Food access strategies implemented in Venezuela by a group of Venezuelans living in Cuiabá, Brazil

Estrategias de acceso a los alimentos implementadas en Venezuela por un grupo de venezolanos que viven en Cuiabá, Brasil

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Abstract

The socio-political crisis in Venezuela has generated various problems, such as food insecurity, shortages of basic products and medicines, increased unemployment and massive migration to other countries in the region. To identify the strategies for access to food experienced by Venezuelan immigrants residing in Cuiabá-MT, Brazil. This research was conducted under the qualitative approach, this approach allowed us to investigate how was the impact regarding the access and consumption of food in Venezuela lived by Venezuelan immigrants residing in Cuiabá - Brazil, from the documentation, description and understanding of the experiences they face; 13 participants were included, the data collection technique used were individual interviews. Among the main findings was that most of the interviewees did not feel comfortable with the food they had in Venezuela, given the poor conditions of access and availability of food, many of them expressed perceptions of hunger and anguish due to the lack of food and these situations led them to seek better living conditions. The socio-political crisis in Venezuela that produced the lack of availability and access to food, generated strategies to ensure a permanent food supply within households where often these strategies are not in line with a healthy and adequate diet.

Keywords: Food availability; Venezuelans; Access to food; Food insecurity.

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Resumen

La crisis sociopolítica de Venezuela ha generado diversos problemas como la inseguridad alimentaria, la escasez de productos básicos y medicinas, el aumento del desempleo y la migración masiva hacia otros países de la región. Este estudio tuvo por objetivo identificar las estrategias de acceso a los alimentos vividas en Venezuela por los inmigrantes venezolanos que residen en Cuiabá, en Mato Grosso, Brasil. Esta investigación se realizó bajo el enfoque cualitativo para indagar cómo fue el impacto respecto al acceso y consumo de alimentos en Venezuela vivido por los inmigrantes venezolanos desde la documentación, descripción y comprensión de las experiencias que ellos enfrentan. Se incluyeron 13 participantes, la técnica de recolección de datos que se utilizó fueron las entrevistas individuales. Entre los principales hallazgos encontrados se evidenció que la mayoría de los entrevistados no se sentía a gusto con la alimentación que tenía en Venezuela, dadas las pocas condiciones de acceso y disponibilidad de alimentos, muchos de estos manifestaron percepciones de hambre y angustia por la falta de alimentos, y estas situaciones llevaron a buscar mejores condiciones de vida. La crisis en Venezuela que produjo la poca disponibilidad y acceso a los alimentos les generó estrategias para poder garantizar una alimentación permanente dentro de los hogares donde muchas veces estas estrategias no son acordes a una alimentación saludable y adecuada.

Palabras clave: Disponibilidad de alimentos; venezolanos; Acceso a los alimentos; Inseguridad alimentaria

Introduction

Nearly 2 billion people in the world suffer from food insecurity according to the latest report of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO et al., 2019). The lack of access to food in an adequate quantity and quality puts at risk the nutritional status and health of the people who suffer from it.

Venezuela is no stranger to this situation due to the many problems it has experienced in the last decade such as the financial crisis; shortages of food, commodities and medicines; increased unemployment due to the closure of private companies; and massive migration to other countries in the region. The 2014 energy crisis caused inflation to drastically rise, becoming the second highest in the world, which directly affected the availability of basic foodstuffs. Likewise, the devaluation of the Venezuelan currency caused the people's purchasing power to decrease, unleashing a major crisis. In response, the Venezuelan government created a new currency as a lifeline to inflation called sovereign bolivars which has not provided the expected results (Venezuela..., 2018).

According to Catillo Crasto and Reguant Álvarez (2017), this situation of shortage of commodities has led Venezuelans to pay up to a hundred times the value of basic foodstuffs in the black market, where they resell food at high prices. In addition, the unemployment rate increased considerably between 1998 and 2008 in the country, and the labor precariousness of 61% of workers (Castillo Crasto; Reguant Álvarez, 2017). In this context, food insecurity problems such as access to food, scarcity, hunger, and poor health conditions stand out (Landaeta-Jiménez, 2016).

Therefore, the need for adequate food plays an important role in the decision to improve, to some extent, an individual's access to food. When food needs are not satisfied or there is simply no access to certain basic foods, the individual's biological, cultural, and social needs remain unmet. Thus, they seek ways to reach this well-being, which is both a necessity and a fundamental right. If this right is not guaranteed in the place where one resides,



they may being migrates to another city, region or country to access quality food in an adequate, fair, and satisfying way (Franken; Coutinho; Ramos 2012). This happens in Venezuela for the above-mentioned reasons (Vargas-Machuca et al., 2019).

Based on the above, the objective of this study is to identify the food access strategies experienced by Venezuelan immigrants residing in Cuiabá, in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the field of collective health under the qualitative approach which "studies reality in its natural context, as it happens, trying to make sense or construe the phenomena according to the meanings they have for the people involved" (Gómez; Flores; Jiménez, 1996. p. 32). This approach allowed us to investigate the impact on food access and consumption experienced in Venezuela by Venezuelan immigrants residing in Cuiabá, Brazil, helping us to document, describe and understand the experiences they face.

Field work

This study was conducted in the municipality of Cuiabá, capital of the state of Mato Grosso, located in the Midwest of Brazil, in 2019. The technique used for selecting participants was the snowball or chain technique, which consists of the first respondent referring another possible participant and so on (Martínez-Salgado, 2012). The first respondent was a doctoral student who indicated two others who were taking undergraduate courses. They informed us of other subjects, one of them being external to the academic environment. Thus, we got a heterogeneous group in relation to insertion or not into work.

This study considered the following criteria for the selection of the Venezuelan participants: Older than 18 years of age, of both sexes, with different insertions in the labor world; Immigrant living for at least six months in the municipality of Cuiabá; and physical and mental status adequate to answer the interview. The exclusion criteria were: People with communication difficulties, terminally ill, or bedridden.

Field work used individual interviews as data collection technique. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an interview script to guide the conversation; however, other issues not described in the script were also addressed in the interview.

Ethical considerations

This study complied with the ethical principles described in Resolutions 466/2012 and 510/2016, in addition to the fact that informed consent was used to collect information. It was also approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Mato Grosso, with approval number: 3.462.876, of year 2019.

Data analysis

Once the collection, organization and systematization of information was concluded, interviews were transcribed verbatim, which allowed the qualitative data to be coded in order to identify the units of analysis. This procedure was tabulated in an Excel matrix in which each of the units described were integrated to review the information following the whole process of description, interpretation, and contrast with the theory, according to what was suggested in the analysis process (Minayo, 2007).

Results

Social, demographic, and economic characteristics of participants

The study population consisted of 13 participants (six male and seven female), whose ages ranged between 21 and 51 years. Regarding marital status, seven were single, three were divorced and three were married. As for the number of children, six of them had only one child and the others had no children.

Most of the participants had previously lived in Venezuela with family members, and some were finishing their studies with friends. All of them were employed in different trades according to their level of education and financially contributed to the household. Although most of their family members



remain in Venezuela, many of them also began to migrate to other countries.

Two subgroups emerged among the participants: one is that of professionals who had stable jobs in Venezuela, but whose monthly salary did not guarantee access to the basic conditions necessary to live. This subgroup migrated to Brazil through study scholarships, which was represented by six participants who are currently studying in a graduate program (three in a Master's program and three in a Doctoral program). The other subgroup was made up of seven participants who had a lower educational level; most were also employed, but earned lower salaries and, like the first subgroup, their salary was not enough to cover basic needs.

The particularity of this last subgroup is that these participants migrated to seek better working conditions in Brazil. Currently three of these seven participants are engaged in informal activities, hold no service contract, and only earn money depending on the number of activities they perform, such as teaching English, manicure and pedicure, or barbering; in addition, two participants sell fast food, one works in the food industry and one participant was unemployed.

The educational level of the 13 participants varies: nine of them are professionals in different areas, three are technicians, and one participant only finished high school.

Food access and consumption strategies in Venezuela

Between the 1980s and early 2000s, Venezuela was one of the countries in the Americas with notoriously low rates of violence, unemployment, and poverty, thanks to its economic and political stability linked to the economic growth generated by oil (Briceño-León, 2017). This economic stability allowed Venezuelans to have a good quality of life in which having access to and consuming food adequately in quality and quantity was not a problem.

When I lived there, I had breakfast, then in the middle of the morning a 'snack' some fruit or something, then lunch, in the middle of the afternoon a coffee, sweet bread and dinner. We always had dinner at my house, I am talking about before the socialist declaration, to then make the connection of what eating means now with the socialist declaration. When food shortage started, some things were missing, other things were very expensive and could no longer be bought. (Participant 3).

Because of serious political, social, and economic crisis they experienced in their country of origin, since 2006, many Venezuelans began to emigrate to other countries, especially to those that offer more stable employment. This happened at an important political moment for Venezuela, as *Chavismo* won the elections and continued with the same policies. Sometime later, when the news of the crisis became worldwide, the disproportionate migration of Venezuelans began especially to the countries of Colombia and Chile.

Among the participants' accounts, it was found that food situation was one of the decisive reasons for their decision to emigrate to another country. They agreed that the situation in Venezuela worsened as time went by. Every day the situation at the household level became more unsustainable; since 2005, there were sporadic shortages of products. As the years went by, this situation became commonplace, so getting food was a truly difficult task. "The situation has worsened every day. I talk to my mom and she never complains, but I talk to my niece and she tells me that she goes to buy something and she can't buy it, or that there isn't any or it is too expensive, that she has to buy what she can or something else." (Participant 6).

In Venezuela there are currently two realities: the one of people who have money and the other of those who do not. In the case of the former, although they have money they cannot buy food, since it is not available in the market. In the case of the latter, they do not have the resources to buy it, since existing foodstuffs are very expensive. Both situations generated a change in the diet, since "you eat what you can and not what you want".

I used to eat a lot of carbohydrates, especially rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There were three income generators in the house, since my mom does



not work but she receives her pension. The hardest to get are chicken and meat, and the easiest and cheapest are flour, bread, and rice. (Participant 2)

Different means of accessing food emerged such as that known and referred to by the participants as "black market", where people who can get the food resell it at very high prices compelling consumers to pay an exaggerated cost for food they do not have, but still need. "Today the situation is worse than when I came, virtually nothing is available and people are still looking to see what they can buy. The Venezuelan people's diet has changed a lot." (Participant 1)

As already mentioned, two subgroups emerged within the group of participants: the group of professionals who had stable jobs in Venezuela, but whose monthly salary did not guarantee them access to food; and the group of people with a lower educational level, also mostly employed, but with lower salaries than the first group and not enough to afford with their food needs. Although these subgroups had money, and the professionals a little more than those living only on minimum wage, the money at the household level was not enough.

I lived decently on my salary until a year and a half ago, before I came here. My salary was enough to buy food and pay for everything I had to pay for. But at the end of 2017 the situation was critical, food was very expensive, our salary was not enough. Everything was very expensive. So, the first thing one did was to stop buying things. (Participant 5)

Another problem faced by these individuals was the quality of the food, which had been drastically reduced. If they used to consume first-quality meat, the economic crisis forced them to consume third-quality meat, that which used to be wasted such as chicken skin, legs, and fat, because meat has an excessively high cost, while chicken giblets are much cheaper and also contain protein. However, the consumption of this type of food has certain repercussions for nutritional status, since these contain large amounts of saturated fatty acids and cholesterol that increase their serum levels and lead to health problems (López-Romero et al., 2019).

Well, the sale and purchase of chicken skin, liver, meat waste increased. So, what once was not even thought to be sold, now is what people buy; there is more chicken wings, legs, what used to be thrown away, now people eat them. Another thing that increased a lot was the purchase of ricotta cheese, hard cheese, which are the cheapest. Everything that people hardly ever consumed before, because it was cheaper, now it is consumed more - or it was not sold, because before one went to a supermarket and saw beef feet. Not now, now the traders gain from it. (Participant 5)

Under this general situation, participants' food consumption underwent some changes. Most of them consumed the daily three meals, although with certain restrictions in consumption. For example: they decreased the portion of food, adjusted preparations, stopped consuming certain foods, such as meat, chicken, and cheese because of their high cost, and consumed more rice and vegetables. One participant even reported to have become a vegetarian because he did not have access to animal protein, that this choice was not by taste, but by necessity. These restrictions somehow ensured that food was guaranteed for all members of the household. However, they reported not having breakfast several days or only having a coffee in order to have more economic resources available for the purchase and consumption of other foodstuffs. In this regard, one participant said:

Well, thank God I did not stop eating, I could eat three times a day, but I had to reduce what I ate. If you used to eat two sandwiches, you now have to eat only one because you need the other one to eat at night. It is a matter that is totally restrictive. I mean, you have to restrict what you're eating. One time we ate so little at dinner, my son came out and said to me: 'Is there nothing else?' And I said: 'No.' That's when you realize the situation is serious. (Participant 5)

Other extreme situations reported by some of the participants are the consumption of food in a state of decomposition, in those cases of people



for whom this is the only way to feed themselves, or those accounts of people taking food out of the garbage in order to have something to eat.

Days before coming here I was very surprised, I saw many people in my city taking food out of the garbage, they were normal people, I am not talking about homeless people, people that could have been me; that happens because when people are hungry they simply look for something to eat. (Participant 4)

The lack of food has significant impact on households, a fact that worries participants, as they have noticed a decrease in the body weight of their family members. As one participant said: "We even ate yucca and whey all day one day, because there was nothing else." (Participant 8). He no longer consumes the same amount of food he used to eat. As one of the participants noted, "it is difficult to get [food], there is an evident decrease in weight because they are not consuming the same food they used to eat" (Participant 1). Other participants said the following:

It has gotten worse and worse. When they send me pictures of my family I see them getting thinner and thinner. I know it's because of that, because of the food. Imagine a carton of eggs costs 20 thousand Bolivarianos Sovereign, and the salary is 18 thousand. So, tell me, how do people eat? What I do is send money from here so that at least my mother has some food, and she can supplement with her pension, and with what they organize to eat at home. (Participant 5)

I have definitely seen many friends, neighbors, teachers who used to have a strong body, they were big, they looked imposing. For some time now, you see them weaker, skinnier, as if they were sick. (Participant 6)

Strategies to access food have led Venezuelans to implement creative actions. These are socialized among them and replicated later to ensure that all household members can be fed according to their needs and tastes. These actions are described by the participants below.

The purchase of food at low cost became one of the most popular options, since buying food that is in season allows having more food stored at the homes and, thus, guaranteeing a more varied diet or at least to have something to eat. This is how one can have access to kinds of food little consumed at present such as fruits, milk and sometimes meat as mentioned below:

For example, people go to popular markets. I used to shop at a place where on Wednesdays the new stuff came in. They sold cheaper what they had left, which was second, third or fourth quality. So, I went that day because I could buy a little more, those were not the best quality fruits and vegetables. (Participant 5)

Collective food preparation was another strategy used by the population, that is, preparing food in a communal way helps to eat in greater quantity. This strategy consists of gathering family or friends and each one brings the food available at home. Then among all the participants, the collective preparation of lunch or dinner is done to have a varied diet.

For example, make a broth for the whole family and add a little protein if available, a rib or a piece of meat and with that put the potato or other things. Everybody eats that. To make it yield a little bit, everyone collaborates here and there to look for food. That's what other people have told me, even neighbors. They don't necessarily have to be family. Let's say, if one has rice and the other [also], we don't see what we can do to organize at least one, two or three days a week. (Participant 4)

The exchange or bartering of food is used by Venezuelans to be able to get the food they miss. This strategy consists of exchanging a kind of food that is in greater quantity in the home for another that is not needed. For example, exchange a pound of rice for a pound of sugar. This ensures the consumption of more food and contributes



to a slightly more varied diet. Such exchange of products is announced and carried out through social networks:

I would exchange rice for milk, for example 500 grams of rice for 500 grams of milk, that was a strategy we implemented. We did not exchange in money, but what do you exchange with me. Sometimes we exchanged bread flour for soap or rice for soap because the soap runs out and you have to do hygiene. When I came here we were doing that. We used to publish it on the Internet: what do you have, what do I have. It was published on Facebook. (Participant 4)

More extreme strategies reported by participants that are carried out by friends or some of their family members is sleeping late and getting up late. In this way, one or more of the main meals are skipped in order to consume the available food over a longer period. This strategy has been used by adults and children within households. It is reflected in the following testimonies:

The most extreme [measure] that people do is to sleep late and get up late, because when you sleep you don't get hungry, so people get up at about 11 o'clock in the day without hunger and you hold out as long as you can until four, five in the afternoon, and you only eat one meal a day. Then you return to bed. This is what people do when they have nothing to eat, when they go to bed late and sleep late, and in this way with only one meal a day they feel full. (Participant 7)

Other strategies are the aids implemented by the Venezuelan government to provide adequate food. It consists of delivering a food box called CLAP which are the Local Supply and Production Committees, in charge of food distribution promoted by the Venezuelan government in which the communities supply and distribute priority foods by delivering a box of products at every house. However, this action does not occur on a regular basis, as this program is designed to deliver a box per family every 2 months,

but according to the participants many of these only receive it once a year.

Even the government developed a type of program to provide food at low cost, initially for the popular classes, but it was extended to the entire population, but it is not enough. This program used to give a box supposedly every 15 days, boxes that had about four kilos of rice, three kilos of pasta, three or four kilos of beans. The problem is that it is not enough to cover the entire population. For example, the box arrived every 15 days to the sector where I lived, which is a popular sector. The box arrived every 6 months and it only lasts 15 days. (Participant 1)

Discussion

Regarding food access strategies, some studies identified similar strategies employed by the Venezuelans. A study conducted in Medellín (Colombia) in 2013 whose objective was to identify food access strategies implemented by low-income households presented results similar to those found in our study. In other words, strategies such as food preparation in collectives or assistance from family and friends, as well as different types of governmental aid. It is worth mentioning some significant differences between the population studied in Medellín and that of our study. On the one hand, the Medellín study considered very low-income families with a low level of education. The population of Venezuelans considered by our study reflects a group of people with higher educational level, with employment and better living conditions than the Medellín population (Arboleda; Ochoa, 2013).

Sleeping without eating anything was one of the most extreme strategies reported by the participants, since in this way one or several meals are skipped and the food available is intended to last for more days. A study conducted in Brazil mentions the same strategy. According to the study conducted in 2019 in the community of Japeri, in Baixada Fluminense, mothers report the efforts and sacrifices involved in raising children in a context of poverty, unemployment and violence.



This study contains accounts of similar situations experienced by the participants of our study. One of them states: "I recall the days without food at my parents' home. My mother sent us to bet to make the hunger pass, because hunger gives pain. This lasted until I grew up. When I was 14 I went living with my grand, because there was no food at my mom's house" (Lobato, 2019).

These situations disclose the different states of hunger experienced in different contexts, which are worsened in situations of extreme poverty and require the design of social protection policies. The hunger situation directly influences nutritional strategies and social dynamics within families (Arboleda; Ochoa, 2013). These strategies vary according to the specific situation experienced by Venezuelans, even though some have better conditions than others.

However, the condition of poverty is currently associated to food insecurity that affects the most vulnerable sectors of the population, including immigrants. To the extent that the State does not provide the necessary guarantees to enforce the right to food, the difficulty of coping with hunger is worsened. The more economic income of families decreases, the greater the difficulty of acquiring the necessary food. Income poverty makes it possible to analyze one of the dimensions of household food security. That is, from the possibility of access to a set of food that meets food and nutritional needs, this means that a household that does not have access to food lives in conditions of extreme poverty (Candela, 2016).

This scenario only confirms that migration has become a way out, at least temporarily, of this deep crisis. Effectively, if the hunger situation becomes more generalized and acute, the pressure on Venezuelan citizens forces them to leave the country in search of better living conditions. The economic situation places Venezuela as one of the countries with the highest inflation rates in the region and in the world. (Castillo Crasto; Reguant Álvarez, 2017).

For those who remain in Venezuela, the lines to get food and overcome hunger are endless, and many times economic resources are not enough. They are aware that without the support of their relatives abroad who send money on a weekly or monthly basis,

the household situation would be unsustainable. Queuing outside supermarkets and grocery stores to see what products are sold at fair prices is a daily or weekly journey. Often nothing arrives and one returns home empty-handed, despite the extra money they receive through remittances (Bermúdez et al., 2018). Purchasing power is decreasing as time goes by and, despite this, there are thousands of Venezuelans who get up every day, some sleep around the markets, in the hope of acquiring some food or product of the basic basket.

Consequently, and in view of the silence and complicity of the government, shortage has intensified. Illegal incursions to farms by illegal armed groups were also denounced, confirming that there is no security for producers in the country and the risk of an increase in the hunger emergency is imminent if pertinent actions are not taken. In this scenario in which a totalitarian government that subjugates the productive apparatus and violates the right to food with its state policies, one can understand why Venezuelan households have devised several strategies to access food and fight hunger (Bermúdez et al., 2018).

Therefore, for many of the participants, putting certain strategies back into practice is not new. These strategies include going to sleep without eating or consuming the basics in order to save money (generated by work or as savings from scholarships in the case of scholarship fellows) that is then sent to family members. Abroad, the concern of Venezuelan immigrants leaves a bitter feeling of being far from their country and perceiving the hardship situation their families are going through.

Moreover, thinking about social protection policies that guarantee the right to food and take Venezuela out of the worrying situation of food insecurity and hunger will require the intervention of international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, which has been setting specific objectives aimed at stimulating greater attention to agricultural production by combining national, bilateral, multilateral and nongovernmental efforts (FAO, 2019).

The humanitarian emergency experienced in Venezuela requires even greater efforts to demand



and ensure full compliance with the right to food, and promote through all mechanisms of dialogue and action the need for national and international solidarity in the fight against hunger, malnutrition and poverty. The experience of going hungry, as voiced out by the participants of our study, demands urgent attention in face of a serious violation of fundamental human rights that puts the lives of millions of Venezuelan families at risk.

Conclusions

There is a generalized feeling among participants that the shortage of food and the high cost of these make the food be not varied, balanced, adequate and of quality. This leads many of them and their families to reduce food consumption, skip main meals, go to bed and get up late as strategies to ensure permanent food supply at the households.

The situations and paths followed by the Venezuelan immigrants to get to Brazil are a reflection of the current crisis in Venezuela, and the experiences shared about food, the strategies implemented in the different homes of the respondents to have access to food according to cultural, social and biological needs, are the very result of this crisis that hit not only the neediest, but also the working middle class.

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Authors' Contribution

Velasquez Vargas contributed to the research design, data collection, analysis, discussion, writing and revision. Gugelmin contributed to the research design, data analysis, discussion, and revision.

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