

Speaker's corner

The Argentinean paradox: the case of contradictory child malnutrition epidemics

The media avalanche around child malnutrition is part of the current complex and heterogeneous situation of Argentina. From the nutritional standpoint, Argentina exhibits a kaleidoscopic health profile that is unexplainable from the rational logic. On one side, severe cases of malnourished children are violently exposed through the media as unexpected breaking news. Media has been functional to the system contributing to install health problems into the public debate based on a corporate interest and a biased approach. Our recent history offers a set of demonstrative examples (the case of meningitis and anthrax pseudoepidemics, 1993 and 2001, respectively). In the same way, infant mortality becomes a matter of debate during periods of social tension and pre-electoral campaigns. From the nutritional point of view, Argentina shows a contradictory picture characterised by the coexistence of malnutrition and excess food production. Argentina ranks fifth among food exporting countries in the world. However, the prevalence of chronic malnutrition (expressed as stunting prevalence) varies according to the geographical regions with the highest prevalence in the north eastern and western provinces as a clear expression of social inequity. Obesity is becoming a public health problem and the new face of poverty affecting families of large periurban settlements exposed to poor quality diets and low physical activity. Finally, iron deficiency anaemia is highly prevalent in the whole country (range 30%–60%) affecting both children and women of reproductive age despite the availability of iron

enriched foods (meat). The response from the state to population nutritional problems has been anachronistic, providing food for more than 50 years with a paternalistic and client oriented approach that helped to perpetuate poverty, dependency, and the sustainability of the traditional political power. Furthermore, Argentina is "feeding" its external debt through the acquisition of food and other goods through credits provided by multilateral financial organisms. It seems that food supply in itself, is not the key issue that solves the Argentinean tragedy. Local and empowered actors must develop other initiatives. Time of solutions: this historical crises emerges as a unique opportunity to trigger a new social response oriented to formulate social and food policies. These responses should include: the renewal of the traditional political class, the improvement of technical skills among policy makers to establish priorities, assuring programme continuity and impact evaluation; the strengthening of the role of the state (reinforcing education policies); the building of a new federalism; the reorientation of wealth distribution, and the construction of a more equitable and transparent society.

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