



Letter

Understanding children's undernutrition in Venezuela

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Nutrition is one of the most important requisites for achieving good health. Despite efforts made in the past decades, globally more than 144 million children under five suffer from stunted growth, clinical wasting, obesity and micronutrient deficiencies [1]. Astonishingly, undernutrition, a consequence of deprivation and poverty, is becoming highly prevalent in what used to be a wealthy country: Venezuela.

Since my medical school graduation in Venezuela in 1990, I always had an interest in nutrition and its social determinants. I was sent to very low-income urban areas in Caracas, the capital city, to work as a primary care physician. I remember seeing many diseases related to nutrition; at the time, the prevalence of obesity was increasing. After 30 years as a physician, and 20 working in the field of nutrition, I have witnessed changes that were not necessarily for the best in my country.

Despite having extraordinary resources, mismanagement of health policies, corruption and abuse of power over the last two decades have had a toll on people's wellbeing. In particular, children under five and of school age have been impacted by high food insecurity present in more than 80% of Venezuelan households [2]. In a country where inflation is the highest in the world and minimum wage is a few dollars per month [3], it is no surprise that families struggle to feed their children. In 2017, a study by Bengoa Foundation for Food and Nutrition and Andres Bello Catholic University, reported that 33% of children between 0 and 2 years old were already stunted [4], and recent surveillance reports from Caritas Venezuela show that acute global malnutrition in children under five has increased by 73% during the current COVID-19 pandemic [5]. This alarming situation shows a high vulnerability during the early life years in Venezuelan children, which constitutes one of the critical periods of growth, as many studies have shown that early life disadvantages and impairments of the nutrition status are a risk factor of future diseases.

Challenging as this situation is, the work of NGOs, academia and the private sector shows a resilience that shines within the shadows. Training for physicians, paediatricians, dietitians, watchdog organizations and human right activist groups continue to be dynamic and vigilant providing information to understand the real situation of Venezuelan children and implement the best possible actions such as health promotion, nutrition education, food distribution through soup kitchens and breastfeeding reinforcement in underserved communities.

Children are the future of a country and should be the priority on any action that procures sustainable progress and development to society. The World Food Program's food security assessment on Venezuela 2020, recognized that food security is a countrywide concern, and that nearly one household out of five has an unacceptable level of food consumption. As painful as the process was, we have now recognized and been able to make a diagnosis on the nutritional state of Venezuelan children, one of the most encouraging achievements in the past five years. Moving forward, there is still a need to galvanize widespread understanding and acceptance of the challenges we face if we are to successfully implement public problem solving. We expect the political good will of the government to take action for all, regardless of political visions, ideology or resentments. Children deserve our best efforts, especially as they represent Venezuela's potential and future.

Contributors

The author confirms sole responsibility for the conception and preparation of this invited letter

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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