Artículos de investigación
Research articles

Conditions of human development in Wayuu child malnutrition[1]

Condiciones del desarrollo humano en la desnutrición infantil de los wayuus

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Received: May 6, 2024 – **Accepted:** October 8, 2024 – **Published:** January 15, 2026

APA citation format:
García Peña, J. J., & Pimienta Arismendy, J. C. (2025). Conditions of human development in Wayuu child malnutrition. *Revista Colombiana de Ciencias Sociales*, *17*(1), 63-86. https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

Abstract

Objective: To analyze the incidence of factors associated with human development in Wayuu child malnutrition in the department of La Guajira, Colombia. Method: A qualitative study based on a social phenomenological methodology, using semi-structured interviews. Results: Wayuu lived experiences reveal a progressive conception of development, as well as the influence of the territorial context as a determining factor in child malnutrition. The findings show that this social scourge constitutes a multidimensional problem and represents the materialization of precarious living conditions and social inequality to which this community has historically been exposed. Conclusions: There is a need to implement comprehensive approaches that enable, through coordinated institutional actions, the effective participation of the community while recognizing and valuing their ancestral knowledge.

[1] This article is derived from the research project "Conditions of Human Development Influencing Malnutrition among Wayuu Children." Unfunded project.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

Keywords

Human development; Child malnutrition; Food sovereignty; Culture; Drinking water; Multidimensional context; Indigenous community.

Resumen

Objetivo: analizar la incidencia de factores asociados al desarrollo humano en la desnutrición infantil de los wayuus en el departamento de La Guajira, Colombia. Método: cualitativo, desde una metodología fenomenológica de corte social, mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas. Resultados: se encuentra en las vivencias de los wayuus una concepción de desarrollo progresista, y una incidencia del contexto territorial como condicionante de la desnutrición infantil. Se evidencia que este flagelo social es una problemática multidimensional, materialización de precariedad y desigualdad social a las que históricamente esta comunidad ha estado expuesta. Conclusiones: es necesario implementar propuestas integrales que posibiliten, desde acciones institucionales articuladas, la participación efectiva de la comunidad reconociendo sus saberes ancestrales.

Palabras clave

Desarrollo humano; Desnutrición infantil; Soberanía alimentaria; Cultura; Agua potable; Contexto multidimensional; Comunidad indígena.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

Introduction

Human development is a theoretical–practical concept that today allows us to analyze, in real-world settings, problematic human situations such as child malnutrition, situating it within a multidimensional context that involves cultural, historical, social, geographic, economic, and, very particularly, political dimensions.

Human development is therefore closely linked to sociocommunity factors—such as economic and political conditions—that facilitate access to local institutions and their services, including education, health infrastructure, income levels, and the feasible distribution of wealth (Sen, 2004).

In communities with low levels of human development, such as Colombia's ancestral Indigenous communities, there are high rates of child malnutrition due, for example, to limited access to nutritious food or to adequate health services. Consequently, child malnutrition must be understood as both a public health problem and an issue of food insecurity (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020).

The Wayuu Indigenous community is located in the department of La Guajira, in northern Colombia, which is composed of fifteen municipalities: Riohacha, Uribia, Manaure, Maicao, Dibulla, Albania, Hatonuevo, Barrancas, Fonseca, Distracción, San Juan del Cesar, El Molino, Villanueva, Urumita, and La Jagua del Pilar. The territory comprising the Guajira Peninsula covers an area of 20,848 km² and has a population of 1,038,397 inhabitants, of whom 480,560 belong to Wayuu communities, according to the 2018 National Population and Housing Census conducted by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) (Chamber of Commerce of La Guajira, 2024).

The Wayuu community exhibits particular sociodemographic characteristics that are analyzed in this study and are related to the multiple forms of vulnerability to which it has historically been exposed, hindering its comprehensive development, with children in early childhood being the most affected. Malnutrition among Wayuu children is one of the predominant factors that must be examined, as it has been the cause of a high number of deaths. Since 2013, official records and judicial actions report 581 children who have died from causes associated with malnutrition or the lack of adequate nutrition.

In 2014, 48 children died from malnutrition (Diario Las Américas, newspaper, July 25, 2016), 37 in 2015, and 84 children in 2016 (National Institute of Health, SIVIGILA, 2016). In 2017, 48 cases were recorded; in 2018, 105; and in 2019, 72 cases. In 2020, there were 47 cases; in 2021, 55 children died from hunger (El Tiempo newspaper, September 25, 2022); and in 2022, there

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

were 85 deaths of minors due to this cause (El Tiempo, January 12, 2023). These figures indicate that a food security crisis persists and even tends to worsen, which in turn reflects an ongoing humanitarian crisis in the department.

Child malnutrition among Wayuu boys and girls highlights the conditions of development of this community and the extent of state protection afforded to it. Although, as an ancestral community, it is protected under Colombian legislation—beginning with the 1991 Political Constitution, which recognizes Indigenous peoples as holders of fundamental rights and acknowledges the existence of 81 Indigenous groups speaking 64 languages—Indigenous communities are also protected by laws and decrees such as Law 89 of 1890, which guarantees Indigenous representation through cabildos; Law 2 of 1959, which safeguards the Amazon forest reserve zone; Law 21 of 1991, which establishes that Indigenous and tribal peoples shall fully enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms without obstacles or discrimination; and Law 99 of 1993, which mandates that the exploitation of natural resources must occur without undermining the cultural, social, and economic identity of Indigenous communities (Ministry of the Interior, 2024).

Despite the above, Colombian legislation does not include specific provisions for Indigenous communities regarding the protection or safeguarding of their food sovereignty. In light of this context, the objective of this article is to analyze the incidence of factors associated with human development in Wayuu child malnutrition in the department of La Guajira, specifically in the municipality of Manaure, with the aim of making visible the social scenarios of the Guajira context embedded within a sociohistorical ecosystem that is configured through the disaggregation of cultural factors linked to child human development in Wayuu communities.

La Guajira is a territory marked by profound social inequities, one of whose consequences is child malnutrition. The United Nations Children's Fund (2021) warns that hunger is not a problem with an isolated origin but rather the result of multiple exogenous and endogenous factors; therefore, its understanding and intervention are complex.

Medina Rey et al. (2021) note that among the essential factors in a contextual analysis of the right to food are barriers to health services, the historical difficulty of access to drinking water, and obstacles related to access to territory. In the Wayuu case, demographic dispersion is a significant factor due to geographic characteristics. Rancherías are located in desert areas of middle and upper La Guajira, distributed across twenty-one reserves, which generates multiple difficulties for community development, such as access to quality education, appropriate health services, and food services provided in the territory by the public network or by private entities.

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These particular territorial conditions in La Guajira have led to numerous governmental and non-governmental intervention efforts that are continuously implemented in the communities, often disregarding their traditions, local knowledge, and ancestral customs. This becomes another contributing factor to the problem of child malnutrition, as interventions are offered that are decontextualized, lack a differential approach, and, in many cases, become focal points of corruption and the misappropriation of public resources (Ruiz García et al., 2023).

This panorama reflects a situation of multidimensional poverty that reveals complex conditions of precarious human development (DANE, 2023). These development conditions that underlie child malnutrition have, in recent decades, been the subject of media coverage and academic research; nevertheless, they persist and continue to be experienced amid indifference—and even a certain apathy—on the part of communities external to the Wayuu people.

Despite the multiplicity of quantitative studies with epidemiological and biomedical approaches, the literature addressing the perspective of those directly affected—mothers, children, and community leaders, who play a central role within the community—remains scarce; consequently, the worldview of the communities themselves is seldom heard. This situation leads to inefficiencies in research processes and intervention programs (Paz, 2012). In this regard, the study by Peláez González (2022) is noteworthy, as it seeks to understand ancestral perspectives related to child malnutrition in the Wayuu communities of Perramana and Mawasirra, within the jurisdiction of the municipality of Manaure. This study addresses concepts such as interculturality, ancestral medicine, hunger, and poverty, and highlights the importance of alternatives that ensure the proper implementation and operation of productive projects, with the aim of mitigating the impact of malnutrition based on the communities' own conditions and ancestral knowledge.

Along similar lines, López Ríos et al. (2021) examine microprojects developed with three Wayuu Indigenous communities (Limunaka, Taiguaicat, and Pañarrer) focused on food security, and evaluate the implementation of these strategies through community forums, photovoice, and circles of knowledge, among other in situ interactive techniques. Likewise, Caicedo (2020) conducts a study from a participatory perspective with children experiencing malnutrition in the municipality of Maicao, examining the external causes of malnutrition among Wayuu children in order to improve the conditions of comprehensive well-being within the population.

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Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on a social phenomenological methodology, which allows for the reconstruction and understanding of lived experiences through an engagement with the subjective meanings of reality (Galeano, 2018). As a methodological procedure, in situ engagement with the Wayuu community was conducted through the use of semi-structured interviews, emphasizing participatory processes and the direct voices of various actors related to the issue under study. These actors reside in the communities of Walaschen and Patsuwain, located within the high and middle Guajira Indigenous reserve, in the municipality of Manaure, La Guajira.

The purpose of this approach was to explore the narratives and experiences of the community directly affected by the problem under investigation—namely, mothers, community leaders, and public-sector professionals involved in institutional service provision—thus enabling the generation of multiple contributions, emotions, and interests, as noted by Díaz et al. (2013). In this case, these elements revolve around the situation of malnutrition affecting Wayuu boys and girls.

Within this participatory methodological experience, the community's lived practices regarding the issue are fundamental. Ten individuals participated in the study: six Wayuu mothers (aged between 15 and 40 years, referred to anonymously in their contributions using the codes M1 through M6), two community leaders (L1 and L2), and two public servants (SP1 and SP2).

The monolingual characteristics of the communities—whose primary language is Wayuunaiki—were taken into account. Contact was established with local translators, who provided communicative support during the interview process.

The systematization of the data generated was analyzed using ATLAS.ti version 22, enabling categorization and contrastive analysis for subsequent theoretical development.

Ethical considerations. This study was conducted in accordance with current ethical standards as regulated by the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2017) and the Code of Ethics and Bioethics for the practice of psychology in Colombia (Law 1090 of 2006). These frameworks ensured that, through respect for and recognition of the cultural rights of the participating community, a process of constructive horizontal dialogue and interaction was carried out, without transgressing or disrespecting the worldview of the Wayuu people.

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Results

Conditions of Human Development Related to Child Malnutrition

In engaging with the community, we explored their understanding of the concept of human development in order to identify how they integrate it into the socially multicausal situation of child malnutrition. The Wayuu hold a notion of human development framed almost exclusively within an economistic and material dynamic of progress, possibly shaped by territorial logics themselves. That is, for them, it is closely associated with moving forward, obtaining benefits, growing, and even with arithmetic operations that conceive the process as a cumulative sum. Development is not interpreted as an aspect embedded in cultural and social dimensions that contributes to improving quality of life both collectively and individually. One mother expresses it as follows:

> That is looking for or finding a way to earn income so we can invest it, buy our animals, strengthen the family, adapt or improve the house—basically managing to improve and grow. (M3)

Nevertheless, this account shows that although in their language development is equated with progress, their narratives do capture the dimension it entails—at least in monetary terms and in relation to growth. It is about living better, even if they do not conceive it through other, more qualitative spheres of human development. Although none of the six participating mothers can formally define what development is, each describes how it is lived and how it is projected. “I don’t know, it’s having food, having a place to stay with your children, having work, some income—for me that is progress” (M4).

The participating Wayuu mothers state that development—if it were to occur—would directly benefit children, as they are the foundation of both the present and the future of the Wayuu community.

> Supposedly, as time goes by, progress should increase instead of things becoming scarcer, as people say. But how can there be progress if our children keep dying? It’s not the same as taking action—having actions to achieve progress. For example, the birth of a child: a child is born to grow; they are our future. Or, say I buy 10 goats today—I know that in 10 years I will have 100 goats, 10 goats per year. In short, if there is progress and services improve, our community will continue to grow. (M2)

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The community empirically associates human development with optimal access to public services. Thus, it identifies a close relationship between access to health services and the limitations it must face in order to obtain them. One participant illustrates this as follows:

> I have a complaint regarding health care. First of all, transportation from the community to the urban center is difficult. What happens is that sometimes, even if you have a bicycle, there isn't enough time to get there. Then when they arrive, they say, "No, the appointment tickets are already gone, go to emergency services." So they go, and in emergency services they tell us, "No, your child is fine, go to outpatient care." So that's the dilemma—they have to see the child agonizing before they will attend to them. (M4)

Due to precarious transportation routes and mobility conditions, access to the health care system in the territory is often difficult, revealing barriers to health development that prevent optimal care for children who may reach medical centers. Regarding care within health facilities, technical, administrative, and operational procedures constitute additional constraints that hinder sensitive and humane care, as this mother recounts:

> When my child had diarrhea and vomiting, I went to the health service provider [IPS], to emergency care, and they told me to sit down and that they would attend to me shortly. One of the difficulties for us mothers here is obtaining what children need—diapers, soap. So you take advantage and ask for them, but there they scold us, saying, "Why did you come for that? Look, you brought the child dirty." Sometimes we don't even have money to pay for a motorcycle ride from here to Manaure. That's why sometimes you don't want to go to the doctor—because you can't cover basic needs and you are treated badly, and time just passes while you wait. And they don't even carry out outreach health brigades here anymore, which used to help us avoid having to travel there. (M3).

There is no regularity in health-related support, nor preventive, field-based care as would be required, leaving these communities adrift and without protection for addressing health-related conditions.

Another fundamental factor associated with Wayuu child malnutrition concerns access to adequate nutrition and employment opportunities within the territory, which are reported as precarious. This situation generates low household incomes that prevent families from providing quality food. The core of the problem lies in the difficulty Wayuu families face in securing employment due to scarce local opportunities, as one mother explains:

> The only way a child can eat well is if our husbands work and can earn an income so they can provide good food for our children and for us as well; but there is no work—nothing works out. (M5)

A tripartite relationship among development, water, and food is also identified. As participants report, access to water enables the cultivation of foods native to the territory and their subsequent consumption; however, due to the absence of this vital resource, food production cannot be sustained over time, creating barriers to adequate and sustainable food access. It is important to highlight development practices framed within community-based appropriation initiatives, such

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as the use of land for subsistence farming (*pancoger* crops—foods grown by the community to meet part of their nutritional needs). Despite limited access to water, communities use ingenuity to irrigate crops and harvest some foods within short periods, as described below:

> Here, basically, the community takes advantage of the rainy season and we make gardens. When the rain comes, it is a time of abundance, because you can plant everything—beans, squash, melon, watermelon, corn—and it is something secure, produced by oneself, by one's own hands. You can eat as much as you want, the same for the children, because it is no longer bought, it is produced here. If there were water all the time, production could be better utilized. (M1)

Cultivating and consuming one's own produce is ideal for any community, given the potential to create meaningful pathways toward food sovereignty. It is crucial that these initiatives be grounded in community-led processes with ethnic and cultural approaches, as this is what enables ownership and dynamization from within the community itself.

Another aspect associated with human development identified by participants relates to access to and enjoyment of education, which, according to them, has been subjected to territorial hardships as well as neglect and internal disputes among Indigenous clans. This situation directly affects school dropout rates and undermines life projects, dreams, and aspirations among the population, as clearly illustrated in the following account:

> I have three children. One of them is in ninth grade and studies about 12 or 13 kilometers from here. To get there, she has to ride a bicycle, and sometimes it gets a flat tire, or sometimes she leaves without breakfast. When she comes back, she returns under the scorching sun. These are things that really aren't right—education isn't feasible that way; no one finishes. (M4)

Within this overview of the conditions affecting the development of Wayuu communities, another essential issue is full access to and enjoyment of water. National, departmental, and municipal governments, along with the communities themselves, have made significant efforts to guarantee access to water as a vital resource, but with limited effectiveness. Participants describe it as follows:

> What I find difficult about water is that here we are not drinking potable water. We live off brackish water, and it's hard because there is only one windmill, and many people depend on it—not only the Patsuwain and Waleshein communities, but more communities as well. There are 12 communities benefiting from a single windmill. (M6)

During in situ fieldwork, we observed an abundance of water wells throughout La Guajira that are abandoned or inhabited by bats and no longer fulfill their intended function, reflecting state neglect and political corruption.

All of the above constitutes a wave of absences in guaranteeing rights in this territory from an institutional standpoint, demonstrating the State's difficulty in implementing effective strategies to improve the living conditions of this population. Furthermore, communities face limitations in their capacity for agency, which is examined in greater detail below.

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Parental Agency Capacity and the Nutritional Status of Wayuu Children

Malnutrition in the department of La Guajira is a multidimensional social scourge in which access to adequate food is a determining factor for Wayuu communities. The lack of food intake among pregnant mothers marks the beginning of a cycle of child malnutrition, as one mother explains: "When I became pregnant, I didn't eat because I vomited everything. I was like that until six months into the pregnancy, and after six months I ate very little because there was nothing." (M2)

In many cases, food scarcity is associated with the lack of economic resources to purchase food. Additionally, early pregnancy and the absence of education on reproductive health constitute factors that contribute to malnutrition. In the face of state neglect, children's food intake becomes contingent upon the agency capacity of their parents—that is, their cultural resources or economic means to survive. Accordingly, some mothers describe what they feed their children: corn porridge with milk (M2); rice, and sometimes beans if available (M4); spaghetti with lentils (M3); rice *chicha*; bean soup with corn (M5).

Participants report that these food preparations are, in some cases, provided to children once a day, or—when there is a moderate income—twice a day. This clearly indicates that agency capacity within these communities is very limited, a situation that constitutes a significant risk of household food insecurity among Wayuu families.

The nutritional status of children in these communities has become a focal point of national and international concern. In this regard, institutional programs are present in the territory, such as the Community Care Unit (*Unidad Comunitaria de Atención*). However, from the community's perspective, these programs are insufficient to adequately respond to children's nutritional needs. In parallel, international cooperation efforts involving external actors operating in the territory also seek to mitigate the situation. Within this framework of assistance-oriented interventions aimed at improving children's nutritional conditions, the distribution of vitamin supplements has gained relevance (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2011). A professional providing in situ care states:

> A good diet means that a child receives at least four of the eight food groups considered in the Food-Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs). That is, our children should consume fruits, vegetables, dairy products, meats—at least four of the groups. That is a good diet for it to be considered diverse and to contribute to their development. (SP2)

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Consequently, the nutritional status of children in Wayuu communities is deficient. Another participating professional warns:

> According to ENSIN [National Nutrition Situation Survey], Indigenous populations in Colombia have a 26% rate of child malnutrition, compared to 10.8% in the general population. Of that 26%, 94.8% suffer from chronic malnutrition. Chronic malnutrition is the best indicator any country can use to speak about social inequities and violations of rights. In that sense, three forms of malnutrition are observed here: acute malnutrition—meaning weight deficit for height—which is subdivided into moderate acute malnutrition and severe acute malnutrition. Malnutrition is also subdivided into three phenotypes: one phenotype is the thin, marasmatic malnourished child, also known as "boustin," basically skin and bones; at the other extreme is the swollen malnourished child, known as kwashiorkor. In between, we have a mixed phenotype: a marasmatic malnourished child who contracts an infection—a cold, fever, diarrhea, vomiting—and then begins to swell. (SP1)

Feeding Practices in the Wayuu Community

Addressing feeding practices requires an examination of the causes of malnutrition or adequate nutrition from a multidimensional perspective, one that captures access to goods, services, and the effective enjoyment of rights within this territory. Feeding practices are necessarily constrained by the lack of economic income and insufficient protection of rights by both local and national actors.

Adequate nutrition refers to aspects framed within food sovereignty, as understood in academic and institutional contexts—that is, having the ability to manage and produce food for consumption under optimal conditions while considering territorial particularities. As one mother states: "Beans, corn—what is consumed here, what is eaten here, what the region provides" (M2).

Corn porridge with milk (*mazamorra*), *chicha*, and goat meat are part of the daily diet—most of the time—of Wayuu children. However, their consumption is subordinate to the dynamics of collecting goat milk, obtaining water, and sacrificing animals such as goats. This has cultural implications, since animals—particularly goats—are associated with clan prestige: the greater the number of goats, the greater the prestige.

> Yes, it's true, we have goats here, but we take very good care of the female goats—why? So they can produce more offspring or so we can milk them to make yajaus [porridge]. And the male goats, the sheep—sometimes we sacrifice or sell them so we can buy corn or grains. (M6)

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It should be noted that, with regard to Wayuu feeding practices, participants explain that over the years these practices no longer rely exclusively on traditional preparations or customary recipes. Instead, they have been supplemented with external inputs—new foods that contribute to child nutrition—such as vitamin sachets and powdered preparations containing multiple nutrients, which now play a central role in daily diets.

> With the vitamins, the children have recovered—they have been improving. Vitamil is something that comes from the United States; that was a process we managed with Fucai [Caminos de Identidad Foundation], which has been coming for quite some time—about two years now. It's a donation from some businesspeople; it comes already packaged in bags, not pre-cooked but ready to cook. Three bags per household are distributed monthly. (L2)

This aspect shows how international cooperation and local management capacity have reconfigured feeding practices, which ultimately function as complementary mechanisms for community survival. While this represents a benefit, from another perspective it could also point to a gradual loss of native, original, and traditional dietary patterns, as external models of food consumption are adopted. Nevertheless, when weighed on a scale, life must prevail over any other social or economic consideration; the key lies in achieving a balance between these two sources of nutrition.

It is important to emphasize once again that, within the Wayuu context, participants affirm that cultural considerations often prevail over pressing nutritional needs. Only in limited circumstances does the need to eat override cultural aspects, such as the sacrifice of animals that represent prestige and power. Not all families sacrifice their assets or social backing—namely, livestock—to secure adequate nutrition with sufficient protein. This typically occurs during events of social gathering or collective solidarity, such as funerals, as one participant explains:

> Well, the possibility of being able to eat it is that we have certain customs here. When there is a funeral, for example, your husband is invited, and as a courtesy, the family holding the funeral gives a goat. That goat serves everyone for breakfast, lunch, and so on while it lasts. Once that is over, there is nothing left to cook and no way to buy food. (M5)

There are multiple questions surrounding these scenarios of juxtaposition between cultural practices and subsistence needs; however, this tension constitutes a fundamental factor that must be understood as part of the broader contextual reality.

Institutional Support in the Guajira Context

From the perspective of participants, discussing institutional support in the communities of Walaschen and Patsuwain means confronting a profound lack of understanding of their lived realities; they perceive that institutional presence contributes very little. Community leaders and several mothers believe that institutional actions aimed at Wayuu populations rarely incorporate

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

community participation, local knowledge, or their perspectives, perceptions, worldviews, and life projects. They consider these elements essential for the design of proposals capable of fostering sustainability and improving living conditions.

> The reality is that we have no knowledge of those public proposals that are supposedly being implemented or of what actions political leaders are taking for the benefit or recovery of our children, because they say nothing—they don't show up, they don't ask what we can improve for our children or what we can provide for them. We are the ones who are with the children every day, yet they don't ask us what would be best for them. So if they don't ask us, any action they bring will not work. (L1)

The participating population views the future with discouragement due to the few—or nonexistent—actions implemented by the State in their territory:

> What can one do? To improve malnutrition, today we no longer believe in promises, because they never materialize—not in the short term nor in the medium term. They appear during campaign seasons and then disappear until the next elections. (L2)

Communities clearly understand the scope of the political component and the role they play within the electoral landscape, which is directly related to the provision of services in the territory.

> In the Wayuu community, candidates for elected office are aware of our importance as an electoral base. That is why they appear during election periods with short-term strategies that benefit daily life, but without the sustainability needed to consolidate long-term processes or to generate real community ownership. (SP2)

Community participation in public processes is necessary as an exercise in co-construction, grounded in harmony and mutual respect. Although the current outlook is discouraging, it may also present opportunities to build alternative realities that allow for genuine community participation—placing their needs and knowledge at the center of interventions addressing child malnutrition as a complex problem. This issue has become so normalized in La Guajira that it is often perceived as part of the landscape.

It is also important to note that, based on information provided by participating mothers, the role of the State is not clearly visible or is perceived as deficient. What they do recognize, however, is the support of international cooperation in developing actions that help mitigate malnutrition, as reflected in the successful experience shared by one mother:

> There was a program from the Fucai Foundation. They made a kind of ground grain mix—they ground and mixed several grains. That helped my daughter recover; she was in very bad condition, and that program helped her get better. (M4)

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According to participants, this project included participatory, nutritional, and educational components that mothers value very positively:

> We made a mixture that we called "food for life." It was a project we carried out ourselves—the mothers prepared it with guidance from a nutritionist. She explained that the lack of many grains in children's bodies—beans, corn—those foods are good for the body. What we had to do was toast them, and once toasted, grind them until they became something like a fortified flour. We toasted local beans, squash seeds, sesame seeds, corn, and plantain. We dried the plantains completely and ground them as well. It turns into a flour that can be eaten easily because it is already cooked, and it can also be prepared with milk. (M5)

Projects such as those described have left a lasting impression on participants due to their impact on empowerment processes, agency capacity, and the transformation of community dynamics. These are the types of psychosocial intervention proposals—based on active participation, joint construction, and recognition of ancestral knowledge—that communities feel truly benefit them. Greater ownership leads to greater empowerment of the population and a deeper understanding and analysis of their circumstances. In this regard, a community leader describes a troubling reality experienced by this and other communities in the municipality of Manaure:

> In the last 10 years, as far as I remember, more than 48 children died here in this area. For us, they didn't die from diseases as such, but from diseases related to malnutrition. For the community, it's not malnutrition—they say the illness came and took them. But in reality, it was scarcity, because when you begin to work as a community advocate, you understand more deeply the symptoms the children had, what they looked like, what their hair was like. (L1)

The figures on child deaths due to malnutrition or related causes underscore the severity of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in La Guajira and constitute an urgent call for comprehensive, intersectoral intervention. In addition, when community members engage in educational and formative processes, this strengthens their cultural identity and fosters respect for their environment and for others in an inclusive and sustainable manner.

By contrast, in other types of processes—experienced by communities as being imposed by the State—resistance and conflict between parties are commonly observed. This occurs because such initiatives are implemented unilaterally, without prior recognition of the context or of ancestral and traditional customs. The following testimony illustrates this situation:

> It is clearly difficult, because there is no genuine dialogue in which, for example, other entities say to us, "We are going to do this," and then ask us to make a proposal, or we also make them a proposal, so that we can work together. It is difficult because they do not arrive, they say nothing, they do not dialogue with us, they do not take us into account—basically, they ignore us. (M4)

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From the perspective of professionals working within public institutions, there is an emphasis on the actions carried out by the State. According to participant SP2, numerous initiatives have been implemented in the Guajira territory:

> In the department there have been many projects, but as far as I know, none has reached a successful conclusion. I will give an example: the project carried out by Baylor in some communities under its jurisdiction in Manaure—laying hen houses, pig farming. I saw very large pigs, but paradoxically, in those areas the prevalence of chronic malnutrition remains high. So the question remains—why does it continue to fail? But projects, there are many.

These proposals have not achieved sustainability, community ownership, or adherence. Comprehensive actions are still lacking, as is a deeper understanding of in situ conditions analyzed through the communities' own cultural frameworks, which would allow Wayuu communities to achieve greater harmony with state systems.

Continuing with the viewpoint of public servants, although numerous actions are implemented, they do not succeed in eradicating malnutrition in these territories—perhaps because they are short-term, palliative, fragmented, and poorly articulated initiatives. As a result, they tend to be insufficiently relevant and ineffective, as one participant notes:

> The failure lies in effectiveness. There are many actions, but they are uncoordinated. The different actors working in the field do not share information. Many times, there is duplication of efforts in the same region—two or three NGOs—while in others there are none at all. (SP1)

Cultural Traditions and Dietary Customs in the Wayuu Community

Being Wayuu is intrinsically linked to a cultural and territorial identity mediated by symbols, spaces, and places that generate connection and meaning for ancestral and traditional practices. In this sense, the territory functions as a channel for the expression of the intangible and largely encapsulates the collective community ethos.

> The relationship we have with the territory is an ancestral bond, through our relatives, our ancestors, our elders. They have instilled in us this sense of belonging to remain within the communities. That bond they left us is what we want to pass on to our children—a family and cultural bond rooted here in our community. (M4)

However, in contemporary times, Western culture has permeated Wayuu ancestral customs through an inevitable process of cultural exchange, in which hegemonic power structures absorb older traditions. As a result, identity, food practices, and even the territory itself now reflect a form of mestizaje with Western influences, although within the community there remains a strong effort to preserve Wayuu cultural ties. In other words, Wayuu culture has endured for millennia, but in

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

recent decades it has undergone transformations that have given rise to new social situations and subjective realities shaping how community life is felt, lived, and enacted. Even so, its ancestral essence remains intact. Culture is inseparable from territory, as one participant states: "Because we are from here and were raised to be here; we were born here, placed here, our ancestors left us here, and here we will remain" (M2).

For this reason, it is crucial to examine the role played by territory, as it serves as a foundation for identity and relationships—not merely in a transitory way, but permanently, across a lifetime—fostering processes of territorial and identity rootedness mediated by self-expression and, collectively, by the construction of shared and intersubjective practices. In this regard, being a Wayuu mother entails an intimate relationship with the territory:

> Being a mother means being tied to the land and to one's family, struggling daily with the adversities we face, finding ways to provide for our children. Being a Wayuu mother means many things—it means living with the risk of losing our children at any moment due to lack of food or other illnesses. That is what it means to be a Wayuu mother for us; we live with the risk of losing our children. (M4)

This concept carries multiple meanings connected to the context and to the hardships experienced daily in the territory, often requiring mothers to relinquish their own interests in order to care for, protect, and attend to others.

Dialogue between elders and children must constitute the pathway through which processes carried out in the territory safeguard and protect ancestral cultural patterns and practices, ensuring that they are materialized locally and continue to develop over time.

Among the culturally relevant aspects of the Wayuu community, the influence of external factors on cultural practices must also be acknowledged, one of which is religion—first Catholicism and more recently Evangelical Christianity. This factor has transformed traditional approaches to illness, diminishing the central role historically played by the *piache* (the traditional Wayuu healer), who today has lost prominence and relevance within the communities. As one participant explains: "In the past, ailments were treated by the *piaches*, everything related to traditional medicine. But nowadays, people entrust it mostly to God, and traditional medicines are no longer as important" (M1).

On the other hand, although deeply rooted cultural patterns persist, it is now critically important to work toward their protection, preventing exogenous factors—which are sometimes inevitable and part of contact with the contemporary world—from excessively altering or weakening the Wayuu people's own social dynamics.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

With regard to food security and food sovereignty within the Wayuu community, it is necessary to interrelate millennia-old customs transmitted across generations with contemporary guidelines and perspectives. In this way, a balance can be achieved between the community's needs in the current historical moment and the preservation of its traditions. Such balance must be fostered through genuine and explicit support from the State.

Discussion

Based on the objective of analyzing the incidence of factors associated with human development in Wayuu child malnutrition in the department of La Guajira, it is relevant—consistent with the contributions of the participating community—to highlight the human development approach proposed by Escobar (2007). Escobar argues that, as a consequence of colonial capitalism, a progressive ideology of development has been imposed in our territories. These sociocultural impositions disregard the interests, achievements, potentialities, and knowledge of communities, devaluing alternative ways of living. As observed in the Wayuu community participating in this study, such impositions have generated idiosyncratic positions that overlook the multiple facets of human development within a sociocultural and ecological framework, as also proposed by Max-Neef et al. (1986).

Poverty, exclusion, precariousness, and inequality remain pervasive, as denounced by many authors, including Utria (2015) and Reygadas (2008). This study particularly evidences these conditions within Wayuu communities, upon whom a model of progress has been imposed that places them at a disadvantage in the enjoyment of their rights. The United Nations Development Programme (2010) posits that human development encompasses two dimensions: the formation of human capabilities—such as improved health status, knowledge, and skills—and the ways in which people utilize the capabilities they acquire.

Within Wayuu communities, it is evident that although development is conceived primarily in quantitative terms of economic growth, other meanings of human development have not been fully incorporated, as understood by authors such as Reygadas (2008) and Max-Neef et al. (1986). These broader meanings would allow recognition that daily life also involves other spheres, such as the satisfaction of fundamental needs and the full enjoyment of personal dimensions like affection and even leisure. Furthermore, they would support the articulation of intracommunity actions that strengthen agency capacity for self-management and enable communities to demand that local institutions contribute—within their specific mandates—to the achievement of improved states of community well-being and quality of life.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

In this regard, it is important to revisit the different development conditions identified here as having a direct impact on the nutrition of Wayuu children. First, as noted by Ríos et al. (2021), health care provision plays a critical role. Health insurance entities and their service providers—responsible for preventive and treatment-related procedures—often become, within the territory, obstacles rather than facilitators of timely and appropriate care.

Peláez González (2022) and Villalobos et al. (2012) report that health services frequently fail to reach communities to provide suitable and effective support. In this territory, it is common for local particularities to be disregarded and ultimately treated as obstacles or barriers, such as language differences. Other factors that must be considered include mobility barriers due to geographic distances and the population's lack of economic resources to travel to health care institutions.

When health services overlook these factors and treat them as barriers, they do not facilitate communities' full access to and enjoyment of care, resulting in what various authors describe as low health indicators among Wayuu communities. Consequently, these communities are placed at a comparative disadvantage relative to other population groups within the same department (Caicedo, 2020).

Specifically, the participating mothers highlight—consistent with López Ríos et al. (2021) and Paz (2012)—how the demographic dispersion of Wayuu culture throughout the Guajira territory plays a predominant role in child malnutrition. Rancherías are distributed across upper and middle La Guajira and consist of clusters of homes that house a family unit. The distance between them is marked by several kilometers, with difficult access routes and, in most cases, isolation from urban centers. This constitutes a real limitation in accessing food, water, and other essential inputs for daily living.

In line with the above, as expressed by Wayuu mothers and in agreement with Erazo et al. (2022), Medina Rey et al. (2021), and Ayala and Díaz (2015), food insecurity is accompanied by a lack of economic income and precarious educational attainment. According to these authors, there is a close relationship among these factors. Food insecurity in our territories is therefore often addressed through state-led assistance-based actions that generate dependency within populations, rather than through formative processes that empower communities by strengthening their own knowledge and traditions. This dynamic ultimately hinders, as observed among the participating Wayuu communities, their capacity to self-manage opportunities (Peláez González, 2022; Álvarez, 2019; Echagüe et al., 2016).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

Additionally, another contributing and deeply problematic cause of malnutrition emerges in relation to interventions carried out by state, governmental, and non-governmental institutions. These interventions are frequently implemented without a differential approach—an approach that is essential for reaching rancherías in a relevant and contextualized manner. Caicedo (2020) demonstrates that interventions are often conducted without consideration of the specific sociocultural context of these communities, rendering invisible the cultural patterns and practices that constitute their identity. This, in turn, becomes a barrier that prevents the population itself from understanding its own problems and incorporating potential solutions for change, particularly given the notable absence of Wayuunaiki as a language of interaction.

Another variable influencing Wayuu child malnutrition is political corruption, which exacerbates the problem and negatively affects other associated factors. Humanitarian aid and the multiple projects implemented in the region frequently fail to reach their intended beneficiaries. According to a report issued by the Office of the Comptroller General of the Nation (2016), the construction of water storage systems for Indigenous communities revealed a fiscal irregularity amounting to 1,014 million Colombian pesos. This finding exposed an unsustainable and counterproductive practice that neither ensures the sustainability of interventions nor improves the quality of life of communities suffering from droughts that have become a public calamity.

In accordance with the above, and as previously shown by Arias et al. (2013), there is a lack of consensus-building and joint construction for the optimal implementation of actions framed within public policies that adopt territorial approaches. What is perceived instead is a form of instrumentalization of the population aimed at achieving political gain within the territory. As participants indicate, actions are carried out in Wayuu territory, but the mechanisms that would enable participation, long-term sustainability, visibility, and contextual involvement are not established. As Roth (2019) argues, this lack of participatory structure undermines the effectiveness of public policies at the territorial level.

It is important to note that psychosocial interventions or community-impact projects implemented in La Guajira by multiple actors must be articulated through coordinated actions at intrainstitutional, interinstitutional, and intersectoral levels. Moreover, they must propose field-based actions grounded in the needs, potentialities, and resources of grassroots communities themselves (García Peña, 2012). In other words, it is essential to design comprehensive and integrative local projects that address food security in Wayuu communities decisively and contextually.

As emphasized by participants, it is imperative that proposals aimed at improving child nutrition be constructed from the ground up—that is, from the beneficiary or participating communities themselves. Project beneficiaries are the ones who best understand their realities and are therefore

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

able to propose viable and sustainable alternatives for their contexts. Historical-cultural factors and community idiosyncrasies constitute key elements for the optimal, effective, and successful development of intervention projects; failing to consider them represents a fundamental misstep.

Conclusions

The interventions offered to the Wayuu community tend to be assistance-based and often rely on external food policy initiatives, accompanied by insufficient preventive actions on the part of public health agencies. What is required in this territory are psychosocial interventions or community-based projects that promote intrainstitutional, interinstitutional, and intersectoral coordination, and that offer participatory activities grounded in the community's own needs, potentialities, and resources. The passive attitude observed among the Wayuu population in the face of state abandonment and the challenges this has entailed is striking and should raise an alert within the psychosocial field, prompting a rethinking of accompaniment approaches in this territory. This situation necessitates the design of human development strategies that, as proposed here, recognize the population in its complexity and multidimensional condition, enabling it to participate actively in its own growth and empowerment.

To this end, it is important to adopt a perspective that acknowledges the extreme conditions to which this ancestral population has historically been exposed, recognizing its forms of survival up to the present day—particularly with regard to the food-producing capacity of its lands—in order to identify optimal and contextually appropriate activities that may serve as pathways for action.

Author contributions

Project design: both authors. Data collection: José Camilo Pimienta Arismendy. Data analysis: both authors. Manuscript writing: both authors. Final review of the unpublished manuscript: John Jairo García Peña.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4962

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any institution or commercial association of any kind.

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