

The dimension of food insecurity

In a time where the whole world gathers around the problem of feeding six billion people, the food insecurity theme becomes central, exceeding the limits of academic debate and reaching the great media. Of unquestionable relevance, this theme has been receiving contributions from different approaches and occupies, to an ever-growing extent, the scenario of public policies. The growing attention devoted to the theme in Brazil is very positive as it resulted in the inclusion of a module to investigate food security in surveys done by Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE)¹ and in an increased supply of funds for researches on the theme - consequently - in more scientific production in this area.

This special issue was planned with the objective of promoting the debate among different segments that deal with food insecurity and, this way, contributing to the advance and improvement of research in this area. It presents the results of some researches funded by the *Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome* (MDS), by the call for proposals CT-Agribusiness-2003, managed by the *Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* (CNPq). Projects funded by other institutions, such as the Pan-American Health Organization, the Ministry of Health and the State of São Paulo Research Foundation were also included.

This collection of writings intends to be a document of support for the discussion of policies and programs developed around the food insecurity issue; it consists of twelve articles that discuss food insecurity from many viewpoints.

Until the 70's, people believed that insufficient food production was the main determinant of hunger in the world. In the 80's, it became evident that the problem was not scarcity but unequal distribution of food. In this context, the notion of food security began to be created and was initially based on the idea of access to food. In the last two decades, other associated aspects were aggregated into the notion of food security, such as, for example, the notion of diet quality, respect for the eating habits of different cultural groups and the idea of safe food. The incorporation of equality and environmental sustainability concepts was also important. Furthermore, the need to provide other basic needs in order to achieve food security to the fullest was taken into account, such as health, education and a home to live in.

Thus, the concept of food security defined in the Second National Conference of Food and Nutritional Security, in 2004, incorporates all these aspects and was defined as "realizing that everyone has the right to have regular and permanent access to quality foods, in enough quantities, without compromising access to other essential needs and based on food practices that promote health, that respect cultural diversity and that are environmentally, economically and socially sustainable"².

Food insecurity has been a recurring theme in the national and international literature in the areas of health, nutrition and social sciences, generally focusing on its occurrence in different population groups, its repercussions and determinants. Now there is an urgent search for indicators of the food

(in)security situation, indicators that allow the progress of the situation and interventions to be traced and that can be compared as a function of time and region.

Guided by this theme, Pérez-Escamilla and Segall-Corrêa present five alternatives to measure food insecurity, four of them based on the repercussions of food consumption or on the nutritional status, and one direct measurement "based on the experience of food insecurity". Meanwhile, Melgar-Quinonez and Hackett reviewed the experiences that happen in distinct scenarios in the development and validation of instruments that measure food insecurity based on the North-American model.

In Brazil, this instrument, which became the Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale (EBIA) resulted in the adaptation and validation of a questionnaire used in the United States and was applied in a population-based study of national representation - the National Household Sample Survey, in 2004³. The Brazilian experience was positive in mapping and identifying vulnerable groups and will certainly be very valuable to assess the policies and programs recently proposed, such as *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger), a broad strategy of social inclusion, and the program *Bolsa Família* (Family Stipend) which provides financial aid to poor families. Thus, one of the articles of this issue authored by Segall-Corrêa et al. analyzes food security in Brazil under the light of financial aid programs, indicating the positive effects of these programs on food security.

Three different experiences deal with building methodologies that dimension the food security situation. Yuyama et al., interested in constructing comparable methods that measure food insecurity and meet the particularities of specific population groups, applied the Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale to native South-American groups living in the Amazon region and found that these populations find it hard to understand some traditionally urban concepts.

The experience of Panelli-Martins et al. also concentrates on detailing the methodology to dimension the situation of food security. By gathering indicators that are considered capable of expressing the situation of a small, poor town in the State of Bahia, a proposal to monitor the situation of food insecurity in towns with these characteristics was developed. The authors report that there are no local assessment practices and emphasize that the process and knowledge of the proposed method, although pending validation, is to be appropriated by local administrations.

Silva et al. explore the determination of food insecurity in *quilombola* communities at risk of deep structural changes brought about by the construction of a highway. This is a common scenario in Brazil today, where infrastructure works such as highways and hydroelectric power plants, or deforestation of vast areas in order to raise livestock or crops affect traditional population groups. Participatory socio-anthropological methods were employed and it became evident that collective participation is also an important aspect to achieve food security.

The situation of food insecurity of population groups living in the suburb of a metropolitan region described by Salles-Costa et al. and that of 14 municipalities in the State of Paraíba, studied by Vianna and Segall-Corrêa, was investigated by applying the EBIA. In these distinct environments there are high prevalences of food insecurity, affecting more than 50% of the families, and income was the main determinant of this condition.

The issue of food insecurity in the family core and cultural and socioeconomic aspects involved in the feeding process are seen in different scenarios. Murrieta et al. compare the dynamics of food consumption in two Amazon ecosystems, showing how social, economic and environmental conditions are interrelated in modulating eating conditions and habits. Panigassi et al. analyze the daily consumption of 14 food groups, according to the family's food insecurity status, and conclude that food-insecure

families have monotonous diets, consisting basically of high-energy-density foods. Another study, by Menasche et al., of rural families whose production was mostly for self-consumption, used the theoretical-analytical resources of nutrition anthropology. They concluded that production practices for self-consumption are associated with food security and social reproduction.

All these reports summarize the most preeminent issues associated with food insecurity, where it becomes evident that public action is essential. However, collective participation can make a difference. Such realization is corroborated by Rose who summarized many international intervention experiences on food security and emphasized that participatory community actions help improve intervention strategies and guarantee respect for human rights.

As emphasized earlier, this issue can be considered an incentive to the publication of results of national researches in a high-level journal, such as the *Nutrition Journal*. However, important gaps in the knowledge of the phenomena involved in the issue of food security require new studies. One of them is the apparent paradox of poverty and food insecurity found together with high prevalences of obesity and metabolic disorders. This challenge involves many sectors of society and must be treated not only by epidemiology or pathophysiology and nutritional biochemistry but also by dietetics, anthropology, sociology and public policies that must equalize the issue of how to promote food security in a context of healthy eating, avoiding unbalanced consumption and excess weight.

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As editors of this issue, we could not miss the opportunity to show our acknowledgment to the editors of the *Journal of Nutrition*, who, with professionalism, have been strengthening this journal in the Brazilian editorial scenario. Finally, our thanks to the referees who collaborated in the discerning selection of the articles included in this issue, resulting in a selection of high scientific level.

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