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Food Banking System Helps Alleviate Hunger in Mexico

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Food banks are beginning to play an increasingly important role in the effort to address food insecurity in Mexico, bringing the private sector into an area of service that for decades had been the domain of the federal government.

The Bancos de Alimentos de México (BAMX), which brings food banks around the country together via the Asociación Mexicana de Bancos de Alimentos (AMBA), came on the scene in 1989 to help collect donations from private food companies to distribute to agencies that serve poor and hungry families. According to AMBA, the organization consolidated its operations in 1995, and now serves food banks in 67 Mexican cities. The program is modeled after Feeding America, the US network of food banks that serves more than 200 food banks around the US.

The efforts of BAMX and AMBA to address hunger represent a drop in the bucket when compared to the huge problem that exists in Mexico. According to government statistics, 28 million people in Mexico suffer from hunger, or almost one-fourth of the country’s estimated population of 120 million. “In 2015, the system of food banks had the opportunity to distribute 117,000 tons of food, serving 1.2 million Mexicans who were in this worrisome situation,” said BAMX director Rubén Oliva Rodríguez.

“The success of the organization has been significant,” AMBA said in its website, noting that there are 67 food banks in operation throughout the country, from Chihuahua to Yucatán. AMBA provides guidance and support to each facility.

The food banks serve primarily urban communities, missing the residents of isolated rural areas. According to recent statistics from the social development ministry (Secretaría de Desarrollo Social, SEDESOL), 6.1 million Mexicans live in extreme poverty in 2,457 municipalities, mostly out of reach of food assistance. The isolated nature of rural areas came to the forefront in 2012, when reports emerged from the Sierra Tarahumara that an extended drought had decimated the crops grown by the Raramuri indigenous communities, causing several people to die of hunger (SourceMex, Jan. 25, 2012).

**Government efforts fall short**

At the beginning of his administration, President Enrique Peña Nieto launched an ambitious campaign to eliminate hunger in Mexico, with initial efforts targeted at 7.4 million people living in extreme poverty (SourceMex, Jan. 23, 2013). Results from the president’s campaign, known as the Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre, have been mixed a best. According to SEDESOL officials, the program has reduced hunger in Mexico by more than 50%, but critics suggest that the administration is exaggerating the results of the program (SourceMex, March 16, 2016).

Oliva Rodríguez acknowledged that the administration has managed to make some inroads in the fight to reduce poverty, but not enough to make a huge difference. “The government’s strategies have not yielded the results that we had anticipated,” he said.

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The UN has set a target via its Global Goals for Sustainable Development and its Zero Hunger Challenge to end hunger globally by 2030. Mexico might not be able to attain that goal, but there is talk of reducing the total number of hungry people to about 5 million by the targeted year. “We have 28 million people living in this regrettable situation, so we have a long way to go,” Oliva Rodríguez said, pointing out that the association he leads has been working on the problem for more than 20 years. “Our vision is to eventually phase out our food banks,” he said. “Then we would be able to say that we reached our objective of eradicating hunger in Mexico.”

For now, the BAMX and the AMBA are continuing efforts to increase the amount of food available to distribute. As part of a campaign unveiled in October coinciding with the global commemoration of World Food Day on Oct. 16, the associations spoke about their food-salvage efforts. According to BAMX, food banks around the Mexico are trying to rescue the 30,000 tons of food that are thrown away each day by restaurants, hotels, and grocery stores.

“Over the past several years, we have touched base with hotels and restaurants, distribution centers, markets, and food companies,” said Magaly Quintana, procurement director at BAMX. “We make connections with the entire food chain.”

There are five ways to collect food, Oliva Rodríguez said in an interview with the daily newspaper Milenio. “The first is from the field, where a lot of produce is discarded because of a decline in price,” he said. “The second is from the distribution centers, the third is from the food producers, the fourth is from hotels and restaurants, and the fifth is from supermarkets.”

The main activity of the food banks is to collect surplus product from the commercial food companies. “The level of donations is still very slow, and is insufficient for us to help address the level of hunger in our country,” Oliva Rodríguez said.

Still, Oliva Rodríguez pointed out that 4,000 food companies donate to the 67 food banks around Mexico. Some 60% of the donations are brought directly to communities in need, while charitable institutions receive the remaining 40% for distribution among their clients.

“Our task is to create a bridge between those who possess abundance and those who suffer from shortages,” Oliva Rodríguez said. “That is why we work to create a culture of sharing in order to help the most vulnerable communities in our country.”

A paradox of abundance and scarcity
Some observers alluded to the paradox that exists in Mexico. “On one hand, we have a level of food production without precedent that puts our country among the top producers in the world,” Sen. Jesús Casillas Romero wrote in a guest column in Crónica.com. “We have a problem with access to [healthy food], along with the problem that millions of Mexicans are overweight or obese.”

Casillas Romero, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), said Mexico ranks third in Latin America and 12th globally in terms of food production, with 280 million tons estimated for 2016, according to statistics from the agriculture ministry (Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA). “It is conceivable that the tendency will continue and that we could break into the top 10.”

Casillas Romero then alluded to statistics from the social development council, the Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL), that show almost 28 million lacked access to proper nutrition in 2014.
The senator also addressed the problem of high weight levels and obesity among Mexicans. “This is one of the public health problems that we have not been able to address,” he said. “We rank first in child obesity and second globally in adult obesity. Seven out of 10 adults, one of every three children, and four of out every 10 youths suffer from this health condition.” He said specialists have linked the problem to poor eating habits.

Others noted that despite the huge production, the paradox lies in the uneven distribution of the food that is grown in Mexico. In a piece published in the daily newspaper La Jornada, columnist Carlos Fernández-Vega, citing statistics from the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), noted that Mexico’s model of agricultural production has generated significant shortages in foodstuffs for much of the population, including fruits, vegetables, seafood, cereals and bread, beef and poultry, dairy products, eggs, and legumes.

“On the anniversary of the creation of World Food Day, the recommendation of the FAO is to invest more in rural development,” Fernández-Vega said. Under this model, he added, small-scale producers in rural areas would be enlisted to guarantee the food security and food sovereignty of Mexico and other countries around the world. A bonus of this type of localized production would be the reduction of energy use, which could help combat global climate change. “The proposal is to reverse the agro-industrial model that we have used in favor of promoting sustainable development in smaller communities while reducing poverty,” he wrote.

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