GUATEMALA

Food security: the challenge for effective aid

Food insecurity is a national scourge, one which calls for urgent, coordinated, effective and sustainable measures, in the planning and execution of which civil society must take part. It is not enough to declare a State of Public Calamity – as the Government did in September 2009. The first step in reducing poverty and achieving economic and social development is breaking the hunger cycle. National policies and international financial assistance must be coordinated, prioritizing the urgent needs of the Guatemalan population. Otherwise, achieving the MDGs will remain a distant goal.

Food and nutrition insecurity in Guatemala is widespread, resulting in high indices of morbidity and mortality, inadequate infant and child growth and development, school learning difficulties and low adult productivity. Poor, rural, illiterate and indigenous populations are those most affected.

The causes of this insecurity are social, economic and environmental; they include poverty, inadequate housing and sanitation, low levels of schooling, domestic and foreign migration; highly unequal land ownership and access, persistent unemployment, increased prices for basic food basket items and a scarcity of basic grain products – all of which are exacerbated by the international economic crisis, climate change and desertification and the El Niño and La Niña phenomena.

A few figures

• Guatemala is ranked 122 out of 182 countries in the Human Development Index.1 It is a middle-income country with vast differences in wealth: 20% of the population enjoys 60% of the national income.

• Of just over 14 million inhabitants, 50% are indigenous and 54% are rural.2 Fully one half the population (7,140,000) live in poverty, including some 2 million in extreme poverty.3

• Declining foreign remittances, especially in the last year, have added to the poverty risk. At present some 850,000 people are at risk of falling below the poverty line and 733,500 in danger of descending into extreme poverty.

In some areas of the country malnutrition reaches 75%, one of the highest rates in the world.

According to the World Food Program (WFP), Guatemala has the highest rate of child malnutrition in the region (1 child in 4, up to age 5).4 In addition, although chronic child malnutrition reaches 43%, in the “dry corridor”, the eastern region of the country which was hit the hardest by the 2009 drought, figures rose from 1% to 10% for children and to 14% for young mothers.

Between 1994 and 2004, over 500,000 children under age five died from malnutrition, 77% of whom would otherwise be alive.5

According to the Food Security Secretariat (SESEPLAN), some 145,000 families lost their crops in 2009 due to the lack of rain and are currently in need of food aid.

Government action

The Cabinet, along with the Social Cohesion Council, play an important part in defining and implementing programs designed to guarantee food and nutrition security through social funds and welfare programs such as: BOLSAS SOLIDARIAS (“Solidarity Sacks”), MI FAMILIA PROGRESA (“My Family Moves Forward”) and MI FAMILIA PRODUCE (“My Family Produces”). They developed an Inter- Sectoral Food and Nutrition Security 2010 Annual Operational Plan with five strategic objectives and a budget of about GTQ 2.218 billion (US$ 272,000). Some additional agencies are also included, such as the FNS Sectoral Board7 and the National Food and Nutrition Security Commission.8

On 11 September 2009 the Government of President Álvaro Colom presented the Intervention Plan to Guarantee FNS in the priority “dry corridor” departments – El Progreso, Baja Verapaz, Zacapa, Chiquimula, Jutiapa, Jalapa and Santa Rosa – which will allocate USD 17.5 million for immediate food delivery, the development of productive projects and the organization of medical days for checking and monitoring vulnerable groups. In the department of Guatemala, 50,000 Solidarity Sacks are delivered monthly to an equal number of families in deprived urban settlements.

The projected budget to fulfil the objectives of the Strategic Plan for Food and Nutrition Security (PESAN) during 2009 was USD 269.2 million, including USD 2.82 million for strengthening capabili- ties in order to combat food insecurity.9

International aid fails to address structural problems

Programs to implement PESAN 2009 were financed as follows:


5 Ibid.

6 Coordinated by the First Lady.

7 Set up in September 2009 and composed of the President and Vice-President of the Republic, SESEPLAN, international development cooperation ambassadors and representatives, SESEPLAN, Social Cohesion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the FNS National Committee.


Guatemala regards the poverty reduction strategy, the peace
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lems, the structural problems which are particularly
contributed to combating some of the social prob-

United Nations system supplied 5%.

During 1990-2008 a net total of about USD 5 billion in
Official Development Assistance (ODA) was received
for development, particularly rural development pro-
grams. Some 85% came from countries belong-
ing to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation
and Development (OECD), including 54% from EU
countries; multilateral aid amounted to 15% and the
United Nations system supplied 5%.

Although international development aid has
contributed to combating some of the social prob-
lems, the structural problems which are particularly
evident in the inequality of wealth and income dis-
tribution have not been addressed. This has made it
difficult to develop an effective fight against hunger,
which continues to represent a systematic violation
of human rights in the country. Thus, the impact of
this development aid has been slight, particularly as
regards the poverty reduction strategy, the peace
program and the fulfilment of the Millennium Devel-
opment Goals (MDGs).

The situation in Guatemala requires effective
inter-sectoral dialogue that can enable a critical
debate, with wide stakeholder participation, on the
issue of international development cooperation. De-
velopment funding has consistently been one-sided,
based on the interests of international financial insti-
tutions, concerned more with balance of payments
than the well-being of the population. In the case of
 bilateral cooperation, it is usually guided by the will
of the government in power and not by State policy,
and therefore does not take civil society organiza-
tions into account.

Another problem concerns the timelines for aid
delivery, which are designed according to the priori-
ties of the donors and not the specific needs of either
the Government or of the population.

The appointment of the Council for International
Cooperation10 is the outcome of the Declaration of
the High-Level Meeting between the Government
and the G-13 Dialogue Group in 2008.11 The Coun-
cil is responsible for developing a joint plan which
will make it possible to coordinate aid delivery and
management with national development plans, in
accordance with the Paris Declaration12 and the
Accra Agenda for Action (2008), particularly with
regard to direct budgetary support and sector-wide
approaches – with emphasis on health, education
and security-justice. It is not known what progress
has been made to date in this respect.

MDG 1 – closely related to food security – stipu-
lates that extreme poverty and hunger must be eradi-
cated. It is estimated that halving the number of per-
sons living in poverty by 2015 requires urgent and
transforming measures to address the urgent needs
of the 29% of the population, and 32% of the rural
population living in extreme poverty (particularly
indigenous groups), especially in Alta Verapaz and El
Quiché, where 8 out of 10 people are poor.

With only five years to go to the target date for
achieving the MDGs, 2015, MDG 1, reducing poverty
and hunger is a long way from being attained:
• The effects of extreme poverty continue to dis-
play significant disparities.

• Funds implemented by SESAN: USD 1.62 mil-
lion, from the Inter-American Development
Bank, UNICEF and the EU.
• Funds administered and coordinated by SES-
AN: USD 32.48 million, from USAID, FAO, the
EU, the WFP, the World Bank, PAHO and the
UN system.

In response to the El Niño and La Niña emergency in,
several multilateral institutions allocated resources
to investment in agriculture, education, health, im-
proving the situation of children and women of child-
bearing age, food security, nutrition and the donation
of food. These included:
• UN system – USD 34.1 million.
• UN Central Emergency Response Fund – USD
5 million.
• PAHO, WHO, UNFPA – USD 5.7 million.
• FAO – USD 5.454 million.
• EU – USD 31.4 million.
• WFP – 200 tonnes of food.
• MDG Achievement Fund, which supported
several programs to improve the situation of
children, food security and nutrition.

The great challenge
As long as the availability of food locally and nation-
ally is limited – a situation which could be remedied
by storing food in silos or warehouses – it will be
very difficult for the population living in poverty and
extreme poverty to take control of the means of pro-
duction and achieve adequate access to foodstuffs
available on the market. This limits their consump-
tion and their chances of enjoying the minimum serv-
ices which enable them to lead a decent life.

The Government, as well as civil society and
international cooperation organizations, have been
weak with regard to harmonization measures to pro-
gressively guarantee the right to food for the most
vulnerable population. The Government’s response
to economic or environmental crises continues to
be short-term and based on welfare, and is more
sensationalist than effective – as in the case of the
State of Calamity decree.13

Although fully one half of the country’s popula-
tion is indigenous, international aid has neglected to
take into account the realities of ethnic or other form
of social, cultural or economic differences, in part
due to the failure of the Government to propose the
allocation of assistance according to these realities.
As a result, improving aid effectiveness continues
to pose a challenge. It is imperative that a greater
commitment towards the social purposes of aid
be undertaken, so that it does not respond only to
geopolitical or economic interests (whether of the
government or of the donors) that have little to do
with genuine development.

10 The Council for International Cooperation includes
the Presidency’s General Secretariat for Planning and
Programming (SEGEPLAN), the Ministry of Public Finance
and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

11 Composed of Guatemala’s nine highest donors (Canada,
Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain,
Sweden, the US), together with the Inter-American
Development Bank, the World Bank, the European
Commission, the IMF, the UNDP and the OAS.

12 The Paris Declaration promotes the principles of ownership,
alignment, harmonization, results-based management
and mutual accountability, in order to achieve greater
effectiveness and impact in development aid; the Accra
Action Agenda specifies actions needed in order to fulfil
these principles.

13 Government of Guatemala. Decree Nº 10-2009 of 8
September 2009, extended by Decree Nº 11-2009 of 7
docs/Acuerdo%20Calamidad.pdf>.