

You are what you eat: Malnutrition & its determinants in Ecuador

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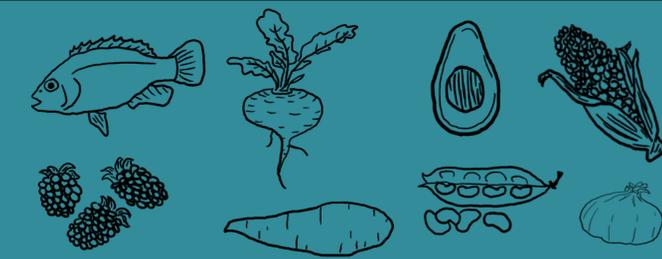
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YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT: MALNUTRITION & ITS DETERMINANTS IN ECUADOR

Lindsay Stone
Advised by Professor Michalczyk



INTRODUCTION



“
the deleterious
nutritional situation
of Ecuador is a source
of great concern.
- THE WORLD BANK -

Why do we eat the foods that we do? This question is one that is not often considered by individuals as they go about their daily lives, but can have large implications on public health - for, there is a strong, physiological connection between food consumption and one's health and wellbeing. Accordingly, when reflecting upon the health of a nation it is often important to consider its nutritional status.

Though the actual foods that an individual consumes fundamentally dictates his or her physiological health, how and what one eats (i.e., according to their food habits) can also lend themselves to one's wellbeing. As such, when looking at a region it can be beneficial to examine both its people's food behaviors and the nutritional conditions as a measure of the community's health.

Ultimately, many determinants can contribute to how and why an individual eats certain foods, as can be seen in Ecuador. In this Latin American country, for instance, historical, socioeconomic, cultural, behavioral, socioeconomic, and environmental factors (among others) can be seen to influence the different diets - and by extension, the nutritional statuses - of different ethnic, regional, cultural, and geographic populations. Though common across Ecuador, discrepancies among these groups are particularly noticeable in the country's highland region, the Sierra.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How has the Ecuadorian diet been shaped according to different geographic, socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural factors?
- How have different subcuisines lent themselves to varying forms of malnutrition - i.e., stunting (chronic malnutrition), micronutrient deficiency, and obesity?
- Specifically, what are nutritional conditions in the Sierra region, where malnutrition is noticeably high?
- How do the nutritional conditions in the Sierra affect those living in rural and indigenous communities?

THE SHAPING OF THE ECUADORIAN DIET

Regional and ethnic subcuisines of the Ecuadorian diet are determined by:

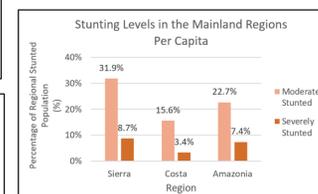
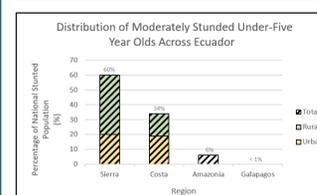
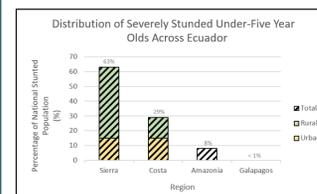
- Ecuador's history of colonization, repression, and class-stratification
- Tension between traditional & modern foods (viz. their semiotic significations)
- Topographic & geographic limitations (e.g., soil quality, altitude, etc.)
- Adherence to the hierarchical ideals of food prestige
- Adoption of Western diets; cultural homogenization

Dietary discrepancies among different communities arise from variations in:

- Socioeconomic opportunity
- Energy needs (i.e., due to different lifestyles and occupations)
- Desire for cultural assimilation
- Regional & geographic location; urban vs. rural settings; environmental conditions
- Ethnicity &/or cultural affiliation (i.e., indigenous vs. non-indigenous)



NATIONAL PATTERNS OF MALNUTRITION



The highest concentration of stunting (chronic malnutrition) exists in the Sierra, where the populace experiences:

- Higher levels of stunting (and malnutrition) both relative to the country's total population and per capita
- Larger discrepancies between rural and urban nutritional conditions than the other mainland regions

MALNUTRITION IN THE ECUADORIAN SIERRA

The Sierra's high altitude, large rural populace, and significant number of indigenous peoples lend themselves to this highland region's high levels and often chronic forms of malnutrition:

- Increased altitude is positively correlated with severity of malnutrition
- While urban-urban differences in nutritional conditions can be observed in the Sierra, urban-rural discrepancies are most significant
 - Rural and/or indigenous diets are notably high in carbohydrates (e.g., potatoes and tubers) and low in protein - this unbalanced diet is linked to the prevalence of stunting
 - Rural areas have higher levels of poverty, limited access to nutrition education, healthcare facilities, etc.
- Historical and current exploitation of indigenous individuals negatively impacts their nutrition

AVERAGE MEALS: rural vs. urban communities

Tingo, Ecuador.

- 1 Starchy soup, fava beans, oca (a tuber), & 2 eggs



Quito, Ecuador.

- 2 Pumpkin soup, chicken, rice, & mixed vegetables



CONCLUSIONS

When looking at Ecuador, and specifically the Sierra, one can identify a variety of conditions which lend themselves to different food consumption patterns - and thus ultimately the nutritional state of the individuals who prescribe to them. Among these conditions, several in particular remain central to Ecuador's current nutritional status: the influence of industrialized countries on the traditional diet, the implications of Ecuador's colonial history, the presence of distinct ethnic groups, and other key factors can all be attributed to the high (although, in some cases, improving) levels of malnutrition.

The Sierra is particularly noteworthy because of its intense geography. Thus, urban-rural discrepancies in this region cause acute differences in the prevalence of malnutrition, as those in rural communities endure more extreme environmental conditions, experience more energy-demanding lifestyles, and consume less nutrient-rich diets. Moreover, the high concentration of indigenous peoples - who have a history of exploitation (which continues today) - living in the Sierra are exposed to a variety of dietary, environmental, and socioeconomic factors which promote malnourishment. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find that this highland region experiences the highest levels of chronic malnutrition in the country (as is manifested through stunting).



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