

FOOD INEQUALITIES IN RURAL FAMILIES: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS THAT CONDITION THE DAILY DIET

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ABSTRACT

The present research aimed to analyze the social and economic factors that condition the daily diet of rural families in the community of Papahurco, with the purpose of understanding how economic income, family dynamics, and living conditions influence dietary practices. It was developed under a qualitative approach with a descriptive design with interpretive scope. The information was obtained thru semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 families from the Papahurco community.

The results showed that the daily diet of families is conditioned by economic, social, institutional, and territorial factors, which influence access, availability, and food consumption. Likewise, it was identified that economic conditions, family organization, and subsistence strategies play an important role in the food decisions of rural households.

Likewise, it was identified that labor precariousness, unstable incomes, and subsistence agriculture condition purchasing and consumption decisions, prioritizing foods that provide greater satiety at a lower cost. It is concluded that food inequalities are due to the interaction of economic, social, institutional, and territorial factors, making it necessary to strengthen public policies and interventions from Social Work aimed at promoting food security, rural development, and reducing inequalities that affect the well-being of families.

KEYWORDS: Food inequality, daily nutrition, economic factors, rural families, food systems.

INTRODUCTION

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (FILAC) maintain that the food systems of Indigenous peoples are integral to their identity and social organization. Beyond contributing to community nutrition, these systems combat hunger and food insecurity. Their effectiveness stems from integrated territorial management and a close connection with nature, enabling the preservation of practices such as agriculture, hunting, fishing, gathering, and herding to ensure food security.

These practices create sustainability models that balance food production and consumption. This body of knowledge, practices, and ways of life is particularly relevant in a context where the international community faces the dual challenge of eradicating hunger and fostering the development of food systems that are sustainable, inclusive, and culturally appropriate (FAO & FILAC, 2015).

In this regard, factors such as the limited availability of healthy foods in rural areas, economic hardship, and the heavy burden of domestic responsibilities—often borne by women—limit families' ability to maintain nutritious dietary practices (Melby et al., 2020). These structural barriers affect diet quality and demonstrate that food-related decisions are shaped by broader social inequalities. According to Ballesteros et al. (2019), variables such as education level, place of residence, and gender roles fundamentally determine access to food. Daily nutrition is essential for the health and well-being of families, particularly in rural areas where structural conditions limit access to an adequate diet; Salazar and Torres (2018) note that dietary practices are influenced by families' social and economic contexts. In Ecuador, rural communities face significant wage insecurity. Barreno et al. (2018) point out that the instability of agricultural activity restricts household income, forcing families to devise strategies based on the popular and solidarity economy to overcome economic barriers and ensure their subsistence. In rural communities in Cotopaxi, limitations regarding nutritional quality and access to a balanced diet have been identified, linked to socioeconomic factors and the specific conditions of the rural environment (Guapi-Alava et al., 2025).

In rural settings, family income relies heavily on agricultural activity, which is subject to various economic, production, and market factors that affect household stability. In this regard, Chávez Espinoza et al. (2022) note that the income of farming families depends on factors such as access to productive resources, market access, the size of the agricultural holding, and available economic options. These conditions impact households' ability to meet their basic needs, particularly regarding access to quality food. Access to land and agricultural resources, socioeconomic conditions, and gender inequalities significantly influence opportunities to obtain nutritious, high-quality food (Dwomh et al., 2023). These structural factors determine the availability of and access to adequate

nutrition for families in rural areas; furthermore, they allow us to understand nutrition as a phenomenon linked to social inequalities rather than merely to individual preferences.

In the Ecuadorian context, Cordero-Ahiman et al. (2020) determine that food security in rural households is linked to social, economic, and territorial factors, including access to support programs, income levels, and conditions for agricultural production intended for self-consumption. The authors note that families dependent on agriculture face higher risks of food insecurity when faced with economic constraints or limited access to productive resources, which impacts the quality and variety of their diet. Furthermore, the nutritional transition in rural areas of Ecuador has altered not only dietary habits but also the ways in which families obtain their food (Gross et al., 2016). This process entails a shift from a diet based primarily on products from family farming and self-consumption to one that combines traditional foods with industrialized products purchased in the market. In a context where subsistence increasingly relies on monetary income, agricultural production shifts from being exclusively for consumption to being oriented toward commercialization.

In this regard, this research aims to analyze how social and economic factors shape the daily diets of rural families. The study seeks to understand how income availability, the economy, productive activities, and employment opportunities—alongside social factors such as family organization, gender roles, cultural practices, and subsistence strategies—influence food selection, preparation, and consumption. It also aims to understand the community's prevailing dietary patterns, taking into account family dynamics and the strategies families adopt in response to the economic and social inequalities present in their environment. Accordingly, the research seeks to answer the following question: How do social and economic factors shape the daily diets of families in the community of Papahurco, Salcedo Canton, Cotopaxi Province?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted to interpret the dietary experiences, perceptions, and practices of families in the Papahurco community within their own social and cultural context. According to Hernández Sampieri et al. (2014), the qualitative approach seeks to understand phenomena from the participants' perspective, considering the meanings they attribute to their experiences within the context in which they occur; this approach enabled an analysis of how social and economic factors influence the families' daily diet.

A descriptive methodological design with an interpretive scope was employed to describe the characteristics of dietary practices and to understand the influence of social and economic factors on the daily lives of rural families in Papahurco. This design made it possible to explore and interpret the participants' personal interrelationships and perceptions regarding the acquisition, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food, in relation to their family, economic, and community contexts.

The research focused on families residing in the rural community of Papahurco, located in the Salcedo Canton, Cotopaxi Province, Ecuador. The local economy relies on family farming—specifically the cultivation of tubers and cereals—as well as livestock rearing. Residents share dynamics typical of a rural environment, characterized by subsistence consumption, unstable income, and limited access to a varied diet. These economic realities make the community an ideal setting for examining food-related inequalities and interpreting how social and economic factors influence dietary practices.

A purposive sample of 15 families was selected based on accessibility and community representativeness. This approach enabled the study to reach the level of theoretical saturation necessary to identify common consumption patterns and recurring socioeconomic factors within the rural context. Inclusion criteria required permanent residence in the community—a key factor ensuring that diets were directly linked to the local geographic environment and local markets—and included multi-generational households, thereby allowing for an examination of support dynamics and food distribution. Additionally, the study considered families whose livelihoods were tied to the local economy—specifically through agriculture or informal employment—to analyze the impact on dietary habits. Finally, the voluntary participation of the individuals responsible for household food-related decision-making was a prerequisite.

Regarding data collection instruments, a semi-structured interview guide was used with the individuals responsible for food preparation and decision-making to understand the criteria guiding food selection and consumption. The information gathered provided insight into dietary trajectories, changes in daily diets, and their relationship with the social and economic factors present in the community. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, taking into account both the structural conditions and the family dynamics that influence the diets of rural families.

In this study, two main variables—independent and dependent—were defined; these variables represent the characteristics or elements of interest within the research and facilitate the organization of analysis categories as well as the interpretation of the results obtained. Furthermore, their proper definition contributes to maintaining coherence among the research problem, the objectives, the data collection instrument, and the analysis of the information (Rodríguez, Breña, and Esenarro, 2021).

Table 1. Identification of research variables

Variable	Definition	Category	Technique/Instrument
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Independent variable: Social, economic, and institutional factors	Factors related to economic status, family roles, community support, and institutional conditions that influence food access and consumption among rural families.	Economic status and food access Family roles and community support Institutional and territorial factors	Semi-structured interview/ Interview guide
Dependent variable: Daily diet and food inequality	Dietary patterns of rural families, considering access, frequency, quality, and variety of consumed foods	Daily diet	Semi-structured interview/ Interview guide

Note: Prepared by the authors based on the research focus.

The research process began by engaging with the Papahurco community and identifying participants who met the established criteria. Subsequently, the study's purpose was explained, and voluntary participation was requested, with guarantees regarding the protection of participants' identities. Direct semi-structured interviews were then conducted, creating a dialogue in which participants could share their experiences regarding family nutrition, economic hardships, cultural practices, and strategies used to ensure access to food. Data analysis involved coding, categorizing, and interpreting the qualitative information obtained from the interviews. The ATLAS.ti software was used to facilitate the organization and systematization of the data. The analysis identified categories linked to family economic conditions, food access, dietary practices, family roles, and strategies adopted in situations of food scarcity. Finally, the results were interpreted using thematic analysis, relating the findings to the study's objectives and the theoretical framework reviewed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Families in the Papahurco community exhibit dietary patterns characterized by a lack of variety, relying predominantly on locally produced foods and affordable products—such as cereals, tubers, and processed foods—while the consumption of high-quality proteins, fruits, and vegetables remains limited and irregular.

Table 2. Key findings

Category	Finding	Frequency
Economic situation and access to food	Diet depends on economic income	14/15
Family roles and community support	It is primarily women who purchase and prepare food.	13/15
Institutional and territorial factors	The majority do not receive State support.	12/15
	A minority of households receive the Human Development Grant and pensions or rural social security coverage.	3/15
Daily diet	When money is scarce, they stop consuming beef and pork, while chicken consumption also decreases	15/15
	Older adults exhibit greater food insecurity.	15/15

Note. Authors' own elaboration.

Job insecurity, unstable income, and reliance on subsistence agriculture shape purchasing and consumption decisions, forcing families to prioritize foods that provide greater satiety at a lower cost. This situation aligns with the findings of Leavy (2022), who notes that income instability leads to the adoption of consumption strategies that favor foods of low nutritional quality.

Economic situation and access to food

Table 3. Systematization of the category "Economic situation and access to food."

Aspect analyzed	Findings	Synthesized evidence
Aporte económico al hogar	In most households, two members contribute financially to supporting the family.	Most families indicated that income comes primarily from agriculture, animal husbandry, or supplementary work activities.

Influence of income on diet	Diet depends on the household's available financial income.	Interviewees stated that the quantity and variety of food purchased are determined by available financial income.
Access to food outlets	There is a perception that the availability of stores in the community is limited.	More than half of the participants noted a lack of sufficient food outlets, which restricts purchasing options

Note: Authors' own elaboration based on semi-structured interviews conducted in the Papahurco community.

The diet of rural families in the community is conditioned by their economic situation; it was found that the availability of income largely dictates food purchasing, limiting access to products with higher nutritional value when financial resources are insufficient. This situation reflects the fact that dietary decisions are driven not only by family preferences but also by economic constraints.

Furthermore, participants noted a scarcity of commercial outlets in the community, which reduces options for obtaining a varied diet and compels families to rely on their own produce. Additionally, when income drops, priority is given to purchasing staple foods—such as rice, vegetables, pasta, potatoes, and flour—while consumption of items like animal protein is reduced. These results indicate that dietary choices are primarily determined by household economic conditions rather than just consumption preferences, highlighting how economic vulnerability impacts food security among the rural population.

These findings align with those of Chávez Espinoza et al. (2022), who maintain that family income is the primary factor influencing food security and access to food. Similarly, Salazar and Torres (2018) state that socioeconomic conditions shape dietary practices by limiting households' access to a varied and adequate diet. Meanwhile, Dwomoh et al. (2023) emphasize that low-income households in rural areas are more susceptible to food insecurity due to poverty and economic disparities. These factors manifest in the Papahurco community through a reliance on income to purchase food and access issues stemming from geographical location, highlighting the need to strengthen public policies aimed at improving food security and the quality of life for rural families.

Table 4: *Qualitative analysis matrix for the category "Family roles and community support"*

Category	Code (ATLAS.ti)	Synthesized evidence	Interpretation
Family roles	Family roles	Women generally purchase, prepare, and distribute food.	Traditional gender roles persist in food-related organization.
Family roles	Decision-making	In more than half of households, financial decisions are shared with a partner.	Food-related decisions depend on family dynamics.
Community support	Limited institutional support	Most participants reported receiving little support from public institutions.	Limited institutional intervention increases food vulnerability.

Note. Authors' own elaboration.

Regarding family roles, the organization of food-related activities continues to follow traditional gender patterns. Most of the families interviewed consisted of three to four members; nuclear households predominated, although some extended families were also identified. In the majority of the households interviewed, women bear primary responsibility for purchasing, preparing, and distributing food, whereas decisions regarding family expenses are typically shared with their partners when both earn an income. This distribution highlights the persistence of domestic responsibilities historically assigned to women in rural settings (Njuki et al., 2022).

Gender Roles: Women as the Central Figure in Food Management

Analysis of the interviews reveals that food management is a predominantly female task; despite nuances in decision-making, there is a clear trend in which the woman (whether wife, mother, or daughter) bears direct responsibility for purchasing and preparing food. In several instances, this responsibility is shared exclusively among women of different generations—such as daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law, or mothers and daughters. Only in isolated cases does a man assume this role, or is the task distributed among all family members (Abokyi et al., 2022; Chaturvedi et al., 2024).

Regarding decision-making—as opposed to the actual execution (preparation)—the choice of what to eat reflects a more collaborative structure. Decisions made jointly by the couple or involving the entire family predominate. Nevertheless, in approximately one-third of households, the woman remains the sole decision-maker regarding the daily menu.

Community Support: Limited Support Networks

A lack of community support is evident; the most common response regarding a shortage of funds is that individuals receive no assistance from anyone and must "find a way" on their own. Participants did not report receiving assistance from community organizations, soup kitchens, or neighborhood networks providing aid during crises; the absence of an organized community social fabric leaves those without active family ties—particularly older adults—in a vulnerable situation.

The relationship between the gathered data and theoretical evidence reinforces the idea that eating is not a purely biological act. On one hand, Salazar and Torres (2018) argue that nutritional practices respond directly to the caregiving structures within each household. Similarly, Alvarado Rodríguez et al. (2026) approach eating as a sociocultural practice in which gender roles determine the distribution of responsibilities related to food preparation, selection, and consumption. These insights highlight how the burden of the food dynamics falls upon rural women—from selecting ingredients to serving the meals. This scenario reveals a persistent gap in the division of unpaid domestic labor in rural areas. Interviews in the Papahurco community indicated that women remain primarily responsible for organizing family meals; however, this responsibility is compounded by other productive activities, such as agricultural work, animal husbandry, and generating household income. Likewise, the results align with the findings of Dwomoh et al. (2023), who note that social and community support networks play a crucial role in reducing food insecurity in the most vulnerable households; yet, when these networks are inadequate, families face greater difficulties in accessing proper nutrition.

Institutional and territorial factors

Institutional and territorial factors are elements that can foster or constrain the food security of rural households. Based on an analysis of the interviews, aspects related to institutional support and territorial mobility conditions were identified; the results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Analysis of the "Institutional and territorial factors" category

Aspect analyzed	Finding	Interpretation
Institutional support	The majority of families stated they did not receive support from the State or other institutions. Only a small number indicated receiving the Human Development Grant.	The lack of State support demonstrates that families rely primarily on their own financial and productive resources to meet their food needs.
Transport and mobility	9 of the 15 interviewees noted that difficulties in traveling to the market or transporting their products affect food access and marketing.	Geographic conditions affect families unevenly, as mobility influences access to food and opportunities to market agricultural produce.

Note. Authors' own elaboration.

The majority of participants stated that they do not receive support from the State or other institutions to improve their nutrition or living conditions. Only a minority indicated they were beneficiaries of the Human Development Grant (Bono de Desarrollo Humano), a pension, or Social Security (including the Rural Social Security scheme); according to the interviewees, these benefits primarily help cover food and medication expenses. This situation demonstrates that social protection is insufficient to meet the needs of most households, thereby increasing their vulnerability to food insecurity.

The results reveal limited institutional support for families in the Papahurco community, a situation that heightens their food-related vulnerability. This finding aligns with Bravo Moreano (2026), who notes that although Ecuador has policies aimed at strengthening family farming, their implementation across different territories remains fragmented, limiting small producers' access to resources, support programs, and development opportunities.

Regarding territorial factors, the majority of participants stated that transportation does not pose a significant obstacle to accessing food. This is because some families own vehicles, while others live near the main road, facilitating the use of public transport and travel to markets. However, not all families share this reality. Those living in more remote areas reported that infrequent public transport and long distances hinder both the sale of their agricultural products and access to outlets offering a wider variety of foods. This disparity demonstrates that territorial conditions do not have a uniform impact; rather, the effect depends on each family's geographic location and mobility.

These differences validate the findings of Cordero-Ahiman et al. (2020) regarding how territory and a lack of institutional support shape risk within family farming systems. Furthermore, these issues reinforce the need highlighted by the FAO and FILAC (2025)—organizations advocating for the design of differentiated public policies that account for the specific characteristics of each territory and ensure equitable access to basic services, infrastructure, and rural development programs. In communities like Papahurco, where the family economy relies

primarily on agriculture, the absence of institutional intervention limits opportunities to improve production, diversify diets, and strengthen food security.

Daily diet and food inequality

Table 6: *Qualitative Analysis Matrix for the Category "Economic Situation and Access to Food"*

Category	Code (ATLAS.ti)	Synthesized evidence	Interpretation
Daily diet	Insufficient income	Most interviewees stated that their income is insufficient to purchase all necessary food items.	Financial capacity shapes food choices and limits access to a varied diet.
Daily diet	Frequently consumed foods	The majority of interviewees mention frequently consuming soups, rice, and noodles.	Daily diets rely on foods that are frequently consumed, low-cost, and easily accessible to families.
Daily diet	Reduced meat consumption	Due to a lack of money, meat consumption decreases, and lower-cost foods are prioritized.	Economic inequality directly impacts nutritional quality.
Daily diet	Self-production	Most grow produce for family consumption.	Self-consumption serves as a food security strategy.
Daily diet	Family farming	Agriculture is the primary source of food and income for most households.	Dependence on agriculture determines household food stability.
Daily diet	Vulnerable groups	Older adults represent the group facing the greatest food-related difficulties.	Older adults are more vulnerable regarding food due to economic constraints that hinder access to a quality diet.

Note. Prepared by the authors based on interviews conducted in the Papahurco community.

The results demonstrate that economic factors play a decisive role in the diet of families in the community, compelling households to adopt adaptive strategies in the face of economic constraints. In this context, local agricultural production serves as a key buffer, ensuring self-sufficiency and reducing reliance on market-purchased food. Conversely, livestock rearing is primarily market-oriented; while it provides a source of income for families, meat consumption tends to be infrequent and depends on each household's specific circumstances. The testimonies gathered confirm that food acquisition is dictated by income levels—a reality that reinforces the prioritization of low-cost food items. Protein consumption is curtailed as a budgetary adjustment; indeed, when asked, "Which foods does the family stop consuming when money is scarce?", the unanimous and recurring answer was "meat." These patterns demonstrate that consumption choices are not merely matters of individual preference but rather structural responses to economic hardship.

Such behaviors indicate that dietary decisions are not driven solely by personal preferences but are shaped by the economic constraints facing rural families. It was found that many families supplement their diet by cultivating crops that thrive in the local area; this helps reduce the need for external food sources and ensures the availability of staples during periods of economic instability.

These findings align with Peralta et al. (2020), who argue that food availability in rural Ecuadorian communities is closely linked to small-scale agricultural production. However, producers face challenges such as low profitability, unpaid family labor, and poverty—factors that limit food security and force many families to devise strategies to ensure their daily food supply.

Another key finding is that the most frequently consumed foods among families in the Papahurco community are rice and pasta—products often purchased at the local market. These findings reflect a shift in traditional dietary patterns, where family diets combine local agricultural produce with commercially sourced foods.

These results align with the observations of Gross et al. (2016), who explain that diets in rural Ecuador are undergoing a nutritional transition characterized by the coexistence of traditional eating habits and the adoption of new products driven by economic, social, and commercial factors. In this context, the frequent consumption of rice, soups, and pasta in Papahurco may stem from families' need for low-cost, readily available, and easy-to-prepare foods, particularly given their limited financial resources.

It is also evident that older adults are the group most vulnerable to food insecurity within the community. This finding is consistent with the work of Hernández-Moreno et al. (2024), who analyzed food security among rural Indigenous older adults in Latin America and the Caribbean; they found that this group faces vulnerabilities that can hinder stable access to sufficient and adequate food. The authors emphasize the importance of considering the economic, social, and territorial factors that influence food security for older adults. In the Papahurco community, this situation manifests as greater dietary challenges for older adults, driven by economic constraints that limit their access to a high-quality diet.

CONCLUSIONS

The research demonstrates that food-related inequalities among rural families in the Papahurco community manifest as disparities in access to a varied, sufficient, and high-quality diet. These inequalities are primarily

driven by economic and social factors that directly influence households' daily diets; they are also linked to family organization, the distribution of care work, productive conditions, and community support networks. Key economic factors include insufficient and unstable income, reliance on agricultural activities and livestock rearing, and limited purchasing power for food. These budgetary constraints force households to prioritize affordable, highly filling foods—such as rice or pasta—while reducing their consumption of costlier items like meat and other products essential for a balanced diet. Consequently, this situation limits the ability to maintain a varied diet with higher nutritional value. Although family farming and subsistence production serve as important strategies for supplementing household diets, home-grown produce does not meet all nutritional needs; families therefore remain dependent on the market to acquire other products. This reflects the tension between traditional production and subsistence practices and modern dynamics of commercialization and consumption.

From a social perspective, gender roles, family responsibilities, and the vulnerabilities of specific groups—particularly older adults, who face greater challenges in accessing adequate nutrition due to limited income—are evident. Meanwhile, women generally take the lead in planning, acquiring, and preparing food. Taken together, these findings reveal that the food system in the Papahurco community is undergoing a transformation in which traditional subsistence practices coexist with an increasing reliance on the market.

This reality demonstrates that building sustainable food systems cannot be fully achieved as long as economic instability, limited access to healthy foods, gender inequalities, and institutional constraints continue to affect rural families. Moving toward sustainable food systems requires strengthening household productive capacities, improving economic opportunities, expanding access to healthy foods, and promoting a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities.

From a social work perspective, the research findings highlight the importance of strengthening collaboration between institutions and the community to improve family food security. They also underscore the need to drive initiatives that help alleviate the economic and social hardships affecting nutrition and foster better living conditions in the Papahurco community.

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