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## Brazil mobilizes for a war to save lives



Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil.

In January, the new Brazilian President, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, announced his top priority with details of his Zero Hunger initiative. In his own words: “We need to defeat hunger, poverty and social exclusion. Our war objective is not to kill anyone but to save lives.”

So far the response both of Brazilians and of representatives of major national and international organizations has been mainly enthusiastic. A united mission of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) visited Brazil last December to discuss the project and define modes of collaboration. The President of the IDB, Enrique Iglesias, had pledged, last November, in Washington, a contribution of about US\$ 6 billion for social programmes, in addition to the US\$ 5.8 billion in low-interest loans approved earlier.

“The IDB has every interest in supporting the projects of Lula’s Government to reduce poverty and promote human development in Brazil,” said Waldemar Wirsing, who represents the IDB mission here.”

The project is aimed in particular at poor populations in the south, the



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A garbage dump outside Rio, where families can sometimes make a dollar a day.

About 14% of the population of Rio de Janeiro — nearly two million people — live in extreme poverty. A group of 70 scavengers living on the 12 truckloads of garbage dumped in the Embankment of Bongaba in the outer suburbs exemplifies their situation. One of them is Vilméia Gomes, 35 years old, a mother of five children, only two of whom survive. The others died of complications from malnutrition. Vilméia has been working there since 1996.

"Some days, I can raise about a dollar from sorting garbage and reselling cans, plastic bottles and glass," she says. "When I don't find anything to sell, I get food out of the garbage. It's a dangerous way to live but I keep dreaming that one day I'll somehow be able to leave and live somewhere clean."

Claudia Jurberg, *Rio de Janeiro*

north and the north-east of the country. In parts of the north and north-east, up to 50% of the population lives in poverty. The proposals outlined in the project will benefit 9.3 million families or 44 million Brazilians out of a total of 170 million.

The plan includes short-term and long-term strategies for food security, estimating the costs, target populations and sources of funding. Its 20 objectives include measures in the areas of land reform, social security, food stocks for homeless people, programmes to combat maternal and child malnutrition, expansion of the popular restaurants where meals cost a symbolic US 30 cents, and distribution of meal tickets.

José Graziano da Silva, the project's coordinator and Minister for Food Security says: "The intention is for the Zero Hunger initiatives to have a multiplier effect on local production. It is not one of those projects which invite people to sit and wait for help. We want to transform the fight against poverty into a force for productive economic engagement and social inclusion." For this first year, da Silva says,

the plan is to invest about US\$ 2 billion in implementing these strategies.

The Centre of Social Politics of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation has drawn up a "Map of the End of Hunger in Brazil" to focus the project's activities. It summarizes living conditions from town to town, locating the estimated 50 million people, or 29% of the total population, who are living in poverty. Poverty is defined as living in a situation of food insecurity, which means having no assurance that one will obtain the average of 2288 kilocalories (9.6 megajoules) a day the body needs, according to Marcelo Néri, the head of the Centre.

This means Brazil has a high prevalence of malnutrition. While the average proportion of undernourished children is estimated to be about 10% for the country as a whole, in slums and other poor areas in the interior of north-eastern Brazil it is between 40% and 60%. Malnutrition goes with social exclusion, poverty, unhealthy living conditions, lack of access to health services, and broken families. In Brazil this is also seen in low height-for-age, caused by chronic malnutrition of long duration.

Among the health problems caused or made more severe by malnutrition are anaemia, diarrhoeal diseases, respiratory infections, parasitic diseases, and vitamin deficiencies. Gisela Soly-mos, director of projects at the Centre of Nutritional Recovery of São Paulo, points out that lack of appropriate treatment can also lead in adulthood to chronic degenerative diseases such as obesity, diabetes and hypertension, which are risk factors for cardiovascular diseases.

The Ministry of Health rates malnutrition a major public health problem which has been getting worse from year to year. Deaths from malnutrition rose from 6872 in 2000 to 7195 in 2001. Hospitalizations rose from 64 390 in 2000 to 67 534 in 2001, and by September 2002 there had been over 55 000 hospitalizations for malnutrition, with a mortality rate of 11%. The cost of hospitalizing and treating those patients was over US\$ 4 million, resources that would have been far better spent on reducing hunger.

The Zero Hunger project has critics, however, especially in relation to the meal tickets. The main objection is that this and several of the other measures will foster dependence. Even more fundamental to a human being than the need for food, they say, is the need for self-fulfilment. Any social programme that fails to take this into account will fail. Unawareness of this is the greatest cause of failure in anti-poverty initiatives: hungry families are excluded from the knowledge and opportunities available to others, and food hand-outs reinforce their exclusion, because it reinforces their dependence. In the critics' view, a programme to combat malnutrition must promote responsibility and autonomy if it is to have any hope of success.

The idea, though, according to da Silva, is that the campaign will involve everyone in the struggle for both a livelihood and autonomy. ■