



Food Insecurity
and Covid-19
in Brazil



VIGISAN

National Survey of Food
Insecurity in the Context
of the Covid-19 Pandemic
in Brazil.

2021

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Foreword

The Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security (*A Rede Brasileira de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* - Rede PENSSAN), created in 2012, brings together researchers, students and professionals from throughout Brazil to form a network of research and exchange that is independent and autonomous from government, political parties, national and international organizations and private interests. Key objectives outlined in its statutes include the exercise of citizen science committed to overcoming hunger and promoting food and nutrition security and sovereignty, and contribution to public debate about actions and public policies that interface with these issues.

With the realization of the *National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil*, and dissemination of the results in this report, the Rede PENSSAN is taking steps to achieve these objectives. We hope to shed light on the scourge of hunger and raise the awareness of Brazilian society and its public leaders regarding the manifestations of hunger and food insecurity that affect a significant and growing portion of the population, the signs of which were already visible prior to the pandemic.

This initiative was made possible by the convergence of the scientific competence of the members of the Rede PENSSAN, in particular the Working Group on Monitoring, with decisive support from partners committed to promoting knowledge about the social reality in Brazil and to developing tools for creating a society that is more just and respectful of human rights, including the right to be free from hunger and to have access to adequate, healthy food. We are deeply grateful to ActionAid Brasil, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation - Brasil, the Ibirapitanga Institute and OXFAM-Brasil for their invaluable support, and to the Vox Populi institute for their technical competence in carrying out the data collection.

Executive Coordinating Committee Rede
PENSSAN,

March 2021

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“National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil”, carried out by the PENSSAN Network in December 2020 and presented in this report, because we believe it is important for the country to know the current food security situation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. A previous survey carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in 2017/18, using the same Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale of Food (EBIA) applied in this study, already pointed to a deteriorating food security situation in Brazil. Thus, we cannot wait five more years to assess a situation that will certainly worsen in a short period of time. The current research, carried out by a recognized and competent team of researchers, verifies the seriousness of this situation, calling on the Brazilian authorities and us, members of Brazilian society, to get involved in facing the problem.

“Hunger is one of the cruelest manifestations of social injustice, and we know that, historically, it hits marginalized sectors of society the hardest. The events that have occurred since 2016, and now the pandemic, have further deepened economic and social inequalities in Brazil. The research “National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil”, conducted by the PENSSAN Research Network, is essential at this juncture, because it shows us the severity of the setbacks caused by the overlap of multiple crises and their impacts on food security. It is alarming that the situation of severe food insecurity and hunger has returned to the levels of 2004. We hope that this study can contribute to create awareness of the situation, to promote a debate based on evidence and thus develop and resume policies that lead to the eradication of hunger and inequality.

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“ The “National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil”, conducted by the PENSSAN Research Network, provides a precise and broad portrait of the alarming situation of food insecurity and hunger in Brazil today, looking at the impacts of the pandemic and the political and economic situation on the population. A persistent challenge, that seemed overcome a few years ago as result of public policies that had been put in place, is back in the center of social concerns and public debate. For this reason, reliable research using validated methods is essential to inform policies and programs aimed at ending hunger. Such actions must be accompanied by approaches that incorporate principles of a healthy, just and sustainable diet – goals of Ibirapitanga’s Food Systems Program. The fight against hunger cannot be disassociated from transformations in food systems that contribute to reducing the impacts of climate change, caring for people’s health, and building fair and equitable social relations.

“ Oxfam Brasil’s work is focused on fighting inequalities in the country. Hunger and food insecurity are brutal expressions of Brazilian inequalities, particularly given how much food the country produces. In 2014, Brazil celebrated not showing in the FAO’s Hunger Map anymore. This was a victory of public policies at all governmental levels combined with the efforts of civil society in the struggle for the human right to food and nutrition. Seven years later, and particularly in recent years, there is a growing number of people and families facing hunger, and the decline in the food security and nutrition indicators in the country, both resulting from the dismantling of the policies and councils that had become an international reference to fight hunger. In the face of the unfolding tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic, the “National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil”, conducted by the PENSSAN Research Network, is fundamental for promoting understanding and recognition of the current situation of hunger in the country. At the same time, it is a call to the State and to all Brazilian society to implement emergency measures and medium- and long-term public policies to reverse this shameful setback.



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Summary

The Brazilian Research Network of Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security (Rede PENSSAN) carried out a national survey to assess food security in Brazil in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey was based on a nationally representative sample of households in the five macro-regions of the country – the North, Northeast, Central-West, South and Southeast. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with 2,180 households from December 5 - 24, 2020: 1,662 urban households and 518 in rural areas.

The information was collected using the 8-item version of the Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale (*Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar* – EBIA) with reference to the three months preceding the interview. Information about employment was also collected, with reference to the previous 12 months. As the EBIA has been used by the Brazilian government since 2004 to monitor food insecurity in periodic national surveys, it was possible to compare the findings regarding food insecurity levels in 2020 with those of national surveys conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) between 2004 and 2018.

The results of the survey show that, in the three months prior to data collection, less than half of Brazilian households (44.8%) were food secure. While 55.2% of households were experiencing some level of food insecurity, 9% of households were facing hunger (severe food insecurity). The situation was even worse in rural areas, where 12% of households were affected by hunger. In rural areas, severe food insecurity is twice as high in households without access to water for food and livestock production compared to those with access to water. Out of a total of 211.7 million Brazilians, 116.7 million were experiencing some level of food insecurity, 43.4 million did not have enough food, and 19 million were facing hunger.



Households with income of up to half of a minimum monthly salary *per capita* faced severe food insecurity at levels 2.5 times the national average. The study also pointed to persistent inequalities among regions, including disparities in household income, which are important determinants of food access. Residents of 25% of households in the North and Northeast reported monthly incomes of less than $\frac{1}{4}$ a half of a minimum monthly salary *per capita*, compared to 10% in the South-Southeast and Central West regions. Regarding the head of the household, severe food insecurity was six times greater when the household head was unemployed and four times greater if engaged in informal work compared to those with some kind of formal employment. Severe food insecurity was higher among households headed by women, or by men or women self-declared as being black or brown, or with fewer years of schooling.

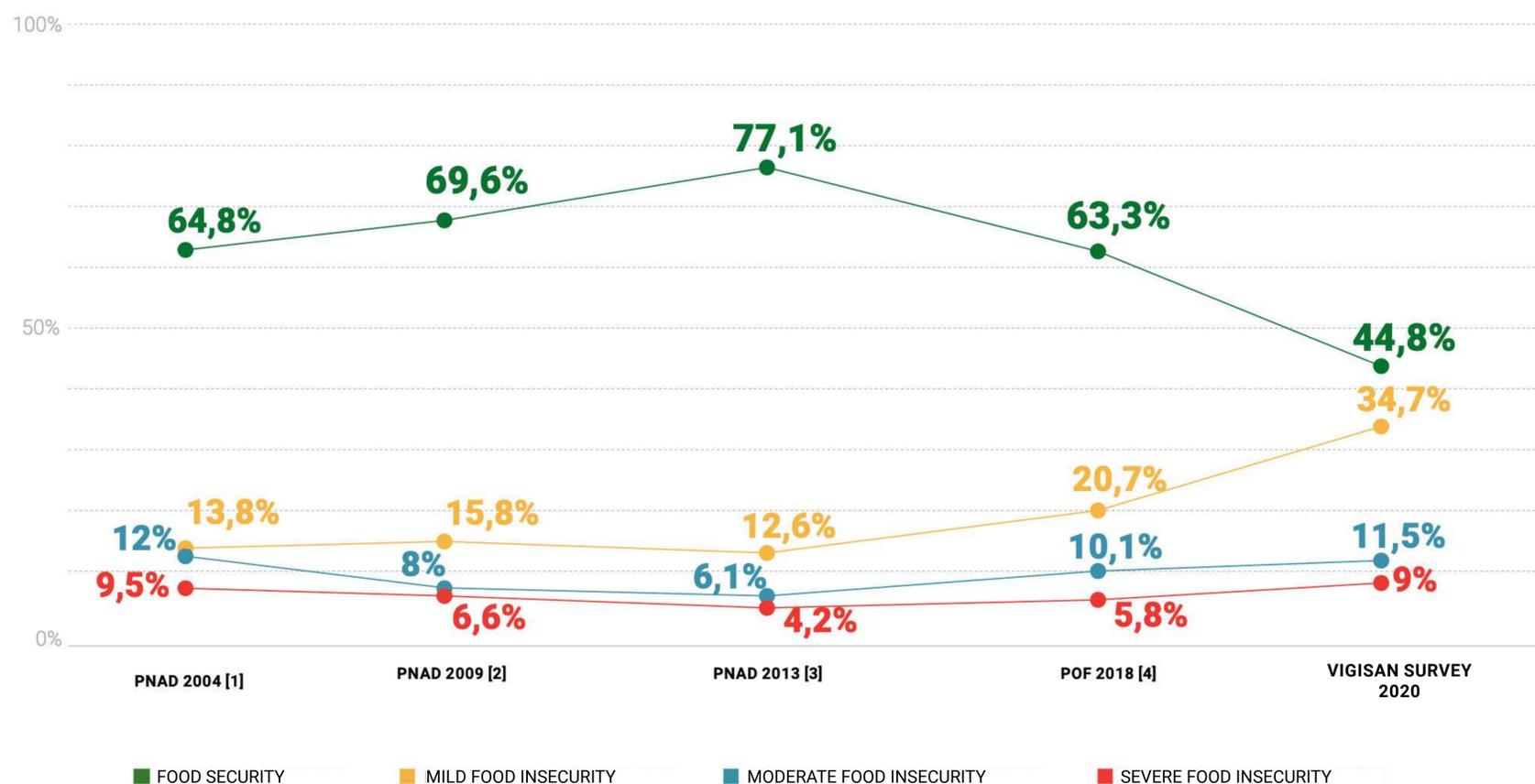
As expected, the Covid-19 pandemic was found to have had a negative impact on the food security of families, with notable differences that reflect the marked social inequalities in Brazil. Among households where the pandemic had led to job loss or increased debt, nearly 20% were facing severe food insecurity. Households with residents who had applied for and received government emergency assistance were affected by moderate or severe food insecurity at levels three times the national average. In rural areas, households that reported lower prices for their products faced moderate or severe food insecurity at twice the rate of rural households that did not. The highest proportions of job loss, reduced family income, deepening debt, and cuts in expenditures on basic necessities – all due to the pandemic – were found in the North and Northeast regions. In these regions, close to 60% households applied for and received emergency assistance, compared to about 50% in other regions of the country.



Particularly noteworthy was the trend in food security observed since 2004 when the IBGE first began collecting data using the EBIA (Figure 1). Periodic national surveys documented progressive improvement in food security from 2004 until 2013. However, results of the national 2017-2018 Household Budget Survey pointed to a reverse in this trend after 2013. The results of the present study reveal an even steeper deterioration in the past two years, aggravated by the pandemic, with levels of moderate and severe food insecurity back up to levels documented in 2004. This reverse in progress after 2013, and exacerbated in recent years, reveals how the Covid-19 pandemic has added to the existing economic and political crises to significantly erode the right of the Brazilian population to an adequate and healthy diet.

The results of this survey are an alert to Brazilian society and its leaders regarding the urgent need for effective actions and public policies to assist vulnerable population groups and promote food and nutrition security, respecting restrictions needed in the face of the worsening pandemic, allied with structural policies aimed at reducing the social inequalities and inequities in our country.

Figure 1 - Comparison of Food Security/Insecurity estimates from the VigiSAN survey and national surveys reanalyzed according to the eight-item scale. VigiSAN National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil, 2020.



Source: Data from the following surveys, reanalyzed for the eight-item scale: [1] National Household Survey (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios – PNAD) 2003-2004 (IBGE); [2] National Household Survey (PNAD) 2008-2009 (IBGE); [3] National Household Survey (PNAD) 2013-2014 (IBGE); [4] Family Budget Survey (Pesquisa de Orçamentos Familiares – POF) 2017-2018 (IBGE).

Don't turn away from hunger

The challenge is ours

Understand the size of the challenge

Food insecurity is when someone does not have full and permanent access to food. Today, in the midst of the pandemic, half the population of Brazil is facing some level of food insecurity: mild, moderate or severe. Severe food insecurity affects 9% of the population – in other words, 19 million Brazilians are facing hunger.

These data are from the *National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil*, carried out by the Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security (Rede PENSSAN), as part of the VigiSAN project.

The numbers about hunger in Brazil are alarming! Don't turn away from them. The challenge is all of ours!

In the Midst of the Covid-19 Pandemic, Brazil is Experiencing an Epidemiological Peak in Hunger: 19 Million Brazilians are Facing Hunger

The National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil was conducted with 2,180 households in all five regions of the country, urban as well as rural areas, between December 5 and 24, 2020.

The results of the survey show that, during the three months prior to data collection, less than



Photo Luiz Carlos Gomes / Oxfam Brasil

half of Brazilian households (44.8%) were food secure. This means that 55.2% of households were facing some level of food insecurity – an increase of 54% since 2018 when 36.7% of households were food secure.

In absolute numbers: during the period covered by the study, 116.8 million Brazilians lacked full and permanent access to food. Of these, 43.4 million (20.5% of the population) were without enough food (moderate or severe food insecurity) and 19.1 million (9% of the population) were facing hunger (severe food insecurity).

This scenario leaves no doubt that the combination of economic, political and health crises has provoked a significant reduction in food security in Brazil.

Brazil is Still Divided Among the Few Who Eat at Will and the Many Who are Left Willing to Eat

Hunger is a historical problem in Brazil, but there was a time when we were able to combat it.

Between 2004 and 2013, the success of the Zero Hunger strategy allied with public policies aimed at combating extreme poverty was increasingly evident.

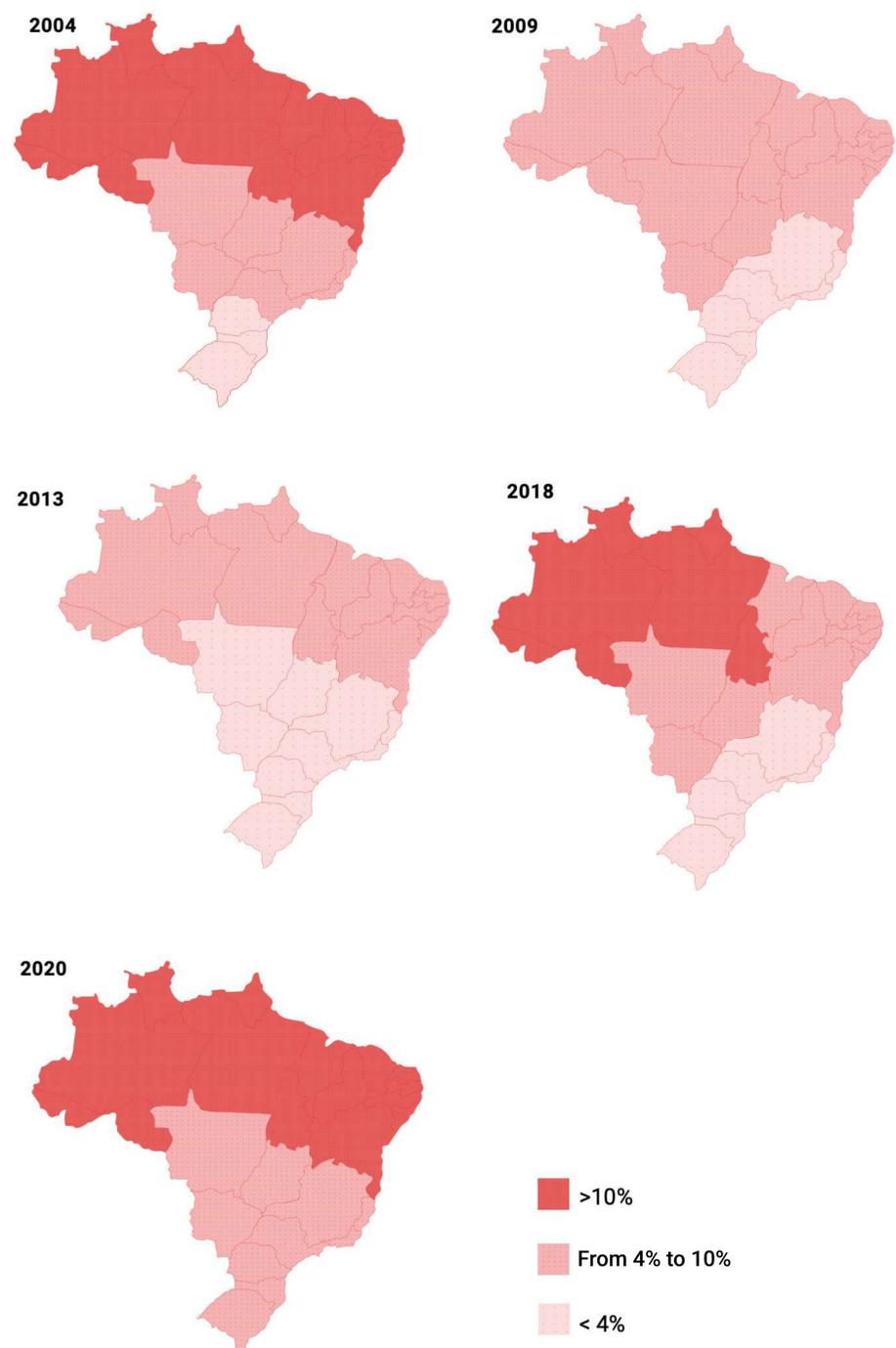
The National Household Survey (PNAD), conducted in 2004, 2009 and 2013, showed a significant reduction in food insecurity throughout the country. In 2013, the proportion of the population facing hunger had fallen to 4.2% - the lowest level since it was first measured in 2004. But this success in guaranteeing the human right to adequate, healthy food was erased (Figure 2). The current numbers are double those observed in 2009.

Hunger levels are back to those of 2004

The largest setback occurred in the last two years. Between 2013 and 2018, according to data from the PNAD and the National Family Budget Survey (POF), severe food insecurity increased 8.0% per year. After that, the increase accelerated: from 2018 to 2020, as the VigiSAN study shows, hunger increased by 27.6%.

In other words: in only two years, the number of people facing severe food insecurity jumped from 10.3 to 19.1 million. In this period, hunger became a reality for nearly 9 million Brazilians.

Figure 2 - Evolution of hunger in Brazil: percentage of the population affected by severe food insecurity from 2004 to 2020 – macro-regions.



Sources: [1] National Household Survey (PNAD) 2003-2004 (IBGE); [2] National Household Survey (PNAD) 2008-2009 (IBGE); [3] National Household Survey (PNAD) 2013-2014 (IBGE); [4] Family Budget Survey (Pesquisa de Orçamentos Familiares – POF) 2017-2018 (IBGE); [5] VigiSAN National Survey of Food Insecurity in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil, 2020. For sources [1] through [4], data collected using the 14-item Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar were reanalyzed for the eight-item scale.



Hunger Has no Time, But it Has a Place

According to the VigiSAN survey, food insecurity increased throughout the country, but regional differences are still pronounced. The North and Northeast are the regions most affected by hunger.

In 2020, food insecurity affected more than 60% of the households in the North and 70% in the Northeast, compared to the national prevalence of 55.2%. While 9% of Brazilian households were facing severe food insecurity (hunger), the proportions were much higher in the North and Northeast – 18.1% and 13.8%, respectively.

The Northeast has the largest number of people facing severe food insecurity – nearly 7.7 million. While North region accounts for only 7.5% of the national population, it is home to 14.9% of the total number of people facing hunger in Brazil.

In addition, the persistent poverty among rural populations has a strong impact on their food security, be they family farmers, communities of descendants of enslaved Afro-Brazilians (quilombolas), indigenous populations, or riverbank communities. In rural areas, 12% of households were facing hunger.

Hunger is Associated with Gender, Color and Educational Level

Some population groups are at higher risk of food insecurity. In 2020, 11.1% of households headed by women were affected by hunger, compared to 7.7% of households headed by men.

Hunger was present in 10.7% of homes where the head of the household was Afrodescendent, compared to 7.5% of households headed by Whites. Hunger affected 14.7% of households headed by people who had not finished high school compared to only 4.7% of households headed by people with a high school diploma or more.

Photo Tatiana Cardeal / Oxfam Brasil



Hunger does not Occur in Isolation

Hunger is accompanied by a lack of many other things, notably lack of access to water.

Water insecurity, meaning the lack of regular access to potable water, affected around 40% of homes in the North and Northeast in 2020 – nearly triple the percentage in other regions of the country.

Irregular access to water increases the risk of COVID-19 transmission, and it is more common in the poorer households and regions of the country.

The relationship between food insecurity and water insecurity is clear. According to the VigiSAN study, the proportion of rural households experiencing hunger is double when water is lacking for food production – 44% compared to 22% in rural households with access to water.

Food insecurity may have also increased among the non-poor

The proportion of the population affected by mild food insecurity increased from 20.7% to 34.7% in two years.

Close to half of the people interviewed reported a reduction in household income during the pandemic, leading to cuts in spending on basic necessities. These households composed the group with the highest proportion of mild food insecurity – about 40%. This points to the impact of the pandemic on families that previously had stable incomes and were likely pushed from a situation of food insecurity into mild food insecurity.

The economic crisis, worsened by the pandemic, is increasing food insecurity even among the non-poor.

Policies to create jobs and generate income + emergency assistance = effective fight against hunger during the pandemic

One finding of the study stands out: moderate and severe food insecurity completely disappears in households where the monthly income is above one minimum salary per capita.

Regarding the employment situation of the head of household, hunger was four times greater when the head of household had only informal work and six times greater when unemployed.

The pathway to eradicate hunger is through policies aimed at generating employment and income

In times of Covid-19, the challenges are greater. The successful achievement of realizing the human right to enough food in Brazil has been progressively eroded since 2013 – erosion that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

A large proportion of families that requested and received emergency assistance – 29% - were facing moderate or severe food insecurity, pointing to the vulnerability of this group. Without an adequate governmental response in the form of public policies, hunger will persist and increase.

The rise in hunger during the pandemic is not the responsibility of a virus but rather is due to political choices of denial and the absence of effective social protection measures.



Photo: Tatiana Cardeal / Oxfam Brasil

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from hunger.
The challenge
is all of ours**