

Dietary transition and cultural diversity: challenges for indigenous health politics in Brazil

Nutrition security is an important topic in contemporary life, gaining contours of even greater relevance in the present setting of globalization in emergent economies. In Brazil, the official nutrition security policy is presented as an interdivision initiative seeking to guarantee sustainable access to healthful food, based on respect for cultural diversity. Despite that recommendation, field implementation of these activities in Brazil – as in other settings – is marked by standardization of foods offered, with negative implications for the cultural variability of human dietary practices.

Dietary transition is inherent to the process of industrialization and urbanization that today regulates access to food. Such events assumed planetary scale, reaching those, such as indigenous peoples, whose lives are situated at the most distant poles from the primary trajectory of globalization.

In Brazil, scientific and institutional discourses regarding indigenous health have called attention to rapid increase in chronic diseases associated with growing consumption of industrialized foods and changes in physical activity patterns. As occurs in other populations, this dietary transition gives rise to overweight and obesity in adolescents and adults, which are associated with cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, and diabetes and not infrequently coexist with infant undernutrition. Solutions to the problem demand extremely complex individual and collective behavioral changes that transcend contemporary indigenous modes of life. In this sense, dietary change may be understood simultaneously as a local and global phenomenon.

From an anthropological perspective, diet may be seen as an aspect of culture in dynamic interaction with the environment, the economy, and each group's values and beliefs. Thus, the impoverishment of indigenous diets due to increased availability of a restricted group of industrialized foods acquired on free will or prioritized in nutrition security actions implies risk to the sociocultural diversity of indigenous Brazil. The more strictly biological perspective in the area of nutrition does not consider the intrinsic symbolic and affective dimensions of dietary consumption among constituent ethnic groups. Part of the problem derives from lack of familiarity with the richness and variety of indigenous dietary cultures and their implications for maintaining adequate nutritional levels.

Dietary behaviors of indigenous peoples, as those of any peoples, are affected by their worldviews. Diversity of worldviews implies multiplicity of dietary traditions, which should be recognized as supporting the proposition of participatory health strategies for the sake of integrality and humanization of nutrition security politics.

Addressing the dietary transition currently underway among indigenous peoples calls for recognizing the cultural diversity of the groups involved. It is an important challenge to increase reflection in academia and the health services in order to provide appropriate tools for promoting culturally sensitivity in public politics. In this effort, anthropological knowledge represents an exceptional means for stimulating the interdisciplinary and intercultural collaboration necessary for effective health promotion, as this subject requires.

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