

# Developments in National Policies for Food and Nutrition Security in Brazil

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*Brazil is on track to achieve many of the Millennium Development Goals, and this is widely credited to bold and innovative government policies backed by new forms of popular participation in social policy. This article examines evaluation evidence on two of the most important recent initiatives in Brazil's policies for food and nutrition security (conditional cash transfers through Bolsa Família and support for family agriculture through the Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos). It also considers advances in older policies (such as the School Meals programme) and the work of the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security, which has culminated in national legislation establishing food and nutrition security as a right.*

**Key words:** Brazil, conditional cash-transfer programmes, family agriculture, food and nutrition security, participatory governance, school meals programmes, social policy

## 1 Introduction

What is happening in Brazil in the area of social development is of international interest, for three main reasons. First, Brazil is one of the countries on track to achieve many of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly in reducing extreme poverty and malnutrition. UNICEF's *Progress for Children* (2007) reports that it is in a good position to achieve its 2015 goals of reducing the prevalence of underweight children under five, achieving universal primary education, eliminating gender disparity in primary education, reducing the under-five child mortality rate, and providing access to safe drinking water. Second, much of this achievement is credited to bold and innovative government policies (some of which are described here). Third, it seems to be achieving much of its success with the help of new channels for popular participation and local democracy, from participatory budgeting to local tripartite (government, private sector and civil society) social councils, thus exemplifying new forms of governance for food security.

This article describes some of the most important components of the national government's overall strategy (*Fome Zero* or Zero Hunger) to reduce hunger, malnutrition and overall food insecurity in the country: conditional cash transfers (*Bolsa Família*), the school meals programme, and programmes to support family agriculture

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(PRONAF and PAA). Section 3 looks at the participation of civil society in the governance for food security through local social councils, as well as the experience of the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA) and its success in promoting the National Law for Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN), enacted in 2006.

Key issues raised by the article which are of particular interest to researchers include: (i) how governments can address the comprehensive, systemic nature of food and nutrition security; (ii) the design of basic safety-net policies which include structural change components; and (iii) the development and institutionalisation of participatory models of governance. The article concludes with a discussion of the main challenges to the sustainability of advances in food and nutrition security in Brazil. It suggests that the country is well positioned to continue making progress in this area, and that lessons learned from its experience should be considered by other countries.

## 2 The *Fome Zero* strategy

*Fome Zero* is a strategy of the Federal Government to ensure the human right to adequate food to people having difficulty in accessing it. This strategy is embedded in the promotion of food and nutrition security with social inclusion and citizenship rights for the population most vulnerable to hunger. (<http://www.fomezero.gov.br/>; author's translation).

*Fome Zero* was first announced in early 2003 as *the* major social policy programme of the newly elected government of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva. It was so central to the national government's strategy that a special Ministry (*Ministério Especial de Segurança Alimentar – MESA*), directly linked to the President's office, was created to house it. Its announcement both mobilised the country around the problem of hunger and food insecurity, and created high expectations of what it would accomplish. For the first time, food security was a declared priority of the federal government's social policy.

High expectations led, however, to huge disappointment. In its first year *Fome Zero* was not able to capitalise on its significant political clout. An ambitious programme, it mobilised Brazilian society without having a good plan of what to do with it. Many of those in charge of the programme were inexperienced politicians, with little or no administrative past. That first year *Fome Zero* demonstrated why good intentions are not enough for good policy.

It is to the government's credit that it quickly regrouped in the following year. MESA was abolished and *Fome Zero*, now described as a 'strategy' rather than a programme, was moved to the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (MDS), where it has been steadily growing in number of programmes, beneficiaries, funding, and geographic coverage. Its programmes, especially *Bolsa Família*, have been credited with reducing the incidence of hunger and malnutrition, as well as extreme poverty rates in the country. The poverty rate, measured as the share of the population with a per capita income below R\$121 (approximately US\$60) per month, fell by 19.18% between 2003 and 2005, reaching 22.7% in that year, a historic low (Neri, 2006: 3). A record 15% drop in one year put the poverty rate in the country

below 20% (at 19.31%) in 2006 (Neri, 2007: 42). That year, 6 million Brazilians left the ranks of the poor.

Much of the reduction in poverty rates can be attributed to a reduction in Brazil's notorious income disparity between rich and poor. The 4% reduction in income inequality between 2001 and 2004, by itself, is responsible for lifting 5 million Brazilians out of poverty. If that same result were to be achieved through economic growth (and no redistribution), the country would have to grow at a rate of 6% per year (IPEA, 2006: 4). In 2006, the average income of the poorest 50% of the population increased 11.99% against a rise of 7.85% for the average income of the richest 10% income group (Neri, 2007: 43). While *Fome Zero* cannot account for all of this significant reduction in inequality (steady increases in minimum wages, growing rates in formal employment, and higher pension payments have also played a part), its programmes have clearly contributed in increasing the income of the poorest families in the country (Jaccoud, 2006).

Table 1 lists all the programmes and initiatives which make up *Fome Zero*, according to the government website in early 2008. Not all programmes are administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger. Many have been in place for many years, initiated by previous governments. Some were in fact started by the private sector or by non-governmental organisations. Most depend on partnerships among government departments and different levels of government. And some have been more successful than others.

What is noteworthy in Table 1 is the comprehensive nature of the *Fome Zero* strategy, which certainly has greater food access as a priority, but also includes components for strengthening family agriculture, for income generation, and for promoting partnerships with the private sector and civil society. The list is also noteworthy for what it does not include. According to the government, the programme for agrarian reform and land redistribution (under the Ministry of Agrarian Development) is not listed as part of the *Hunger Zero* strategy, although many of the programmes in *Fome Zero* support new settlers benefited by the agrarian reform.

While many *Fome Zero* programmes have been established for many years, the Lula government can be credited with extending their reach and improving their quality. Below we describe three components of *Fome Zero* which, by themselves and together with other programmes, are improving food and nutrition security in the country. *Bolsa Familia* and the School Meals Programme are by far the most important components of *Fome Zero*, in terms of their national coverage and numbers of people attended. The importance of programmes to strengthen family agriculture lies in their directly addressing a segment of the Brazilian society and economy long neglected by social and economic policies. The Food Procurement Programme also deserves attention for proposing a more active government role in influencing food markets (Rocha, 2007).

**Table 1: *Fome Zero* programmes**

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*I - Food access*

Bolsa Familia (BF)  
 National School Meals Programme (PNAE)  
 Food for Specific Groups  
 Rainwater Cisterns  
 Popular Restaurants and Community Kitchens  
 Food Banks  
 Urban Agriculture  
 Food and Nutrition Surveillance System  
 Distribution of Vitamin A  
 Distribution of Iron  
 Food and Nutrition for Indigenous People  
 FN Education for Consumption  
 Promotion of Healthy Habits/Healthy Diets  
 Workers Food Programme (PAT)  
 Basic Food Basket Tax Reduction

*II - Strengthening family agriculture*

National Programme for Family Agriculture (PRONAF)  
 Harvest Insurance  
 Family Farming Agriculture Insurance  
 Food Procurement Programme (PAA)

*III - Income generation*

Social and Professional Training  
 Solidarity Economy and Productive Inclusion  
 Food Security and Local Development Consortium  
 Food and Nutrition Security Organisation  
 Co-operatives of Recyclable Material Collectors  
 Guided Productive Micro-credit

*IV - Partnership promotion and civil society mobilisation*

Social Assistance Reference Centre  
 Social Mobilisation and Citizenship Education  
 Social and Public Agents Capacity Building  
 Volunteer Work and Donations  
 Partnership with Private Sector and NGOs  
 Social Development Councils

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Source: MDS website <http://www.fomezero.gov.br/>

**2.1 Conditional cash transfers: Bolsa Familia**

*Bolsa Familia* (Family Grant) is a highly targeted, conditional cash-transfer programme. It was created in 2003 as an amalgamation of a number of previously existing programmes which targeted the poorest families in the country. It is certainly the

centrepiece of the government's social policy, in terms of both coverage and impact on poverty.

To qualify for the programme families must be in a situation of poverty (monthly per capita income between R\$60 and R\$120) or extreme poverty (monthly per capita income below R\$60). Through the programme, families can earn up to R\$95 per month (R\$1.00 = US\$0.60 in early 2008), depending on the level of poverty and the number of children in the household. The money is usually transferred to the mother of the family via an electronic card.

The Ministry of Social Development and Hunger Alleviation administers *Bolsa Familia* in partnership with municipal governments which are in charge of registering local families into the programme (via the federal government's central registry) and monitoring the conditions beneficiaries are to follow to continue in the programme. These conditions are related to children's education and health. Families in the programme must keep children aged 6 to 15 to a minimum of 85% attendance rate at school, and must keep a record of health clinic visits and vaccinations for children aged 0 to 6. Pregnant and nursing women must also maintain a record of health clinic visits.

Despite exceptions and many 'words of caution' (Farrington and Slater, 2006), there seems to be growing evidence of the benefits of cash transfers over in-kind transfers (such as direct food aid). This represents an advance in this debate, as the discussion is now moving towards how best to design and implement cash-transfer programmes. In particular, the discussion is now focused on 'what are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to targeting and conditionality' (ibid.: 502; Hailu and Soares, 2008; Soares and Britto, 2007; Standing, 2007).

Concerns about *Bolsa Familia* illustrate some of the main questions about conditional cash-transfer programmes in general. They relate to the programme's efficacy (does the programme achieve what it proposes to do?), and efficiency (could the objectives be achieved at lower costs?). Results of evaluation studies are just starting to be released (Soares et al., 2007); overall they seem to indicate a good (although far from perfect) score for the programme on both criteria. A large part of *Bolsa Familia*'s success is due to its high scores for inclusion targeting (it does reach a large proportion of the intended families), although it also presents 'leakage problems' (in which many families receiving the benefit are actually above the cut-off point for programme eligibility). Most of the 'leakage families', however, are above but still very close to the cut-off poverty income level.

In 2003 *Bolsa Familia* reached 3.6 million families with a budget of just over US\$1.1 billion. By early 2007 it was estimated to be reaching 100% of its target of 11.1 million families (about 45 million people or a quarter of the country's population) with a budget of over US\$4.1 bn (Britto, 2008; FAO, 2006; MDS, 2007), becoming the largest programme of its kind in the world. Nevertheless, *Bolsa Familia* accounts for less than 3% of direct government transfers, and only 0.5% to 0.8% of the country's GDP (FAO, 2006; Hall, 2006: 693-4; *The Economist*, 2008: 39-40). The government's expenditures with the programme were estimated at US\$6 bn in 2008 (Ananias, 2008).

The programme is estimated to have raised participants' income by 21% (FAO, 2006); by itself it is not enough to lift families out of poverty (Jaccoud, 2006: 36), but it has had a significant impact on the lives of the poor. It is estimated that it was responsible for a 19% reduction in poverty severity (the degree to which poor families

fall below the poverty line) and a 21% fall in the Gini (income inequality) index between 1995 and 2004 (Soares et al., 2007: 4). In terms of its contribution to increasing food and nutrition security in the country, studies show that 76% of the transfers are spent on food, and families in the *Bolsa Família* programme have been able to improve their diets (FAO, 2006).

As far as the conditionalities in the programme are concerned, results have not been so positive. *Bolsa Família* has had a positive impact on school attendance, but children in the programme do not advance academically as well as other children. And preliminary data suggest that *Bolsa Família* has had no impact on child immunisations (Soares et al., 2007). This seems surprising, but both of these results point to supply-side impediments – lack of appropriate resources in schools to help the children re-entering the system (or entering for the first time) to succeed, and the absence of appropriate public health services in areas of need. As stated in Farrington and Slater (2006: 506), ‘imposing conditions on beneficiaries is impractical without commensurate investments to ensure the supply of services, particularly in health and education, can meet demand’. Other reports (Paraguassú, 2008) have indicated that, ironically, the very increase in school attendance has led to a rise in school evasion rates, as 15-year-olds are cut out of the programme. It is doubtful that a recent extension of benefits to young people up to 17 years of age can compete with the lure of market earning possibilities for this group of the population. Thus, although it is still too early to fully evaluate the effects of the programme on education, there are concerns that *Bolsa Família* may not meet its secondary goal of having children in beneficiary families completing the basic education cycle.

Because of these concerns, and despite its overall positive results, *Bolsa Família* continues to be criticised in the Brazilian press (and by many in the government opposition) as no more than a paternalistic policy of hand-outs, which creates disincentives to work and compensates inactivity (Torquato, 2008). Such criticisms, however, may not be fair as they rely mostly on anecdotal accounts, and have ignored initial evaluation results which show, for example, that the labour force participation rate for beneficiaries of the programme is, in fact, 2.6 percentage points higher than for non-beneficiaries (Soares et al., 2007: 6). As more evaluation results become available, it will be possible to separate more legitimate concerns about the programme from mere speculations.

## **2.2 The school meals programme**

Although children in the *Bolsa Família* programme may not be getting the necessary support they need to succeed in school, greater school attendance can at least give them a chance of improving their nutritional status. The National School Meals Programme (*Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar – PNAE*) has a long history in Brazil. It was launched in 1955, and it has since provided federal funds for school meals to children in day-care centres, pre-school and primary school in the public school system. At the federal level it is administered by the Ministry of Education which transfers funds directly to states and municipalities responsible for its implementation (decentralisation of the programme dates from 1994).

PNAE has three main stated objectives: (i) to cover at least 15% of the children's daily nutritional needs (calories, proteins, and other nutrients); (ii) to improve children's learning capabilities; and (iii) to foster healthy food habits in children and adolescents (Weis et al., 2005: 11). Since 2001 the programme has required that at least 70% of federal funds be spent on 'basic products' (defined in a list of mostly fresh fruits and vegetables, grains, bread, milk and other dairy products, meats, and other generally low-processed foods), and according to local habits and local production. Hence, secondary objectives of the programme are the promotion and preservation of local food habits and support for local food production (FNDE, 2008).

A comprehensive, nation-wide evaluation of PNAE, funded by the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger, has only recently been launched (in 2007), but a number of studies since decentralisation in the 1990s have shed light on different aspects and results of the programme. Data from 1997, for example, suggest that 46% of students in the public school system participated in the programme daily, whereas 17% did not participate at all (Sturion et al., 2005). Factors such as per capita family income, students' nutritional status, parents' educational level, and the presence of a commercial food outlet in the school premises are inversely related to children's participation in the programme. Hence, although designed to be a universal programme, in practice the PNAE benefits 'mostly students with nutritional status at risk, from families of lower income and educational levels' (*ibid.*: 168). Some studies have indicated that for over 50% of children in the poorest regions of the country (North and Northeast), the food they have in school is their main meal of the day (Weis et al., 2005).

Federal funding in this programme has increased from R\$850 million in 2002 to about R\$1.5 bn in 2006, serving 36.3 million children. Funding per child/per school day increased from R\$0.13 in 2003 to R\$0.22 in 2006 (FNDE, 2008). Schools serving indigenous populations receive R\$0.44 per child/per school day, to reflect the special needs of this group (*ibid.*). There are indications, however, that this level of funding is inadequate to achieve the nutritional standards determined in the programme (Mascarenhas and Santos, 2006; Rezende, 2007). In 2006, the average cost of school meals per child/per school day varied from R\$0.28 to R\$0.70, depending on school location and children's ages and special needs (Ação Fome Zero, 2007). Not surprisingly, many schools relying only on federal funding have failed to meet the programme's requirements and goals.

By law, federal funding can cover only the cost of food. The programme therefore relies heavily on partnerships. Municipal governments are responsible for covering all costs of infrastructure (from storage to kitchen utensils) and personnel (from nutritionists to school cooks). Adding both food and non-food costs, successful implementation of the programme must rest on a partnership in which, typically, federal funding accounts only for about 49% of the financial resources needed, with other funding being provided by municipal governments themselves (about 42%), state governments (3%), and other sources, such as foundations and the private sector (Ação Fome Zero, 2007). Thus, the success of the school meal programme depends on complementary resources, beyond the funding guaranteed by the federal government.

### 2.3 Support for family agriculture

Despite the government's stated objective of also supporting local food production through the School Meals programme, only about 30% of the municipalities purchase food directly from local producers (Ação Fome Zero, 2007). Common barriers cited for the limited access of local suppliers are a complex process of competition to obtain government contracts and lack of capacity among small local producers to maintain reliable supplies of consistent quality (Badue, 2007: 53). Recently, a series of measures under PRONAF (the National Programme for Strengthening Family Agriculture) have attempted to reduce such barriers.

In Brazil 30% of rural enterprises are classified as 'family farms'. These are responsible for 38% of the agricultural value produced in the country, employing over 70% of all workers in the agricultural sector (Barros and Adami, 2006). With an average size of 26 hectares, family farms have been responsible for a significant share of national food production, in particular for the domestic market. In the late 1990s, family farms produced 67% of beans, 84% of manioc, 48% of corn, 31% of rice, 52% of milk, 58% of pork, 40% of poultry and eggs, 58% of bananas, 24% of meat, 25% of coffee – all staples in the Brazilian diet (INCRA/FAO, 2000).

PRONAF was created in 1996 to assist this sector, mostly through subsidised agricultural credit, crop insurance and technical assistance. Administered by the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA), the programme benefits 2 million small farmers, including agrarian-reform settlers. Resources allocated to the programme have increased from R\$2.2 bn (US\$1.3 bn) in 2003 to R\$12 bn (US\$4.5 bn) in 2007 (Peraci, 2007).

An earlier evaluation of this programme (Anjos et al., 2004) questioned its capacity (or even true intention) to support the poorest farmers or to promote rural development. Such concerns have been partially addressed with the creation in 2003 of the national Food Procurement Programme (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos – PAA*). Initially funded and administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger, since 2006 PAA has been integrated into PRONAF and administered by a consortium of ministries which includes the MDS and MDA, but also the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Planning, and the Ministry of Finance. PAA promotes direct crop and milk purchases by the government for building food stocks (and regulating prices) and to be used in government food programmes such as School Meals or food banks. Small farmers can earn up to R\$3,500 per year through the programme. In 2006 the government spent US\$310 m. (up from US\$72 m. in 2003), benefiting over 11,000 farmers that year (FAO, 2006). The programme is present in over 3,500 municipalities throughout the country, and has supplied food to over 15,000 social agencies since its creation (CONAB/MDS/MDA, 2007; MDS, n.d.).

Indirect beneficiaries of the PAA also include producers who are not covered in the programme, but feel the impact that government purchases (or even just the announcement of government purchases) have had on increasing local prices for agricultural products such as beans, rice and corn (Delgado et al., 2005). Building of food stocks has also played a role in reducing fluctuations in local food prices. The programme has also provided a stimulus for greater organisation of small family farmers into co-operatives and associations, as this is a requirement for participation in



most of its modalities. Greater organisation has, in turn, facilitated credit for participating farmers, and has opened access to other (more distant) markets.

Although local prices for some staple foods have increased as a consequence of the programme (and, indeed, as intended by the programme), indirect benefits to consumers include better and more consistent quality and safety of local products as these are now more closely inspected through government purchases (ibid.). Furthermore, the programme has been contributing to the preservation of local customs by favouring purchases of foods featured in local cuisines.

A more systematic evaluation of the PAA is needed to confirm the extent of its benefits, but there are indications that its potential is not fully realised in many areas of the country with the poorest and most marginalised rural populations. In these, family farmers have difficulties in meeting the technical and procedural requirements of the programme, such as organising themselves in co-operatives and associations. Meeting these minimal requirements demands resources (information, knowledge, time), which many of these farmers do not have. Hence, despite favouring co-operatives and associations of indigenous and *quilombola* (descendants of slaves) producers (MDS, n.d.), the PAA has not been able to reach many of these most marginalised rural communities.

### 3 Governance for food security: the participation of civil society

Increasingly, throughout the world, civil-society organisations (CSOs) are becoming key actors in governance – the institutions, policies and practices which determine the common/public good in a society (UNDP, 2005). In this way, ‘governance’ encompasses but also transcends the public sector (government), extending public action and responsibility to civil society. The role of CSOs in governance and in producing ‘a new expansion of democracy’ in the twenty-first century (Lavalle et al., 2005) has been the subject of many studies, which have contributed in better defining the contours and nature of these organisations and in challenging the long-held, dichotomous view of a world shaped by only markets and states. These studies have also sharpened questions concerning the actual place of CSOs in governance and their relationship with other sectors of society.

Today’s Brazil presents a fascinating laboratory for investigating these questions. Governance in many of the programmes in the *Fome Zero* strategy has followed a trend, started in the 1990s and intensified under the Lula government, of participation by civil society through representation in local social councils. Civil-society organisations have emerged as significant players in food security, both independently and also increasingly in association with governments. And as other researchers have noted, the *possibility* of a partnership between state and civil society has been one of the greatest political legacies of the 1990s in Brazil (Rizek, 2003: 162).

At a minimum, local social councils are responsible for the monitoring and control of how federal resources are spent in local programmes. Hence, by law, municipal governments must have an operating School Meals Council in place before federal funds are transferred for the School Meals programme. In the case of the PAA,

monitoring is to be done by local Food and Nutrition Security Councils. But, in many instances, the role of the councils goes beyond monitoring the use of federal resources. School Meals Council members also participate, for example, in the elaboration of menus to comply with guidelines to maintain and support regional food habits and local production.

The composition of social councils overseeing different programmes also varies, but they must take at least half of their members from civil society. School Meals Councils are composed of seven members: two representatives of government, two of teachers, two of parents, and one from any other group (for example, school cooking staff or local producers). In many municipalities a further requirement is that councils' Chairs cannot be government representatives.

While, through the requirement for the establishment of local councils, the government has created potential institutional spaces for civil-society participation in governance, the mere existence of such spaces does not guarantee effective participation. Studies of School Meals Councils showed that in the late 1990s, over 20% of them were completely inoperative, existing only 'on paper' to fulfill the requirements of the law (Pipitone et al., 2003). At the same time, an active council has been identified as the most important component in successful School Meals programmes (Weis et al., 2005).

Even where councils are operating, effective participation in governance often demands skills and resources not readily available to civil-society representatives. With a broad mandate that encompasses everything from policies to programmes, the effectiveness of local councils depends on how well representatives from different sectors interact and work together towards food security. Civil-society groups have identified a significant gap in the human resources needed to face this undertaking, pointing out the desirability for the formation of personnel in key areas that can design, implement, monitor and evaluate a range of relevant food-security policies, programmes and projects. While new spaces for participation were opened through the formation of local councils, there is a recognised need for training and education so that those spaces can be filled in an effective manner. In fact, throughout Brazil, 'the issue of training of non-governmental councilors is ... considered, by the councilors themselves, to be one of the main obstacles to effective participation by civil society on the councils' (Tatagiba, 2000: 17). Despite such difficulties, social councils are now common institutions in the governance for food security in Brazil.

At the national level, this model of governance is represented in the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA). Described as a tool for communication between the government and civil society (CONSEA, 2008), CONSEA is an advisory body to the President on policies and general guidelines for food and nutrition security. Composed of 54 representatives (in 2008), two-thirds from civil society and the private sector and one-third from the federal government, CONSEA was re-assembled (after a brief existence in the early 1990s) immediately after the Lula government came to power in 2003. Among its members are representatives from labour unions, business associations, the food industry, church groups, professional associations, academics, and non-governmental organisations representing family farmers, indigenous communities, and others. The government representatives come from 19 different federal Ministries and special Secretariats.

Despite such diversity of interests, since 2003 CONSEA has put forward a number of proposals and initiatives, such as the increase in allowances for the federal School Meals programme and the creation of the PAA, discussed earlier. But the Council's most significant accomplishment so far has been the elaboration of the National Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN), passed by the Brazilian Congress in 2006. The importance of this law can be hardly overstated. Article 1

establishes definitions, principles, guidelines, objectives and composition of the National System for Food and Nutrition Security – SISAN – through which the State, with the participation of organised civil society, will formulate and implement policies, plans, programmes and actions towards ensuring the human right to adequate food. (Brazil National Congress, 2005; author's translation)

For the first time in the history of the country the Right to Food is institutionalised as a matter of public policy and an obligation of the state. LOSAN also strengthened CONSEA, since it establishes the national Council as a permanent state institution, with an elected president from civil society and the mandate to develop a national System for Food and Nutrition Security (SISAN).

#### 4 Conclusion

In early 2008 it is estimated that over 30 million Brazilians are still below the poverty line, suffering the daily threat of hunger and malnutrition. The current world food crisis created by the sharp increase in grain prices is certainly putting greater stress on that population. Clearly, *Fome Zero* programmes have not yet been able to alleviate food insecurity among all the vulnerable groups in the country, especially those living in remote, isolated communities.

In trying to improve the effectiveness of its food and nutrition policies, challenges faced by the Brazilian government include the following:

- (i) Supply-side impediments have frustrated the potential of many policies and programmes to work as agents for long-term structural change. Some of the most innovative and successful policies of the past few years combine basic safety-net mechanisms (and are well targeted) with structural-change components. Hence, the objective of *Bolsa Familia* is not just to alleviate income poverty, but also to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty. It is in this light that its 'conditionalities' should be interpreted – as instruments for possible long-term structural changes (increasing human capital through education and health), rather than as violations of basic and 'unconditional' human rights, as some critics have contended (see, for example, Marques and Mendes, 2007). This potential, however, has not yet been fulfilled.
- (ii) Lack of information and knowledge among small-scale farmers has prevented them from taking full advantage of recent government agricultural programmes. Policies to support small-scale family farmers have the same double objective of providing short-term support in conjunction with long-term structural changes.

These, however, cannot be realised without further resources geared to farmers' capacity-building in gathering information, market-functioning and general education, and forming associations and co-operatives.

- (iii) The effectiveness of social councils in governance for food and nutrition security has also been undermined by the lack of appropriate training and education among potential representatives from civil society. Local patronage and corruption are also obstacles to effective participatory governance in many municipalities.
- (iv) Notwithstanding recent significant reduction in income inequality, Brazil continues to be plagued by inequalities represented particularly in the socio-economic and regional disparities in access to resources (land, credit, jobs) and public goods and services (sanitation, housing, health care, transportation, and education). These inequalities are reflected, for example, in the fact that the infant mortality rate among the indigenous population is 138% higher, and that among the black population 37% higher, than the rate among whites in the country (UNICEF, 2008).

These challenges suggest that further progress towards food and nutrition security depends on addressing more structural problems which characterise the Brazilian economy and society. In a conversation (on 12 June 2008) with the author, the Brazilian Minister for Social Development and Fight against Hunger, Patrus Ananias, recognised the limitations of the *Fome Zero* strategy in forging structural changes. He mentioned the need to expand many of the programmes, and also to create more robust links between social and economic policies. He reiterated, however, the sense of urgency that underlies policies and programmes in his ministry, emphasising that the main goal of *Fome Zero* is to achieve the first Millennium Development Goal of reducing extreme poverty and malnutrition. One-fifth of families in the *Bolsa Família* programme still present severe food insecurity, experiencing periodic hunger (Ibase, 2008).

Nevertheless, advances in food and nutrition security in Brazil are undeniable. Indeed, notwithstanding their operational problems and limitations, the effectiveness of *Fome Zero* programmes in addressing food insecurity is far from insignificant. 45 million people live in families receiving grants under *Bolsa Família*, which has reduced the incidence and severity of poverty in the country. Over 36 million children are served by the School Meals programme, a major source of food access for poor families (*ibid.*). And 80,000 small-scale family farmers have been able to increase their incomes through the government's Food Procurement Programme (Ananias, 2008). Impacts of such programmes are reflected, for example, in the significant improvement of children's health in the country (*ibid.*; UNICEF, 2008), where: (i) the infant mortality rate has dropped from 47 per 1,000 in 1990 to 25 per 1,000 in 2006 – a 47% reduction; (ii) the proportion of children under two years old reported to be underweight has dropped from 12.7% in 2000 to 3.5% in 2006 – a 72.4% reduction in six years; (iii) general malnutrition in the semi-arid region of the Northeast (the poorest area of the country) has dropped from 17.9% in 1996 to 6.6% in 2005.

Many questions now turn on the sustainability of such advances, for which much depends on continuing commitment from the federal government to improve existing programmes and develop new initiatives to overcome the gaps not covered by previous policies. Political sustainability is threatened by having *Fome Zero*, in particular *Bolsa*

*Familia*, too closely associated with the Lula government (Britto, 2008), despite widespread support for these programmes throughout the country.

There are indications, however, that the essence of the *Fome Zero* strategy will outlive the Lula government. First, the institutionalisation of food and nutrition security as the responsibility of the state, rather than of governments, has been advanced with the National Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN). LOSAN brings with it a firm understanding of food and nutrition security as a comprehensive, systemic issue, to be dealt with from a multidimensional approach, involving diverse sectors of the economy, society and government. This understanding is to be followed by community groups, civil-society organisations, and government departments working in this area. Article 3 of LOSAN defines ‘food and nutrition security’ under the law in the following way:

Food and nutrition security consists in realising the right of all to regular and permanent access to food in sufficient quantity and quality, without compromising access to other essential needs, on the basis of food habits which promote health and respect cultural diversity, and which are environmentally, culturally, economically, and socially sustainable. (Brazil National Congress, 2005, author’s translation)

Second, the development of a participatory model of governance through the work of social councils is well advanced, and has made possible the institutionalisation of collaboration between government and civil society to an extent rarely seen in other parts of the world. This model of governance is advancing ‘food citizenship’ (Wilkins, 2005) far beyond its individual realm of appropriate ethical choices (such as ‘buying local’) to the collective, public realm of policy. New spaces for potentially effective participation by civil society in governance have been created, and through their institutionalisation the danger of a reversal in the trend towards further progress has been minimised.

In her 1997 book, *Good Government in the Tropics*, Judith Tendler suggests that there is a bias in development studies towards analyses of bad and negative experiences from developing countries. She argues that not enough attention is paid to positive experiences, and that this imbalance leads to faulty models and prescriptions. Despite many limitations, there have been some important advances in the area of food and nutrition security policy in Brazil in recent years which deserve attention. Other parts of the world may want to consider what lessons can be derived from this experience, its challenges and successes.

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