

BUENOS AIRES, Feb 21, 2011 (IPS) - Despite years of strong economic growth, record harvests and massive social assistance programmes, there are still places in Argentina untouched by the boom, where child malnutrition has even claimed lives.

Hunger and malnutrition affect 53 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean, including nearly nine million children under five, according to United Nations statistics.

Argentina is not one of the countries with the most serious problems of malnutrition, like Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala and Bolivia.

But the question is that this country, once known as the "bread basket" of South America, produces enough food to feed its population of 40 million 10 times over.

The Argentine economy has grown at a rate of seven to 10 percent a year since 2003, with the exception of 2009, when growth dipped as a result of the global economic crisis.

In that period, the country has also seen bumper harvests of grains and other crops, while the centre-left governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his wife, President Cristina Fernández, who succeeded him, implemented massive income transfer and food assistance programmes targeting poor children and adolescents.

But the Health Ministry reports that 750,000 children and teenagers under 18 still have problems of under-nutrition.

A little more than a year after the creation of a cash transfer programme to poor families with children under 18, experts are debating the reach, positive impacts and limitations of the subsidy.

The universal child benefit, which went into effect in December 2009, provides a monthly payment of 220 pesos (55 dollars) per child to parents who are unemployed, work in the informal economy or are domestic workers -- in other words, all parents who do not have access to the government's family allowance scheme that already covered workers in the formal economy.

The benefit, which reaches 3.5 million children, is conditional on school attendance and regular medical check-ups and vaccinations.

A family can receive the subsidy for up to five children -- an amount that is close to the official minimum monthly wage.

However, the plan is not actually universal: 2.8 million children and teenagers are not covered by it, for different reasons.

Sociologist Gabriela Agosto, director of the Asociación Civil Observatorio Social, told IPS that

the universal child benefit "is an incentive for education and health care, but does not substantially modify access to food.

"The benefit generates a transfer of income, but in and of itself it does not correct a key deficit, child malnutrition, because chronic poverty cannot be turned around with this alone: targeted policies are needed," she said.

Agosto referred to the cases of severe malnutrition and even deaths among indigenous children that are periodically reported in provinces in northern Argentina like Salta, Formosa, Chaco and Misiones, the country's poorest provinces.

When the sociologist argued with the governor of one of these provinces, who asserted that the problem of malnutrition in the most isolated indigenous communities was "cultural," she challenged him to adopt specific policies targeting those communities.

"Of course in terms of sheer numbers, our problem pales in comparison to countries of Africa, or even other Latin American nations. But considering that Argentina is a producer of food and has been growing for the past eight years, under-nutrition is inadmissible," she said.

The expert cited a recent string of conferences on the universal child benefit, where anthropologist Patricia Aguirre, a specialist in food, noted that while the monthly payment improves access to food, it is not a food policy.

The presentations by the experts taking part in the conferences were published in book form. In her presentation, Aguirre pointed out that the universal child benefit went to the entire family, not just the children, and was used not only to buy food but to pay for cooking gas, clothes, transportation and school supplies.

The universal child benefit "is very significant, very important," the expert said. But she warned that it could actually aggravate malnutrition, by increasing consumption of carbohydrates, soft drinks, candy and other high-sugar foods.

Another social activist concerned about the pockets of malnutrition in Argentina is Juan Carr, head of the Red Solidaria (Solidarity Network), who believes that with a concerted effort, Argentina could completely eradicate hunger in one to three years.

"With just four days worth of the annual grain harvest, without even mentioning the animal protein derived from beef or dairy products that we also produce, we could solve the problem of hunger in Argentina," he told IPS. "And with 122 days worth, we could solve the problem in Latin America as a whole."

Carr said social awareness has grown over the last 15 years and that more people in the middle and upper classes today believe it is a disgrace that hunger and malnutrition are still problems in Argentina.

That means there is interest and willingness to put an end to the problem, said Carr. And in his

view, that social conscience is more important than political will, because the actions of governments respond to demands from and consensus among people.

According to statistics compiled by the Red Solidaria from different sources, the number of children under six who die of malnutrition-related causes has dropped sharply since the late 2001 economic collapse.

"To reach a Pilagá indigenous mother who has seven children and a husband who doesn't work and is violent, the universal child benefit is not enough; what are needed are sound policies that take the problem as a whole into account," in all its complexity, Carr said.

Source: [IPS](#)