

Food and nutritional security and public health

Food and Nutritional Security has become an increasingly important area of public policy in Brazil. In the tumultuous process of constructing national values and practices, it has come to have a direct impact on the political and institutional make-up of various sectors of government and society. Until the 1990s, the main forms of food security were thought to relate to problems of access to food, supply shortages, hunger and the quality of sanitation services. Subsequently, more emphasis was placed on cultural, environmental, health and nutritional factors. More recently, and as a result of this process, the 2006 Organic Law on Food and Nutritional Security established a national system based, like the National Unified Health System (SUS), on the principles of universal access, social participation, intersectoral collaboration and equity (including social, economic, ethnic and gender-based equity). This system proposes that methods of food production, supply, commercialization and consumption should be socio-economically and environmentally sustainable, respect cultural diversity, be health promoting and guarantee the human right to sufficient food and a healthy diet. Thus it was reasoned that the complex nature of Brazilian morbidity and mortality indicators with respect to food (marked by the co-existence of chronic non-contagious illnesses, obesity, anemia, micro-nutrient deficiencies, hunger, malnutrition, eating disorders and illnesses transmitted by food, among others) could only be tackled in full through activities that would have a combined effect on all of these dimensions (from production to consumption).

Just as with Food and Nutritional Security, the subject of Health went through a process of participatory construction of knowledge and political action which came to recognize good health as a universal right that should also be guaranteed through access to a range of integrated public policies relating to living conditions (food, shelter, education, income, the environment, work, transport, employment, leisure, freedom, land ownership, health services). The paths that were trod in these two domains in the process of developing new thinking about the determinants of health and food, led to the questioning of Brazil's socio-political system itself and the specific development models that had been adopted, and resulted in broader social struggles for democracy, rights, equity, justice and ethics. Thus, the social and political ideas behind these two themes shared common principles that made them potential strategic partners in their search for integrated and sustainable development processes. In this way, a recognition of the multiple intersects between Food and Nutritional Security and Health and the coming together of people working on these two themes, can contribute to both the reformulation of healthcare models (with the aim of providing integrated care) and the strengthening of intersectoral cooperation. One hopes that the guarantee of these rights will become an increasingly important element in the decision making process of different fields of public policy.

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