

RIO+20 BRAZIL CASE STUDY

Behind Brazil's amazing success against hunger and poverty, questions remain...

Brazil has been astonishingly successful in tackling poverty and hunger in its own back-yard. In just nine years it has slashed child malnutrition by 61% and rural poverty by 15% largely by supporting local farmers and locally-sourced consumption. At the same time, it has been equally successful in selling more and more of its food too. Brazil is on course to become the world's biggest food exporter.

Brazil seems to have found the 21st century's Holy Grail of how to feed a globalised world. Last year, it set up a 'Centre of Excellence against Hunger' in order to share the lessons of its "Hunger Zero" program with other developing countries. Brazil has also become an international reference point for food security, including at the World Trade Organization and the UN food agencies for example. Everyone will be listening to Brazil at Rio.

But behind Brazil's incredible statistics and undeniable success, a nagging question remains as yet unanswered. In reality Brazil is precariously balanced between embracing both "big" and "small" agriculture. The former is helping to drive the country's economic growth but it is eating up vast amounts of natural resources in the process, potentially hurting the same small-holder farmers that the government has so successfully put at the heart of its anti-poverty and anti-hunger policies.

Brazil's ability to marry these two models and mitigate clashes, especially around environmental and resource sustainability, is perhaps the most important lesson in feeding tomorrow's world. It might be that Brazil – and some say *only* Brazil – can make this contradiction work, given its sheer arable size and abundance of resources, alongside a feisty and empowered civil society that can protect its most progressive policies.

But even Brazil has not made this work yet. Its achievements as both a major global food exporter and local food provider are coming at a huge environmental and social cost.

Small-holder farmers account for around 70% of Brazil's internal food market. They also play a key economic role via their farming cooperatives and in Brazil's "solidarity economy" that attempts to place value on people over capital. The Brazilian government deliberately set out to bolster these small-holder farmers in order to tackle its poverty and hunger problems. The "Hunger Zero" program that began in 2003 delivered an eight-fold increase in credit for small farmers. Along with other social policies like an increased minimum wage and the 'Bolsa Família' cash support from government to poor families, "Hunger Zero" has helped lift 28m people out of poverty in a country of 192m, cut child malnutrition and boost the average family farm income by 33% against an average overall rise of just 13%.

The "Hunger Zero" program traces its beginnings back to 1988 when Brazil adopted a new Constitution based on human rights. As the result of intense joint efforts between civil society and the government, in 2010 the Constitution was amended to include the right to food and nutritional security. An entire regulatory framework, including social participation and control, kicked in to join up all the government structures and other groups working on food security. The state became the catalyst for Brazil's food production, consumption and distribution.

The government began to strengthen its public food policies and design new ones. For instance, the National School Food Program demanded that schools and later kindergartens source 30% of their food from family farmers. The Program of Food Acquisition invested R\$3.5 billion

(\$1.76b) to buy food from 160,000 small farmers; 14 million people have benefited from this program alone each year.

One of the most important reasons that “Hunger Zero” was successful was that it genuinely encouraged all groups to help design and implement its policies. Social movements, family farmers’ and women’s organizations all participated in talks on policies and practices and strategic development. They helped to monitor and become accountable themselves in mechanisms such as the National Council of Food and Nutritional Security, CONSEA, which is made up by one-third governmental officials and two-thirds civil society members.

Nevertheless, the “Hunger Zero” program continues to sit in contradiction to Brazil’s other agricultural model of massive agro-exportation that is about to make the country the world’s largest food commodities exporter. This industry is driven by an ultra-competitive private agribusiness sector dominated by huge national and transnational companies. Their use of new technologies and natural resources is particularly intensive, as is the power of their political lobby. Brazil invests heavily in agricultural research. It is now the second world’s biggest producer of soy and a leader in bio-fuels, especially in the production of ethanol from sugar cane.

While this agribusiness sector is central to Brazil’s economic growth (it accounted for 22% of Brazil’s GDP in 2011) there are serious questions about its social impact and environmental sustainability and resilience. Overwhelming evidence exists that the sector is exploiting Brazil’s huge reservoir of natural resources in unsustainable and irresponsible ways. Brazil’s massive cattle sector in particular is very inefficient. The country has become a major global meat exporter in large part because it has been able to expand its pastoral frontier ever deeper into the Amazon rain-forest. The Amazon and indigenous lands and livelihoods are today under intolerable threat. Politically powerful, the agribusiness sector exerts enormous pressure on the government and its institutional and budgetary policy. For example, they managed to influence the Congress recently to approve a new Forest Code which diminishes the amount of native vegetation that has to be preserved and also forgives environmental crimes up to 2008¹.

Brazil’s food production models are hotly disputed. As a result, so is the country’s entire development model. Brazil is facing more and more internal territorial disputes, at the cost of small farmers’ lives, related to food, land, water, climate and energy. Some lobby groups are pressuring for market-based solutions, others are calling instead for more state engagement and regulation. The agribusiness sector and small farmers groups compete with each other – unequally – for government program and budgets. This contradiction is also playing out through Brazil’s growing influence in the region and, increasingly, also into Africa.

While Brazil could benefit economically by global food price rises, on the other hand there are still people in Brazil who are food insecure and would be hurt by price hikes. According to the 2009 National Household Sample Survey, of the 58.6 million households in Brazil, 30.2% or 17.7 million of them still face some degree of food insecurity, with more of those at-risk households in rural than in urban areas, and women-headed households (14.2%) more at risk than those headed by men (10.2%). This is an improvement from 2004.

In addition, there is always a heavier burden placed on women. Women produce and provide more food yet there is limited debate around their role in rural food production or in providing food in big cities. However, Brazil’s social services do recognise women’s roles in ensuring food and shelter and in the *Bolsa Familia* (Family Grant) program, for example, women receive the allowance and transfers of cash to poor households are made on condition that the children attend school and keep up-to-date on vaccinations and health checks.

¹ Several of proposed articles were vetoed by President Dilma Rouseff and the issue is unlikely to resolved before Rio+20.



Brazil faces many challenges. The government does not imagine that it has a single ideal model of agriculture that both provides food-for-all and export-led economic growth in a perfectly sustainable way. But it does now have sufficiently well-developed experiences that policy-makers and producers and companies and consumers can learn from. For poor countries that are struggling to feed their people, Brazil has become a reference point for food security policies. On Brazil's part, this brings both internal and international responsibilities. The UN Committee on World Food Security reform was influenced by the Brazilian experience, especially regarding civil society participation. In January 2012 Brazil's José Graziano da Silva who was directly engaged in the "Hunger Zero" program became director general of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Oxfam's GROW campaign is contributing to proposals to help correct the imbalances that remain evident in the equity and sustainability of Brazil's dual food model. Brazil has undeniable positive experiences to highlight and replicate but it also demonstrates an aggressive and socially and environmentally unsustainable expansion by agribusiness and an unhealthy political influence by that sector too. This must be resisted. Brazilian civil society and social movements can still see more improvements, incentives and investments that can be scaled up for a socially and ecologically sustainable food production and consumption model in Brazil ... and elsewhere.

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For more information contact.....

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