

Hunger returns to Brazil

With several food programmes dismantled during the pandemic, the food crisis in Brazil has taken a turn for the worse.

In the 21st century, Brazil had surprised the world with a robust political agenda to confront one of the worst expressions of inequality: Hunger. However, during this year's COVID-19 pandemic, the topic of hunger and food security once again dominated the Brazilian public debate as research data was released that attested to what many social movements had already been denouncing: That hunger was once again haunting millions of households in the country.

Food insecurity designates a reduction, concern, or uncertainty about regular and permanent access to food in adequate quantity and quality. According to a survey conducted by the Research Group Food for Justice: Power, Politics and Food Inequalities in a Bioeconomy of the Freie Universität Berlin in collaboration with scholars from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) and the Universidade de Brasília (UnB), 59.4 percent of the households in Brazil were food insecure from August to December 2020. Of this total, 15 percent of Brazilian households suffered from hunger. The Food for Justice data showed a significant deterioration in food security that had already worsened a few years prior to the onset of the pandemic. According to the data from the 2017-2018 Family Budget Survey (Pesquisa de Orçamento Familiar; POF), conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística; IBGE), food insecurity in the country had increased from 22.6 percent in 2013 to 36.4 percent in 2017-2018.

However, food insecurity does not affect all social groups equally. Urban households with a white male head, a monthly per capita income above 1,000 reais, located in an urban area or in the Center-West, South, or Southeast regions are less likely to be food insecure. On the other hand, households where the head of the household is a brown (pardo) or black (preto) woman, with a per capita monthly income less than 1,000 reais, located in a rural area or in the North or Northeast regions are most likely to be food insecure. This is a portrait of Brazilian inequalities expressed in food.

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Regarding data on food consumption, even before the pandemic, households in situations of food insecurity already consumed healthy foods—such as meat (72.6 percent), vegetables (67.2 percent), and fruits (66.5 percent)—on an irregular basis (less than five times a week). This situation worsened after the pandemic, when there was a significant reduction in the consumption of important foods, such as the meat group, which decreased amongst 44.4 percent of the interviewed households. This percentage is much higher amongst households in situations of food insecurity. Such households suffered a reduction of more than 85 percent in their consumption of healthy foods.

How did a country that left the UN Hunger Map in 2014 return to a situation of critical food insecurity in 2020? There are multiple reasons for this. Firstly, the difficulty and restriction of access to food is related to decreased incomes; the main determinant of food insecurity. In the last five years, Brazil has experienced an economic crisis, with increased unemployment, devaluation of the minimum wage, and rising inflation, all of which impact food prices. The COVID-19 pandemic has only aggravated the situation.

Secondly, as of 2016, the political agenda, which had prioritized the fight against hunger in the previous decade, has since focused on extreme austerity. It is essential to highlight that while Brazil has received international acclaim for the success of the Brazilian cash transfer programme (Bolsa Família) in combating extreme poverty, a process of structural change had been benefiting a much more significant portion of the population due to the increase in formal employment and income. This cycle was interrupted with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016. However, her administration had already showed signs of austerity as a reaction to the economic crisis beginning at that time. From a continued policy of real appreciation of the minimum wage—that is, a consistent increase in workers' income above inflation—and expansion of the national social security system—whose benefits are tied to the value of the minimum wage—public policy now consists in relaxing labour rights, reducing public spending for social policies, and decreasing the purchasing power of the minimum wage. In December 2016, a new constitutional amendment instituted a new fiscal regime for the following 20 years. It created a limitation on public spending and investment until 2036, especially on those of a social nature.

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Finally, in terms of food production and distribution, a series of changes were begun in 2016, which saw public policies for the promotion family farming dismantled, the Ministry of Agrarian Development (2016) disbanded, and essential policies such as the Food Purchase Programme scrapped (Programa Nacional de Aquisição de Alimentos; PAA). Moreover, in the context of the pandemic, essential programmes guaranteeing the Human Right to Adequate Food, such as the National School Feeding Programme (Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar; PNAE), have been partially defunded. This has significantly affected the principle of universality in serving the population. In 2019, the national government closed many channels for dialogue with organized civil society and chose to ignore the accumulation of decades of learning in the promotion of the right to food. It disbanded the National Food and Nutrition Security Council (Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional; CONSEA), a space for social participation that brought together representatives of civil society and the state to dialogue on food and nutrition security policies.

Steps to be adopted

To recover the country's food security indicators, income redistribution policies will need to be resumed, alongside social protection policies, specific support for family and peasant agriculture, and food and nutritional security policies. Food insecurity has been successfully tackled in the past and such previous action must serve as a guide to confront this problem once again. However, updates and innovations that respond to the challenges of the new context are required. For this, it is essential to engage in the same dialogue with organized civil society that was fundamental in the past for the creation of public policies on food security and nutrition. In the context of the pandemic, such dialogue has been essential in carrying out actions of solidarity and making denunciations with a view to confronting hunger.

The views expressed above belong to the author(s).

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