

Accessibility and scarcity of food in Maracaibo

Information gathered during October and November of 2018

The State shall promote sustainable agriculture as the strategic basis for overall rural development and thus ensure food security of the population, defined as the sufficient and stable availability of food at the national level and the timely and uninterrupted access to them by the public consumer. Food security must be achieved by developing and prioritizing internal agricultural production, meaning that from agricultural activities, livestock, fisheries and aquaculture. Food production is of national interest and fundamental economic and social development of the nation. To this end, the State shall adopt the measures of financial, commercial, technological transfer, land tenure, infrastructure, manpower training and others that were necessary to achieve strategic levels of self-sufficiency. It will promote actions in the framework of national and international economy to offset the disadvantages inherent to agricultural activity.

The State shall protect the settlements and communities in industrialized fishermen and their fishing in inland waters and near the coastline, as defined in the law.

Article 305 of the Venezuelan Constitution

I. Methodology for monitoring accessibility and scarcity

The results of the Commission for Human Rights of the State of Zulia's (Codhez) *Survey on Food Security in Maracaibo*, conducted between August and September, revealed the increasing issues in regards to the sufficiency, adequacy, and variety of food consumed in the city of Maracaibo. In response to these results, Codhez identified the need to further investigate the access of Venezuelans to the high cost and scarcity of food. According to the results of our survey, households in Maracaibo reported that what affected them most when buying food was its high cost (54.6%) over its scarcity (24.5%). According to our survey, the food items that Maracaibo households have had to stop buying the most due to its cost or scarcity are animal proteins: 21.3% stopped buying chicken due to scarcity and 18.6% due to its high cost, 19.8% stopped buying beef due to scarcity and 20.3% due to high cost, and 10.4% stopped buying fish due to scarcity and 12.3% due to high cost.

This investigation specifically consists in monitoring the supply of food items which are most important to Maracaibo's population in 44 establishments that sell food throughout the city - including popular markets, supermarkets, and small corner stores - to verify the levels of scarcity and price of food items every fifteen days. The monitoring also measures other factors which impact access to food, such as the methods to enter the establishment, the presence of State officials, or the impact of failures in public service while buying food.

The list of foods which are monitored correspond to those with a high protein makeup and other foods which – according to the results of our survey – are most consumed in Maracaibo:

1. Beef: choice beef, select beef, and ribs
2. Chicken: whole chicken, breast with bone, thighs, wings;
3. Grains: black beans, peas, lentils, beans;
4. Eggs: single egg, 12-egg carton, 15-egg carton, 30-egg carton;
5. Cheese (*Queso blanco semiduro*);
6. Pre-cooked corn meal (distinguishing between national and imported brands);
7. Pasta (distinguishing between national and imported brands);
8. White rice (distinguishing between national and imported brands);
9. Margarine.

The report presents the results on the monitoring of food conducted every fifteen days during the days of: 14th/15th of October (October I), 29th/30th of October (October II), 14th/15th of November (November I), and on the 29th/30th of November (November II).

II. Trends and incidences

The increase in the scarcity and cost of food has been greatly affected by the monetary conversion process and increases in the legal minimum salary. The latest of these increases, announced on November 29th by the president, saw an increase from the previous minimum wage from BsS. 1,800.00 to the established BsS. 4,500.00, starting December 1st. The impact of this decision on prices will be shown during the first accessibility monitoring of December.

Alongside these economic circumstances, the lack of official data by the Central Bank of Venezuela and the National Institute of Statistics worsens the availability of reliable data. In this context, the National Assembly has taken up the task of publishing a consumer price index, (INPCAN¹) alongside other initiatives that have emerged in different media outlets to expose the increase in prices that affects Venezuelans². The results of our food price and accessibility monitoring in October and November reveal that both scarcity and the rise of prices are significantly more worrying with the passing of time.

Scarcity rates are high and affect all products

On average, the rate of food scarcity was 72% for monitored items during the October-November period. That is, on average, food items were not found in the establishments that were monitored. In 16 of 20 items, scarcity was higher than 60%. Peas were among the least available (7% on average), while white cheese was the most available in stores (67% on average).



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Average Scarcity Oct. I – Nov. I

Peas	93%	Whole Chicken	72%
Beans	92%	Beef Ribs	71%
Eggs (12 Pack)	91%	Choice Beef	71%
Lentils	89%	Eggs (15 pack)	66%
Chicken Wings	89%	Eggs (30 pack)	64%
Black Beans	88%	Margarine	60%
Eggs (Single Unit)	83%	White Rice	57%
Chicken Breast (w/bone)	82%	Pre-cooked Corn Flour	54%
Chicken Thigh	77%	Pasta	43%
Select Beef	73%	White Cheese	33%

Proteins are scarce and prices constantly increase

Vegetable protein is the most affected food category – peas, black beans, beans and lentils – with an average of 90% scarcity, and a total price variation of +424% in October and November. The secondary half of November experienced the highest increase (+143%). In regards to animals protein – beef and chicken – the average scarcity rate was 76%, while the price increased by +278%.

Price variations in food products between Oct I – Nov II

Peas (1 kg)	533%	Chicken	267%
Pre-cooked corn Flour (1kg)	479%	Margarine (500g)	260%
Lentils (1kg)	429%	Chicken Breast (w/ bone)	239%
Beans (1kg)	413%	Chicken thigh (1kg)	234%
Select Beef (1kg)	357%	Eggs (12 units)	232%
White rice (1kg)	335%	Egg (single unit)	218%
Pasta (1kg)	329%	White cheese (1kg)	210%
Black beans (1kg)	320%	Egg (30 units)	197%
Beef ribs (1kg)	275%	Egg (15 units)	193%
Choice Beef (1kg)	273%		

Regulated food available in few stores

Food products with a government-regulated price were only found at the established prices at *Centro 99*, *De Cándido* and *Nasa* supermarkets. The constant supply of these products in *Centro 99* generally create long lines of people trying to access these products, as well as the presence of National Bolivarian Police and National Guard.

The food products with regulated prices are generally subject to illegal re-selling of these by other food establishments at marked up prices, especially in both popular markets and corner stores. This phenomenon is clearly observed with pre-cooked Corn Flour, which during the first half of November was had a regulated price of Bs. S 20 but was usually sold for Bs. S 235 and 450 in popular markets and *abastos*.

The sale of regulated food products is conditioned

Conditioned selling of regulated food products are frequent in Maracaibo. Establishments which sell these require consumers to purchase a minimum amount of products, to buy a bag of food which includes the available regulated products (known to the population as *combos*), or the regulated foods are sold in limited quantities. There are fees while paying with credit card, especially in the popular markets of *Corito* (10%) and *Santa Rosalía* (25%), and for specific products in *Los Plataneros*.

Although on November 26, 2018, the Governor of Zulia attempted to intervene in Maracaibo's popular markets in the historic center – an important area of markets in the city - in order to “eradicate”³, amongst other situations, the web of re-selling regulated food products and the selling of cash (which is scarce), our monitoring shows that in the popular market of *Las Pulgas*, people keep selling regulated food products at marked up prices, with considerably lower prices than other markets given that they only accept cash — which is currently scarce.

We also need to highlight the fact that in only 4 of the 6 popular markets in Maracaibo, along with several supermarkets and *abastos*, commonly accept foreign currencies (such as Colombian pesos and U.S dollars) as a form of payment, which denotes the low value of our national currency and the need for using more stables ones.

The shutdown of *Bicentario* supermarket

In our initial list of monitored establishments, we included *Bicentario* supermarkets from the *Costa Verde* Mall (northeast of Maracaibo) and *Metrosol* Mall (south of Maracaibo) which were a part of the government-run web of food distribution since the government expropriation of the *Éxito* and *Cada* supermarket franchises in 2010. During our first monitoring session —October I— we were able to confirm the these establishments had closed, though seemed to be in the process of being remodelled. On December 13th, Zulia’s governor announced that those establishments of *Bicentenario* supermarkets, along one other in Maracaibo and another one in the city of Cabimas, were taken under the administration of private companies which were considered “nationalist” by the official, without giving any additional information about the privatization process.

III. Availability rates

In the case of animal protein, the average availability was of 24% between October I and the first days of November. On November II, the availability of Select Beef raised by 39% in comparison with previous research. In the case of chicken (entire), the highest average scarcity index is that of wings (89%) and chicken breast with bone (82%).



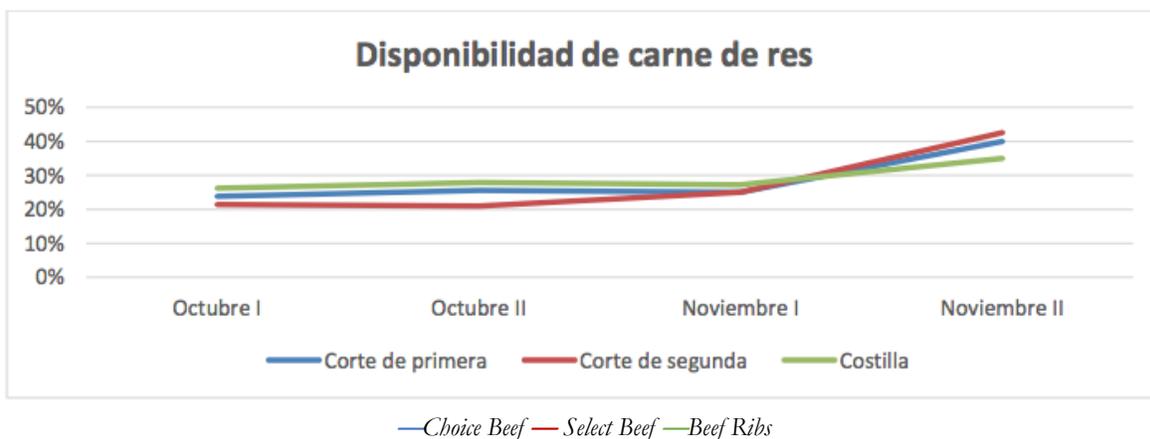
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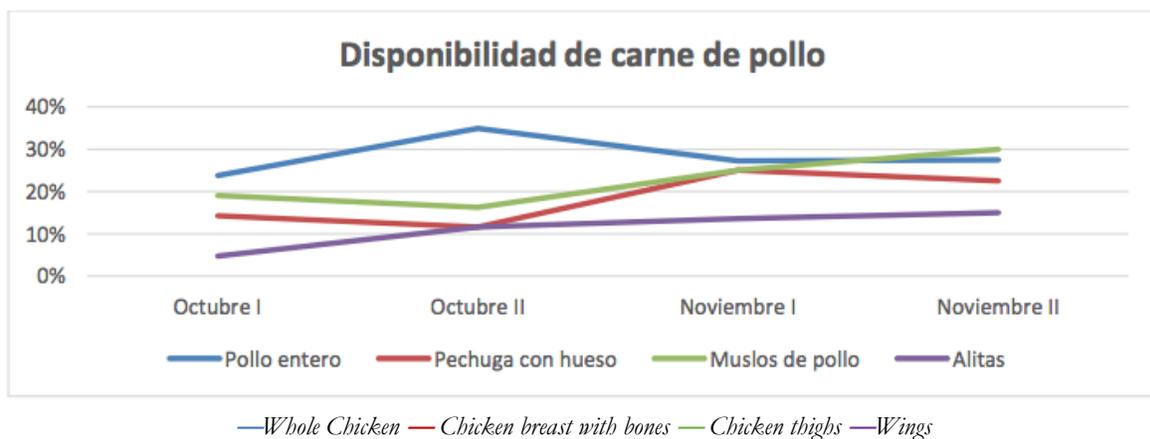
Availability Rates of Animal Protein in Monitored Establishments

Animal Protein	October I	October II	November I	November II
Choice Beef	24%	26%	25%	40%
Select Beef	21%	21%	25%	43%
Beef Ribs	26%	28%	27%	35%
Whole Chicken	24%	35%	27%	28%
Chicken breast with bone	14%	12%	25%	23%
Chicken Thigh	19%	16%	25%	30%
Chicken Wings	5%	12%	14%	15%

Availability of beef



Availability of chicken



In the case of grains, the scarcity is the most pronounced amongst all the food products monitored — only available in an average of 10% of establishment monitored between October and



November. Peas are the hardest to find (7%), while the decrease of lentils available is significant: from 14% in the first fifteen days of October to a 8% during November II.

Availability Rates of Vegetable Protein in Monitored Establishments

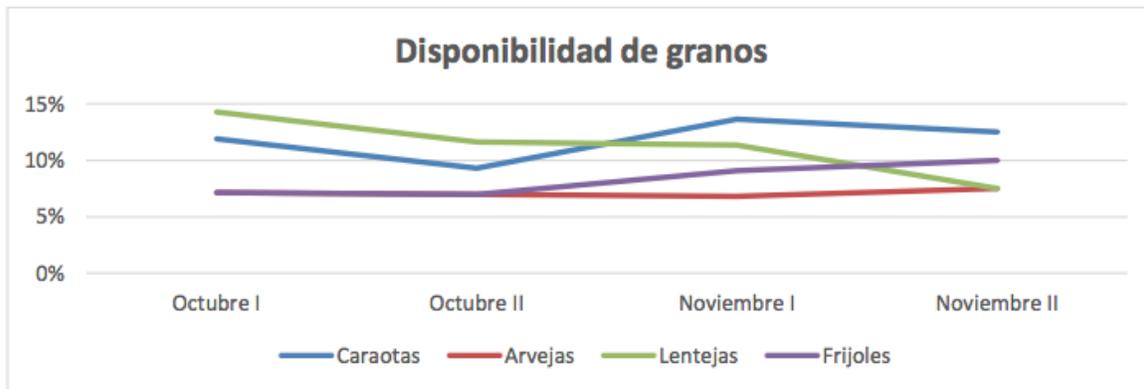
Grains	October I	October II	November I	November II
Black Beans	12%	9%	14%	13%
Peas	7%	7%	7%	8%
Lentils	14%	12%	11%	8%
Beans	7%	7%	9%	10%

In average, the scarcity of the different egg packages — by single unit, 12 egg package, 15 egg or 30 egg package— was of 76% during October and November. We need to highlight the increase in scarcity of the 12 egg package in the first half of November from 86% to a 97% in the second half.

Availability Rates of Eggs in Monitored Establishments

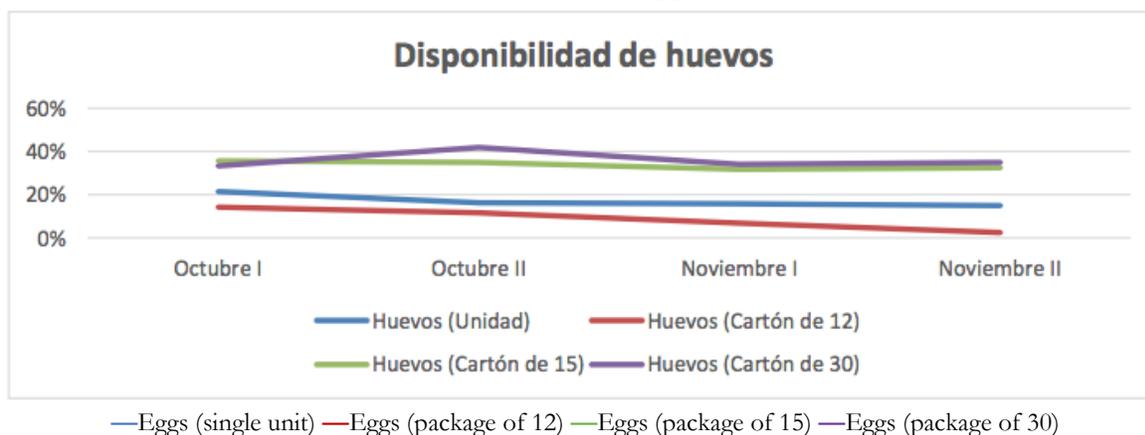
Eggs	October I	October II	November I	November II
Eggs (Single unit)	21%	16%	16%	15%
Eggs (package of 12)	14%	12%	7%	3%
Eggs (Package of 15)	36%	35%	32%	33%
Eggs (Package of 30)	33%	42%	34%	35%

Availability of grains



—Black Beans —Peas —Lentils —Beans

Availability of Eggs



The availability of white cheese, is the highest between all the monitored food (67%), it marked a decrease rhythm since the first half of October (76%) to the second fortnight of November (58%). In comparison, pre-cooked corn flour and margarine were slightly more widely available since the beginning of the monitoring, nevertheless with an average Scarcity of 54% and 60% respectively. Furthermore, pasta in average denotes a scarcity level of 43%, and white rice of 53%.

Availability Rates of Other Basic Foods in Monitored Establishments

Other basic foods	October I	October II	November I	November II
White cheese	76%	67%	66%	58%
Pre-cooked corn flour	38%	35%	55%	58%
Pasta	57%	44%	66%	60%
White rice	43%	40%	48%	43%
Margarine	36%	23%	50%	53%

VI. Rates of prices

The increase of prices has been considerable since our first monitoring session. On average, the monitored food item increased 305% between the first half of October and the last one of November. In the case of Choice Beef cuts, the increase was of 302% in that period, Select Beef cuts experienced the highest increase (357%).

Cash prices	October I	October II	November I	November II
Choice Beef (1kg)	Bs. 398,78	Bs. 558,64	Bs. 923,64	Bs. 1.486,88
Select Beef (1kg)	Bs. 296,67	Bs. 507,78	Bs. 747,27	Bs. 1.354,65
Beef Ribs (1kg)	Bs. 209,27	Bs. 317,67	Bs. 486,00	Bs. 785,00



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Variability of prices	October I	October II	November I	November II
Choice Beef (1kg)	-	40%	65%	61%
Select Beef (1kg)	-	71%	47%	81%
Beef Ribs (1kg)	-	52%	53%	62%

Price variation from October I - November II

Choice Beef	273%
Select Beef	357%
Beef Ribs	275%

The biggest increase in prices of chicken was in chicken wings — as we mentioned before it's the most difficult to find. In general, the increase of prices of chicken was of 260%.

Cash prices	October I	October II	November I	November II
Chicken	Bs. 274,00	Bs. 471,00	Bs. 724,17	Bs. 1.004,55
Chicken breast with bones (1kg)	Bs. 380,00	Bs. 586,00	Bs. 884,55	Bs. 1.288,44
Chicken thighs (1kg)	Bs. 342,08	Bs. 560,86	Bs. 789,82	Bs. 1.141,17
Chicken wings (1kg)	Bs. 240,00	Bs. 498,00	Bs. 718,33	Bs. 958,33

Price variations	October I	October II	November I	November II
Chicken	-	72%	54%	39%
Chicken breast with bones (1kg)	-	54%	51%	46%
Chicken thighs (1kg)	-	64%	41%	44%
Chicken wings (1kg)	-	108%	44%	33%

Prices variability October I - November II

Whole Chicken	267%
Chicken breast with bones (1kg)	239%
Chicken thighs (1kg)	234%
Chicken wings (1kg)	299%

Peas are not only the most difficult to find grain type but also the ones that got the most expensive since the first half of October: +533%. They are followed by lentils (+429), beans (+413%) and black beans (+320%). We saw, also, that price increase variation of beans between the first half and second part of November was of +301%.

The price of eggs got a notable increase. The package presentation that was most affected was the 12 egg package, +233%. This presentation in average, was the most scarce (91%) since the first half of October.

Between October and November, pre-cooked Corn Flour price increase was of 479%— for which regulated prices went from BsS. 20,00 during October I to BsS. 110,00 during November II. Pre-cooked Corn Flour was the second food that experienced the highest price increase during this period of time, only surpassed by peas (533%).

Also to be considered was the increase of white cheese prices (+210%) and pasta (+329%), where weekly price variations were high. White Rice (+335%) and margarine (+260%) are also subject to large increases. In the case of white rice we highlight its variations in the last half of October and first weeks of November (+114%).

V. Final considerations

It is important to note that, according to our survey on food insecurity in Maracaibo, 8 of every 10 households reports that the adults and children of the home are not eating properly or enough, affirming that they had in the last three months a poor nutrition and insufficient access to healthy food most of the time.

Additionally, our survey indicates the following conclusions about the eating habits of Maracaibo families: proteins such as grains, beef and chicken are only eaten at lunch and only 8% of families reported to consume each of these during this eating period. The foods most people consume during breakfast are cheese (28.2%), margarine (19%) and arepa (18.7%), followed by bread (12.6%) and yuca (7.6%). During lunch: rice (26.2%), pasta (14.3%), vegetables (12%), and to a lesser degree, chicken (8.4%), grains (8,3%) and beef (8,1%). During dinner, cheese (26,3%), arepa (21%), margarine (17%) and yuca (10,6%). The plantain, fundamental in Zulia's tradition, is barely use during breakfast (2,3%), lunch (3,5%) and dinner (6,3%).

In general, Maracaibo's residents have a diet based on carbohydrates (arepa, rice, bread, pasta, plantain and yuca) than animal protein (beef, chicken, eggs, fish) and vegetable (grains), with a strong presence of dairy (milk and cheese) and fats (margarine) and low consumption of vegetables and fruits — these food groups are based in the categories established by the last National Nutrition Survey released in 2015 by the National Institute of Statistics. During that time, the foods most consumed by Venezuelan families were arepa, cheese and eggs during breakfast; rice, vegetables, grains, pasta, beef, and chicken during lunch; and arepa, rice, cheese, eggs and chicken during dinner.

It's a fact that scarcity of food alongside its high prices were a constant in our monthly monitoring, conditioning the nutritional habits of Zulia's people to a low-cost diet based on food products such as pre-cooked Corn Flour and pasta, or easy to find foods, like cheese. The alternatives to animal protein —the most expensive among monitored food— are very difficult to find, both because of the high prices and high levels of scarcity (black beans, lentils, peas, beans), foods which were a tradition in the daily diet of Venezuelans.

Through our monitoring, we were able to verify that during October and November there was an absence of effective government price regulations, producing speculative practices and

causing high levels of scarcity in these basic food items. Given the conclusions of our monitoring, we keep insist that the Venezuelan State has to design and execute policies that attend to the grave levels of food insecurity. Amongst others causes, we consider that the scarcity and high prices of food are negatively impacting the nutrition of both adults and children. In this scenario, the government must take measures to improve national food production in order to decrease the inflation caused by the importation of food products. We also insist that the Venezuelan State must seek technical expertise in the design of government programs with the goal of establishing tackling the grave food insecurity and poor nutrition of the people of Maracaibo.