

‘Tell Me What You Eat and I’ll Tell You Who You Are’: Changing Eating Habits in Cochabamba, Bolivia

Rosario León

Abstract This article describes changes in the lives of families in two communities in the Cochabamba Region, Bolivia, caused in part by food price volatility. It questions whether government policy aimed at ‘Vivir Bien’ (Living Well), is tackling the real issues of ill-being that arise from the commercialisation of food. Adaptation to a rising cost of living has social, economic and cultural costs for the families. The article illustrates these changes by recovering the voices and views of the community members themselves. These changes are broader, more prolonged, and more complex than the ‘Vivir Bien’ policy has assumed.

1 Introduction

In 2006, Evo Morales’ government launched the Overall Implementation Strategy for the National Development Plan (*Estrategia General del Plan Nacional De Desarrollo 2006–2011*), an ambitious and widely applauded blueprint towards the objectives of Evo Morales’ administration. At the core of the Plan are goals of reducing poverty and social inequality. The Plan and related policies included measures to promote food sovereignty by supporting food production and controlling food prices. They saw the introduction of distribution systems and the provision of support to food producers (creating for the purpose the Empresa Nacional de Apoyo a la Producción Alimentaria, or National Food Production Support Company, EMAPA); a voucher system for pregnant women, the elderly and school-age children; housing and agricultural credit; and house construction in rural areas. A series of infrastructure projects was also initiated, above all to provide drinking water and irrigation. All these changes were implemented under the aegis of the approach known as ‘Vivir Bien’ (Living Well).

The capacity of these policies to deliver tangible benefits to the population and especially to the poorest has been questioned, as has the faith placed in them to achieve positive changes in the wellbeing – in particular – of the poorest sections of society (Laserna 2012). Indeed, President Evo Morales himself publicly recognised the shortcomings of

the policy when he said: ‘The *campesino* [small farmer] organisations are not complying with the *Law on the Agricultural Productive Communitarian Revolution*, which, among other things, orders the creation of economic production councils, which are not operating’ (*Los Tiempos* 2013). There are also inconsistencies in the delivery of the policy. For example, the free breakfasts provided by the government to children in the state education sector are composed of processed foods with artificial flavourings and wrapped in plastic bags. This practice seems to be inconsistent with the stated principles of ‘Vivir Bien’.

This article asks whether it is enough to provide access to fair price food, credit and infrastructure to achieve the condition of *living well* and casts light on the real impact of rising cost of living on people on low incomes. It focuses on changes in the people’s everyday lives and eating habits, drawing on evidence gathered as part of the Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility study carried out between 2012 and 2014.

The research was carried out in two sites in the region of Cochabamba: Pirhuas, a rural community in the municipality of Sipe Sipe, and Kami, an urban neighbourhood in the municipality of Quillacollo. The research was carried out over a three-year period and involved repeated visits to 20 families, ten focus groups and nine key informants across the two locations. The complexities of family life, social

dynamics and the commercial activities pursued in the *ferias* (permanent markets) that are a traditional focus of trade in the region, became increasingly important aspects of the study over the course of the research. In order to give context to the responses of the families and communities included in this study, efforts were made to examine official sources and macroeconomic analyses covering the last three years. In addition, annual quantitative analyses were conducted to document national and local variations in food prices. The implementation of government policies and interventions by other entities such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and churches were also examined. In this manner, the study assembled comprehensive data and additional information on food price volatility and set these against the stories told by the research participants, their situations and subjective views concerning their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with their lives. These views are fundamental aspects of the sense of 'living well'.

Food price volatility is largely the result of institutional transactions in production systems, markets and policy spaces, but it has profound effects on real lives. While individuals, families and communities react in different ways, their responses form patterns that have repercussions for wellbeing at family, community and national levels. In the region of Cochabamba, where the research was carried out, changes were apparent in the living conditions of families. These were largely negative in terms of wellbeing. Social and cultural changes were observed that were expressed in altered eating habits that may have negative consequences for public health. The changes may also compromise the capability of families and communities to make the adjustments that will be necessary to negotiate their changed reality.

2 Food price inflation in Bolivia

In 2012 and 2013 changes to food prices increased (INE 2014). There was a tendency for most prices to rise, though some fell without returning to previous levels. An analysis of monthly variations in the all-items Consumer Price Index (CPI) and of changes in the CPI for food show that between September 2012 and September 2013 monthly food prices rose faster than the all-items CPI. Official figures show that 'general prices varied by 7.91 per cent while accumulated food price inflation varied by 13.05 per cent in the same period.' (INE 2014). The difference in inflation rates is important because the all-items CPI is used to define salary increases for Bolivian workers. The difference indicates a gap

between the purchasing power of salaries and the price of foodstuffs. The gap affects the household economy and the ability of salaried families to feed themselves. In addition, a chain of small increases in the price of food affects the poorest families who work in the informal economy and do not have predictable salaries (Barroso 2014). This is the case, for example, of most of the working population (male and female) in the neighbourhood of Kami.

The state responds to food price volatility by stabilising prices on the basis of negotiation with interested parties, including producers, traders and consumers (Cortes 2014). The transaction costs involved in negotiating the prices of foodstuffs are high, because they include the costs of social mobilisation and negotiation and of collateral actions by the state as it buys and imports foodstuffs and establishes infrastructure to distribute its purchases and sell them in the shops run by the EMAPA or at state-run fair price markets in attempts to reach families at a fair, officially controlled, price. Importantly, many people who need it cannot make use of the EMAPA shops or the fair price markets because they work all day or buy only small amounts of food. This is the kind of poor family included in the research in the two study areas, whose members are obliged to pay the price the shop owners are able to impose on consumers when they sell their merchandise at unusual weights, from opened packets or at different markets or *ferias*.

For example in Quillacollo, the most important *feria* market in the Lower Cochabamba Valley, three markets take place within the large space it occupies: one in the early hours, between 1am or 2am and 7am; another from 7am until 10am or midday, and another that goes on well into the night. In these traditional markets the price of food varies considerably depending on the time of day, as do the weights and measures used in the transactions. However, many housewives from Pirhuas and the Kami neighbourhood are not always able to attend the market at times or on terms that are convenient for purchasing the best value food. This may be due to high transport costs, because they no longer buy the products they used to buy, or they do not purchase them in sufficient quantities to justify going to the early markets.

In the course of the research it became clear that the origins of the changes in the local farming economy had taken place over the last ten years and that they were therefore associated with the state's new 'Vivir Bien' and food sovereignty policies but that they

had also occurred in the context of volatile food prices. Respondents explained that improvements in the productive infrastructure brought about by government policy were not sufficient to improve their living conditions. A small farmer¹ and former women's leader in Pirhuas explained how production seems to be diminishing:

We buy almost everything now. They [the people from the highlands] don't even bring potatoes or wheat down from the high country anymore like they used to. They got tired and came down to the valleys to work as day labourers.

3 Changes in life patterns

Our study has uncovered changes in the living patterns of families in the research areas that raise questions about what it means for people on low incomes to live well under current conditions.

3.1 Livelihoods

In Pirhuas the installation of irrigation systems ten years ago did not bring with it incentives to increase agricultural production as we may suppose the NGOs and the authorities that collaborated on the project thought it would. Instead, the new irrigation system and the clean drinking water supply created commercial interest in the land. This coincided with the fact that rising food prices led to changes in the productive activities of the peasant households, as illustrated by this quote from Mr J.,² a 55-year-old former farmer from Pirhuas:

I stopped being a fool. I can't explain why for so many years I allowed myself to be humiliated and worked like a donkey, watering my crops at two in the morning, washing my produce in cold water to take it to the market, and why? I didn't earn anything, just enough to eat. I don't understand why I did it for so many years. Now: never again! I'm thinking of going to Quillacollo and opening an ironmongers.

Like Mr J., half the families who took part in the research stopped producing for home or market and began to buy most of the products that they consume. These peasant farmers became involved in other livelihoods including mining, sand and gravel quarrying and milk production, some with more success than others. During the first year of research we encountered families such as that of Mr M.³ (among the poorest in the community). He was unable to work because his health was very poor. He suffered from fainting fits and was unable to deal with the rigours of working the land. During the second year, the family was very happy because they had bought a few cows using money their daughter

had brought back from Argentina, where she had worked as a domestic servant for a year. This year they made *quesillo* (curd cheese) and yoghurt from the milk and Mr M.'s health had improved. 'Now we drink milk when we are thirsty. We are doing better. My son is working building houses under the [rural housebuilding] programme *Evo cumple*.' In the third year the family entered into crisis once again, because the cows were no longer producing milk and the family had to make sacrifices to carry on keeping them. The family is therefore thinking of selling their animals and growing alfalfa instead, which is the most sought-after food crop for cattle. Mr M.'s family now depends on working as day labourers for other farmers.

We estimate that in 2014 some 30 per cent of families in Pirhuas supplemented their incomes with non-agricultural activities such as mining and petty trading, while others still depend on activities such as cattle farming, growing alfalfa or maize and maintaining small kitchen gardens. The poorest group of families still try to follow the strategy of working as day labourers on the lands of other peasant farmers hoping for arrangements that had been common in earlier times whereby as well as being paid for their work they would receive food. The view was that a day labourer who had been well fed would work better. However, this custom has changed over the last three years, as explained by Mr J.,⁴ a 60-year-old farmer from Pirhuas: 'I can't even contract day labourers anymore because it's really expensive having to feed them'.

The impact of rising prices in Pirhuas led to changes in land use and activities associated with the production of food. The strategy followed by peasant farmers was to cease producing for the market, and they are now no longer self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs. Nor can they maintain practices such as paying day labourers, because it is no longer affordable.

In urban Kami the situation is no better. It was a neighbourhood where everyone knew everyone else and helped each other because everyone belonged to former mining families who had worked in the Kami mine. But the arrival of new families who came to buy houses or to establish businesses affected the former solidarity. These new arrivals paid more for rent and to purchase houses, pricing the ex-miners out of the housing market. 'Nowadays each family develops its own strategy to try to guarantee its quality of life and its food intake, spending more than 60 per cent of their income on food (CERES 2015).

3.2 Quality and quantity of food

It was found that in Pirhuas wellbeing declined during the study period, not only as a result of a scarcity of money but also because even families with higher incomes changed their eating habits. They introduced foods to their diets that were quicker to cook or that could be bought in the street, because women no longer spent most of their time in the home, or were not now dedicated exclusively to agricultural activities. People explained how culinary traditions are being lost. A 50-year-old female smallhold farmer⁵ from Pirhuas stated:

Mothers knew what food to prepare for each occasion and which things could be mixed and which couldn't. Now people just eat what's in front of them and everything is rice and noodles.

Housewives have to find ways to make savings. Mrs M.,⁶ a 35-year-old mother from Kami explained: 'I buy the same weight of meat every week, as before. What has changed is that I buy the meat on the bone and not pure soft meat like I used to.' Others changed the amount of food they consume, as in the case of a widow from Kami who said: 'I don't eat at night because I don't have enough money; I'm happy just to give my children something to eat. I just drink some tea.' Women felt themselves obliged to work longer hours in order to be able to continue living in the neighbourhood and to cover the costs of feeding their children. Mrs M. explained:

Now I work more. I clean the gymnasium that the family I work for has because I don't have enough money and it's worse now my daughter is pregnant because the food bills are higher.

Many women and men have turned to selling food in the street as a strategy to make ends meet. This supply of food creates a variation in price and quality that means all pockets and all tastes are catered for (*La Prensa* 2012). The supply of food in the Kami neighbourhood has increased to such a degree that, according to the local Catholic priest, 'there are snacks for every pocket and taste, but nobody guarantees their quality'.

3.3 Processed food

In Kami, eating habits have also been influenced by the effects of the market and advertisements for international food brands, such as hamburgers and chicken prepared in many different ways. A female domestic worker explained, 'My husband sees food on the telly and he says "You should buy that stuff",

but they don't give us any more money to buy it with – that is my problem'. The same influences are being brought to bear on children, for example on the myriad street stalls which have changed completely what is on offer in the areas near schools (*La Prensa* 2012). At home it is no longer a question of guaranteeing the availability of food, but of putting on the table the kind of food the family demands under great time pressure. Women enjoy neither the time nor the opportunity to transform ingredients that require so much preparation – such as certain Andean grains, maize, or tubers such as *chuño* – in order to transform them into food, food which has now lost prestige among the young. As the price and the availability of pre-prepared foods often means saving money and time, they have become incorporated in the habits, tastes and flavour preferences – acquiring, even, a special prestige. A 45-year-old woman⁷ from Kami argued: 'It's hard to fight against flavour. I try to copy the flavour of the street food but I can't.' A poor female farmer⁸ with two children at university explained: 'The young people prefer that food; it's an addiction for them, but it's tasty so.... They don't like *notes* [cooked maize] anymore, or *lavuas* [a heavy soup made using traditional cereals], so they go and eat that stuff.' Another 45-year-old woman⁹ in Pirhuas, who had recently returned from working overseas, and now separated from her husband said:

Parents complain because their children just want money, nothing else – they don't want to eat in the house. They see how the children of the people who work outside the community have money, and they want the same.

Advertising has transformed certain foods and brands into indicators of prestige and of a modern lifestyle, which many young people see as way of freeing themselves from the stigma of their poverty. Leaving the countryside or the poor neighbourhoods in order to go to the places where they can buy chicken, hamburgers or processed foods is, for young people, a way of participating in the modern world, the world of the 'good people', as one housewife whose children are at university and who herself suffers discrimination in Kami put it. This insistence on modern ways is not uncommon among people who have been treated with contempt because of the colour of their skin, the circumstances in which they live, because of the fact they consume traditional foods or because they are 'Indians' (Delgado and Delgado 2014). Young people are acutely sensitive to discrimination, as a young female student from the Kami neighbourhood demonstrated:

I thought that you were discriminated against because of where you lived, or the clothes you wore, or the colour of your skin, but now they discriminate against you because of what you eat. If you eat traditional food they criticise you or they discriminate against you. And if you eat fast food they discriminate against you because you don't eat in the places where they eat.

Even though eating these foods covers up the shame people feel at being poor, the prestige assigned to eating in the street is not coherent with the possibilities of the poorest families in Pirhuas or the Kami neighbourhood. Consequently, access to this kind of food is also a way in which social divisions are deepened. The extra-economic effects of food price volatility on families in both Kami and Pirhuas also encompass various forms of depression and desperation, sometimes leading to family breakup, alcoholism and crime. These are the social, cultural and human costs of these changes to eating habits, which are invisible to the national accounts, but which have been told using the words of the families of Pirhuas and Kami.

Not only are cultural patterns changing with eating habits, so too are the health issues that are increasingly affecting the communities. These include obesity (in Kami) and stomach problems such as ulcers and gastritis, which are common in Pirhuas. The changes in eating habits also imply serious public health consequences, which require increased attention (Quezada Siles 2012). One housewife indicated during an interview that when she went to the hospital in Quillacollo she came across a ward full of children with liver and stomach

problems. Recently, more than 477 children in the region of Pando were poisoned after eating a breakfast provided by their school. Following the incident the authorities promised to review existing food hygiene policies. Several experts expressed the hope that the problem would be recognised as structural and not circumstantial (*La Razón* 2015).

4 Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that living well means much more than being able to access food, water and credit. It has shown how real life as it is lived on the ground is separated from the ideals of policies like the Bolivian model of 'Vivir Bien'. Women's voices from both research areas show what is happening in the families as a result of the fact that they have to work more in order to be able to afford food and also satisfy other family needs. They have less time available, and less energy to engage in the domestic tasks of food preparation in the home or to buy ingredients with any regularity. It is as if eating were now merely a physiological action required to maintain the body or – in the cultural sphere – to gain access to a more prestigious modern lifestyle, or one that hides the shame of poverty, and not an act of family cohesion or an expression of affection or attention. Mothers anxious to feed their children complain that they cannot prepare traditional foods because they no longer have time or they can't afford to buy them, as in the case of quinoa or other traditional foods whose prices have risen dramatically. Children and men demand tasty fast foods. All these new demands and difficulties are consolidating changes in family wellbeing that pose a challenge to the ideal of living well.

- 5 Interview, 2014.
- 6 Interview, 2014.
- 7 Interview, 2014.
- 8 Interview, 2014.
- 9 Interview, 2013.

Notes

- 1 Interview, 2014.
- 2 Interview, 2014.
- 3 Interview, 2012.
- 4 Interview, 2014.

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