

Foodie destination Peru combats malnutrition in children

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Peru, a shining star in Latin America's culinary firmament, is battling alarming rates of malnutrition in children and pregnant women.

More than two in every five children under the age of three—43.6 percent of the total—suffer from [anemia](#) in the Andean country due to a poor diet, according to a family health survey done by Peru's statistics agency.

Nearly 30 percent of [pregnant women](#) suffer from anemia for the same reason—an iron deficiency blamed on low consumption of meat, poultry or fish, the study revealed.

Both rates have remained unchanged since 2011 despite Peru's high economic growth over the last decade.

"Combating anemia is a priority for the government and we want it to be a priority for Peru," said President Martin Vizcarra at the start of a nationwide campaign.

"We need to lower it from 43 percent to the goal that we have set ourselves of 19 percent within three years," he said.

The irony is that Peru—which draws 4.5 million tourists a year—is increasingly known not only for its archeological wonders like Machu Picchu, but also as a foodie paradise.

Two high-end eateries in the capital Lima—El Central and El Maito—are in the top 10 of this year's influential "World's 50 Best Restaurants" list.

Now one of the powerhouses of Latin America's economy, Peru's 4.9 percent growth is more than double the region's 2.4 percent average.

But that growth is leaving an increasing gap between the haves and have-nots.

Thousands of poor Peruvian families go hungry despite the fact that 60 percent of their income goes to buy food, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

"Anemia has severe effects on the psychomotor development of children, affecting their ability to learn, increasing the risk of disease, and even death," said a recent report by the FAO, the World Health Organization and the Pan American Health Organization.

Worse in Andes and Amazon

Pediatric anemia is more severe in the remote and poor Andean and Amazonian areas of Peru.

Around Lake Titicaca on the border with Bolivia, it reaches nearly 76 percent. In Iquitos, where the Amazon rises, it reaches 61.5 percent.

Peruvian politicians have long been aware of the scourge, but the remedy has proved elusive.

In April last year, then-president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski launched a plan to halve the rate of childhood anemia by 2021.

But his efforts were derailed months later by a bribery scandal which eventually forced his resignation.

His successor, Vizcarra, is plowing ahead with his own initiative, but in recent months, his government has been distracted by a constitutional reform aimed at fighting Peru's other main scourge, corruption.

And critics say a law passed in June that prohibits the government from spending on media advertising has made it impossible to use local radio stations in remote areas to promote the nutrition campaign.

Opposition leader Keiko Fujimori has attacked Vizcarra's government, saying that childhood anemia is a more urgent problem than constitutional reform.

Restaurants against hunger

In the absence of results on the ground, the NGO "Action Against Hunger" has taken the matter into its own hands, recruiting 400 restaurants and cafes to raise funds for a campaign to combat anemia.

Over the next two months, the "Restaurants against Hunger" will donate part of their earnings to tackle infant malnutrition in Santiago de Lucanamarca, a remote Andean district.

The money raised will finance "the training of mothers and health personnel, the sustainable production of basic foods, the revaluation of ancestral techniques, among other activities," said the NGO's director America Arias, who decried the "alarming" malnutrition statistics in Peru.

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