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Latin America a World Leader in Fight Against Hunger

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Latin America has become a world leader in the fight against hunger by successfully halving its undernourished population in the last 20 years. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the proportion of undernourished people in Latin America and the Caribbean fell from 14.7% in 1990–92 to 5.5% in 2014–16. This compares with 10.9% of the global population suffering from undernourishment. The absolute number of people suffering from hunger has also fallen, from 66 million to 34.3 million (NotiSur, March 17, 1992, and July 30, 1992).

This makes Latin America one of the few regions to meet the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for halving undernourishment in member countries between 1990 and 2015. Poverty also fell across the region during the same period, from 44% of the total population to 28%, with variation across sub-regions. The FAO defines undernourishment as the inability “to acquire enough food to meet the daily minimum dietary energy requirements, over a period of one year.” It defines hunger as chronic undernourishment (NotiSur, Nov. 15, 2002, and May 30, 2014).

Behind the success
What has been the key to Latin America’s success? How have many countries in the region managed to reduce undernourishment more dramatically than their global counterparts?

In the FAO’s 2015 Food Security Report published at the end of January, Raúl Benítez, regional representative for Latin America and the Caribbean at the FAO, attributed the region’s success to a high level of political commitment combined with macroeconomic growth over the last decade.

These levels of political commitment have been demonstrated by numerous region-wide initiatives to fight hunger, by the fact that all countries in the region are uniting to support many of them, and by the ambitious nature of their aims. In 2005, all countries in the region supported the Hunger-Free Latin America and the Caribbean Initiative, which went beyond the MDGs by aiming for the complete eradication of hunger from Latin America and the Caribbean by 2025.

Within this framework, the Parliamentary Front Against Hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean (PFH) was formed in 2009 and now consists of fronts from 17 countries recognized by their national legislatures and encompasses politicians from across the spectrum. According to the FAO, which lends technical support to the PFH, they “promote the establishment of institutional frameworks for the full realization of the right to food in Latin America and the Caribbean.” There are also four regional fronts within bodies such as the Latin American Parliament (PARLATINO) and the Andean Parliament (PARLANDINO).

In addition, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) created a plan for food and nutrition security and for the eradication of hunger that consolidated the aim of eradicating hunger in the region by 2025. This was approved by all 33 member countries in January 2015. The four main pillars of this plan are ensuring food security through regional and national public policy, timely and sustainable access to food for all, nutritional wellbeing, and stable food production. (NotiCen, Jan. 22, 2015).
These common initiatives are evidence of the political will across the region to fight hunger, and they have translated into a broad range of food policies and programs. The PFH, for example, has been instrumental in programs such as the extension of a school feeding initiative in La Paz, Bolivia, throughout the whole country; family farming laws in Argentina and Peru; school gardens and school meals in El Salvador, and a credit program for rural women in Honduras. It has also promoted the draft law for the right to adequate food in Mexico, which is based on the implementation of a constitutional reform from 2011 that has yet to be approved in the country’s Senate.

**Food as a human right**

Another key to Latin America’s success in the fight against hunger is the growing awareness of food security as a human right. Though this concept forms part of Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food”—it is not legally binding. One of the major advances seen in Latin America over recent years has been the explicit inclusion of the right to food in 14 national Constitutions in the region, and the progressive passing of food security laws in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela, with approval of similar laws pending in others. These laws create a more solid and enforceable framework for protecting access to food and often help to recognize broader issues affecting it, such as conflict, environment, land ownership, and distribution of resources.

In addition, the inclusion of the right to food in national legislation can safeguard against “backsliding” on progress made against hunger, which Benítez, in an interview with Inter-Press Service, warned is always a “latent danger,” particularly in the face of deteriorating economic conditions.

Of course, the fight against hunger in the region has not been a blanket success. When broken into sub-regions, the Caribbean and Central America have much higher levels of undernourishment than South America and have made slower progress. Food security policies are also difficult to implement in parts of the region with deep-rooted instability, for example Haiti, where 75% of the Caribbean’s malnourished people live, according to the FAO. And despite an overall decline in poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2002, extreme poverty has risen in the last two years. However, the bigger picture is of a region that has become increasingly aware and mobilized to confront undernourishment and implement solutions.

**Looking ahead**

The conclusion of the sixth forum of the PFH in Lima in November was a commitment to continue to ensure effective progress on the implementation of the CELAC plan and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be reviewed at the next forum to be held in Mexico later this year. The SDGs allow for improved global monitoring of the objectives against hunger and also bring Latin America under the umbrella of the wider global effort.

Olivier De Schutter, the former UN special rapporteur on the right to food, identified a number of necessary steps for eradicating hunger and malnutrition in his final report in January 2014. He considered that local communities’ needs should have a greater influence on national-level policies and emphasized the need for participative, accountable processes by which all stakeholders come together to seek consensus. He also highlighted the need to support the right to food with relevant
domestic reforms in areas such as social protection, health, agriculture, and rural development, as well as creating a favorable international environment in terms of trade, investment, and development.

To achieve the goal of eradicating hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean by 2025, leaders will benefit from building on their current successes to ensure that the right to food security for all citizens is guaranteed through effective food laws and extends to reforms in other relevant areas of public policy. They will also need to take careful steps to safeguard against losing the ground that has been gained through the potential resurgence of extreme poverty and changing economic conditions.

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