed increases in this prevalence. This was the year in which the 2030 Agenda was defined at the UN General Assembly, with the delimitation of the 17 sustainable development goals, number 2 being “Zero Hunger”. Thus, we can say that despite the merit in pointing out guidelines for the policies of the countries, there is a limitation in the implementation of public policies that promote the goals.

Another indicator that makes this situation clear is the prevalence of moderate and severe food insecurity (graph 2), in which only Central America did not show an increase in food insecurity from 2015 onwards, followed by a significant worsening in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic.

Graph 2 – Percentage of people with moderate and severe food insecurity between 2014 and 2022

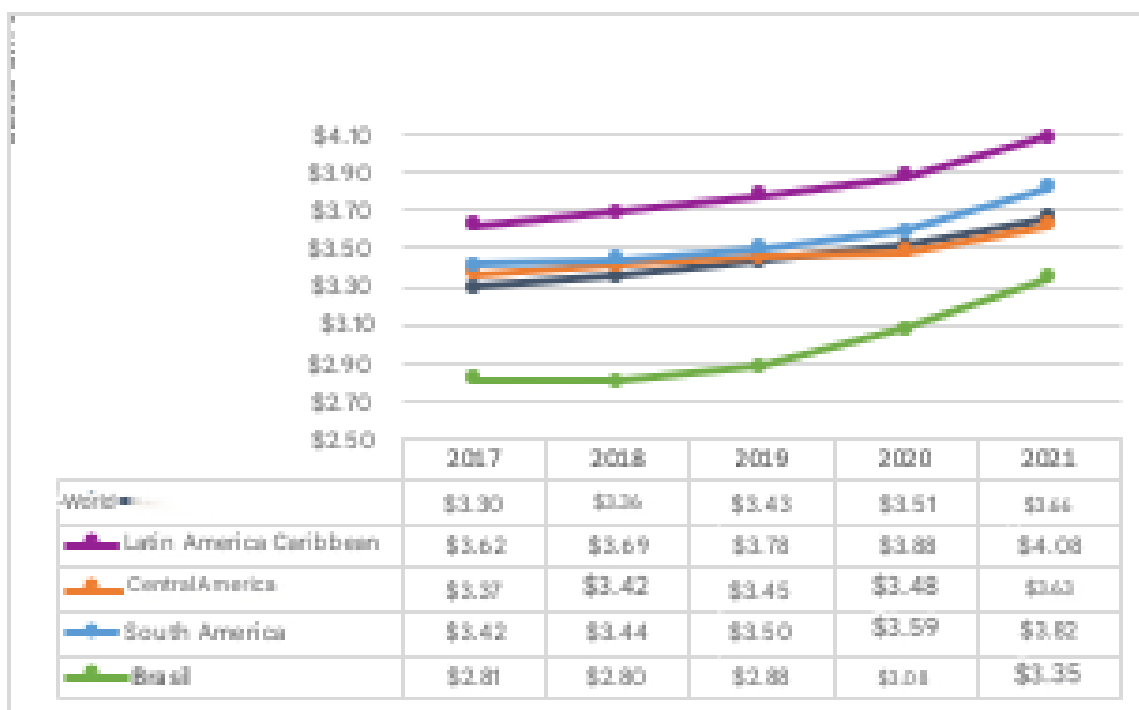


Source: Prepared by the authors with data from FAO (2024).

A relevant factor in this scenario is that in 2016, Brazil had a high unemployment rate and the number of discouraged people reached 4.3 million, the largest contingent since the beginning of the historical series of the Continuous Quarterly National Household Sample Survey – PNAD, which began in the first quarter of 2012, when discouraged people totaled 1.9 million (IBGE, 2018).

Observing the financial issue in access to food, it is important to notice the variation in the cost of healthy diets in these locations (Graph 3). In it, we can see that Brazil has the lowest values, however, it has the largest curve of increase in the values of healthy diets. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is highlighted in Latin America as the region of the planet where it is most expensive to eat well and healthily.

Chart 3: Cost of Healthy Diets 2017-2021 (USD)



Source: Prepared by the authors using data from FAO (2024)

Latin America and the Caribbean stand out with costs above the rest, and these costs directly influence food choices. High food prices directly impact people's quality of life, particularly regarding the quality of products obtained by families who allocate a significant portion of their income to food.

Below is a table showing the cost of healthy diets in Latin America and the Caribbean:

Table 1: Cost of Healthy Diets in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) in 2017 (USD)

	A diet sufficient in daily calories	A diet adequate in nutrients	Healthy diet
World	0.79	2.33	3.75
LAC	1.06	2.83	3.98
Caribbean	1.12	2.89	4.21
Latin America	1.00	2.78	3.75
Central America	1.13	3.04	3.81

South America	0.91	2.61	3.71
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Source: SOFI (2020)

This table presents three columns: a diet sufficient in terms of energy, meaning there are enough calories per person so that, on average, all individuals can maintain an active life; a diet adequate in terms of nutrients; and, finally, a healthy diet.

Compared to the world, the energy-sufficient diet in Latin America and the Caribbean is 34% more expensive; the diet adequate in nutrients is 21% higher than the global average, and the healthy diet—the ideal one—is 6% costlier. This leads to the conclusion that a healthy diet is the most expensive worldwide and has the lowest price variation among countries in Latin America.

High food prices directly impact people's quality of life, particularly in terms of the quality of the products obtained by families who allocate a significant portion of their income to food.

These statistics reveal a significant reason for the high levels of overweight and obesity in LAC. In our region and globally, eating well and healthily is much more expensive than eating poorly. Consuming non-nutritious foods is cheaper than eating healthy foods.

A portion of the population has daily and regular access to food; however, their choices and combinations often result in insufficient intake of certain essential nutrients for adequate nutrition, leading to "hidden hunger," while also consuming excessive amounts of other substances, contributing to the incidence of overweight, obesity, hypertension, and other weight-related complications (Dutra et al., 2014, p. 02).

In this context, the Caribbean stands out, as its small islands import most of the food they consume. Due to their small populations—where, in some cases, the number of tourists visiting these islands equals or surpasses the local population—food imports are often influenced by the types of food that tourists demand, typically those high in fat, ultra-processed ingredients, and excessive salt. It is worth noting that eating well and healthily is significantly more expensive: in the Caribbean, it costs USD 4.21 per person per day; in Central America, this cost drops to USD 3.80 per person per day; in South America, it is

USD 3.70. It is easy to conclude that many families, such as those with four members, cannot afford a healthy diet.

The following table (Table 2) presents data that illustrate this reality.

Table 2 – Number of People Unable to Afford a Healthy Diet – Latin America and the Caribbean – 2017 (Millions of inhabitants)

	A diet sufficient in calories	Nutritionally adequate diet	Healthy diet
World	185.49	1,513.01	3,021.53
(Percentage)	(4.63%)	(23.31%)	(38.3%)
LAC	10.46	66.7	104.24
(Percentage)	(3.7%)	(18.2%)	(26.5%)
Caribbean	1.32	8.29	13
(Percentage)	(3.4%)	(23%)	(36.7%)
Latin America	9.14	58.48	91.24
(Percentage)	(3.7%)	(16.8%)	(23.6%)
Central America	2.19	20.39	31.64
(Percentage)	(4.9%)	(22.6%)	(28.5%)
South America	6.95	38.09	59.59
(Percentage)	(3%)	(13.1%)	(29.5%)

Source: FAO, IFAD, PAHO, WFP, and UNICEF (2023)

Worldwide, three billion people cannot afford to purchase food for a healthy diet. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 104 million people—equivalent to 27% of the population—cannot maintain a healthy diet. In South America, 60 million people—almost 30% of the population—cannot eat healthily.

From an ethical perspective regarding ignorance about what we eat and its relationship with foodborne illnesses caused by added substances, Muller (2014, p. 29) poses a highly relevant question:

"The issue is understanding what we know and what we do not know about food. Certainty is a privilege we do not possess, and food security remains a utopia we insist on imagining as achievable. After all, what do major corporations reveal about the production of industrialized foods? Or are we merely pieces of a (un)known mechanism that manages the productive and industrial market, whose sole objective is profit, regardless of human cost?"

It is evident that economic interests prioritize profit as their main objective, and the food system is no exception. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen and enhance public knowledge about the food they consume to enable informed choices that favor healthy and sustainably produced options. Although, as demonstrated earlier, a large portion of the population cannot afford this type of diet, having this awareness is essential, at the very least, to make the least harmful choices possible.

From the perspective of producing and acquiring food without compromising human dignity and basic rights, Rocha (2013, p. 73) emphasizes:

"In a market economy, a dignified and acceptable means of accessing food is through purchase. When the market fails, the dignity and human rights of many people are threatened by the urgency of obtaining food and being free from hunger."

Beyond the economic difficulty of accessing healthy food, people must understand the importance of three daily meals, particularly regarding the quality of the products consumed and their impact on health. Respecting people's autonomy in their food choices, by the human right to adequate and healthy food, is crucial. Access to reliable information about consumed food is essential, as adopting healthy eating habits is not merely an individual choice but is influenced by multiple factors, including education and socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, media influence plays a significant role in shaping food trends, often promoting dietary fads and eating behaviors that may be harmful to health (BRASIL, 2016).

Numbers indicate that diet is not merely an individual choice where people can decide between eating well or poorly. For large segments of the population, making such a choice is impossible because the cost of a healthy diet in our region is among the highest in the world.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is necessary to create an environment where the right to food is exercised in a way that allows all individuals to sustain themselves, either by producing their food or by having dignified economic conditions to access adequate nutrition.

Food sovereignty is also considered a right, with its promotion linked to public policies associated with social development. It is one of the key strategies for ensuring adequate nutrition, as people should have the right to decide their own food choices.

The right to adequate food should never be considered separate from human dignity; it must respect the necessity of a healthy, varied diet that aligns with cultural and traditional habits.

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