



## Indigenous Shawi communities and national food security support: Right direction, but not enough



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### ABSTRACT

Food insecurity is a major challenge facing Peru's Indigenous Shawi communities, who receive food support through national level programs. There is limited research, however, on how national food and social programming support is perceived, received and used among Indigenous communities. We address this research gap by characterizing the preferred diet and coping mechanisms among Shawi Indigenous households, and investigating community perspectives on the national food program and national social supports. We used a mixed methods approach, including a quantitative survey among eleven Shawi communities in the Peruvian Amazon (n = 177 households), and semi-structured interviews with key informants (n = 24). We found that national food programs in Peru rarely provide foods that are desired and preferred among the Shawi, particularly familiar and locally-sourced protein sources such as bushmeat and fish. Food and social programming requirements do not integrate consideration of the remoteness of many vulnerable households, and are considered culturally or linguistically inaccessible to many families. In some cases, foods supplied by national programs are not consumed as they are perceived as unfamiliar. Key opportunities to improve food and social programming include: monitoring and revising eligibility requirements for remote and highly vulnerable households; increasing provision of locally-preferred protein food and familiar food types; avoiding use of written Spanish as a sole source of information to support programming; extending food provision outside of school months; developing contingency plans during education sector strikes; considering hiring of staff with working knowledge of local languages for community distributions; using visual or oral communication rather than written communication to increase accessibility of programs; increasing knowledge on the use and nutritional value of external food; and considering exemptions to school and health eligibility requirements during the rainy season and during sector strikes. Nationally-developed programming that does not consider Indigenous and cultural contexts risks inefficiency, limited improvement of health outcomes, and the potential to increase inequities in Indigenous health.

### 1. Introduction

Despite recent economic gains, high food insecurity remains a national challenge in Peru (Ministerio de Desarrollo e Inclusión Social, 2012). The Peruvian government has launched ambitious initiatives to improve nutritional indicators with notable success; for example, among children under 5 years, stunting has decreased from 37% in the 1990s to 19% in 2014 (Urke et al., 2014). National initiatives have been unable, however, to reduce high malnutrition among vulnerable and

remote rural populations, particularly among children (Huicho et al., 2016). Targeted nutrition-related programming in Peru has typically focused on geographically isolated and economically deprived areas since the rural poor have had the highest rates of child malnutrition in the country (Programa Juntos, 2014). There has been limited consideration, however, of the unique needs and contexts of Indigenous peoples – often among the poorest and most remote populations in the country – within nutrition programs (Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas, 2009). Yet significant disparities in malnutrition rates have

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been consistently reported between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in Peru and globally, with ethnicity recognized as an important factor underlying social determinants of child malnutrition (Díaz et al., 2015; Lutter and Chaparro, 2008).

In the last two decades, Peruvian authorities have shifted from their initial approach of food assistance programs to national social interventions with an emphasis on household well-being (Programa Juntos, 2017). Evaluation of the *Vaso de Leche* (Glass of Milk) initiative – the largest food program in the country – has identified no detectable evidence of impact on child malnutrition (Copestake, 2008; Stifel and Alderman, 2006). The *Juntos* program – a cash conditional transfer program implemented in 2005 to promote access to health services and improve nutrition among children and pregnant women from disadvantaged households – has been credited with much of the decrease in malnutrition in Peru over the last decade (Acosta and Haddad, 2014; Perova and Vakis, 2009; Sánchez and Jaramillo, 2012). Despite this, investigation to confirm or validate presumed linkages between nutrition sensitive programs and malnutrition in Peru remains limited and with mixed results. Critiques of *Juntos* have highlighted that while the program supports consumption of nutritious food, quantitative evidence linking *Juntos* to reductions in malnutrition is limited and still in early stages (Escobal and Benites, 2012a; Gahlaut, 2011; Pérez-Lu et al., 2016; Saldaña et al., 2009; World Bank, 2009). Concurrently, qualitative investigations have highlighted constraints to on-the-ground success of the *Juntos* program, including unclear and restricted eligibility of who qualifies for the program (e.g. single mothers and windows often excluded) (Escobal and Benites, 2012b; Jones et al., 2008; Saldaña et al., 2009; Streuli, 2012).

Peruvian food and cash transfer programs specify the need to be nutritive and/or culturally adapted for local populations (Ministerio de Desarrollo e Inclusión Social, 2016; Programa Juntos, 2016); yet, there has been limited characterization of whether these interventions are in fact approaching food security in the context of Indigenous traditional food systems. For example, information on the acceptability and use of food and cash transfer programs among Indigenous peoples in Latin America, and particularly in Peru, more generally remains scarce (Gutiérrez et al., 2012). We identified one report from Peru involving Andean and Amazonian communities, highlighting limitations for the implementation of *Juntos* in different cultural contexts (Correa and Roonnaraine, 2013).

Globally, the nutritional and social characteristics of many traditional food systems among Indigenous communities have been documented, yet the bulk of this research has been based in populations from high income countries, with more limited comparable research in low and middle regions (Amaral, 2005; Kuhnlein et al., 2009; Lardeau et al., 2011; Ortiz et al., 2013; Perreault, 2005; Roche et al., 2007; Romeo et al., 2015). Limited knowledge of food systems, including diet and coping mechanisms to deal with food insecurity, among remote Indigenous communities constrains our ability to effectively evaluate existing food programs and tackle persistent inequity in food security between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peruvian populations.

We contribute to addressing this research gap by characterizing diet and coping mechanisms for food insecurity among Indigenous Shawi communities located in Loreto region in the Peruvian Amazon, with emphasis on community experiences of national food and social support programs. The Balsapuerto District (predominantly Shawi ethnicity) was ranked as the third most vulnerable district for food insecurity in Peru (Ministerio de Desarrollo e Inclusión Social, 2012). Our previous research in this area indicated that virtually all households with young children were food insecure, with high prevalence of stunting and anemia among children  $\leq 5$  years old (Zavaleta et al., in prep). Here, we characterize the context of the food systems underpinning this level of malnutrition and food insecurity among the Shawi, and the role of national food programming in responding to remote Indigenous food insecurity. This work aims to inform evidence-based national, regional and local programming to tackle food insecurity among Peruvian

Indigenous peoples in general, and Shawi communities in particular. Our objectives include: (1) characterizing the typical and preferred diet and coping mechanisms among Shawi households, (2) investigating community perspectives on national food programs and social support, and (3) providing practical recommendations for Peruvian national food security programming.

## 2. National food security programing in Peru

Peru has promoted and implemented multiple initiatives, from different sectors and working at national and local levels, targeted at improving mother's and children's nutrition (Programa Juntos, 2017). The longest running and still active program, *Vaso de leche*, works locally through municipalities to provide a daily serving of food over the year to poor and extremely poor households. The most recently introduced and well-known national programs, however, include the conditional cash transfer program, *Juntos*, and the national school feeding program *Qali Warma*. (Vigorous child) These two programs are part of the main national strategy aimed at improving food security and nutrition in Peru by supporting mothers and children (Food and Nutrition Security Platform, 2016).

The *Vaso de leche* program distributes fortified whole milk – sometimes complemented with oat, rice, or quinoa flour – or other nationally produced food. Food distribution is prioritized based on need, with priority given to those households with children  $< 6$  years old, and/or pregnant and lactating women. Children aged 7–13 years, elders, and TB patients comprise the second prioritized group, accessing support only when the first priority sub-populations have been serviced (Stifel and Alderman, 2006). The implementation, distribution, supervision and evaluation of this program are the responsibility of the municipality. Additionally, each community has an elected *Vaso de Leche* mothers' committee, which is responsible for collecting, preparing and distributing the food (Alcázar, 2007).

The *Qali Warma* program, launched in 2012, was designed to provide quality food service for children  $> 3$  years attending public schools. The program aims to “Ensure food service every day of the school year according with users' characteristics and areas where they live” (Ministerio de Desarrollo e Inclusión Social, 2016). Depending on district poverty levels, some schools qualify to receive breakfast only, whereas others under extreme poverty will receive breakfast and lunch. A feeding school committee or CAE (*Comité de Alimentación Escolar*) is implemented to manage food aid from *Qali Warma*. In cases where the food is provided as a prepared meal, the CAE must receive and verify that the food is in a good state, and distribute and supervise consumption. When food is provided un-cooked, the CAE must also store, cook and organize food distribution daily (Programa Nacional de Alimentación Escolar Qali Warma, 2014).

While *Qali Warma* delivers food directly through the school, the *Juntos* program – active since 2005 – was designed to promote human capital and tackle poverty by promoting households' access to several public services included health and nutritional (Programa Juntos, 2017). Households are eligible if they have at least one target member (pregnant woman, child or adolescent under 19 years), who must attend health services or school to receive a monetary incentive of two hundred soles every two months ( $\sim 60$ USD). Pregnant women and children under 5 years must complete health attendance requirements, which include ante- and post-natal evaluation, growth monitoring, a series of vaccinations, and provision of micronutrients (iron and vitamin A for children, iron and folic acid for pregnant women). Children 6–14 years are required to attend school at least 85% of the academic year (Ministerio de Salud, 2011; Programa Juntos, 2014). One adult woman per household is selected to receive the economic benefit after signing an annual agreement, with suspension in cases where a participant does not attend or comply with the required health and/or educative conditions.

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