Recognized for its tremendous diversity, richness, and contrasts, the region of Latin America and the Caribbean produces enough food to nourish its 550 million inhabitants. However, almost 53 million people do not have access to sufficient food needed to live an active and healthy life. Throughout the region the two main manifestations of hunger are chronic undernutrition (height for age deficit, otherwise known as stunting) and micronutrient deficiencies.

9 million children under five years of age suffer from chronic undernutrition. For these children, the majority of whom are indigenous or afro-descendent, poverty, hunger, and the loss of opportunities continue to be determining factors in their daily lives. It is estimated that at least another 9 million children are at risk of becoming undernourished.

Chronic undernutrition is the gravest manifestation of hunger in the region, affecting more than 70% of indigenous children in some areas. Chronic undernutrition is an indication of a structural problem. It is the consequence of an accumulation of factors including lack of adequate food and nutrition, inadequate care practices, absence of quality health services and exposure to an unhealthy environment.

Micronutrient deficiencies (the lack of vitamins and minerals) are often referred to as “hidden hunger.” While micronutrient deficiencies may not produce pangs of hunger in the stomach, they do attack health and vitality on the deepest levels by increasing children’s susceptibility to infectious diseases, affecting physical and intellectual development, and increasing the risk of childhood mortality. By reducing children’s capacity to learn, micronutrient deficiencies impact their potential for future productivity in the workforce, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty and hunger.

The most serious micronutrient deficiency in the region is anemia, which still affects 22 million pre-school age children. The precarious nutritional situation of the children worsens as a consequence of living in areas repeatedly impacted by droughts, hurricanes, earthquakes, and frosts. The effects of the food price, oil, and financial crises must be added to these pre-existing conditions. This combination has forced poor families to reduce their daily number of meals and lower the quality of food they consume.
Childhood undernutrition is not solely an abuse of human rights or an attack on the human capital of each affected infant; childhood undernutrition also presents an enormous financial cost to society. Societies pay to eradicate undernutrition, but they pay infinitely more by not eradicating it. In the countries of the region, approximately 1% of social spending is destined for food-based programs. The investment in promotion, production, and distribution of fortified foods for children in their first years of life is still smaller.

According to the study “The Cost of Hunger: The Social and Economic Impact of Childhood Undernutrition in Central America and the Dominican Republic” (ECLAC-WFP, 2007), the history of childhood undernutrition in recent decades has generated a cost of almost 6.7 billion dollars as of the year 2004, derived from the greater costs for health treatments, inefficiencies in educational processes, and losses in workforce productivity.

Hunger costs our societies much more than its eradication: for this reason sustained investments in the fight against hunger and undernutrition are essential to guarantee that social protection programs have adequate impact.

The economic losses from hunger, according to the study, are equivalent to more than 6% of GDP in the year 2004 for Central America and the Dominican Republic, with a range that varies between 1.7-11.4% of GDP by country. From this data, it is not difficult to demonstrate that a region free from childhood undernutrition would benefit all governments and all sectors of society.