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Food Security, Food Insecurity and Food Vulnerability in Central America, Part 2

Rome Declaration on World Food Security, 1996
“We, the Heads of State and Government ... reaffirm the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.”

The Politics of Food

Although most experts and governments know and agree that the world produces far more food than is required to meet the needs of its inhabitants, almost 800 million human beings, or one in seven, suffer from hunger, according to the Food and Agriculture Association of the United Nations (FAO).

There are many organizations, governmental and non-governmental, that are making an attempt to deal with the ongoing reality of food insecurity and malnutrition in Central America. While there is a growing chorus of voices pointing to the effects of globalization and market-driven energy programs as a direct cause of food insecurity and poverty issues, many governments are looking to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help solve the problems while continuing to pursue their much criticized neoliberal policies.

One main area of controversy in the debate on globalization is whether export expansion through trade liberalization—one empirical expression of globalization—will impact negatively on poverty and food security in the region. The argument is that scarce resources among small farmers will constrain their effective participation in the new expanding markets, with adverse consequences on incomes and rural livelihoods. This is particularly a problem in Guatemala where both the lack of food and the inability to attain adequate food are high-level problems.

The majority of low-income food-deficit countries in Central America have viable sustainable means at their disposal to increase food availability. According to the FAO however, these are not taken advantage of because of a series of constraints that prevent farmers from meeting their basic needs and seizing the opportunities that arise. As a result, the FAO's Special Program for Food Security (SPFS) was adopted at the 106th Session of the Organization's Council in '94. The Program works with farmers, livestock producers, and other stakeholders to identify and overcome these constraints, be they technical, economic, social, institutional, or political in nature.

Projects financed by the SPFS include small-scale pilot projects for water regulation, boosting crop yield, diversification of small-animal production, small-scale fishing and fish farming, analysis of social and economic problems, and technical assistance in policy-making. Technology transfer will be promoted, especially within the framework of other Latin American countries, as an inexpensive way of achieving adequate development from a technological, ecological, and sociocultural standpoint. The following relevant activities recently have been carried out in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Guatemala and Honduras the SPFS is focusing on increasing the food supply in agricultural systems with a high presence of rural poor. The objective is to help improve food security in the area of intervention, while increasing food production and access to food by strengthening production systems with the use of sustainable technologies.

In addition, the Millennium Goals set forth by the UN in '02 are a yardstick with which to monitor and promote change in these countries concerning the most impoverished of their citizens. The first goal in the Millennium Project is to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty. According to the Project these goals are:

Target 1. *Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day. Indicators:* 1. Proportion of population below \$1 (1993 PPP) per day (World Bank) 2. Poverty gap ration [incidence x depth of poverty] (World Bank) 3. Share of poorest quintile in national consumption (World Bank).

Target 2. *Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. Indicators:* 4. Prevalence of underweight children under five years of age (UNICEF-WHO) 5. Proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption (FAO).

The most recent report from the Millennium Project shows a striking difference in food security and malnutrition between Central American countries. Costa Rica for instance has a rate of hunger lower than 3% of the population, roughly the same as the so-called "First-World" or developed countries. Whereas El Salvador is reportedly on its way to achieving the Millennium Goals, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua are not projected to achieve them by the target date of 2015. In addition, according to the report, Panama is the only country in the region where underweight prevalence is increasing. While it is clear that some of these governments, in coordination with many NGOs, are working on the problem, what are the mechanisms for getting there?

SPFS is doing work in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. As stated above, SPFS is an extension of the FAO and is part of the commitment from two world-wide summits on food security during '96 and '02 in Rome, and is part of the commitment to meeting the Millennium Goals. According to SPFS, the projects in Central America have a two-pronged approach: first, to promote effective farming practices and helping families improve nutritional practices while working with bodies at the state level; second, to promote institutional and policy reforms in order to improve technical abilities in farming and the management of information regarding the food security of a given country.

Where the Work is Being Done

Guatemala: In mid-'05 the Guatemalan government approved the Food Security Law (*Ley de Seguridad Alimentaria*), which, as a result, established the National System of Food Security and Nutrition (SINASAN) and the Food Security and Nutrition Secretariat (SESAN). On paper the law

considers food security to be a national policy issue and a human rights issue. Yet, according to the FAO, the country is still in the midst of possibly the largest food security problem on the isthmus. Additionally, the law is protected within the framework of cultural, social and economic rights and specifically recognizes the right to food (a result of the Rome Declaration on World Food Security) of its citizens. It is claimed by the Guatemalan Government to be the only law of its kind in Central America.

At the end of '05, the Government of Guatemala and different national and international organizations initiated the Program to Reduce Chronic Malnutrition (PRDC), which has the objective of reducing by half—at the national level by '15, following the Millennium Goals—the prevalence of chronic undernourishment in children, especially smaller children under 5 years of age. The PRDC is executed through Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, the Secretariat of Social Work of the First Lady (SOSEP) and other institutions under the coordination of SESAN.

The present head of SESAN, José Andrés Botrán Briz, has pleaded for work to be done in 83 municipalities that currently display the highest indices of malnutrition, although he says that even then results may not be able to be evidenced until the second or third year of the next government. The next general election will be held in Sep '07. Botrán says that he has talked with several political organizations concerning malnourishment and hunger in the country, and assures that he has received enough supplies to continue the program well into the next government.

Also, at a meeting in the city of Esquipulas on 26 and 27 July '07, SPFS representatives began their new strategy for '08-'15 to continue improving the food security for the most vulnerable people in Central America.

Honduras: In an interview in July '07, the FAO Representative for Honduras, Dr. Compton Laurence Paul, said that the organization is not happy with the nutrition gained by a diet of maize and beans that is promoted in rural areas of Honduras, which is why FAO is promoting projects for the consumption of fruits and vegetables to improve the current level of nutrition. According to FAO, in the last five years it has helped more than 60,000 families in different departments of Honduras (specifically in the departments of Lempira, Intibuca, La Paz, Copán, Valle, El Paraíso, Choluteca, Santa Bárbara, Colón and Yoro), under a SPFS project financed by the Spanish government.

In statements to *hondudiario.com*, Dr. Paul stated that, in sectors with greater necessity, they are promoting the creation of small companies to assure food and aid to poor people, many of whom only consume maize and beans, leaving aside other foods necessary for balanced health and nutrition. Dr. Paul explained that the group is working on a project where the plan is to encourage the consumption of more fruits and vegetables, but mainly to educate the people about nutritional aspects so that they understand what they need to eat to improve their health. In addition, they plan to promote the use of hygienic habits during the preparing and consuming of foods to avoid the propagation of diseases for lack of cleaning.

El Salvador: In the Municipality of New Granada, Usulután, the Vice-President of El Salvador, Ana Vilma de Escobar, together with the ministers of Agriculture and Health, Mario Salaverría and Guillermo Mace respectively, visited the municipality during the final week of June to measure the capacity of families to generate income through diverse farming practices. She reported that these are the objectives of the government along with SPFS and with support from FAO. Their program through SPFS, which is just under one-year old, has been developed through the Ministry of

Agriculture and Livestock as well as the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare and with strategic help from FAO. The program presently supports 343 families of New Granada and Guatajiagua, in the department of Morazán. This project, like many others in Central America, has been financed by the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation (AECI). Vilma de Escobar visited four families benefited by SPFS to identify the development process they have had with their farms in producing egg-laying hens, pigs and organic vegetables.

Néstor Deras, SPFS director in El Salvador, says that the focus on food security, health and nutrition in El Salvador has four approaches: availability, access, consumption and promotion of biological safety (i.e., no genetically modified organisms). He reports that this is unique to El Salvador because they are attempting to work with both the public and the private sectors on the issue, and he feels that to ignore the private sector would jeopardize their programs.

Nicaragua: Some of the most recent SPFS program reports paint a positive picture of progress in the country. Specifically, a Mar '07 report states that, in Nicaragua, locals have benefited from the program as follows:

181 families benefited from a goat project that provides milk and its derivatives that have aided in their nutrition; 120 families learned farming methods and sustainable practices; 520 families learned how to harness water for aquaculture practices; 1,327 benefited from mini-aqueducts; 600 families have increased grain yields due to help from the SPFS program.

However, this was the only information available.

Costa Rica: As noted in Part I of this article (see Vol. 26, No. 7), Costa Rica, relative to its neighbors, is one of the more stable countries in Central America—economically, politically and, combining both of those aspects, food security. At a speech during the World Food Summit in '96, Ricardo Garrón-Figuls, then Minister of Agriculture and Livestock, stated that since the 1980s Costa Rica has made food security a fundamental part of its national political process. While Costa Rica has many programs devoted to alleviating poverty and malnutrition connected to poverty, it does not presently have a system in place strictly devoted to food security, and the FAO-SPFS program is not currently active in the country.

Panama: The Monitoring System for Food Security and Nutrition (SIVISAN) is a government program that enhances the nutritional aspects of existing programs, which approach the problems of food insecurity in the country. The National Secretariat of Food and Nutrition (SENAPAN) is the governmental organization responsible for the program. This somewhat new information system, said to be unique in Central America, is an Internet-based program, connected to other government webpages. It has a supposed level of easy accessibility to people and organizations interested in knowing information related to the food and nutrition security of Panama, defined by provinces, districts, groups of judges, locating sites, schools and areas where high-priority attention in the matter of food security is required.

During the launching of the program on 6 Aug, President Martín Torrijos stated that, “this monitoring system has a incalculable value in the fight that we are waging against poverty, with the intention of not letting one more Panamanian girl or boy die from hunger or undernourishment.”

According to a study by SENAPAN, the Minister of Health and US-based Baylor University, Panama produces a variety of foods sufficient to feed the entirety of its population. The index on

chronic malnutrition in children under five years of age is of 20.6%, a number that rises in the Indigenous and rural areas where it can reach levels of more than 50%.

Conclusion

During the coming months, years and decades we may either witness a rise in food insecurity around the globe or, perhaps, a focused and devoted amount of attention to food security and what can truly be done to keep it secure. As governments—and programs put in place by those governments—come and go, the same people will still need to have safe, secure and nutritious food to survive on this planet. This is truly a universal right of every individual no matter what their politics, net worth or geographical location may be.

—*Jason Howd*

Sources:

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3. UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean: <http://www.eclac.cl/default.asp?idioma=IN>
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