Lessons from Brazil for the National Food Plan and Global Food Security

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Key Points

- Brazil’s Belo Horizonte Food Security Programme has important lessons for Australia’s National Food Plan
- Brazil developed a National Food and Nutritional Security Policy (PNSAN) in 2010.
- The Brazilian programme has reduced the number of those on poor diets, the number of child deaths and the extent of malnutrition.
- Educating the public about food security, good nutrition and making the objectives of programs transparent, is essential for the initiatives to be successful.

Analysis

Nearly two decades ago the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte declared food to be a citizenship right and made it the duty of the city to facilitate access to food for all its citizens. Multiple programs were implemented to support local farmers, link producers directly with consumers and to provide food for those who could not afford it. Since then, the Belo Horizonte Food Security Programme has had a significant influence on the development of Brazil’s National Food and Nutritional Security Programme. The Programme demonstrates some useful lessons about the role the state can play in social justice, poverty reduction and ensuring food security for its citizens. These lessons are especially important for Australia now, as the development of an Australian National Food Plan is currently in progress.

Belo Horizonte is the fourth largest city in Brazil (following Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador) with a population of 2.5 million and an area of 330 square kilometers. The city contains a large number of shanty towns or Favelas, populated by low income or unemployed residents, predominantly young women. Prior to the changes in food security policy, around 11 per cent of the city’s population lived in absolute poverty and nearly 20 per cent of its children were underfed. In 1993, the newly elected mayor of Belo Horizonte,
Patrus Ananias, declared food to be a right of citizenship and it became the duty of the city government to make nutritional, quality food accessible and affordable for all of its citizens. Initially, a city agency was created to assist in developing a new food system. It consisted of a council of 20 citizens, business, labour, and church representatives. Central to all programs are the notions that food is a human right rather than a commodity and people are citizens rather than simply consumers.

The Belo Horizonte Food Security Program has evolved over the 19 years since its initiation, with its highly participatory nature encouraging citizen involvement. Annual evaluations have allowed for any necessary alterations to be made to its various programmes, to improve their effectiveness. From the beginning, supply and regulation of food markets were altered with great positive effect. Farmers’ markets have been expanded in the city, to sell directly to urban residents rather than to retailers. In this way, more of the profits reach the farmers to support their business, while the urban population has access to fresh, good quality food.

A further innovation toward ensuring access to quality food at a lower cost for the poor was the option for farmers to bid for the right to use high-traffic areas of city land to sell their produce, under two conditions. First, these markets must sell certain items at a state-set price, 20-50 per cent below market price; so that around 20 of the basic staple foods are made more affordable. The second is that on weekends, the farmers must bring their produce to poor neighborhoods outside of the city centre. As well as facilitating lower food costs by supporting local farmers, the program reduces poverty and gives farmers a more profitable role in the market. Rural stability increases as farmers are able to sustain their lifestyle and do not need to migrate to overpopulated urban centres to seek employment. Supporting local production also enhances the city’s food security, making it less susceptible to fluctuating world market prices.

Another widely influential programme involves the “People’s Restaurants” (Restaurante Popular). They serve thousands of residents daily, with meals made from locally produced foods and costing less than 50c. To avoid social stigma, poverty is not a prerequisite to eat in these venues, so although the majority of the diners are poor, people from any socioeconomic background are welcome.

Further programs run by the city include education on nutritional food consumption and food programs offering free meals (predominantly made from local produce) to school children, daycare centers, health clinics, nursing homes and other charitable institutions. In 2004, food banks were established to reduce food wastage. For these, fresh produce donations are collected from markets, cleaned and vacuum frozen, and then distributed to charitable organisations. The benefits of this strategy are significant. In 2007 alone, 108 institutions received 600 tonnes of food. The city also compiles a weekly price-list of 45 basic household items surveyed in supermarkets; it posts these publicly to increase public awareness of the lowest prices and encourage competition between larger food retailers.

Urban agricultural projects began in 1995, with the Program of Urban Agriculture and Food Security. Community participation and education in food production has been supported through school and community gardens grown, within the city on vacant lots transformed
for public use (RUAF Foundation: Resource Centers on Urban Agriculture and Food Security Latin America, November 2010). This programme has also been widely successful. By late 2008, 44 community and 60 school gardens had been developed, the city had distributed over 1,600 seedlings for fruit trees and also provided workshops for gardening in urban spaces (World Future Council Future Policy Award, 2009).

The estimated annual cost of the entire Belo Horizonte Food Security Program, which has grown to benefit 40 per cent of the city’s population, is around $10 million annually, equating to less than 2 per cent of the city budget (World Future Council Future Policy Award, 2009). The programme received international recognition in 2009 when it was awarded the Future Policy Award 2009: Solutions for the Food Crisis, awarded by the World Future Council. The Belo Horizonte Program was named “the world’s most comprehensive policy that tackles hunger immediately and secures a healthy food supply for the future” (World Future Council Future Policy Award, 2009). Key concepts recognised by the award as essential elements of the programme’s success include:

- Integrating logistics and supply chains for the entire food system.
- Tying local producers directly to consumers, to reduce prices and increase food sovereignty.
- Using government purchases to stimulate local, diversified agricultural production and job creation.
- Educating the population about food security and good nutrition.
- Regulating markets on selected produce to guarantee the right to healthy, high quality food to all of its citizens.

The successful implementation of these concepts was made possible through legislative changes. These changes encouraged and facilitated public participation, transparent communication and education for the public on the strategies of the programme, multiple public-private partnerships and regular reassessment of all participating programmes for adaptation and improvement. Statistics from 2006 demonstrate the great success since the programme’s initiation in 1993:

- 60 % fewer children are dying, compared to 10 years before
- 25 % fewer people live in poverty
- 75 % fewer children under 5 are hospitalised for malnutrition
- 40 % of the city’s population benefit directly from the programme
- 40 % of people in Belo Horizonte report frequent intake of fruit and vegetables; the national average is just 32 %
- 2 million farmers have access to credit, 700,000 for the first time in their lives (World Future Council Future Policy Award, 2009).

The Belo Horizonte Program was used as a model for the national Zero Hunger (Fome Zero) program in 2003, led by President Lula da Silva, with Patrus Ananias acting as a lead advisor. The Federal Government of Brazil adopted a National Food and Nutritional Security Program in 2006, incorporating food rights into the National Law.
“Food and nutritional security consists in the realization of the human right to regular and permanent access to good quality food, in sufficient quantity, without compromising the fulfilment of other basic needs, having as its basis healthy nutritional habits that respect cultural diversity and that are environmentally, culturally, economically and socially sustainable” (Brazilian National Law No.11.346, 15th September 2006, Article 3).

A further legal achievement toward national recognition of the citizens’ right to food was a constitutional amendment in February 2010, reinforcing food as a social right in Brazil and echoing the declaration made by Patrus Ananias in Belo Horizonte, nearly 20 years earlier.

These recent accomplishments in improving food security in Brazil have been achieved through a long process of government interventions and social mobilisation. This began in the 1950s, when programs for school meals and dining halls for workers were established and continued in the 1970s, with the beginning of food supplement programs. The importance of food and nutrition policies grew in Brazil during the 1980s, with several important events including the presentation of a ‘Food Security - Proposal for a Policy to Fight Hunger’ by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1985 and the first National Food and Nutrition Conference in 1986.

The National Plan to Combat Hunger and Poverty was established in 1993, based on information provided by Brazil’s Institute of Applied Economic Research, which developed a ‘hunger map’ of Brazil, revealing that, at the time, more than 20 per cent of the country’s population was experiencing hunger. The National Food and Nutritional Security Council (CONSEA) was created as part of this plan; it was discontinued in 1995, however, and only re-established in 2003 by President Lula da Silva. The first National Conference on Food Security was held in 1994 and, in 1998, a national network, the Brazilian Forum on Food and Nutritional Security, was established to connect various social organisations, government agents and researchers. These are just some of the multiple initiatives that have taken place in the development of the current food policies in Brazil (International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth Country Study: The Food Security Policy Context in Brazil, 2011).

Following the implementation of Fome Zero, Brazil developed a National Food and Nutritional Security Policy (PNSAN), which was established in 2010. This policy includes five key aspects and has incorporated existing food security initiatives with newly established programs. The first of these aspects is the rights-based approach to food security, now recognised in Brazil’s constitution. The second aspect is an emphasis on food production, with the policy supporting all food producers, but particularly small and medium-sized producers. Land reforms, credit for family farmers, technical assistance and facilitating market access are all undertaken under the policy. Thirdly, supporting access to food is recognised as critical, since Brazil produces sufficient food to support its population and maintain food exports; often limited access, rather than insufficient supply, is what creates food insecurity. To work towards this goal, the government has implemented programs such as: Bolsa Familia, a conditional cash-transfer program for poor families so they can afford food; a national school feeding program; and public utilities for food security, such as food banks, low-price restaurants and community kitchens. Brazil’s PNSAN also takes a multi-stakeholder approach to food and nutritional security, promoting coordination between all
aspects of the food industry and encouraging participation from social sectors, through representative avenues such as the National Food and Nutritional Security Council. Finally, the policy aims to link the food security framework with other related government frameworks, namely the health and labour sectors (International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth Country Study: The Food Security Policy Context in Brazil, 2011).

The implementation of a comprehensive National Food and Nutritional Security Policy for Brazil and the continuing success of the Belo Horizonte Food Security Program, are encouraging examples amid growing concerns for future global food stability. How applicable these initiatives could be elsewhere would depend on each nation’s agricultural, environmental and economic resources; the ability and willingness of the state to enact necessary changes to legislation; and the enthusiasm of citizens to participate.

The Australian Government released the green paper for the National Food Plan for Australia in July 2012. It was recently discussed in a Future Directions International publication: Australia’s National Food Plan – A Plan for the People or a Plan for Big Business?

The first of two central criticisms of Australia’s National Food Plan is that it focuses disproportionately on increasing production to achieve food security, without adequately addressing the underlying food insecurity issues that limit people’s access to food. The second criticism is that it is constructed to support large commercial businesses, rather than benefit the Australian public.

On these issues, developments in Australia’s National Food Plan could take into consideration some of the initiatives supported through Brazil’s National Food and Nutritional Security Policy. That policy aims to address the various factors that can limit access to food and to support small farming businesses, as well as the large-scale agricultural operations.

Many aspects of Brazil’s policy would not be applicable in the Australian context, or in other nations. Some useful insights, however, can be taken from their national food policy, which would be useful for Australia to consider as it works to refine its own National Food Plan. Declaring food to be a human right and enacting constitutional change is an incredible achievement toward ensuring food stability, since it holds the state responsible to secure this right for the citizens. Facilitating participation from the public and concerned stakeholders in the development and frequent re-evaluation of the programmes, allows them to be improved and increases accountability. Stimulating local production and linking producers more directly to consumers, increases farmers’ profits, while still reducing food prices and decreasing the resources used in transport. Finally, educating the public about food security, good nutrition and making the objectives of programmes transparent, is essential to the success of those initiatives.

For more information, see: The City That Ended Hunger by Frances Moore Lappé; Celebrating the Belo Horizonte Food Security Program, Future Policy Award 2009; and The Food Security Policy Context in Brazil, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth Country Study 2011.

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