

DIGITAL DIGEST



THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN BRAZIL, AND WHY POLITICS MATTERⁱ

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After many years of civil society campaigning, the human right to adequate food was recognised in 2010, when it was added to the Brazilian Constitution as an amendment. In the last two decades, and until recently, food and nutritional security (FNS) was a matter of national concern in Brazil, and with good reason.

In 1994, a Hunger Map was commissioned by the government as a result of civil society campaigning on hunger. It identified 31.7 million people – 21.9 per cent of the population – living below the poverty line. A number of food security initiatives were convened in subsequent years. In 2003, the 'Zero Hunger' national food security policy placed the fight against hunger at the centre of the political agenda, mainstreaming it into wider social and economic policies across governmentⁱ. These policies were established to tackle the root causes of hunger and malnutrition, poverty and inequality, by expanding social protection programmes such as the 'Bolsa Família' conditional cash transfer programme, school meals, family farming, increasing people's access to healthcare through the national health system, and access to water, sanitation and housing.ⁱⁱ These policies and programmes were underpinned by a strong cross-sectoral approach and participatory governance structure, designed to ensure coordination mechanisms were in place which enabled their functioning at the national, state, and municipal levels.

Citizen participation

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Until January 2019, Brazil had a National Council for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA); an advisory body linked directly to the President of the Republic. Two-thirds of its members were from civil society, representing different social, cultural, and ethnic groups in Brazil, and one-third were government representatives.

The work of CONSEA was informed by an extensive network of CONSEAs at the state and municipal level (these councils survived the government's dismantling of the federal-level council.) This system was the result of dialogue between civil society and government, and designed to reflect different experiences of FNS in policy-making.ⁱⁱⁱ

Results

Between 1990 and 2015, Brazil more than halved the number of citizens who suffered from hunger: from 14.8 per cent in 1990–92 (22.6 million people) to less than 5 per cent in 2014–16, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). This was a major achievement, which depended on government leadership and funding, cross-party political support from Congress (parliament) for social policies which were underpinned by legal and institutional frameworks, as well as participatory processes.^{iv}

The Brazilian experience of creating legislation, policies and programmes to support citizens' right to food holds valuable lessons for other countries interested in tackling hunger and food insecurity. Notwithstanding its successes, there are still a number of challenges to ensuring the human right to food (RTF) in Brazil. Having legislation on the RTF is important, but not enough by itself. It is worth noting that much of what Brazil achieved in terms of reducing hunger and malnutrition was done *before* the legislation was passed. **Political will is key – without it, there is no funding, and without funding, the right to food is little more than another law which is not implemented.**

Effects of Austerity: Money Matters

In 2016, the government passed a controversial Constitutional Amendment (CE95, also known as PEC55), which froze public spending until 2037 at the level of the 2016 federal budget, corrected only for inflation. This means that there will be less and less of the national budget available for health, education and social programmes, at the same time as the population grows and ages. This excessively harsh austerity policy will hit the poorest and more vulnerable in society the hardest, compromising human rights, including the right to food. The UN Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty

and Human Rights, Philip Alston said that the PEC55 was socially regressive and would put “an entire generation at risk of social protection standards well below those currently in place”.^v

There are already reports that poverty is on the rise again, due to the economic crisis and austerity policies, which has implications for hunger and malnutrition, as well as obesity and overweight, as

people have less money in their pockets, and healthy nutritious foods become more expensive.^{vi}

This unfortunately demonstrates that having the Constitutional RTF is no barrier to the backsliding of a government’s responsibilities towards citizens.^{vii}

People power and the Right to Food

Legislating for the RTF showed Brazilians that FNS public policies were not about social *assistance* or *benefits*, but about citizens’ fundamental, *human right* to adequate, healthy, nutritionally complete and culturally suitable food. The role of social movements in campaigning for RTF over 20 years shows that **people power matters**.

Learning from Brazil

Whilst Brazil still has much to do in addressing poverty and inequality, its experience of tackling hunger and food insecurity since the late 1990s offers some useful lessons.

- **Political will and cross-party support:** without political will, nothing is possible. Cross-party support for FNS is key, and is part of international human rights laws.^{viii}
- **Legislating for a funding mechanism to supports FNS:** Institutionalising policies is not enough; public spending for FNS/RTF policies must be ring-fenced in legislation.
- **Money matters:** social investment is needed alongside economic and fiscal reforms.
- **Data matters:** understanding where, when and why people are hungry
- **Participatory mechanisms:** having formal channels for citizen participation in shaping policies and programmes
- **People power:** civil society and social movements played a vital role in getting government to take notice of hunger and food insecurity, as well as in passing the RTF.
- **Food in all policies:** FNS is not just about food. Having a multisectoral approach, cross-ministry coordination mechanisms and strong local-national links is key.

ⁱ FAO (2019) State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019 (SOFI). Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations

ⁱⁱ Constantine, Jennifer and Santarelli, Mariana (2017b) 'Brazil's policies to guarantee food rights.' *International Learning Series – Brief 5*. July 2017. Brighton: IDS and London: Food Foundation

ⁱⁱⁱ "The extinction of the National CONSEA and its impact on the state and municipal councils" (*A Extinção do Consea Nacional e seu impacto nos conselhos estaduais e municipais*), by Jean Pierre T. Câmara and Éldo Bonomo, 21st January, 2019, *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil*.

^{iv} Constantine, Jennifer. and Santarelli, Mariana (2017a) 'Brazil's Food and Nutritional Governance Plan.' *International Learning Series – Brief 4*. July 2017. Brighton: IDS and London: Food Foundation

^v OHCHR (2016) "Brazil 20-year public expenditure cap will breach human rights, UN expert warns". 9 December 2016, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

^{vi} Ibid. Câmara and Bonomo 2019; FAO SOFI 2019

^{vii} Santarelli, Mariana; Burity, Valéria et al. (2019) Informe Dhana 2019: autoritarismo, negação de direitos e fome. Brasília: FIAN Brasil

Santarelli, Mariana; Burity, Valéria et al. (2017) Da democratização ao golpe: avanços e retrocessos na garantia do direito humano à alimentação e à nutrição adequadas no Brasil. Brasília: FIAN Brasil

^{viii} See Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights