

# THE STRUGGLE FOR A PRO- POOR FOOD POLICY IN GUATEMALA

*This case study explores the reasons underlying endemic hunger and malnutrition in Guatemala. It shows how the actions of powerful elites continue to undermine the struggle for policies that will support small-scale farmers, women, and indigenous peoples in their fight for food justice.*

## INTRODUCTION

The 2008 food price crisis had a devastating impact on poor Guatemalans. This was followed by widespread crop failure and a food emergency in 2009, affecting an estimated 2.5 million people (de Schutter 2010). With a heavy reliance on imported staple grains and the most productive lands allocated to export crops, Guatemala's food system is broken.

This case study will explore the reasons for apparent lack of progress in the fight against poverty, malnutrition, and hunger in Guatemala. This can only be understood by considering the forces and factors that shape the government's policy response to these problems.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Poor households in Guatemala allocate close to 70 per cent of their spending on food. This means that even small food price increases place severe pressure on household finances.

The food price crisis of 2008 raised the price of yellow maize, one of Guatemala's staple crops, by 34 per cent (Oxfam International 2008). Oxfam estimated that the 2008 crisis pushed an additional 450,000 Guatemalans into poverty (Guimaraes 2008). Given that even before the crisis, 50 per cent of all children under five in Guatemala were malnourished, rising to 70 per cent among indigenous children (United Nations Human Rights Council 2010), we see that hunger in Guatemala is endemic.

Teodoro Juracan, a representative of small-scale producers from the community of San Luis Tolimán, located in the south-western part of Guatemala, describes the impact of the food price crisis on his family and on his community: *'What we gain by selling our products is barely enough to sustain our homes. First we give up buying new clothes, then we stop buying medicines, and do everything to keep money to buy food. Some families even need to take a decision on what child they will keep in school, since they cannot afford the costs of keeping all of them studying. Times are hard for us.'* (Guimaraes 2008)

In Guatemala, less than 8 per cent of agricultural producers hold almost 80 per cent of land. A tiny elite profits from selling cash crops for export and local consumption. This concentration is compounded by years of underinvestment in the small-scale farming sector, the dismantling over previous years of many of the institutions set up to support agricultural development, and the historical and ongoing forced relocation of many indigenous Guatemalans to marginal and unproductive lands.

While the best lands are reserved for plantations producing sugar-cane, coffee, bananas, pineapples, and – increasingly – biofuels for export, small-scale Guatemalan farmers remain highly vulnerable to the impacts of shocks on their production, as evidenced by the 2009 crop failures which affected hundreds of thousands of farmers.

The result is a reduction in agricultural growth, and a growing reliance on imported staples from the USA. According to Aída Pesquera, Oxfam Country Director in Guatemala, 'The country is producing less and less corn and beans each year. [The government] is not pushing for spending that will specifically benefit small farmers. ... They need to invest in producing food; otherwise, when there is a drought or a flood, it becomes a dramatic crisis.' (Oxfam International

2010). The hard winter in 2010 generated a loss of 70.000 hectares of crops, meaning that the food reserves held by communities ran out sooner than usual. As a consequence of this and of the food price rises, a nutritional alert was declared by the government in April 2011: 5,000 children are suffering acute malnutrition and 10,000 more are at risk of suffering it due to a lack of minimum nutritional elements in their diet. In total more than 800,000 Guatemalans suffer acute malnutrition (Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos 2011).

For poor farmers, the response to agricultural crisis is temporary migration to find work on coffee and sugar plantations. Sometimes entire families migrate for work, sometimes to neighbouring countries.

## The policy response to the food crisis in Guatemala

*The Special Rapporteur was impressed by the degree of commitment and the range of efforts deployed by the Government to improve the situation of food security in the country. He is also fully aware of the difficult circumstances Guatemala is facing and of the role of international assistance and cooperation in this regard. He is concerned, however, that too little is done to remove the structural obstacles to the full realization of the right to food, including for indigenous people, and to put an end to the very high levels of child malnutrition that remain in the country.*

Olivier de Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, following his mission to Guatemala in January 2010 (de Schutter 2010)

The current government came into office in 2008, coinciding with the international food price crisis. In response to the crisis, it attempted to revive an existing piece of legislation requiring land owners of a certain size to allocate 10 per cent of their arable land to planting staple grains. Just three days after announcing the proposal, the president had to state publicly that he would no longer be implementing it, after having received strong criticism from the private sector lobby.

Government and civil society groups then turned to a promising new Integrated Rural Development law to promote food production and give small producers a better deal in supply chains. But elites used their access to media and policymakers to paralyse the legislative process, and the proposed law was dropped.

Although Guatemala has a well established legal and institutional framework with regards to the protection of the right to food, approaches to poverty and hunger in plans made by successive governments have typically been short-term and limited in scope. Food policies have had limited range, their performance has been fragmented, they have been too narrow in their social or geographical focus, under-resourced, and vulnerable to corruption and the vagaries of political change.

### Elite interests and policy formation

The rural growth model has been dictated by agricultural and financial business elites and typically excludes the interests of small farmers, women and indigenous populations. It is a development model based on the export of raw materials, and on the concentration of land, productive resources, and profits in the hands of a few companies. This is a primarily extractive vision of

development for Guatemala, based on competing in international markets with cheap labour, tourism, and the exploitation of natural assets through monoculture farming and mining.

This model of rural growth has governed all the policies and programmes driven by every recent government. No Guatemalan government has proposed an agenda to combat hunger and support small-scale agriculture that represents genuine strategic change.

## Looking forward: what next for food justice in Guatemala?

The current government recognises that poverty and hunger in Guatemala are deep-rooted structural problems, but it has made limited progress towards eliminating them.

Prioritizing policies against the structural causes of poverty in Guatemala would need to involve a review of the current highly-concentrated pattern of land ownership, and fiscal reform in order to generate higher state revenues. Measures such as these would be considered as deeply threatening by landowning and business elites.

Moreover, to combat the causes of hunger and famine in Guatemala there must be a move towards:

- Strategic management of resources in favour of poor people;
- Better cooperation and coordination between state agencies;
- Greater efforts to engage with the public and consumers; and
- Greater coordination with international efforts.

Civil society organisations are active in the promotion of a vision of rural development that prioritises rural and indigenous populations, and which tries to address the structural causes of hunger. A new initiative under the current government, *La Iniciativa de Ley de Desarrollo Rural Integral* (Initiative for Integrated Rural Development Law), is the result of the sustained pressure from civil society for action on these issues.

The proposed Initiative reflects the demands of rural, indigenous, and environmental organisations and contains specific policies to address the structural causes of hunger and famine. The Initiative has been under discussion in Congress until 2010, but the private sector lobby has pushed for it to be blocked and a debate for its approval is still pending in Congress.

Despite the barriers, civil society organizations will continue their campaign called '*Vamos al Grano*' in alliance with the GROW campaign to change the legal and policy framework and to move towards effective and sustainable strategies in the fight against hunger and poverty in Guatemala.

### At a glance: food insecurity in Guatemala

Guatemalans pushed into poverty during the 2008 food price crisis: **450,000**

Guatemalans affected by the 2009 food emergency: **2.5 million**

Guatemalans suffering acute malnutrition in 2011: **808,137<sup>1</sup>**

Number of Guatemalan children under 5 who suffer chronic malnutrition: **49.3 per cent**

Proportion of indigenous Guatemalan children who are malnourished: **70 per cent**  
Land owned by only **eight per cent** of agricultural producers: **80 per cent**  
Proportion of their income that the poorest Guatemalans spend on food: **70 per cent**  
*Source: Oxfam International 2010*

## NOTES

1. Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos - Human Rights Attorney Office (2011) cited in [http://www.prensalibre.com/noticias/politica/alerta-emergencia-nutricional-recursos\\_0\\_464953719.html](http://www.prensalibre.com/noticias/politica/alerta-emergencia-nutricional-recursos_0_464953719.html) (last accessed 27 May 2011)

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