

A photograph showing a woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue shirt, feeding three children. She is using a spoon to serve white rice from a red bowl. One child, a girl in a pink shirt, is in the foreground, looking at the camera while eating from a red bowl. Two other children, a boy and a girl, are also eating. They are outdoors, near a wooden structure, with a dirt ground and some vegetation in the background.

# Killing us with Hunger

**Indigenous perspectives on nutrition, food aid  
and food sovereignty in the central Amazon of Peru**

**HEALTH  
POVERTY  
ACTION** 

## **Killing us with Hunger**

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**Health Poverty Action works to strengthen poor and marginalised people in their struggle for health.**

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# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. A global outlook on food</b>	<b>6</b>
Global food aid policy	6
A rights-based approach	7
<b>3. Background: Peru and Satipo</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4. Causes of food insecurity</b>	<b>9</b>
Population changes	10
Deforestation, changes in the forest, and effects on hunting practices	11
Changes in diet and lifestyle	12
<b>5. Peruvian Government reaction:     Food aid via donations</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>6. History of Peruvian food programmes:     Past and current</b>	<b>15</b>
Spoiled food	16
Lack of cultural adaption	17
Dependence and unsustainability	18
<b>7. Proposed solutions: Resisting food aid     and putting food back into local hands</b>	<b>19</b>
The government's role in building food sovereignty	22
<b>8. Next steps for governments     and international organisations</b>	<b>23</b>
Recommendations to policy makers	23
<b>References</b>	<b>24</b>

# Summary

Food and hunger have become urgent priorities in global discussions on tackling poverty and inequality. Yet the voices of those who are going hungry, those who bear the devastating consequences of malnutrition, are largely absent from the debate. These are usually communities on the margins of society, like the indigenous peoples in the Amazon of Peru, who face high levels of malnutrition caused by the degradation of their natural forest environment.

Policy makers have tended to rely on market-led solutions to food security propped up by food aid programmes to reach the most vulnerable. But indigenous communities criticise these programmes for their lack of participation; failure to be culturally appropriate; poor quality of the food; and ultimately for creating food aid dependency rather than providing long-term sustainable solutions. Instead, Health Poverty Action is working with indigenous people and other marginalised groups to support them in their efforts towards self-sufficiency and ultimately food sovereignty.

This report takes the case study of the Ashaninka people of Peru as an example of how the food crisis is affecting vulnerable communities around the world. It explores the food crisis in this part of the Amazon, its causes, the community's experiences over time, their efforts to address the problem and what they would like to see from government and policy makers. We hope this report will provide insights into the perspectives of those at the frontline of the food crisis, and that their voices will be much more closely listened to in the international policy debates on food and hunger.

Health Poverty Action approaches health as an issue of social justice, tackling the root causes and addressing the full range of factors which impact on health. We prioritise those missed out by others. Food and nutrition are central to health and wellbeing, and are issues shaped by political, social and economic injustices, which is why we are working on these issues and why our name is Health Poverty Action.



# 1. Introduction

Across the globe, indigenous communities face a food crisis. Indigenous people's food systems are critical to their wellbeing and yet access to traditional food sources such as wild meat has decreased as a result of forest degradation. At the same time, store bought food prices continue to rise.<sup>1</sup> In Peru, this problem has reached critical levels – malnutrition of children under five is estimated at 23% nationally, with 39% in rural areas. In addition, 50% of children nationwide are anaemic.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences of anaemia and malnutrition are dire. Common long-term results of childhood and adult malnourishment include: lack of development of cognitive abilities; changes in personality and friendliness; physical stunting; lower energy levels;<sup>i</sup> low academic aspirations and grade repetition; low self-esteem; low efficiency and high risk of maternal health complications.<sup>3</sup>

These developmental barriers merit urgent attention. As well as the human cost, they have a major effect on the national economy: in Peru, it is estimated that 1.2 billion US dollars are lost to the economy as a result of cognitive impairment, negative impact on schooling, and lost work production due to childhood and adult anaemia.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the Peruvian state spends approximately 225 million US dollars annually on anaemia-related problems such as premature birth, over-age children at school due to grade repetition, and treatment for anaemic adults and children.<sup>3</sup> Taking into account other soft skills valued by employers that malnourished and anaemic children do not develop to their full potential, such as self-esteem and efficiency, the actual economic effect is likely to be higher.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the long-term consequences of malnutrition and anaemia, indigenous populations have been marginalised from discussions of how to respond to this problem. Women have been particularly excluded. Health Poverty Action is working with indigenous Ashaninka populations in the central Amazon to bring to the fore their perspectives regarding how the state of the forest and availability of local foods impacts their ability to ensure good nutrition in their communities. We also highlight their suggestions about what the Peruvian state can do to support communities in reaching self-sufficiency. We hope to have these considerations taken into account as the Peruvian government approves and puts into practice new legislation regarding the promotion of self-sustainability and the consumption of local products.<sup>5</sup>

This paper takes a case study perspective, focusing on three typical Ashaninka communities in the Rio Negro district in the province of Satipo, in the department of Junín. Six focus groups (three of men and three of women) of 8 to 10 people were carried out in March 2013, during which information was collected about the state of forests; hunting practices; dietary preferences; alternative food production initiatives; and hopes for the future. In one community a participatory mapping exercise was also undertaken, with the goal of analysing how the forest looked in the past and present, and how community members hope that it looks in the future.

The report begins with a short introduction to food programs internationally and in Peru. From there, it proceeds to discuss the local history that resulted in high rates of malnutrition, with a focus on the decrease in access to local foods and difficulties with current government nutritional programmes in Peru. The report ends by explaining government's roles and responsibilities in terms of the right to food.

i. Many small children who are malnourished, and show low weight and height for age, may still show 'normal' energy levels, leading parents to think that the child is healthy. In small children, a reliable way to test for malnutrition is by measuring height and weight or using other anthropometric measurements.



## 2. A global outlook on food

Worldwide, indigenous communities rely on the forest as the basis of their diet. However, over time many forests have become weakened by overuse, deforestation, and slash and burn farming, amongst other causes. This stress on natural resources leads directly to a reduction in available wild game.<sup>6</sup> Given this, many indigenous populations have faced severe challenges in feeding their families well balanced, nourishing meals.

To counter this problem, many governments and international organisations sponsor nutrition programmes that focus on the provision of foodstuffs. However, these programmes have by and large failed to ensure long term sustainability because they are providing external products as opposed to supporting communities in using their own resources and knowledge to ensure access to nutritious foods. These programmes have thus far been rooted in a particular approach to food and hunger which relies on the global market to balance supply and demand for food, rather than focusing on local agricultural production.<sup>7</sup>

Within this market-led approach *food aid* has filled the gaps where communities do not have the purchasing power to participate in markets

themselves. Through global and national food aid programmes, major global and national companies sell their products to the state, in order to provide food for the poor.

In contrast, a *food sovereignty* approach looks to shift power into local hands, putting small scale farmers at the centre of the food industry. Food sovereignty is based on an understanding of rights – that the population has a right to food, and that small scale producers have the right to control their crops, production, and influence in local markets.

### Global food aid policy

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Food Programme (WFP) tend to champion food aid programmes as the best approach to ensuring increased nutritional status of low-income populations. The FAO aims to support programmes that create: “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for

an active and healthy life”.<sup>8</sup> This definition does not refer to the right to food, to where this food must come from, or to the power structures surrounding access to food.<sup>9</sup> This lack of specification has left an open arena for international and government-backed programmes to import, internationally or inter-provincially, food that is not native to the area for their nutrition programmes. This imported food is generally produced by large-scale global agro-businesses. Mass production, Northern government subsidies and international trade rules preventing import tariffs all contribute to a situation where it is cheaper to use imported food as opposed to food produced by local, small-scale farmers.

The biggest problem with food aid relates to who holds the power to make decisions. Food aid programmes and policies often benefit major agro companies that produce food on a large scale, shifting the decision making power regarding food and production towards the global North where large companies are headquartered. This has had a devastating effect on small scale, local farmers from the global South who lack the resources and technology to compete with large scale agro-businesses.<sup>10</sup> These programmes ultimately marginalise those who are meant to benefit from them, treating local communities as recipients of a good as opposed to agents of change.

As of 2013, the FAO in Latin America has acknowledged some of the problems with food aid policies,<sup>11</sup> including the impact of volatile food prices and droughts in North America and Asia, and has also sought to incorporate trends like sustainability and locally produced foods. While this new 2013 Latin American Regional policy does consistently cite the small scale farmer in Latin America as the future of agriculture and nutrition policy in the region, the document still underlines the important role international markets must play in order for countries to best ‘benefit’. The right to food is also touched on, though it has yet to be seen how this will be implemented in practice. Health Poverty Action welcomes these potential changes, but we also underline the importance of a shift in the power balance in order to rectify the shortfalls of current food aid policy and enable communities and farmers to truly obtain the right to food.<sup>12</sup> This means that local populations need to take part directly in the decision making process about laws and programmes that affect them.

## A rights-based approach

The idea of the right to food, derived from the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights and reiterated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, was reaffirmed by governments at the World Food Summit in 1996. And yet the numbers of hungry and malnourished people in the world has increased since that time, passing the one billion mark in 2009. Also in 1996, a group of peasant farmers started a global movement known as ‘la via campesina’ or ‘the peasant’s way’.<sup>13</sup> This group began to champion an alternative approach known as *food sovereignty*.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to market-led approaches, this rights-based model mandates a shift in rights and power away from corporations and towards individuals, empowering local populations to take control of production.

The cornerstone definition of this concept is:

The right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets; and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.<sup>8</sup>

This definition underlines the importance of local people defining and having control over their own food and agriculture. The trend towards rights based policies has received support from various countries in Latin America, and in December 2012, the Latin American Regional Congress recognised the right to food on a regional level, supported by the FAO.<sup>14</sup> Health Poverty Actions applauds these efforts but also underlines the importance of ensuring that local producers – especially marginalised groups such as indigenous peoples and women – are offered the opportunity to shape policy and their own futures.

### 3. Background: Peru and Satipo

Peru is a country located along the west coast of South America. More than 34 million people inhabit three different geographical regions: the coast, the mountains, and the jungle. The indigenous populations of Ashaninkas, who are the focus of this paper, are located throughout the jungle region along the rivers: Ene, Apurimac, Tambo, Perené, Pichis, Pachitea, Aprucayalo, and the upper Ucayali and Yurúa in Peru and Brazil.<sup>15</sup> Around 88,000 Ashaninkas are thought to live throughout the country.<sup>16</sup> Satipo, where this study focuses, is home to approximately 31,020 indigenous people (including an Ashaninka majority, as well as Nomatsiguengas, Mastisiguenas, and Kakinte, who share several cultural patterns though also differ in important ways).<sup>15</sup> Nationally, 28% of Peruvians live in poverty and 6% in extreme poverty. In the jungle, the poverty rate increases to 35.2%, of whom 9% are considered extremely poor.<sup>17, ii</sup>

Peru's political system is a largely centralised democracy based in Lima, a large coastal capital. Though steps have been taken in recent years to decentralise decision making, urban populations along the coast continue to have a greater role in the design of public policies, including social programmes. Centralisation of public policy design is particularly isolating to indigenous communities who are given little voice in the development of safety net programmes, including food programmes. Female indigenous people are especially left out of decision making processes as they are less likely to speak fluent Spanish; have lower levels of formal education and literacy; and are often discouraged from participating by a patriarchal culture both in communities and within the government structure.<sup>18, 19</sup>

Nutrition programmes in Peru, supported with technical assistance from the World Food Programme and other international aid organisations, have taken a food aid approach which focused on the donations of food to needy families. Currently, food programmes are run through the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS). These programmes are financed by the ministry itself, which receives its funding via government taxes and international aid (non-refundable grants). International organisations

also have the ability to support the implementation of MIDIS programmes.<sup>20</sup> The donations given by these programmes may provide foodstuffs; however, they do not support building self-sustainability for indigenous populations who look towards long-term survival.

In a Peruvian context, this report is being written during the “year of investment for rural development and food security”, providing an opportune moment for policy change.<sup>21</sup> Congress people, alongside the Ministry of Agriculture and MIDIS have recently produced a new conglomerate bill called the “law about the right to food, food sovereignty, and food and nutritional security”. This bill includes some aspects of “food sovereignty” and the right to food, including a focus on small scale agricultural and fish production.<sup>22</sup> As of the release of this report, the bill had been approved and includes a rights-based outlook on food, with a commission to oversee this right (Consejo Nacional de Soberanía y Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional – Conasan).<sup>23</sup> Currently there is little information available on the progress of the implementation of the commission or law. Health Poverty Action hopes that this law provides an opportunity for local producers to regain control and allows for communities in Peru to move towards food sovereignty. We also emphasise the importance of these programmes supporting communities in producing food for personal consumption rather than just for selling in the local or international market. While the sale of excess food provides extra income, it is important that families themselves gain the nutritional benefits of the food they have produced.

While we recommend a move away from food aid towards more sustainable models of food sovereignty, a suitable transition will be required and governments must prepare and plan carefully to ensure local production has reached reasonable levels and is reaching the most vulnerable, before scaling back food aid programmes.

In order to explore opportunities to increase food sovereignty, this report will analyse the decrease in the availability of local food, including an analysis of historical events and patterns that resulted in the need for communities to access large amounts of external foodstuffs.

ii. For a full explanation of how the poverty line is calculated, see: <http://www.inei.gob.pe/DocumentosPublicos/PobrezaExposicionJefe2013.pdf>





Health Poverty Action found malnutrition rates amongst children in the Satipo area to be as high as 64%.

## 4. Causes of food insecurity

In Peru, malnutrition and anaemia are serious problems that have long-lasting effects on the development of the country. Indigenous communities in the central jungle of Peru have a staggeringly high malnutrition rate, and a very high percentage of children are anaemic. Government reports state that 25% of children are undernourished in Junín as a whole,<sup>24</sup> but a Health Poverty Action project in the Satipo area has found malnutrition rates to be as high as 64%, with another 31% of children on the brink of malnutrition.<sup>25</sup>

Food preparation and consumption is at the centre of the indigenous population's culture.<sup>26</sup> Until relatively recently, indigenous communities relied on hunting and gathering as their primary food source. As such, good nutrition and food sovereignty were linked directly to the forest. One study used empirical methods to show that by reducing indigenous people's access to woodlands there would be a 29% increase in the number of malnourished children and the number of anaemia

cases among children from the most marginalised households would triple.<sup>27</sup> Another study of the 'food transition' from traditional to more Western food states that indigenous peoples' dependence on traditional methods of finding food, such as hunting, may put them at particular risk of health complications as food systems shift.<sup>26</sup>

While a myriad of complex problems have contributed to changes in the forest, local people feel that several issues have directly caused a reduction in food sovereignty and difficulty ensuring proper nutrition of their families. The challenges can be summarised in three major phases:

1. Growth in local population via migration of outsiders and increase in numbers in indigenous communities;
2. An alteration in hunting practices because of changes in forest cover due to deforestation;
3. A change in diet and lifestyle as hunting became a less viable way to obtain animal based foods.





Ashaninka community members use drawing to show how the forest used to contain much more plentiful supplies of food.

## Population changes

Community members consistently cited migration to the central Amazon as one of the roots of change in the availability of wild game and forest foods. *Colonos* (the local term for ‘settlers’ or non-indigenous inhabitants of the area) are mostly internal migrants from the highlands who moved to the central jungle in search of improved access to resources and a better future for their families. This increase in the external population was coupled with growth of indigenous communities, whose numbers augmented with each generation. As the population increased, so did the strain on sources of food.

The three communities interviewed each stated that substantial migration to the area began in the 1970s. This information coincides with official statistics about migration and migratory incentives. During the 70s and 80s, the national government felt that the area of the central jungle had great economic potential and available space. To promote migration to the region, incentives such as free land were provided to many thousands of settlers from the Andean region.<sup>28</sup> Current government reports cite

**The forest was like our ‘market’.  
We got everything from there...  
all kinds of animals...that’s how  
we used to eat.**

**Before there was more fruit,  
now there is almost none.**

**Community members**

this migration as supportive to the economic growth of the area, but concur that this upsurge in population and related infrastructure such as highways has had a negative effect on eco-systems and sustainability.<sup>28</sup>

Middle-aged and elderly community members recalled that plentiful amounts of animals were available during their childhood and early adulthood, prior to this wave of migration. They identified the locally available flora and fauna as the base of their

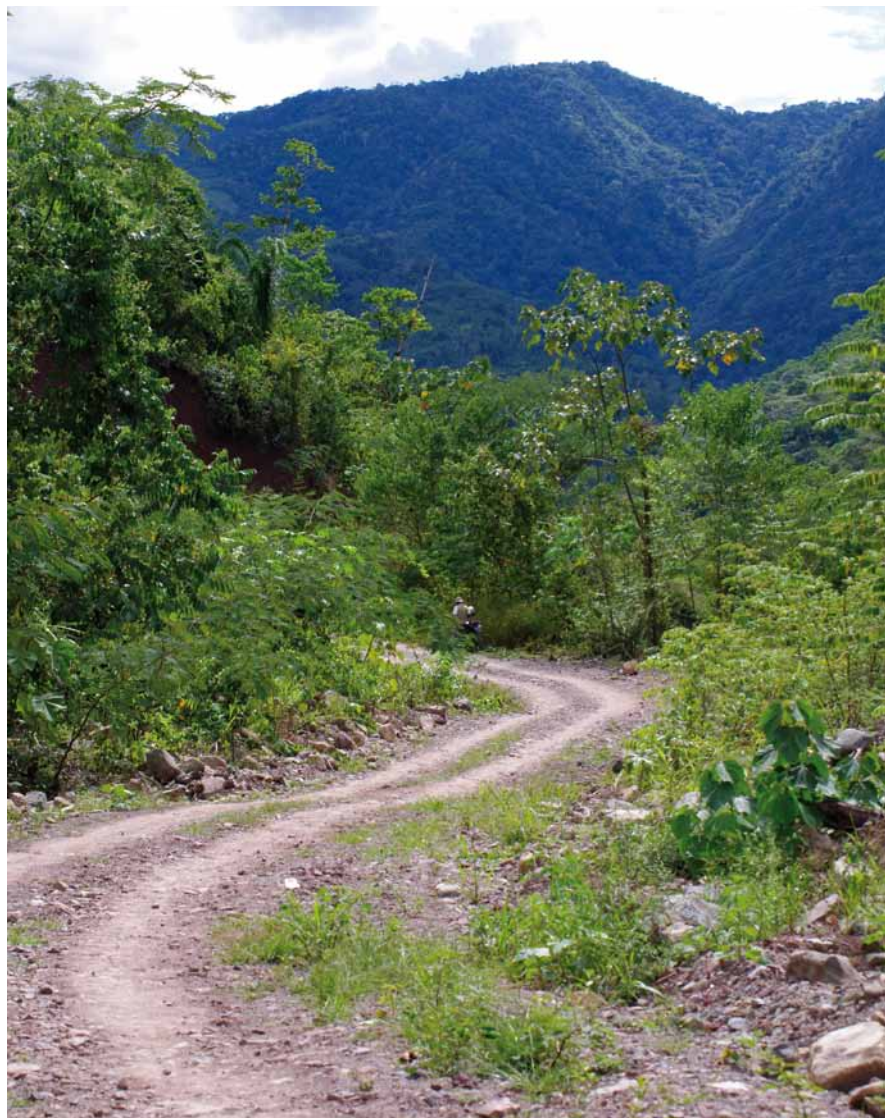
diet. One community member said: “The forest was like our ‘market’. We got everything from there...snails, animals. Before, there were all kinds of animals like veal, tapirs, collared peccary...People went hunting, they brought food, they cooked it over a fire, and they would bring their shredded plantain. The plantain was like their rice. That’s how we used to eat”. Other community members mentioned animals such as partridge, veal, armadillo, spotted lowland paca, tapir, collared peccary, river fish, and snails, as “plentiful”. Fruits were also more available, “now there are just fruits that are similar to the anona, peaches, and cherries. Before there was more fruit, now there is almost none.”

Many of the men remarked that when settlers first migrated to the region, they did not know how to hunt in the jungle. However, over time their ability to make use of local forests increased, which resulted in a decrease in available game.

## Deforestation, changes in the forest, and effects on hunting practices

The population influx and general development of Peru resulted in more investment in infrastructure such as roads, bringing in more vehicles, which provided greater access to the natural resources of the central Amazon of Peru. A combination of logging for profit and slash and burn farming has severely depleted the forest cover in the area. While community experiences of loggers and logging vary, men and women of all ages in the three communities consistently discuss logging for commercial or agricultural purposes as a major contributor to the reduction of available animals. The former Peruvian Minister of the Environment agrees, stating that the serious deforestation of areas near indigenous communities has directly affected their access to wild game, considered one of the most important sources of protein for these communities, second only to fish.<sup>29</sup>

**A combination of logging for profit and slash and burn farming has severely depleted the forest cover in the central Amazon.**





Logging for sale and export is prominent in the area. Despite large number of laws passed to prevent unregulated logging and the destruction of eco systems, the Peruvian government has had little success in curbing the tendency. Though this report will not go into detail regarding Peruvian forest laws, corruption in the forest sector, the 'trafficking' of wood or other similar problems, it is clear that the increased presence of loggers, trucks and machinery for commercial logging has scared away animals and damaged rich soils and the forest, destroying the habitat of many central Amazonian animals.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, the increased population of both indigenous communities and settlers has resulted in deforestation via 'slash and burn farming', and destroyed large areas of land. 'Slash and burn farming' happens when farmers burn down large sections of forest in order to clear land for agriculture.<sup>29</sup> Families then use the corresponding increased food production for personal consumption and sale. According to national statistics, while Peru exports \$120 million of wood a year, over \$2 billion worth of wood is burned in the creation of agricultural lands.

Given the changes in eco-system, many animals began to flee further into the forest, making their capture much more difficult and time consuming. One scholar on the matter cites that populations who live especially deep in the forest may be more vulnerable to these changes in forest cover and hunting by outsiders, as wildlife populations decline quickly, including wild game.<sup>31</sup> Community members living especially deep in the forest – over three hours into the Amazon jungle outside of Satipo, accessible only by crossing two rivers – illustrated a drastic difference in the availability of animals as a result of the changes in forest cover in their area. Pointing to a nearby mountain top, men from the community recalled how they used to walk less than an hour to go hunting. Now, the same men identify a far more distant mountain as where they must go to hunt. To reach this mountain they must walk for four hours – over four times the distance that was previously necessary. Despite being skilled hunters, men are frequently required to stay deep in the forest for days before obtaining enough game to feed their families.

Other communities also discussed the increased amount of time required to obtain animal meat, with one community member stating: "Sometimes I go into the forest and stay overnight, all for nothing! I continue the next day, and stay over again hunting during the night; three or four days later I finally get an animal, and it's a small animal!"

Similar challenges have been encountered when looking for fish. Women and men in all communities report a drastic downturn in the fish population, mirroring the changes to the overall eco-system in the area.

## Changes in diet and lifestyle

The decrease in the availability of animal game has effected overall community organisation as well as diet, changing community life and affecting the future of children in the area.

Due to the changes described above, hunting is no longer a major source of food for indigenous families and communities. One man confirms: "Hunting is something we do when there is a birthday or activity...that's when we go to the forest. More than anything, these are moments when we want to eat forest meat...but hunting is no longer a consistent practice." A woman from the same community mentions that when men do go hunting, they might bring back some forest meat but it is often not enough to feed the whole family.

**We don't really eat natural food from the jungle anymore... now we buy vegetables, other foods, whatever we can afford.**

**Because there aren't many wild animals, now we eat store bought beef, chicken, fish...**

### Community members

Community members' nutrition is now tied to their ability to buy foods produced externally, creating a competitive atmosphere in which each family must work and sell their products to ensure access to this commodity. A man confirms, "we don't really eat natural food from the jungle anymore... now we buy vegetables, other foods, whatever we can afford...it's not like before when there were animals..." In another community, one woman cited a similar change, saying, "Sometimes we eat the animals that existed before...but before we didn't eat things like beef. Because there aren't many wild animals, now we eat store bought beef, chicken, fish from the ocean..."



**Hunting and gathering used to be the main food source for the Ashaninka community. But now the supply of food is so depleted, hunting is reserved for special occasions and celebrations: "Hunting is something we do when there is a birthday or activity...it is no longer a consistent practice."**



In addition to the new need to purchase food, the increased recognition of the importance of school and education has resulted in a need to compete with settlers. A society that previously lived off forest resources has started to cultivate high-demand export crops on sections of their land. Responding to this issue, one man commented on the changes necessary to keep up, saying: “since there aren’t many fish or animals like before, we started to work...We need to educate our children, and we must spend money to buy their school supplies...if we keep fishing, we won’t be able to educate our children. So everyone bought a piece of land where we grow coffee, corn, bananas. But we don’t grow as much as the Colonos...We want our children to be better than us, and so we won’t be able to continue living as before.”

Price barriers prevent the purchase of the most nutritious foods which might provide a viable substitute for local wild meat. During a price spike in 2007 and 2008, for example, the prices of major foods such as legumes rose by 29%, other types of beans by 27%, pig meat by 13%, and milk by 7%.<sup>1</sup> Given the direct link between price fluctuations and caloric intake,<sup>1</sup> a fragile

dependence on externally sourced, commercially bought food leaves communities at risk. Another report underlines the difficulties encountered when shifting from the consumption of local food towards the consumption of store bought food, explaining that access to processed foods in stores plus the changes in social norms result in families buying less nutritious food than they would traditionally eat.<sup>32</sup> Research proves that changes in international production and the ‘delocalisation’ of food sources have a negative effect on the nutritional status of people in developing countries, especially marginalised populations.<sup>33</sup>

Local production has shifted from multi-crop edible foods such as fruits, vegetables, or grains towards single crop, exportable commodities. In Satipo, for example, production is focused almost exclusively on coffee and cacao. Stores in the area have begun to sell foods to meet consumption needs. But, since economic resources are limited, these stores stock mostly cheap, filling foodstuffs such as rice and pasta, in place of nutritious, varied and often protein-rich foods that were previously widely available naturally. In short, these production changes result directly in nutritious foods becoming less available.<sup>32</sup>

## Food Sharing

The commoditisation of food, and the newfound economic aspect, has also changed the way community members relate to one another. Elderly community members mentioned that their parents and grandparents went hunting and when they returned, the food was shared among the whole community. Women stated that there were now fewer community members, as discussed above, who took part in this process. However, there was a clear change in attitude as well—in the past, food was for sharing, and community members worked together to ensure everyone was fed. An elderly woman states, “Before, there were a lot of animals, all different types of birds, fish, anchovies and forest birds...and so we hunted, and since we hunted we shared, we shared between families. For example, if someone killed veal we would share the leg, and this is how everyone ate.” Another community confirms this trend, with one woman saying “When I was younger, my dad killed a samani and shared it with everyone. We called and some people brought cooked or grilled yucca, others brought raw or cooked plantains to make soup with the animal, and they grilled the banana to make mashed banana for the babies and all the families received the same amount of food”.

## 5. Peruvian Government reaction: Food Aid via donations

In accordance with international policy designed by the World Food Programme, Food and Agriculture Organization and World Bank,<sup>iii</sup> the Peruvian Government has taken a food aid approach to its nutrition programmes. This approach includes the donation of pre-packed goods. Though some programmes do mandate that 90-100% of donated products are of Peruvian origin, the regulations do not insist that products are bought from small scale producers.<sup>34</sup> This purchasing pattern does not support communities in increasing production locally, nor does it allow for local communities to have a voice in the process of how nutritional programmes are designed.



## 6. History of Peruvian food programmes: Past and current

Market-led, neo-liberal approaches have dominated past and present global food policies, and their rhetoric and strategy is reflected in the design of Peruvian nutrition programmes. Looking at the recent history of Peruvian food programmes, one review from 2004 cites 26 different food-aid programmes.<sup>35</sup> This report focuses on the programmes that impacted the Ashaninka community: PRONAA, Vaso de Leche, and Qali Warma. Many families also participate in 'JUNTOS', though this is an incentives programme and not directly a food aid programme.

Vaso de Leche and PRONAA were designed with a traditional food aid structure, which is based on the distribution of pre-packaged food to low-income communities. While Vaso de Leche does include some community participation committees, the programme itself still works via donations, giving powdered milk, canned tuna fish, and other products to low-income families. As the WFP's Peru food aid programme has shifted to food assistance over the past five years, food aid programme structure has

also shifted.<sup>36</sup> In 2012, the long-standing 'PRONAA' programme was eliminated and replaced with 'Qali Warma' to try to better meet needs. The World Food Programme provided technical assistance in the transformation, hence ensuring Peruvian public policy remained in line with international food security orthodoxy, though this time under the newer rhetoric of incorporation of the use of local foods.<sup>37</sup>

Qali Warma has a slightly more participatory approach in comparison to PRONAA, creating 'buying committees' in charge of selecting foods to be included in pre-cooked meals which are distributed to schools. The programme provides recipes that can be used to cook foods to be distributed for breakfast and/or lunch. The country is divided into eight dietary blocks to try to provide 'locally appropriate' foods.<sup>38</sup> Satipo is part of the 'Central Amazon' block. In theory, this structure increases the voice of the local population regarding programme structure and leaves room for the purchase of local, culturally appropriate foods.

iii. The role of these organizations was discussed during the conference *mujeres por seguridad y soberanía alimentaria* held in the Peruvian Congress, May 10th 2012.



However, although the buying committees should be better able to include local foods as opposed to imported commodities, the recipes provided are often generalised for the area as a whole (i.e. towards settlers) and may not take into account specific indigenous community dietary needs and preferences. Despite the fact that ‘buying committees’ should ideally allow for Ashaninka integration, none of the Ashaninka communities we spoke to had received any information about the workings of Qali Warma, indicating a complete lack of involvement in determining which foods are purchased for the programme, despite the fact that Qali Warma is running in their children’s schools. The government had also agreed to send uncooked food so that communities could prepare the meals themselves in response to difficulties ensuring freshly cooked food reached remote schools on a daily basis. While this did respond to community demands, the families still knew little or nothing about how the foods offered as part of the programme were selected and had no say in choosing the food sent to them.

This demonstrates two things – firstly the government has acknowledged and attempted to fix some logistical issues, which is a positive step. However, the fact that communities were not offered the opportunity to participate more directly in determining which foods will arrive in their community does not suggest inclusion or an attempt to change production patterns (and thus power relations). Qali Warma’s framework does mention the importance of local food production as key to food security but it does not specify how the programme will contribute to increasing local production or how it will ensure that buying committees purchase locally available foods. Though a step in the right direction, Qali Warma still falls into the pattern of providing foodstuffs to communities as opposed to investing in communities’ ability to produce food themselves.

The food donation programmes mentioned above have huge flaws.<sup>35</sup> Community members highlight major, overarching issues in the food aid programmes that they have participated in. These issues can be summarised as: the distribution of spoiled food; the lack of cultural adaptation; and

the unsustainability of the reliance on external foodstuffs. Problems such as these could be avoided if local farmers and communities were to have the power to make decisions and were able to meaningfully participate in setting and reviewing food and related policies such as agriculture.

## Spoiled food

According to community members, the foods most often received via PRONAA and Vaso de Leche are powdered milk, fortified crackers, canned anchovies, canned tuna, and quinoa, among others. PRONAA purchases these foods from nationally-selected Peruvian-based companies, though the provider selection process was not necessarily transparent.<sup>iv</sup> For a long time, less than 10 major providers were dominant, but decentralisation of some purchases to the 29 zonal offices resulted in a possible wider variety of providers.<sup>39</sup> However, many providers (zonal and national) do not appear to adhere to health and safety regulations.

**The fortified food that came was expired, and the rice came with small bugs (polillas) which were eating away at the grains.**

**Community member**

Many community members mention that these external products are spoiled by the time they reach them. One woman commented that her son ate government supplied food which gave him diarrhoea, resulting in weight loss. She says, “I think that the food from PRONAA is very heavy, and is a risk for the children. The fortified food that came was expired, and the rice came with small bugs (polillas) which were eating away at the grains...” Another woman mentioned, “For example, if the crackers that come are mouldy, who are we going to complain to about this? The milk has made the children sick, so in the end we end up throwing everything out”.

iv. Many major providers were families of congressmen or government officials, or were powerful businessmen. See citation 39 for source.



These complaints take place against a backdrop of seemingly never-ending public scandals of government-provided food making children and their families sick in various parts of the country, including in Junín, Ica, Ayacucho, Cajamarca, Ucayali, Huánuco, and Loreto.<sup>40,41,42,43,44,45</sup>

The height of these scandals was the death of three school children in Cajamarca as a result of insecticide in their school lunches provided by PRONAA.<sup>46,47</sup> Given these problems, local governments started reviewing the food in more detail, resulting in several different districts complaining about expired products, finding rodent and bird droppings in provisions, and in one case finding a dead rat in a bag of food that was to be distributed.<sup>48</sup> Qali Warma hoped to avoid similar difficulties by giving buying committees and school officials more choice regarding the food purchased.<sup>49</sup> However, there have already been over 60 charges in only four months brought against the programme, including problems related to spoiled food. In many cases, it appears that the pre-made meals have started to go bad by the time they reach students, as providers may cook in large quantities as opposed to on a meal by meal basis.<sup>50</sup> As discussed above, this issue has been addressed in Satipo by providing raw foodstuffs as opposed to pre-cooked meals, but not all regions have chosen to adopt such changes, leaving many families vulnerable to sub-standard foods.

## Lack of cultural adaption

For indigenous populations like the Ashaninka, digestive problems created by processed foods may also be related to a lack of cultural adaptation of products, for example giving a mostly lactose-intolerant population milk as a staple food or providing other external products that are not normally eaten. The simple availability of a food does not guarantee its contribution to food security and does not take into account whether foods were produced locally or 'imported' from other parts of the country.<sup>51</sup> While the physical presence of a food may increase in a given community, it may not be eaten if it is considered culturally inappropriate. Instead, it might be given to animals, stored for visitors, or traded for other products.<sup>51</sup>

**Now my son is underweight because he doesn't eat natural food from the area, instead he eats Western food that comes from the store, processed food.**

**Community member**

A local professor comments on the issue, saying, "We Ashaninkas are not used to eating the kinds of food donated. The kids don't like it, the food makes them sick and creates health problems... In the end the government is spending money just to spend it. They don't go to indigenous communities to figure out what foods would be best... [The programme] is not very appropriate for us." Widespread research as well as our experience on the ground backs up the importance of culture and cultural habits in food choices, and highlights the need for programmes to consider the cultural and psycho-social impacts of change in diet.<sup>52</sup> Generally, local knowledge and dietary histories are not taken into account when devising national public policy. Though decentralisation should allow for a better use of local knowledge, hard-to-reach populations are the last to be consulted.

All communities felt that the increase in consumption of processed foods, via government programmes and via their own purchasing power, was a contributor to malnutrition in the area. One woman says, "Now my son is underweight because he doesn't eat natural food from the area, instead he eats Western food that comes from the store, processed food." Especially given the consistent problems with spoiled foods, community members have become weary of externally imported foods provided by the government. However there is a need for more research into which foods traditionally prevalent in Ashaninka diets are nutrient-rich.

It is important to recognise that different cultural patterns should not be seen as an explanation for high levels of malnutrition per se. Well adapted food programmes that take into account local realities will support the inclusion of traditional foods in the diet, hence eliminating the risk of failure due to local cultural differences.<sup>51</sup> Including local people in decision making is key to ensuring cultural adaption.

**The government, by giving us things, is killing us with hunger...you eat and empty a can of tuna, and the next day, what are you going to eat? Tuna doesn't produce more food.**

**Community leader**

## **Dependence and unsustainability**

Given the complexity of these issues, it is not surprising that governments face challenges in devising policy that takes into account all aspects of sustainable food systems, such as environment, production, waste management, and social development.<sup>55</sup> Peruvian food programmes are very concerned with ensuring a sufficient supply of food to low income populations, but are not considering how to ensure an appropriate availability of food over the long-term.

Globally, one of the major fallouts of food aid programmes is a focus on short-term urgencies and a lack of long-term food security planning. This certainly applies to Peruvian food programmes. The current system does not allow for increased capacity of local populations and provides little support for communities to analyse their food situations and come up with local solutions.

Indigenous populations in the central Amazon should not be considered dependent on government food programmes, since in reality the programmes give relatively little food. However, the programmes increase people's dependence on external foodstuffs, hence further distancing populations from their traditional dietary patterns and, at the same time, providing little incentive or support for locals to design programmes that might create sustainable long-term access to healthy food. One community leader says "The government, by giving us things, is killing us with hunger...you eat and empty a can of tuna, and the next day, what are you going to eat? Tuna doesn't produce more food. You could plant it, but nothing would be produced. But, at least for now, if the government was able to provide seeds that could grow, we could plant that. It would be our responsibility to do that."

There are some signs of hope. Since the 2008 food price hike, a new global policy dialogue has emerged that puts more emphasis on better coordination and long-term planning. In Latin America this shift has included a new emphasis on the importance of small-scale farmers in food production.<sup>11</sup> This is a welcome step, however, multinationals are still being given a central role in nutrition programmes, for example in areas such as biotechnology. There is still a considerable gap between the policies of bodies like the FAO and a situation where local communities like the Ashaninka have genuine control over food production and consumption.

In Satipo, many community members know that government programmes are not working, but face difficulty providing better responses as they are isolated from the decision making process. After years of feeling ignored, communities, and especially women, are starting to step up to the challenge of participating in advocacy work.



Community-run fish ponds aim to increase availability and consumption of locally based food.

## 7. Proposed solutions: Resisting food aid and putting food back into local hands

Indigenous populations can no longer realistically rely on the forest as a major food source given the depletion of resources and the increase in the population trying to use the few resources that remain. While Health Poverty Action works to integrate local traditions into programming, both community members and international research acknowledge the difficulties associated with hunting, reforestation, and the timeframe required to re-build an ecosystem that would provide a habitat for animals.

Much international research has focused on the unsustainability of forest hunting as populations grow, because of the toll that over-hunting takes on eco-systems.<sup>56</sup> This research indicates that communities need to find other local solutions to building food sovereignty; some studies, such as one deep in the Manu Reserve in Peru, cite that gun-hunting, specifically, may be unsustainable, while populations hunting with a bow and arrow may be more limited in the amount of game they can hunt in one outing which, in turn,

preserves wild animals.<sup>57</sup> Other studies cite the importance of reserve areas to combat animal loss.<sup>58</sup> While the communities involved in this study all propose the use of forest reserves and promote the regeneration of eco-systems, there is no real consensus on which reserves would be used for conservation, or breeding animals to then be hunted, or general territorial reserve for the future; and so on. There are also difficulties preventing people from moving into reserved land. Forests can take up to 65 years to regenerate, so while reserves may be a positive option in terms of conservation, they do not provide a short or medium term solution to food sovereignty.<sup>59</sup>

While communities may wish to continue hunting, and the government and NGOs can support them in determining sustainable options related to this important cultural practice, interviews with community members also confirmed that hunting wild game is no longer providing enough food to ensure the nutrition of Ashaninka populations in Satipo.



This means that food must be obtained at least to complement hunting practices. Health Poverty Action implements food sovereignty programmes in Peru, as well as in Lao PDR and Cambodia. These programmes include the community-run implementation of family gardens; fish ponds; and chicken coops with the goal of increasing availability and consumption of locally based food. Community members and local leaders have a large role in promoting the success and possible expansion of these programmes. In Peru, female leaders,

including the indigenous federation FREMANK, are taking the lead in pushing for change. Previous knowledge about farming and the local land is the basis for all activities, working alongside indigenous communities to adapt best practices to their reality. Sessions on health education, sanitation, and breast feeding are also part of the approach, as are sessions where family members learn to cook healthy recipes with locally grown foods produced as part of the project.



**Family members learn to cook healthy recipes with locally grown foods produced as part of Health Poverty Action's food sovereignty project**



**We should keep implementing more projects like this...and we as community members should keep working on this to make sure that our children grow up healthy and strong.**

**Community member**

Many men and women participating in the Health Poverty Action programme in Satipo mentioned an increase in consumption of local foods via gardens, fish ponds, and chickens. Family members, especially women, reported increased consumption of vegetables including cucumber, radish, lettuce, spinach, tomato, and onion in salads. In addition, the increased availability of protein foods has reduced the urgency of acquiring wild game from the forest. One man states, “we have this support: if we don’t find food from the forest, or from the river, then with the chickens we are raising...at least we can feed and strengthen our families.” Another person says that they see the new local agricultural processes as a future for their family, “we are thinking that in some time from now, since we have the fish ponds and we are going to continue working with them, that this is like a future for our children.”

Research also shows that communities involved in sustainable agricultural programmes experienced social benefits as they must organise themselves and work together at the community level to manage food production and gardens, resulting in increased problem solving abilities and, often, an increase in the status of women.<sup>60</sup> In addition, Health Poverty Action’s local partner, Salud Sin Limites Peru, carried out a participatory research study in which 12 female leaders put together a document of demands regarding local food programmes, which was presented directly to the government. These changes in community level organisation, and especially in the voice of women, provide a starting point for increased community participation regarding the organisation of food programmes.

In terms of the longer term sustainability, the project has sparked interest in continued community effort towards developing gardens, fishponds, and chicken coops. During a drawing exercise carried out in one of the communities, all groups included fish ponds, chicken coops, and gardens in their visions for the future. A young female community member states, “We want the fish to continue to reproduce and increase, and we want to continue having seeds to plant in the gardens.” A male confirms, saying “I think we should keep implementing more projects like this, they should continue, and we as community members should keep working on this to make sure that our children grow up healthy and strong.”

The successes Health Poverty Action has found in this programme are paralleled by a large scale 2002 study of almost 9 million farmers’ new sustainable agricultural practices via participation in 200 different interventions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The study concluded that adding gardens, fish ponds, and similar activities, coupled with a good use of natural resources like water and natural fertilizers, can bring important benefits to communities related to access to local food and increased social capital.<sup>60</sup> For example, of the 26 communities surveyed, 75% of participants reported being free from hunger during the year, and the portion of families purchasing vegetables was reduced from 85% to 11% as they were able to grow them locally.<sup>60</sup> The study summarises that the agricultural sustainability initiatives have increased the diversity of food consumed by each household, such as fish, dairy products, poultry, and vegetables/fruits from the garden.<sup>60</sup>

It is vital that national governments such as the Peruvian Government, as well as the international organisations that support their nutrition programmes, like the World Food Programme, do more to mainstream a food sovereignty approach. Though the specific steps in supporting communities in accessing their right to food may vary by region, location, and culture, an overarching issue is the importance of listening to community voices and including women in the process. These voices must express their culture and history, as well as discuss how communities look to move forward in the short and long term to attain sustainable food sovereignty.



**We should plant more gardens and also raise birds. Because the gardens that we cultivate are from our own lands...We are eating what is natural as opposed to foodstuffs sent from somewhere else**

**Community leader**

## **The government's role in building food sovereignty**

Government programs have created a circle of unsustainability regarding the use of external food sources, and are not drawing on local knowledge or resources. Though communities' journey towards food sovereignty can be challenging, the approach provides a longer term sustainable solution to food crises. A first step is transforming from an aid-based structure to a rights-based methodology, reducing cultural prejudice against indigenous and other minority communities, ensuring community participation in decision making, and improving the communication between the authorities and the community.<sup>61</sup>

A review of rights and responsibilities of various actors is a key step in the process. Then, capacity building must take place,<sup>62</sup> including agricultural training, as well as leadership and business coaching.

Other research suggests that three main traits are necessary to make the shift towards sustainability in a general sense. These traits are: having information on the state of the environment; motivation to manage the sustainability of projects; and capacity to implement projects.<sup>63</sup> The indigenous communities interviewed certainly have information, but the government is not taking advantage of local knowledge when designing food aid programmes. Decision makers must listen to community perspectives, understand their knowledge, and identify possible barriers to motivation or capacity to implement food and nutrition projects. This will ensure the success of such projects, and reduce the need for the importation of external foods. In the case of Satipo, decision makers must work with other geographically close communities who benefit from forest areas to inform, manage, and implement projects that look towards environmental sustainability and food sovereignty.<sup>63</sup>

The many community members interviewed expressed a preference for the government adopting 'food sovereignty' style interventions as opposed to donating food. One person mentions, "If the government would give us seeds to plant gardens, this would be good...but instead of bringing us seeds, they gave us spoiled food and stomach cramps, sickness..." Another leader states, "According to our reality, we should plant more gardens and also raise birds. Because the gardens that we cultivate are from our own lands... they are natural. We are eating what is natural as opposed to foodstuffs sent from somewhere else, and we don't know if those are processed foods". A woman, concerned about animal intake, says, "That's what we are thinking, that the government provide chicken and fish eggs to raise because this can feed us. And the animals will reproduce," hence ensuring a long-term solution to the protein difficulties in the community.

These demands, coupled with advocacy from the community, have resulted in the Rio Negro district government implementing fish ponds as one aspect of local development programmes. Health Poverty Action recognises the importance of this new development, and hopes that the government also incorporates changes in decision-making power towards community members in regards to the design and implementation of the fishponds. At the same time, the transition away from food aid towards self-sufficiency will have to be carefully planned out and managed over time to ensure local food production has reached appropriate levels and that mechanisms are in place to ensure that the right to food of the most vulnerable is not neglected.



## 8. Next steps for governments and international organisations

Indigenous populations are demanding a shift in power in decisions about nutrition and food. It is vital that national governments such as the Peruvian Government, as well as the international organisations that support their nutrition programmes, like the World Food Programme, do more to build food sovereignty into their policies and programmes. Governments and international entities must listen to community voices, and especially include indigenous people and women in the decision making process.

### Recommendations to policy makers<sup>v</sup>

Governments and international organisations should work towards a food sovereignty policy framework that will ensure adequate, safe, nutritious food for all, including policies and investments to support small-scale farmers, women producers, and indigenous communities:

- Priority should be given to developing local agricultural and food production using local resources to achieve self-sufficiency;
- Local communities, and especially marginalised groups such as indigenous peoples and women producers and consumers, should have an active role in designing food and agricultural policies.
- Food aid programmes should be phased out over time, as food sovereignty is built, while ensuring access to nutritious, quality foods in the interim.
- Where nutrition (food aid) programmes are still deemed necessary, at least as an interim measure, there should be much greater participation of local communities, especially those from indigenous people and women, in programme decision making, oversight and feedback mechanisms.
- National trade policy should be used to safeguard domestic producers from unfair competition.
- Investment in technology should be reoriented to allow farmers and communities to decide research priorities and encourage grassroots innovations.

<sup>v</sup> Adapted in part from the Campaign for People's Goals for Sustainable Development (the People's Goals) <http://peoplesgoals.org/about-us/#sthash.NUTluXIb.dpuf>



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# Killing us with Hunger

## Indigenous perspectives on nutrition, food aid and food sovereignty in the central Amazon of Peru

Food and hunger have become urgent priorities in global discussions on tackling poverty and inequality. Yet the voices of those who are going hungry, those who bear the devastating consequences of malnutrition, are largely absent from the debate.

This report takes the case study of the Ashaninka people of Peru as an example of how the food crisis is affecting vulnerable communities around the world. It explores the food crisis in this part of the Amazon, its causes, the community's experiences over time, their efforts to address the problem and what they would like to see from government and policy makers.



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