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Could Monoculture Trend in Paraguay Lead to Famine?

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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With the fight against hunger in Latin American in decline for the past two years, top officials at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) say the situation could improve slightly this year, with indexes approaching those of 2005-2015. In that decade, thanks to inclusive policies developed in Bolivia and Brazil, this scourge fell to its lowest level in the last half a century.

"Even though unfortunate factors such as the impact of the El Niño climate condition and the global economic recession contributed to increased hunger in 2016 and 2017, we are confident that in 2018 the fight against hunger will be re-energized," FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva said in opening remarks at the organization's 35th regional summit in Jamaica in March. Despite this positive sign, Graziano added, "there will still be a spike in hunger in the region."

Sociologists and ecologists in Paraguay, in the heart of South America, were more realistic. They warned that monoculture and the use of genetically modified plants could lead to a famine ([NotiSur, Oct. 6, 2017](#)).

World Bank and IMF more optimistic

Graziano said negative factors "no longer appear with the same intensity in 2018," adding that he was encouraged by predictions by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) of very high growth rates for most developed and developing countries. Despite his optimism, Graziano unveiled alarming figures that show that between 2015 and 2016, the number of people who suffer from hunger grew by 2.4 million to 42.5 million people. To further illustrate the food crisis that affects Latin American and Caribbean countries, the UN official said that about 20% of the adults in the region, or 96 million people, are obese, and about 7% of the children under 5 are overweight. Both figures surpass the world average. Diseases related to obesity kill 300,000 persons a year, he said.

"We should have a sustainable food system that guarantees a truly nutritious diet," Graziano said. "The consumption of fresh local products to replace highly processed foods is fundamental."

Paraguayan experts have particularly denounced the effects of the new model of agricultural exploitation based on agro-industrial monoculture of transgenic plants.

FAO analysts say the problem is not in the imposition of a new model of land exploitation. They point to climate change that profoundly affects agricultural systems throughout the world, most notably in countries that cyclically suffer devastating natural disasters, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods.

For this reason, Graziano urged governments to promote ways of adapting agriculture to climate change, "especially to protect rural communities." He offered the agency's help in designing projects and mobilizing financial support through the Green Climate Fund (GCF), a financing mechanism of the Committee on World Food Security established in 2010 by the conference of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Just a week before the conference in Jamaica, the FAO had approved the first financing proposal in its eight-year history: a climate change mitigation and adaptation project in partnership with the Paraguayan government for US\$90 million.

During speeches at the Jamaica conference, Graziano noted that Latin America has become a global example on more than one occasion, pointing out that in 2015 it was the first region to complete international goals for reducing hunger. This occurred basically thanks to the policies applied by the progressive governments of Evo Morales in Bolivia and of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil.

Decline in poverty rate

In Bolivia, poverty in rural areas fell from 62.9% in 2005 to 35.9% in 2015 and from 24.3% to 9.9% in urban areas during the same period. On the national level, poverty dropped from 32.2% in 2005 to 17.8% in 2015. Several international organizations point out that during this period, extreme poverty fell from 38% to 17.8%.

Brazil had its “prodigious years”—as the Spanish right-wing daily *El País* described the period between 2001 and 2013—in which overall poverty dropped from 22% to 8%, while extreme poverty dropped from 14% to 3.5%. During these years, access to adequate nutrition reached 98% of Brazil’s nearly 200 million people. Likewise, the income of the poorest fifth of the population tripled in relation to the richest 20%.

The opposite was true in Panama, under a right-wing government, where 96.7% of the indigenous population was poor in 2005 and 72% of the children under 5 suffered from chronic malnutrition (70% of Panama’s Caribbean coast is populated by indigenous people).

Experts at the Jamaica gathering insisted that eradication of the poverty, hunger, and malnutrition that affects indigenous populations—the hardest hit along with landless peasants—should be the central goal of the work of the Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (FILAC) and the FAO. Particular note was made of the indigenous Mapuche, Aymara, Kolla, Quechua, Guaraní, and Senu. During the meeting, FILAC President Myrna Cunningham and Julio Berdegué, FAO regional representative, signed a letter of intent to that effect. They promised “to promote implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) to obtain improvements in the governance of natural resources and the empowerment of indigenous women and young people of the region.”

Berdegué insisted that “the multiple indigenous peoples mentioned form a cultural, social, agricultural, and historical legacy in Latin America and the Caribbean” and emphasized that “the indigenous women, men, and children of our region suffer the highest indexes of hunger and poverty, [which is why] we must generate solutions tailored to them and designed with their active participation, if we really want to reach the goal of zero hunger and malnutrition.”

Agribusiness pushes peasants off land

As experts deliberated in Jamaica, an analysis by the ecologist-agronomist Miguel Lovera—former head of the agency that regulates agriculture in Paraguay (Servicio Nacional de Calidad y Sanidad Vegetal) during the progressive Fernando Lugo government (2008-2012)—was reissued. It warns that “there’s hunger in rural Paraguay, and it is increasingly possible there could be a famine.”

Lovera made a connection between that possible famine, the gradual disappearance of peasant families, and the implementation of an agribusiness model that uses land for a single transgenic soybean crop ([NotiSur, July 1, 2016](#), [June 9, 2017](#), [Aug. 11, 2017](#)). "Up until now," he said, the campesinato (agrarian workers) filled a role in the productive process. When the multinational Monsanto imposed its agribusiness model, it put an end to the role of the state, which guaranteed good quality seeds. Instead, the proposal was to get rid of the campesinos and pay them off so they would flee to the cities, where they would be exploited in other ways."

During the past 15 years, about 10,000 families have migrated from rural areas annually, according to Paraguay's census and statistics department (Dirección de Estadísticas y Censos). Brazilian settlers moved in to occupy their lands, resulting in a decline in the number of food producers and consequently, a decline in the production of fresh foods.

The official Paraguayan delegation to the Jamaica summit did not present the situation and the topic was not discussed in plenary sessions, even though the fight against hunger was the focus of the meeting. According to official statistics, the area for cultivation by peasants in Paraguay was reduced to less than half in just a decade. The area destined for peanut, sweet potato, cassava, pea, pepper, carrot, corn, tomato, and fruit crops, among others, fell from a little over 688,000 hectares in 2002-2003 to 330,000 ha in 2014-2015. In that period, the area used by agribusiness for the cultivation of soy, wheat, sunflower, sugarcane, and rice jumped from 2.3 million ha to almost 5.5 million ha. At the same time, the cost of bean and vegetables imported by Paraguay increased 300%, while the value of fruit imports grew to 412%. These figures, Lovera said, show the scope of the loss of food sovereignty. The population has lost the abundance and quality of the food traditionally provided by family farms and is forced to turn to industrially processed foods.

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