

Press Release No. 23 - Food Monitor Program

The Negative Impact of Power Outages on Food Security in Cuba

May 27, 2024

Over the past few months, Cubans have been experiencing a deepening of energy insecurity as another component of the multifactorial crisis present on the island. The government has warned of deficits of up to 1095 MW during peak hours, due to the shutdown for maintenance, breakdowns, or lack of fuel, of about fifty power generation plants. As a result, power outages of up to 15 consecutive hours are reported, as well as short periods of electricity availability of up to 4 hours respectively. Up to 30% of the national territory has been simultaneously affected during the evenings and nights, peak hours representative of activities carried out during that time frame.

The collapse of the National Electric System (SEN) is leaving Cubans in even more precarious living conditions. It should be noted that the most affected hours coincide with peak demand periods, when people return from work and prepare meals. Given the high dependence on electrical appliances following the so-called "Energy Revolution," the lack of this energy and the inability to use alternative fuels are leaving hundreds of families in exacerbated food insecurity. In provinces significantly more affected by the "blackouts," such as Camagüey, Cienfuegos, or Holguín (although there are also distinctions between municipalities), many households are skipping one meal a day due to the inability to cook it in advance. In other households, as recorded by the Food Monitor Program in Perico, Matanzas, families opt to cook lunch and dinner simultaneously and consume the latter without heating.

Alongside the prolonged power cuts and the high temperatures related to the new heatwave on the island, refrigerators are losing their ability to ensure the preservation of fresh and perishable foods. Additionally, the inability to reheat prepared meals, as a preventive hygienic measure, also affects the safety of the products currently consumed by Cubans, with a high risk of gastrointestinal diseases.

Power outages are also negatively impacting Cubans' ability to collect, store, and purify the water they drink, as they require both booster pumps (to pump water into tanks) and electric stoves (to boil water). Cubans interviewed by the Food Monitor Program claim

they "don't remember what cold water is like," which, combined with the lack of energy for ventilation during nighttime hours, directly affects their quality of life while temperatures in the island reach up to 40 degrees Celsius.

This critical situation also influences gender inequality, considering that women are mostly responsible for preparing food and caring for the most vulnerable in the household. Meanwhile, interviewed adults, responsible for providing food, mention spending more than three days a week searching and "solving" what to eat; they prefer to buy in smaller quantities (which is sometimes more expensive) because with the power outages, they do not want to risk the ingredients spoiling.

The serious energy insecurity, combined with the obsolete infrastructure in most of the country, brings other damages such as the explosion of transformers in urban power lines, as well as the wear and tear of household appliances.

Other less visible repercussions occur in the right to work and study, as many Cuban mothers, unable to provide snacks and "reinforcements" (as school lunches lack protein), prefer not to send their children to school. Due to the need to adjust daily activities at home to the "blackouts" or periods with electricity, a considerable number of Cubans also have absences from their respective workplaces, which are also affected by the scheduled power cuts.

The Food Monitor Program issues an alert about the serious energy insecurity in Cuba, which negatively impacts the safe, healthy, and sustained consumption of water and food throughout the territory. It also calls for greater attention to the precarious living conditions of Cubans and the risk posed by the defective preservation of perishable foods, especially in a context of economic precarity and shortages.