

Zero Hunger: A Food Security Perspective for Brazil

by Walter Belik

The debate on hunger in Brazil began in the early 1930s when Dr Josué de Castro, a famous physician and geographer, began his research on the health of workers in Recife, his hometown in the North-East of Brazil. Considering the labour conditions of these workers, Castro found out the sole reason for the particularly high absence and low productivity rates: hunger among the workers.

In 1946 Josué de Castro published his classic book "Geopolitics of Hunger". The international reputation of this book helped him to be elected chairman of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) during the early 1950s. Josué de Castro participated in the Brazilian government for two decades, playing a central role in the implementation of the School Meals Program, subsidies for workers' meals paid by employers and many other important programs to combat hunger in Brazil (L'abatte, 1988). Unfortunately, after the military coup in the mid-1960s he went into exile and eventually died in Europe.

After Brazil's re-democratisation process, the subject of hunger re-emerged. In the mid-1980s the country was devastated by an inflation rate of more than 3000% per annum and poverty and lack of food was affecting everyone. Consequently, a huge campaign led by a sociologist Herbert "Betinho" de Souza was launched in Brazil, mobilising the population to collect and donate food to needy people.

More recently, upon the realisation that donations alone could not guarantee food security on a national scale, the Zero Hunger program began in 2001. Although donations are very important in fostering citizenship and a sense of solidarity, they are not a sustainable solution to hunger. Moreover, the price stabilisation brought by the new currency, "the real", also did not end the famine and poverty. At that time, Brazil was the third largest world food producer (now it is the second). Thus, the source of hunger was not the unavailability of food but access to it. Although 70% of world hunger is located in rural areas, in Brazil, it is a predominantly urban problem. In the early 2000s, hunger was increasing in the urban areas (Instituto Cidadania, 2001). Previously in the 1980s, rural poverty in Brazil was reduced through higher income of elderly rural residents from pensions granted by the government in recognition of the right to rural retirement by the 1988 Brazilian Constitution. Another source of rural poverty reduction was the migration to the cities. However, due to the economic crises, the metropolitan areas were not able to absorb these hunger refugees. Thus, they settled down in small villages and peripheral cities. As a result, in the early 2000s, the main share of Brazilian poverty population was living in urban and non-metropolitan areas. From the 10 million poor families esti-

mated in the 2001 National Household Research, more than 7.5 million were dwelling in urban areas.

Zero Hunger and its implementation

As hunger was not necessarily a monetary problem, it was clear that Brazil needed a wide-ranging plan to attack it. Zero Hunger stressed three levels of public intervention. At the first level, the government had to work in a more structural approach developing a new inclusive economic model to expand every citizen's rights. At the second level, the public authority had to promote active programs in food provision and consumption, including measures regarding health and nutrition.

The third level relates to local policies facing different realities with different programs. For instance, the emphasis in rural areas was on microloans, which was a new concept in Brazil at that time, to fund the development needs of small North-Eastern farmers. In small urban areas, public policy sought to foster urban agriculture and Food Banks. Finally, in metropolitan areas the programs were much more complex. Some mechanisms were based on successful Brazilian experiences, such as partnerships with restaurants (for US\$0.50 people could have a complete meal) and supermarkets, in order to organise acquisition of food from local and regional producers at low prices (Belik, 2010).

It is very common to propose public policies without showing how these actions could be implemented. That draws a lot of criticism and destroys the confidence of stakeholders, compromising the success of the initiative. Zero Hunger's implementation was based on pre-established goals, considering the monetary funds necessary to execute them. The budget stayed between US\$4 and 5 billion a year for eight years, and the funding sources actually existed. These were funds from the Annual Federal Budget that were not used for their initially intended purpose. To provide perspective, the total cost of Zero Hunger would represent less than 1% of the Federal Budget (Instituto Cidadania, 2001).

In order to change all the political procedures, the newly-elected government of 2003 and civil society launched a legal transformation as well. The initial action was the enactment of a National System of Food and Nutrition (SISAN) law. This was necessary because Brazil is a Federal Union of 27 states and each of them has legal and financial autonomy, controlling their own budget. Therefore, states do not need to follow what is decided by the central government. On the other

hand, the majority of social programs funds come from the Federal resources, although they are executed by state and local government.

By June 2009, together with Bolsa Familia (another major social program in Brazil providing conditional cash transfers to poor families), the main action of Zero Hunger was implemented in the whole country and had reached all Brazilian municipalities (more than 5000). Bolsa Familia was created in 2003 through the unification of five other federal cash transfer programs. Currently, Brazil has 13.7 million families (more than 50 million people) receiving the Bolsa Familia¹. The results of all these efforts were substantial reductions in poverty, infant mortality, child malnutrition. For example, using a poverty line of US\$1.25 per day, according to the World Bank, only 6.1 % of Brazilians could be considered extremely poor in 2009 compared to 10.6% observed in 2002².

In an effort to speed up the implementation of Bolsa Familia, the government resigned the original intention of using the cash transfer program to mobilise the civil society. Instead of promoting beneficiaries' participation the administration of Bolsa Familia introduced two new formulae regarding the amount the municipal agents could receive to compensate them for their productivity. The first, named IGD in Portuguese, is based on the quality and timeliness of the information of the Single Register of beneficiaries as well as the coverage of conditionalities. The second one, named IDF in Portuguese, monitors the families' conditionalities and complementary actions in promoting health and education infrastructure.

In addition to all this, improvements were also made in previous programs such as the National Food Meal Program, which serves 45.6 million free rations to students every day. The central government transfers a certain amount of money per child per day in order to provide the meal. The state government and the municipalities must complement this money in the same proportion. There is a council of parents and civil society representatives that monitors the quality of food and the accounting. The government only delivers the money when the community approves the accounting. From Zero Hunger supervision, the amount transferred to schools was fourfold and they started to buy directly from local farmers. This is a real Keynesian policy in order to develop local economies, reduce waste and save energy of transportation.

Regarding the small farmers, one of the most vulnerable groups, the government submitted a new law to Congress stating that all food purchases for public stocks should be made from the family farms. The law was approved and the government imposed some health and fiscal conditions to be complied with by these farmers, including the use licensed suppliers and paying taxes. The provisions come from the local farmers and go to public stocks; from there, they are donated to social assistance organisations, school meals, hospitals and so on.

Nevertheless, considering the official estimate of 16.2 million people that are still under nutritional risk, in 2011 the new government in office launched a program in order to find this "invisible" part of the needy people. From 2011, Zero Hunger had another special program named "Brazil Without Extreme Poverty". Considering that poverty is a multidimensional problem, these policies are trying to reach the part of poverty that is unseen. As noted earlier, poverty is not only a matter of income. If someone lives in an inappropriate residence in a tough neighbourhood, and has no job opportunities, there is no use in providing an income through Bolsa Familia because that person may not get out of poverty. In order to cover these situations, three axes of operation were established: Income, Public Services and Production. It has been shown that income insufficiency is correlated to the lack of public services in territory (Hoffmann, 2008; Bastagli, 2009). That is why the Plan to eradicate extreme poverty will be through the provision of services, paying special attention to health, education and housing in these communities.

Brazil is proving that it is possible to break this vicious cycle of poverty. However the social investments and the recuperation of minimum wages must continue, despite the world economic crisis that is endangering the stability of employment levels. Could these new lower middle class brought by the social policy sustain the domestic consumption and the animus of the investors?

¹ See <http://www.mds.gov.br/bolsafamilia>

² See <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY/countries/>

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