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LATIN AMERICA: Slower growth may mar hunger advances

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Abstract

Successes in hunger reduction in Latin America.

Although a number of regions have achieved the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of halving the percentage of their population suffering from hunger by 2015, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the first region also to achieve the more ambitious World Food Summit target of halving their absolute number.

Full text

SUBJECT: Successes in hunger reduction in Latin America.

SIGNIFICANCE: Although a number of regions have achieved the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of halving the percentage of their population suffering from hunger by 2015, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the first region also to achieve the more ambitious World Food Summit target of halving their absolute number.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

While ongoing efforts will be required to reduce hunger, obesity has also become an important public health problem in many LAC countries.

A recent increase in extreme poverty in LAC suggests that reduction of hunger may slow.

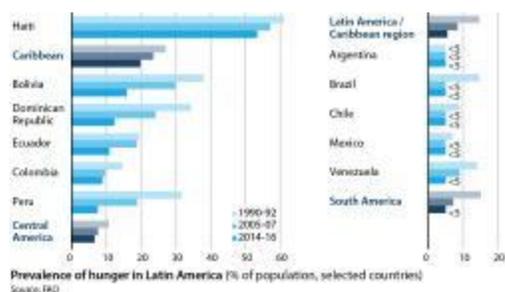
As hunger drops and concentrates in pockets, such as indigenous communities, ever more closely targeted policies will be required.

In its report, Regional Overview of Food Insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean, released on May 28, the FAO compares hunger rates in five three-year periods (used to prevent distortion by short-term events such as droughts or food-price volatility) between 1990 and 2015, the deadline set under the MDGs for halving the proportion of people suffering from hunger and for the target, established by the 1996 World Food Summit (WFS), of halving their absolute number.

Defining hunger as lack of access to the minimum daily energy intake required for a healthy life, the report concludes that:

At present, 5.5% of the population of LAC suffer from hunger, down from 14.7% in the early 1990s.

The number of LAC inhabitants suffering from hunger has dropped from 66.1 million in the early 1990s to 34.3 million at present (of whom almost 6.0 million are in Haiti).



Keys to success.

According to FAO, food availability exceeds the population's minimum energy requirements in all LAC countries and the region is a major food exporter. Beyond this basic condition, however, it attributes LAC's success in reducing hunger to three broad factors:

Sustained economic growth.

The report notes that, since 1990, GDP growth in LAC has averaged 3.0%, above a world average of 2.7%, with the most marked difference in 2000-10 (3.3% versus a world average of 2.8%). Combined with improvements in macroeconomic management, this permitted an increase in government social spending which, according to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), rose from 13.8% of GDP in 1990-91 to 19.1% in 2012-13 -- something that may be put at risk by lower commodity prices and slowing growth (see LATIN AMERICA: Austerity may risk poverty progress - February 4, 2015).

Political stability .

In its global report, the FAO notes that most of the 72 developing countries around the world (including 17 in LAC) that met the MDG hunger target enjoyed the stable political conditions that are crucial for the continuity of social policies to combat poverty and hunger.

Change of approach .

Another key factor in LAC's success, according to the FAO, was a gradual switch from policies that addressed the different dimensions of food security -- access, availability, stability and utilisation -- separately to a more integrated approach. The examples it cites include Brazil's Zero Hunger and Brazil without Poverty programmes (see BRAZIL: Anti-poverty plan fails to tackle causes - June 15, 2011).

Intra-regional differences.

Out of the 17 LAC countries that have achieved the MDG target, eleven have also achieved the WFS target. However, progress has been very unevenly distributed across the region.

South America .

As a sub-regional average, South America has achieved both targets and, in five countries -- Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Venezuela -- the prevalence of hunger is now below 5%, putting them on a par with developed countries, although Argentine figures are disputed (see ARGENTINA: Wages and jobs complicate election outlook - June 12, 2015).

Hunger reduction shows a close correlation with the sub-region's GDP growth (and, therefore, commodity prices). Whereas the prevalence of hunger dropped by less than 4 percentage points in the 1990s (from 15.1% to 11.4%), the reduction between 2000 and 2010 reached over 6 percentage points, taking the sub-regional average to below 5%.

Mexico.

Along with Argentina, Chile, Cuba and Uruguay, Mexico has had a hunger prevalence rate of less than 5% since the early 2000s. The report attributes this partly to successful conditional cash transfer programmes as well as focused efforts to reduce rural poverty.

Central America .

Hunger in Central America has dropped from 10.7% of the population (12.6 million people) in 1990-92 to 6.6% (11.4 million) at present. However, the report notes that, since 2013, the reduction in absolute numbers has halted. There are, moreover, important differences within the sub-region, with prevalence rates ranging from less than 5.0% in Costa Rica to 16.6% in Nicaragua (although down from 54.4% in 1990-92, making it one of the LAC countries with the largest reduction in hunger).

Caribbean.

Progress has been slowest in the Caribbean and its current prevalence rate of 19.8% is well above the average for developing regions (12.9%). However, this largely reflects the problems of Haiti (see HAITI: Earthquake recovery remains slow five years on - February 3, 2015); some countries, including the Dominican Republic, have achieved the MDG target.

Indigenous vulnerability.

Food insecurity and malnutrition, like poverty, tend to be more prevalent among indigenous peoples than the non-indigenous population. In Peru, for example, 23% of indigenous under-5s were suffering from stunted growth in 2012 as compared to 11% of their non-indigenous peers while, in Guatemala, the figure reached 58% (in 2009).

Global comparisons.

The FAO estimates that 10.9% of the world's population (some 795 million people) currently suffers from hunger. This represents a drop from 18.6% (1,012 million) in 1990-92. However, progress has been uneven:

Rapid progress .

As well as Latin America, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and North Africa, which has a prevalence rate of less than 5%, all achieved the MDG target.

Moderate progress .

Like the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia and Oceania also reduced their prevalence rate but more slowly and overall failed to meet the MDG target.

Going backward.

In Western Asia, the prevalence of hunger has increased from 6.4% in 1990-92 to 8.4% while high population growth is reflected in a rise in the number of people suffering hunger from 8.2 million to 18.9 million. However, the situation within the region varies from countries such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where prevalence is below 5%, to countries (such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen) with very high levels of food insecurity that continue to rise due to conflicts.

CONCLUSION: Although the FAO report cites the region as "an example for the rest of the world", much of its progress in reducing hunger is the result of favourable external conditions in the form of a commodity price boom which was, however, also accompanied in many countries by improved macroeconomic management. Maintaining the latter in the face of slower economic growth and tighter fiscal resources will be crucial for continuity of the policies that have reduced both poverty and hunger.

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Details

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