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Peña Nieto Government Touts Success of Anti-Hunger Campaign, but Critics Question Results

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Three years after President Enrique Peña Nieto launched an ambitious campaign to eliminate hunger in Mexico, the verdict is mixed on whether the effort has made much of a difference for the country’s marginalized populations. The government contends the program has made significant progress in meeting the objective of reducing hunger. Critics argue, however, that the government statistics and analysis are faulty, and that the program has had very little impact.

In January 2013, the government announced the creation of Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre (Crusade Against Hunger), a mechanism to fund food assistance and basic services to the 400 poorest municipalities in the country as determined by two government agencies that track statistics and social changes (SourceMex, Jan. 23, 2013). One of the two agencies, the Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (Coneval), reported at the time that more than 21 million Mexicans did not get enough food to eat on a daily basis.

This month, the other agency behind the program, the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), issued a report that highlights at least a partial success for the program. According to INEGI, data collected during a 2015 census indicates that basic needs have been met not only in the 400 municipalities where the program was originally in place, but in another 612 that were added in 2014.

For its part, Coneval noted that the Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre had met some important objectives, but “with some challenges in an ever-changing environment.”

Omar Garfias Reyes, the technical secretary for the project, acknowledged that the first two years were spent collecting data and relevant information about the target areas, but that food and other basic items had still been distributed during this period. “We did not distribute resources in an arbitrary manner, we used certain methods,” Garfias said. “During the first two phases of the program, we relied on information from INEGI on the rural municipalities and the urban areas with the highest percentage and numbers of people living in poverty.”

Administration says hunger down 56%

The Peña Nieto government took the opportunity to tout the results of the program. In comments to reporters in mid-March, Social Development Secretary José Antonio Meade Kuribreña pointed out that the program had reduced hunger in Mexico by 56%. Furthermore, he said, the initiative helped boost and improve housing, increased educational opportunities, and improved access to health care in the targeted areas.

The bottom line, Meade said, is that the effort has been “useful and important,” although there are opportunities to continue improving the program. However, the secretary acknowledged that 11.4 million Mexicans still suffer from poverty in Mexico, including 500,000 who are living in extreme poverty. The latter groups lacks basic necessities that are the right of every citizen, he said, including
access to education, health care, social security, housing and the basic services that come with housing, such as utilities.

According to Meade, the statistics give the Mexican government a set of targets to follow. “We now have a focus, a plan that we can continue to improve, a strategy that we can continue to modify,” he said.

Meade also pointed out that the Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre is a joint effort with state and municipal governments and not just the responsibility of the federal government, allowing a “strengthening of the campaign… to the benefit of beneficiaries.”

The UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization has lauded the Peña Nieto government for the decision to implement the Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre. According to the FAO, Mexico is one of the countries in Latin America that have put in place programs to address hunger in a very intentional way (NotiSur, May 30, 2014, and Feb. 5, 2016).

In comments to the daily newspaper El Sol de México, the FAO representative to Mexico, Fernando Soto Baquero, said the Mexican government is on “the right path” with the campaign, which was launched under the auspices of former social development secretary Rosario Robles Berlanga. During a Cabinet shift in September 2015, Robles was moved to the agrarian, territorial and urban ministry (Secretaría de Desarrollo Agrario, Territorial y Urbano, SEDATU), with Meade replacing her at the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (Sedesol) (SourceMex, Sept. 2, 2015).

**Detractors question statistics, methodology**

Despite the government’s optimistic stance, there are contrary opinions on whether the anti-hunger crusade has made much of a difference. The Auditoría Superior de la Federación (ASF), the auditing unit that answers to the Mexican Congress, said in a recent report that the program had failed to meet its objectives because of flaws in the strategy employed by the government.

According to the ASF, the current structure of the program makes it almost impossible to verify whether it truly helps Mexicans suffering from food poverty (pobreza alimentaria), which is defined by the inability of an individual or family to obtain a basic basket of goods. The central bank (Banco de México) defines the basic basket of goods as the collection of food items essential for a family of four to meet basic needs. The products included in the basket are food items like cooking oil, sugar, rice, tuna, meat, coffee, heating oil, items for personal hygiene and cleaning, and transport.

The ASF offered a set of recommendations for the program, including a more precise objective, because the current format does not provide an accurate measure of its effectiveness.

“The deficiencies in the implementation, focus and coordination of actions under the Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre have not made it possible to verify the level at which the program guaranteed the access to food and other social rights for millions of people suffering extreme food poverty,” the ASF said. “We do not know how much the program contributed to easing hunger.”

Other analyses of the program found more inconsistencies. A study conducted by DataLab, a project of Grupo Milenio, which publishes the daily newspaper Milenio, pointed to the discrepancies in the report published by the organizers of the campaign.

“In the cover of the Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre, they offer assurances that the program is helping 4.17 million people who are suffering from food poverty, but the enrollment data shows
that only 1.15 million people are participating in the program,” said independent journalist Témoris Grecko, citing the DataLab study.

“Milenio DataLab, led by journalist Karen Cota, discovered that millions of people are suffering and will continue to suffer hunger because the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social is not doing its job,” Grecko wrote in an article published in the news site Aristegui Noticias.

Cota’s coverage did not sit well with Robles Berlanga, and her ministry, SEDATU, issued an official censure of the report. The censure became even more controversial when Carlos Marín, director of Grupo Milenio, caved into pressure from Robles and ordered that the article be removed from the Milenio site. Furthermore, the newspaper executive agreed to publish a disclaimer of the article.

Before Marín made the decision to accept the censure and publish the disclaimer, he had Cota and her collaborators meet with Robles and her team from SEDATU. “We were aware that we had solid arguments, and a colleague and I defended the investigation point by point,” Cota said in an interview on Revista Emeequis. “This bothered and angered the SEDATU officials, who banged their fists on the table several times.”

Marín’s decision not to back her report led Cota to resign from Milenio.

The DataLab study also found that coverage is very low in communities where extreme poverty is high. For example, the study found that the state of Oaxaca only had 38.9% coverage, compared with the average of 41% for the 150 poorest municipalities in the country.

“Coverage is unequal in the different states that are participating, and the program does not reach the states that are more vulnerable,” said the daily newspaper El Imparcial, also quoting the DataLab investigation.

The study found that eight municipalities in Oaxaca have zero coverage despite the fact that one-fifth of the state’s population suffers extreme poverty and high food poverty.

An unintended result of the uneven and inaccurate application of the program is that many individuals who otherwise would have not qualified for the program received the benefits. One example, according to the DataLab study, is the community of Juchipila in Zacatecas, where coverage under the Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre was estimated at 500%, and where only 1.5% of the population qualified under the guidelines for food poverty.

The lack of adequate coverage, said Grecko, is particularly difficult for children, who will experience problems related to poor nutrition. “This means that large populations remain hungry and are condemned to permanent underdevelopment as a consequence of poor nutrition,” Grecko said. “There will be thousands of children who will not grow properly and who will also suffer from learning disabilities.”