

June 24th, 2010, Lima- The Peruvian government is taking advantage of the broadcasts of the World Cup football games in South Africa to air an ad touting a reduction in the poverty rate from 48 to 34 percent between 2005 and 2009 as an achievement of the administration of President Alan García.

"Peru won the World Cup against poverty" says the voiceover in the spot financed by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and aired on TV channel 9 and Radio Programas -- the stations that have the exclusive broadcasting rights to the World Cup that kicked off on Jun. 11 in Johannesburg.

The ad celebrating Peru as world champion in the fight against poverty shows President García holding the FIFA (football's world governing body) World Cup trophy on Feb. 16, when it was on tour ahead of the tournament.

The government ad cites the May report by the head of the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI), Renán Quispe, who announced a drop in the poverty rate from 48.7 to 34.8 percent between 2005 and 2009. (García took office in July 2006.)

But poverty statistics broken down by region, which IPS requested from the INEI, show that in 11 of the country's 25 regions, the proportion of people living below the poverty line actually increased.

Between 2008 and 2009, poverty rose from 69 to 70.3 percent in Apurímac; from 61.5 to 64.5 percent in Huanuco; from 53.4 to 56 percent in Cajamarca, the leading gold mining region; from 48.8 to 56 percent in Loreto, home to most of the country's Amazonian indigenous tribes; from 36.7 to 38.9 percent in La Libertad, a leading agro-export and mining region; and from 36.7 to 38.9 percent in San Martín, where the Alto Huallaga coca-producing valley is located.

Poverty dropped, on the other hand, in Pacific coastal regions like Ica (from 17.3 to 13.7 percent) and Piura (41.4 to 39.6), and in the capital (from 18.3 to 15.3 percent).

Economist Iván Hidalgo, director of the government's main anti-poverty programme, "Juntos", said the rise in poverty in some regions is a result of the impact of the global economic crisis.

"The economic crisis has hit the whole world, and Peru too," he told IPS. "But we don't do year-to-year comparisons; we look at longer periods. Our base line is 2005, and there was clearly a drop in poverty by 2009.

"If we only look at the 2008-2009 results, there was clearly a setback. But if we analyse the situation between 2005 and 2009, the proportion of people living in poverty has shrunk," he said.

The economy has been hit harder in some regions than in others because they depend heavily on exports, like Cajamarca and La Libertad, which is why they have seen a rise in poverty, Hidalgo said.

The Juntos (Together) programme provides a monthly cash stipend of 100 soles (35.7 dollars) to families living in extreme poverty.

This year, the programme's budget is 223 million dollars -- funds that are channeled through the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which is paying for the "world champion against poverty" ads.

But Farid Matuk, who was head of the INEI during the government of Alejandro Toledo (2002-2006), had a different explanation.

"The poverty figures published by the INEI and cited by the 'spots' during the World Cup broadcasts are not a product of scientific measurements but an artistic creation," he told IPS. "There is no math on earth that backs up INEI's statistics."

Matuk, a statistical consultant who has advised the government of Iraq and is today working for Angola, says the official figures on the reduction in poverty are not accurate.

"What the INEI does is patch up the figures to please the president. Those statistics are simply not true," he said.

More important than the data on poverty published by the government are the statistics on the calorie deficit or "food poverty," which are also calculated by the INEI, Matuk said.

According to the INEI, from 2005 to the first quarter of this year, food poverty increased from 28.6 to 32.9 percent overall, and from 40.7 to 45.8 percent in rural areas -- which means Peru is not a "world champion" in food poverty reduction either, Matuk said.

"The figures on 'food poverty' are closer to reality than the monetary poverty statistics," he said. "But there is a problem with the INEI statistics: it is not logical to say that Peruvians have more money but are eating less."

Peru is in no respect "the world champion in the fight against poverty," Matuk said. "Inventing statistics is like inventing goals."