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LADB Staff

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## **Government Report Shows Persistence of Child Malnutrition in Rural Areas**

by LADB Staff

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According to a new government study, malnutrition remains a significant problem among children in rural areas despite the existence of special government assistance programs to address the issue. The study Encuesta Nacional de Alimentacion y Nutricion en el Medio Rural (ENAL 96) was based on data collected from 855 sites, located in 649 communities around the country. Roughly 2.17 million families live in the regions that were surveyed. The report said nearly 56% of all children under five years old residing in rural areas are not adequately nourished. According to ENAL 96, this means that at least 1.2 million children in Mexico lack basic nutrition.

### *Little improvement noted since last survey in 1974*

According to the authors of ENAL 96, the rate of poor nutrition among children has improved very little since 1974, when the last ENAL was taken. In fact, the authors said the four surveys taken thus far have all shown similarly negative results regarding childhood nutrition. "The trends are clear," said Abelardo Avila Curiel, one of the authors of ENAL 96. "In the past 22 years, very little has changed in childhood poverty in our country." The authors said the government's only "achievement" in child nutrition since 1974 has been to keep the rate from worsening.

According to ENAL 96, a major reason for continued poverty in rural areas is the government's inability to bring food assistance programs to many rural communities. For example, the government's special program to provide tortillas for needy families has only reached 1% of eligible families in rural areas. The situation is similar with the milk- assistance program, which reaches about 5.3% of eligible participants in the countryside. "No local or federal government assistance program has had much impact on the rural populations," said the study.

### *Problems worse in states with high indigenous population*

The greatest rate of poor child nutrition was found in southern Mexico, including Guerrero, Puebla, Yucatan, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. Not coincidentally, these states also have a high percentage of indigenous populations.

At the national level, ENAL said the rates of child malnutrition in indigenous communities was as high as 60%. A similar study published by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in March of this year suggested that the rate of malnutrition among children in indigenous communities could be as high as 75%. The ENAL 96 report also pointed out a direct correlation between the high rate of child malnutrition and average family expenditures on food. In some of the poorest states, the average family's daily expenditure for food is 3 pesos (US\$0.38 cents). One out of every three families spends less than 20 pesos (US\$2.58) per week on food, while three out of four families spend less than 40 pesos (US\$5.16) per week.

The ineffectiveness of local and federal food-assistance programs in reaching the rural poor was especially evident in low per-capita consumption of corn and beans, which are Mexico's two staple foodstuffs. For corn, average daily consumption in rural areas reached only 30 grams per capita in poor states such as Morelos, Tlaxcala, and Guerrero.

On a national scale, national consumption for corn is estimated at about 246.6 grams per person. Similarly, consumption of beans was particularly low among the rural poor in Zacatecas, Nayarit, Aguascalientes, and Durango. Milk consumption was even more dismal among the rural poor. According to the ENAL 96 report, milk is not available to more than 50% of the rural poor in the states of Puebla, Yucatan, and Chiapas.

The ENAL 96 results confirm a study published by the UN Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLAC) earlier this year, which said one of every two children under the age of five in Mexico lives in poverty. The study said one of every three children lives in households of extreme poverty. ENAL 96 authors expressed hope that the study would prompt the federal government to take more decisive action to address the problems. In October 1996, the Chamber of Deputies discussed a proposal to amend Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution to include a right to food, particularly for children under the age of seven. However, the initiative has not advanced beyond a proposal stage. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on July 30, reported at 7.75 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: El Universal, 10/30/96; Excelsior, 04/24/97; La Jornada, 03/10/97, 07/22/97; The News, 07/23/97)

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