**Food security challenges in Colombia**

By: Alejandro Agudelo Calle [translated by Deep L Translator]  
Doctor in Social Sciences and researcher of the RERDSA group of the Institute of Regional Studies of the University of Antioquia (Colombia)

Colombia has 48,258,494 people, according to the last census in 2018. Women represent 51.2% of the country's total and men 48.8%. The population over 65 years of age has been increasing and now represents 9.1%, while those under 5 years of age have decreased: they are 8.4%. This same downward trend is experienced by the average household size in Colombia: 3.1 persons per household. There is an important growth of the so-called unipersonal households. Women now attend higher education, which means that the age at which they have children has increased (Semana, 2019). The distribution of the population by location is concentrated in the municipal capitals (77.1%), the rest live in populated centres (7.1%) or in dispersed rural areas (15.8%) (DANE, 2019). Colombia has 102 Indigenous peoples, representing slightly more than 3% of the population.

With respect to food and nutritional security, Colombia, like the other countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, shows discouraging figures with respect to the achievement of the goal of zero hunger. The number of undernourished people in the region has been increasing in recent years, with South America being the most affected with 21.4 million (FAO, PAHO, WFP, & UNICEF, 2018). Among the most relevant causes of hunger and malnutrition are the economic contraction, political conflicts in some Latin American and Caribbean countries, natural phenomena, growth in poverty rates and extreme poverty.

Added to the above is the effect of unhealthy eating patterns that have been occurring in the region for two decades, further undermining the situation among the most disadvantaged territories and populations (FAO, 2019b; FAO et al., 2018). Paradoxically, the map of malnutrition also includes data on overweight and obesity, known as "hidden hunger". According to the FAO, 104.7 million adults in Latin America are obese, that is, almost one in four adults, and every year there are 3.6 million new obese. In Colombia, 56.6% of men and 61.2% of women are overweight (University of Manizales, 2019).

Colombia, in particular, has been affected in recent years by the fall in international oil prices, which has led to a decrease in export revenues and a reduction in US dollar reserves. As a result, the national peso has devalued against the dollar, which has implications for higher food imports, reduced availability and higher prices for food (FAO, 2019b, pp. 73-74).

Other factors that affect food security in Colombia are: the import of food at levels well above domestic production, the impossibility of populations to access food, the non-industrialization of agriculture, the loss of its diversity, high social inequality indices, poverty, unemployment, informality in the countryside, migration from the countryside to the city, the high concentration of land ownership and the conflict over land use, the planting of illicit crops and the foreignization of land.

One of the most relevant factors affecting food security in Colombia is the progressive increase in food imports, which makes it dependent, mainly on the United States and Canada, for supplies (Gaviria, 2016 In: Epstein, 2016). In 2016, Colombia imported around 30% of the food consumed by households (ElHeraldo, 2016), a fairly high figure considering that the country has great potential in terms of land and climate. This figure has not changed much recently. But this was not always the case. At the beginning of the 1980s, Colombia was a country that enjoyed outstanding food self-sufficiency and supplied all the national demand for agricultural goods. It was even one of the sectors that contributed strongly to the nation's GDP (Fajardo Montoya, 2014).

The change took place in the following decade (1990s), when the policies of economic opening and the installation of the neoliberal model began to be implemented. This is evidenced by the fact that between 1990 and 1997 there was a strong decrease in the cultivated area, going from 4 million 900 thousand hectares to 4 million 261 thousand, figures that continued to decrease to 2009 (Mejía Triana, 2016). Imports went from 15.5% of GDP in 1990 to 46.9% in 1997 (Fajardo Montoya, 2002). As a result, there was a reduction in the supply of food, which meant that almost 50% of these began to be imported.

According to some analyses, one of the causes of lack of food autonomy in Colombia lies in the fact that its agriculture is not industrialized and is dependent, to a great extent, on the production of peasants in small plots or farms to produce 40% of Colombian entire population basic food needs (Universidad del Rosario, 2016). Likewise, the loss of biodiversity also has a great impact on the country's food autonomy. This loss is associated with climate change, pollution, overexploitation of resources and deforestation, to mention the most relevant (FAO, 2019c).

Other predominant factors are social inequality, poverty, unemployment and informality in the countryside. Colombia has historically been an unequal country; consequently, the enjoyment of rights and access to the benefits of development have been restricted for the majority of its citizens. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Colombia is the most unequal country in Latin America, and it would take 330 years for it to escape poverty. This would be equivalent to 11 generations (BBC News, 2018).

According to the National Department of Statistics (Dane), the unemployment rate has been rising in recent months, to the point of exceeding two percentage digits. The economically inactive population increased in May 2019 by 596 thousand people compared to May 2018 (Portfolio, 2019). This directly results in the inability to buy food. To this panorama is added the phenomenon of informality, which also leaves the country in a bad position. According to Dane, 48.2% of workers are in informality, that is, it affected 10.8 million people in 2018 (ElTiempo, 2019a). And in the countryside the situation is much worse, since informality exceeds 86%, according to the president of the Society of Farmers of Colombia SAC (El Pais, 2019).

Another element that hits the countryside hard is the increasing migration to the big cities. By the end of the 20th century, more than 70% of Colombians were already residing in urban centers, a trend that has increased over the years (Fifth, 2019). Indigenous populations have moved in large numbers to both urban and peri-urban centers (FAO et al., 2018). These migrations are due, among other things, to the historical violence they have suffered from the domination of the land. The concentration of land ownership and the conflicts generated by the use of land, as well as the foreignization (increasing foreign ownership) of land, stand out. Data provided by the Atlas of the Distribution of Rural Property in Colombia, in 2012, clearly show that 1997 was the year in which Colombia presented the highest figure of inequality with respect to land tenure —0.88 in the GINI coefficient (Mejía Triana, 2016). One of the latest reports of the National Agricultural Census states forcefully that "one million peasant households live in less space than a cow has to graze" (Paz Cardona & Latam, 2018).

This situation is accompanied by conflicts over land use, since Colombia has been characterized by privileging economic activities that generate more economic income over agricultural production. For example, the mining sector was given 5.8 million hectares without taking into account the harmful impacts that this type of activity has on ecosystems. The same happens with the percentage of land suitable for agriculture destined for large companies that sell biofuels or for the livestock sector, to cite the most representative cases (Week, 2012). The use of land for illicit crop cultivation should be added to the above. According to the annual report of the United Nations Integrated Illicit Crop Monitoring System (Simci) of 2017, there was an increase of 17%. The total area grew from 146,000 to 171,000 hectares, according to the UN. It should be noted that this has been the highest figure since this international organization monitors the aggregate size of these crops (ElPaís, 2018). Finally, a no less important variable is the foreignization of the land. Since 2011, the existence of five national and seven foreign groups was announced with investments on 130,000 hectares, in addition to investing on another 900,000 hectares by China and India (Fajardo Montoya, 2014).

The previous discussion shows the food insecurity that Colombia is suffering and has been suffering. However, not all populations suffer from this phenomenon in the same way. Reports from national and international organizations have shown that Indigenous communities are among the most vulnerable populations (FAO, 2019a, 2019c; Government of Colombia, 2012). Armed conflict, the extractive development model, mega-projects, monoculture, territorial dispossession, forced displacement, drug trafficking and poverty (FAO, 2015) are some of the phenomena that most affect the 102 Indigenous communities living in Colombia. Extermination is another of the most current risks. Based on the latest report on Indigenous peoples in Colombia by the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia ONIC and the Historical Memory Center, 70% of Colombia's Indigenous peoples are at risk of extermination (ElEspectador, 2019).

And within these communities, children are the weakest links. Child mortality is alarming compared to urban populations. The figures of the Corporation for the Support of Popular Communities CODACOP, among others, are conclusive: an average of 17 out of every 100 Indigenous children born die during the first year of life (CODACOP, FUCAI, CEE, & CPI, 2011). In terms of nutritional status, the ENSIN survey (Colombian Family Welfare Institute, 2010) showed for the first time the delay in height of Indigenous children under the age of 5 compared to other children.

One of the Indigenous peoples that has had more visibility in the different media in the country in recent years has been the Wayuu. Their ancestral territory is located in what is now known as the Department of La Guajira, northern Colombia, and in the State of Zulia, Venezuela. They are shepherds and fishermen, and their agriculture is seasonal in most cases. These people live in diverse ecosystems in this peninsula of northern Colombia, so there is high variability in both their productive activities and their food systems.

The Wayuu have suffered serious food problems that have caused the death of 110 children between 2017 and 2019, according to the National Institute of Health (ElTiempo, 2019b). But this situation is not recent. The National Survey of Health and Nutritional Situation ENSIN, evidenced since 2005 that the Atlantic region, where are located the Wayuu, displaced the Pacific as the geographical place with greatest child malnutrition. Between 2008 and 2013, 2,969 children under the age of 5 died; 278 died from malnutrition and 2,691 more deaths could have been avoided if it had not been for the failure of health services (Puerta Silva et al., 2017). This has led to the declaration of the humanitarian crisis in the region and the activation of protection measures by the State (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2014). If we look back, we can see that the phenomenon of hunger in this community dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. According to the documentary *Shawantama'ana*, the Wayuu approached the beaches of the northern Gulf of Maracaibo to negotiate food products with the boats that arrived there.

The Guajira represents 1.76% of Colombia's surface and is made up of 15 municipalities. According to the latest records, the population is close to one million people, and it is the department with the greatest ethnic diversity. 20% of the country's Indigenous population is concentrated here, being the Wayuu, the largest ethnic group with a population of approximately 400,000 (Procuraduría General de la Nación, 2016).

Multiple and diverse factors explain the phenomenon of hunger in this region. The semi-desert condition of the territory has been the most reiterative factor in the line of explanations; however, there are other determining variables as well. The lack of food supply as a result of the closure of the border with Venezuela, the abusive use of one of the main rivers for mining purposes, extractive projects, climate change, poverty, corruption and the inefficiency of social programs to respond to crises are the most representative causes (Puerta Silva et al., 2017).

In view of the fact that the Wayuu have ancestrally inhabited a region straddling Colombia and Venezuela, what happens politically and economically in either of the two countries affects them. Thus, while the Venezuelan economy was strong, the Wayuu brought food to their Colombian relatives. But as the neighboring country's economy began to decline and food shortages increased, the Wayuu on the Colombian side were disrupted by the decline in Venezuelan products, with their diets and overall subsistence hit (Puerta Silva et al., 2017).

As mentioned, the Wayuu territory stands out for its semi-desert condition, which is why the lack of water is a constant. The main sources of this resource come from reservoirs, wells and rivers. The Ranchería River, the only and most important tributary of the Guajira, has been affected by the construction of the El Cercado Dam and by the mining activities that have been carried out for more than 30 years in the massive coal mine known as El Cerrejón. In the face of the multinational mining company's attempt to divert it for its own commercial benefits, the Guajira population strongly opposed it because it put the water supply of the Wayuu and the rest of the Guajira population at risk (Semana, 2016). However, the Arroyo Bruno River did manage to be diverted with great consequences for neighboring populations and ecosystems. According to some Indigenous groups, like Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu and the Civic Committee for the Dignity of the Guajira, the extractive activities of El Cerrejón affect the water cycles, drying and contaminating the water sources that feed community aqueducts and subterranean wells.

Climate change has also added to the water crisis suffered by the Wayuu. The deepening phenomenon of El Niño has produced droughts throughout the Department of La Guajira, so the rains are less and less, decreasing the sowing due to dry soil or loss of crops by the impossibility of irrigation, as well as the death of their animals and decreased marketing.

Poverty is a very important variable in this region of the country. According to DANE, 53% of La Guajira is income poor, which results in insufficient money to buy basic goods. The Guajira also occupies first place in the incidence of extreme poverty or indigence, i.e., that which shows the proportion of the population that has difficulty accessing the basic food basket. Likewise, income inequality is the highest in the country according to the GINI index.

The Guajira also occupies prominent positions in terms of corruption, as one of the reports of the Comptroller's Office of Colombia states. Among the cases that most affect food and nutritional security in the region are the irregularities found in the PAE School Feeding Program and in the health, housing, aqueduct and sewerage sectors (Puerta Silva et al., 2017).

Finally, media coverage found that La Guajira's social programmes are inefficient, both in responding to and preventing food crises. This is due to two reasons: the corruption of the operators that contract with the State and the disarticulation between the public and private actors that operate in the department. Even the Attorney General of the Nation recently (August 2019) asked the responsible authorities to comply with the ruling of the Constitutional Court that orders the protection of the children of La Guajira. The Court's ruling established a schedule of actions, in addition to the creation of a special mechanism for concerted follow-up with Wayuu communities and with the accompaniment of the Ombudsman's Office for the protection of children's rights. The sentence has yet to be executed (ElTiempo, 2019b).

The Colombian State has been making progress in food security policies, such as Document CONPES Social 113, which outlined the 2008 National Food and Food Security Plan and proposed, among other things, to increase domestic food production, expand access to food and support local production of healthy food. However, such plans have largely remained on paper. The lack of national leadership has not allowed the consolidation of food and nutritional security plans that solve in a sustainable manner the problems of hunger and malnutrition suffered by a large part of the population, especially the most vulnerable population such as Indigenous people and, in this particular case, the Wayuu population (Government of Colombia, 2012).

But it is not only the State that has taken initiatives to solve the Wayuu's food security problems. UNICEF and FUCAI (Fundación Caminos de Identidad – Identity Paths Foundation) developed, together with other national and international agencies, and hand in hand with the community, the project Intercultural Integrated Care of Wayuu Children in the Municipality of Manaure, between 2011-2014. The main objective of the project was the design, development and implementation of an intercultural and comprehensive child care experience that would aim to improve the situation of child morbidity and mortality and promote the creation of favorable scenarios for the full enjoyment of their rights. Among the most representative achievements of this project are the creation of a social network of child care providers, the daily establishment of care routes, the empowerment of authorities and communities aimed at ensuring minimum living standards such as water, food, health, among others and the strengthening of community organization and Indigenous authorities for the exercise of citizenship (Fucai & Unicef, 2015).

Also included among the initiatives that come from the community are those focused on defending, for example, their rights to drinking water and food security. These social struggles have scaled up with international visits such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights CIDH, which ordered the Colombian government in 2015 to address the issue of food security (ElTiempo, 2016). Finally, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) has been present in the region through various programmes, especially for early childhood, through foundations, associations and corporations (ICBF, 2018). In short, many national and international organizations have tried, in some way, to contribute to the elimination of hunger suffered by the Wayuu; however, these efforts are far from structurally resolving the phenomenon of hunger, malnutrition and obesity in the region and the country.

General Bibliography [items consulted in original Spanish]

BBC News. (2018, August 2). Why in Colombia it takes 11 generations to get out of poverty and in Chile 6. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-45022393

CODACOP, FUCAI, CEE, & CPI. (2011). La niñez y el futuro de los pueblos indígenas. Bogotá.

DANE. (2019). Demography and the Colombian population 2019. Retrieved from https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/demografia-y-poblacion

Ombudsman's Office. (2014). Humanitarian crisis in La Guajira 2014. Bogotá.

ElEspectador. (2019, August 11). Seventy per cent of Colombia's Indigenous peoples are at risk of extermination. Retrieved from https://www.elespectador.com/colombia2020/justicia/verdad/el-70-de-los-pueblos-indigenas-de-colombia-esta-en-riesgo-de-exterminio-articulo-875499?fbclid=IwAR2YYRnVns6sd427AO0qKY8frwG8rEhJpdx5t9ECNuWHuLV0cJORnvdmWoM

ElPais. (2018, September 20). Colombia broke its coca cultivation record last year. Retrieved from https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/09/19/colombia/1537380226\_625308.html

ElPais. (2019, April 15). "Informality exceeds 86% in the field": President of the SAC. Retrieved from https://www.elpais.com.co/economia/informalidad-supera-el-86-en-el-campo-presidente-de-la-sac.html

ElTiempo. (2016). Hunger in La Guajira. Retrieved from https://www.eltiempo.com/multimedia/especiales/escasez-de-alimentos-y-desnutricion-en-colombia/16465235/1/index.html

ElTiempo. (2019a, February 12). Informality of workers does not give way and is 48.2%, according to Dane. Retrieved from https://www.eltiempo.com/economia/cifras-de-la-informalidad-laboral-en-colombia-a-enero-de-2019-326116

ElTiempo. (2019b, August 13). The humanitarian crisis of Wayuu children is still not a priority for the Government. Retrieved from https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/crisis-humanitaria-de-ninos-wayuu-sigue-sin-ser-prioridad-del-gobierno-399776?fbclid=IwAR2DUN6A9GGAmSJXm8vLCPzUDNqfzUmIkrQNpWgXx6nyaYR74WHCcQ3sl34

Epstein, L. (2016). Food Security. AMBIENTE SOCIEDAD Association. Bogotá.

Fajardo Montoya, D. (2002). To sow peace you have to loosen the soil. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Fajardo Montoya, D. (2014). Colombia: agriculture and capitalism. In Capitalismo: tierra y poder en América Latina (1982-2012) (pp. 65-113). Buenos Aires: Ediciones Continente.

FAO. (2015). Food, territory and memory. Situación alimentaria de los pueblos indígenas en Colombia. Bogotá: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

FAO. (2019a). Climate change and food and nutritional security in Latin America and the Caribbean. Santiago, Chile.

FAO. (2019b). The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World. Protecting oneself against the slowdown and weakening of the economy. Rome

FAO (2019c). FAO in Colombia. Colombia at a glance. Retrieved from http://www.fao.org/colombia/fao-en-colombia/colombia-en-una-mirada/es/

FAO, OPS, WFP, & UNICEF. (2018). Panorama of Food and Nutritional Security. Inequality and food systems. FAO, OPS, FP, UNICEF. Santiado, Chile. Retrieved from http://www.fao.org/publications/es%0Ahttp://www.fao.org/3/a-i6747s.pdf

Fucai, & Unicef. (2015). Life Weaving Indigenous Communities. Comprehensive intercultural care of Wayuu children. Bogotá: Kimpres. Retrieved from https://unicef.org.co/sites/default/files/informes/comunidades\_tejedoras\_de\_vida\_0.pdf

Government of Colombia. (2012). National Plan for Food and Nutritional Security (PNSAN) 2012-2019. National Government of Colombia. Bogotá.

ICBF. (2018). Entities contracted to operate early childhood programmes in 2018. Regional La Guajira. Bogotá. Retrieved from https://www.icbf.gov.co/sites/default/files/la\_guajira\_eas\_primera\_infancia\_2018.pdf

Colombian Family Welfare Institute. (2010). ENSIN: National Nutritional Situation Survey. Retrieved from https://www.icbf.gov.co/bienestar/nutricion/encuesta-nacional-situacion-nutricional

Mejia Triana, M. A. (2016). Food security in Colombia: changes and vulnerabilities. Bogotá: Universidad Central. Retrieved from http://www.ucentral.edu.co/images/documentos/editorial/2017\_Seguridad\_alimentaria\_001.pdf

Paz Cardona, A., & Latam, M. (2018, April 25). One million peasant households in Colombia have less land than a cow. Sustainable Week. Retrieved from https://sostenibilidad.semana.com/impacto/articulo/concentracion-de-la-tierra-en-colombia-el-1-por-ciento-de-las-fincas-mas-grandes-ocupan-el-81-por-ciento-de-la-tierra/40882

Portafolio, R. (2019, June 28). Unemployment in Colombia continues to rise. Retrieved from https://www.portafolio.co/economia/desempleo-en-colombia-en-mayo-de-2019-531082

Procuraduría General de la Nación. (2016). Wayúu people: with a hunger for dignity, a thirst for justice and other unsatisfied needs. Bogotá

Puerta Silva, C., Restrepo Parra, A., Gutiérrez, V., Valencia Cortés, É., Muñetón Santa, G., & Ceballos, Y. (2017). Hunger-Free Project. La Guajira. Medellín.

Quinto, R. P. (2019). El campo y la ciudad: Colombia, from rural country to urban country. Bogotá. Retrieved from http://www.banrepcultural.org/biblioteca-virtual/credencial-historia/numero-119/el-campo-y-la-ciudad-colombia-de-pais-rural-pais-urbano

Semana. (2012). Special Report: The Forgotten Pillars of the Earth. Retrieved from https://goo.gl/mBKEr2

Semana. (2016, November 10). El río que se robaron: el documental del exterminio del pueblo wayúu. Retrieved from https://www.semana.com/cultura/articulo/el-rio-que-se-robaron-el-exterminio-del-pueblo-wayuu-documental-de-la-guajira/498694

Semana. (2019, July 7). We are 48,258,494 people in Colombia. Semana Magazine. Retrieved from https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/cuantos-habitantes-tiene-colombia-48258494/622241

University of Manizales. (2019). One in four adults suffers from obesity in Colombia. Retrieved March 13, 2019, from http://umcentral.umanizales.edu.co/index.php/2019/03/13/uno-de-cada-cuatro-adultos-sufre-de-obesidad-en-colombia/

Rosario University. (2016). "About the Fascicule. Who are the Colombian peasants today? Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario.