

The future at the kitchen table: COVID-19 and the food supply

O amanhã vai à mesa: abastecimento alimentar e COVID-19

El futuro está sobre la mesa: COVID-19 y el suministro de alimentos

Olívio José da Silva Filho¹
Newton Narciso Gomes Júnior¹

doi: 10.1590/0102-311X00095220

Brazil is experiencing a delicate situation, with a crisis in capital reproduction and a health crisis with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The intersection of these two crises and the need for social isolation create uncertainties about the possibility of meeting basic human necessities due to the reduction in the population's earnings and the resulting drop in consumption and the exhaustion of families' capacity for indebtedness. The most immediate consequence in this scenario is the exacerbation of food insecurity due to income constraints that limit access to food.

The global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 has aggravated preexisting social inequalities, including the threat to the human right to adequate food, an issue excluded from the Brazilian Federal Government's agenda in recent years. The State as guarantor of food and nutritional security has lost relevance on the neoliberal agenda, further undermining the role of the central agricultural supply warehouses and the public food stocks, shattering the Food Purchases Program, and eliminating any and all agrarian reform initiatives. As if the arsenal of antipopular initiatives were not enough, on the first day of the Jair Bolsonaro administration, the National Food and Nutritional Security Council was extinguished summarily, in a clear demonstration of the food issue's irrelevance in the eyes of the Federal Executive Branch.

Access to food depends directly on the regular supply of food products, the availability of income in people's hands, and the prices practiced on the retail market. Food information, habits, and practices add to these three factors, and this arrangement determines which foods, how much food, and when people can buy food.

Since the 1980s, the principal retail food outlet in Brazil is the supermarket. Operating large-scale sales, self-service food shopping in supermarkets has captured most of society's demand for food items, disseminated new consumption patterns, dictated and subverted food and nutritional practices, and organized its own operations to serve any and all social segments, regardless of income or social class. As a result of this domination, the capillary network of small conventional grocery stores, open-air farmers' markets, bakeries, and butcher shops, among others, have either disappeared entirely or become residual¹ in supplying the population. The few traditional outlets that have managed to survive became a form of resistance to the tendency towards the homogenization of services, alongside the emergence of focused forms of farm produce supply and marketing, especially closed food circuits such as the communities that sustain agriculture (CSAs), featuring agroecological or

¹ Universidade de Brasília, Brasília, Brasil.

Correspondence

O. J. Silva Filho
Rua 36 Sul, lote 19,
apto. 1405, Brasília DF
71931-360, Brasil.
olivoson@gmail.com



organic food baskets, and markets based on urban and peripheral urban agriculture and other kinds of direct linkage between farmers and consumers.

In the wake of the undermining of traditional retail food outlets, “food voids” have emerged, urban territories where economically and socially vulnerable populations struggle to survive without access to retail food stores or traditional street markets for their food supply. In these cases, food access is limited to snack bars and convenience stores that specialize in selling mainly unhealthy foods.

The need for social isolation directly affects workers’ income and mobility, especially in urban areas. This situation tends to further weaken what is left of the traditional retail capillarity, contributing to the expansion of food voids and the consequences associated with them, as discussed above.

The current health crisis may thus increase the tendency to reliance on ultra-processed foods in Brazil, to the detriment of socially referenced foods ^{2,3}. The *Brazilian Household Budget Survey* (POF, in Portuguese) of 2017-2018 ⁴, using the NOVA classification ^{5,6}, identified an increase in the proportion of ultra-processed products in total calories from food purchases, from 12.6% in 2002-2003 to 18.4% in the survey’s current edition, while natural or minimally processed foods decreased from 53.3% of the total to 49.5%. These data are consistent with a recently published study ⁷ showing that ultra-processed foods are becoming increasingly cheaper and are expected to be the cost-equivalent of natural or minimally processed foods by 2026. According to the forecast, by 2030 these pseudo-foods will cost BRL 4.34 per kilogram (USD 0.72), or BRL 0.90 (USD 0.15) less than natural or minimally processed foods.

From the second half of March to the first two weeks of April 2020, during the intensification of social isolation, the pandemic’s effect on food prices in Brazil were already evident. According to the expanded version-15 of the National Consumer Price Index – (IPCA-15, in Portuguese) (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. <https://sidra.ibge.gov.br/home/ipca15>, accessed on 01/May/2020), during the same period the country’s overall inflation rate was negative (-0.01%), while household food inflation was +3.14%. As for the sets of foods analyzed by the IPCA-15, the food groups whose prices increased more than the overall household food inflation rate featured potatoes, yams, cassava, and legumes with 22.1%, vegetables and greens with 11.89%, fruits with 8.84%, salt and seasonings with 5.51%, milk and dairy products with 3.77%, and grains, cereals, and oilseeds with 3.59%. During the same period, according to the IPCA-15, natural and minimally processed foods increased more than the average rate for household foods and compared to other food groups in the NOVA classification, while ultra-processed foods showed lower inflation than the average inflation for household foods as a whole.

The Brazilian food supply system has still not shown signs of widespread shortage of produce, but the asymmetry between the population’s earnings and the prevailing food prices signal a situation of food insecurity, which will not result from food shortages per se, but of food-as-merchandise. This asymmetry may create a tendency towards the development of inadequate eating habits, and ultra-processed foods may occupy more space on people’s kitchen tables if their earnings are sufficient to survive and consume, by associating such foods with the notion of comfort and pleasure as a source of relief from the pandemic’s effects.

COVID-19 has underscored the cruelty of the government’s unwillingness to guarantee basic human rights and needs in recent years and reinforced the inefficiency of neoliberal policies for dealing with the pandemic, contributing to unhealthy eating habits and food insecurity. In the midst of the pandemic, the Federal Government’s actions have failed to deal adequately with the challenges faced by the more vulnerable Brazilian population. An example is the Emergency Aid package ⁸, the amount of which fails to meet the recipients’ basic needs in housing, hygiene, and food. Importantly, the way the Emergency Aid has been operationalized has excluded part of the population, which lacks access to the means for enrolling or has difficulty enrolling. Other factors that have been reported are the difficulty women heads-of-families have in receiving two quotas, the delay in processing the registered information, difficulty enrolling persons with irregularities in the Taxpayer Registry of Physical Persons (CPF, in Portuguese), and physical crowding in banks with waiting lines for receiving the benefit. Other measures that aggravate this lack of commitment to the maintenance of life were the approval of *Executive Order n. 927* ⁹ and the attempt to revive and approve *Executive Order n. 905* ¹⁰, which are an assault on labor rights. In addition, *Executive Order n. 957* ¹¹ is a late response with insufficient funds to extend the purchase of family farm produce through the Food Purchases Program,

thereby compromising the guarantee of farm produce sales and food and nutritional security for beneficiaries who otherwise could already be served by this policy.

In the midst of this weakening of the State's role, and particularly that of the Federal Executive Branch, social movements, unions, universities, political parties, social organizations, and associations have redoubled their solidarity in defense of life, based on actions that serve people's material needs and also awareness-raising of measures to confront the virus and guarantee families' rights. Initiatives include research and production of ventilators, protective masks, and alcohol gel hand sanitizer in universities; campaigns to collect staple foods and personal hygiene items for socially vulnerable families; donation of agroecological foods to families, schools, and institutions from agrarian reform areas; free breakfasts and soup kitchens to serve homeless people; donation of milk, food, cleaning materials, and personal protective equipment (PPE) to hospitals; sale of agroecological produce at discount prices; and stimulus for participation by CSAs and agroecological baskets, just a few examples that are becoming increasingly common in various cities of Brazil.

Solidarity and mutual help are traditional practices in social relations on the periphery of Brazilian cities and among communities of small farmers. They have become essential for mitigating the pandemic's effects. Even though such action does meet all the population's needs, the activities and awareness-raising are consistent with the defense of the human right to adequate food and the need for linkage between civil society and the State at all levels in building public policies and community committees capable of ensuring food and nutritional security, income, health, and health security, both on an emergency basis and permanently.

Crises such as the current pandemic also reveal the exhaustion of neoliberalism and of the current hegemonic model in the Brazilian food system for maintaining life and nutrition, placing in check food-as-merchandise (increasingly expensive, globalized, and ultra-processed). These are structural problems that will only be solved by building a food system that prioritizes the dimensions of food and nutritional sovereignty and security, reinforcing traditional and new forms of food supply and produce marketing and promoting food reeducation in all the dimensions of human nutrition.

Contributors

Both authors contributed to the article's conception, analysis, writing, and revision.

Additional informations

ORCID: Olívio José da Silva Filho (0000-0001-9146-9928); Newton Narciso Gomes Júnior (0000-0002-1455-7729).

References

1. Gomes Junior NN, Pinto HS, Leda LC. Alimento e comida: sistema de abastecimento e consumo alimentar urbano. *Guaju* 2016; 2:61-76.
2. Louzada MLC, Martins APB, Canella DS, Baraldi LG, Levy RB, Claro RM, et al. Alimentos ultraprocessados e perfil nutricional da dieta no Brasil. *Rev Saúde Pública* 2015; 49:38.
3. Organização Pan-Americana da Saúde. Alimentos e bebidas ultraprocessados na América Latina: tendências, efeito na obesidade e implicações para políticas públicas. Brasília: Organização Pan-Americana da Saúde; 2018.

4. Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. Pesquisa de Orçamentos Familiares 2017-2018: avaliação nutricional da disponibilidade domiciliar de alimentos no Brasil. Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística; 2020.
5. Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Lawrence M, Louzada MLC, Machado PP. Ultra-processed foods, diet quality, and health using the NOVA classification system. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; 2019.
6. Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Levy RB, Moubarac JC, Louzada ML, Rauber F, et al. Ultra-processed foods: what they are and how to identify them. *Public Health Nutr* 2019; 22:936-41.
7. Gomes EM, Passos CM, Levy RB, Martins APB, Mais LA, Claro RM. What to expect from the price of healthy and unhealthy foods over time? The case from Brazil. *Public Health Nutr* 2020; 23:579-88.
8. Brasil. Decreto nº 10.316, de 7 de abril de 2020. Regulamenta a Lei nº 13.982, de 2 de abril de 2020, que estabelece medidas excepcionais de proteção social a serem adotadas durante o período de enfrentamento da emergência de saúde pública de importância internacional decorrente do coronavírus (Covid-19). *Diário Oficial da União* 2020; 7 abr.
9. Brasil. Medida Provisória nº 927, de 22 de março de 2020. Dispõe sobre as medidas trabalhistas para enfrentamento do estado de calamidade pública reconhecido pelo Decreto Legislativo nº 6, de 20 de março de 2020, e da emergência de saúde pública de importância internacional decorrente do coronavírus (Covid-19), e dá outras providências. *Diário Oficial da União* 2020; 22 mar.
10. Brasil. Medida Provisória nº 905, de 11 de novembro de 2019. Institui o Contrato de Trabalho Verde e Amarelo, altera a legislação trabalhista, e dá outras providências. *Diário Oficial da União* 2019; 11 nov.
11. Brasil. Medida Provisória nº 957, de 24 de abril de 2020. Abre crédito extraordinário, em favor do Ministério da Cidadania, no valor de R\$500.000.000,00, para fim que especifica. *Diário Oficial da União* 2020; 27 abr.

Submitted on 23/Apr/2020
Final version resubmitted on 07/May/2020
Approved on 11/May/2020