

Brazil still suffers from hunger

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Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)

From our correspondent

Every weekend, Elaine, 31, roams the market in this middle-class neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro. She traveled five kilometers to beg and try to collect a few cents. “I didn’t eat anything yesterday. Just an esfiha (sort of small quiche, editor’s note). But I have to buy powdered milk for her, she said, lifting her 2-year-old daughter under her arm, and each box costs 60 reais (a little more than 10 €, editor’s note). » Be a fortune, for this mother of three children, widowed and unemployed, living on the outskirts of the Brazilian megalopolis.

While she testifies to her situation, a little lady with gray hair approaches the fruit and vegetable stall and asks the market gardener if she can have a tomato. She finally takes the opportunity to slip two or three into a plastic bag. “She always does that. Afterwards, she will sell them elsewhere »grumbling, incredulous, the seller.

These two women are part of the impressive battalion of 33 million inhabitants who claim to suffer from hunger in Brazil, a country of continental dimensions which is nevertheless one of the largest agricultural producers in the world. “It’s twice the population of Rio”, says Renato Maluf, president of the NGO Rede Penssan, a network of researchers working on the issue of food sovereignty. According to their recent study, more than 15% of the population suffers from severe food insecurity, and more than 50% claim to have lacked food in the past year.

The pandemic has aggravated the situation, which has “deteriorating at an amazing rate”, continues Renato Maluf. During periods of confinement, housekeepers, like Elaine, were unable to work. It is women, and especially black women, like this mother, who have been penalized the most. According to a study by the Social Policy Center of the Getulio-Vargas Foundation (FGV), a laboratory of ideas in Rio, food insecurity has increased by 14 points among women (from 33% in 2019 to 47% in 2021), while it dropped by one point in the men’s category.

“This food insecurity of women directly affects children, notes Marcelo Neri, director of FGV Social. With the closure of schools, children no longer go to the canteen, where the poorest can eat for free. » Based on international comparisons, the researcher, a former minister of strategic affairs under Lula, says the poorest Brazilians suffer from food insecurity equivalent to countries like Zimbabwe, while the wealthiest almost reach the level of the Sweden. Mirroring social inequalities, hunger in Brazil persists even though the country is one of the main agricultural producers in the world. President Jair Bolsonaro once again boasted, at the recent Summit of the Americas, of the fact that Brazil nurtures “a billion people in the world”.

“The paradox has never been so strong”, says Marcelo Neri. Because if, on the one hand, agro-trade oriented towards export crops, such as soya, is in full expansion with Chinese demand for example, the fate of small farmers is often neglected. “These families sometimes don’t even have enough to eat” assures Renato Maluf, whose survey shows that food insecurity is even stronger in the countryside than in the city. “It is not acceptable in a major food producing country like Brazil that 33 million people cannot eat regularly! », he is indignant.