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Global battle against hunger may have a new hero

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When Altaiza Silva lost her job cleaning houses two years ago, she thought she would have to pull her daughters out of school and put them to work, likely perpetuating the cycle of poverty that's claimed generations of her family.

Instead, their fall has been halted by Brazil's widely admired social safety net, which includes the world's biggest program giving money directly to poor households. With the help of that \$8-billion (U.S.) national effort, Silva gets \$65 a month. That is only about a fifth of what she earns in her new job as a hospital cleaner, but for desperately poor Brazilians, the extra cash from the Bolsa Familia (Family Grant) program often means the difference between starvation and survival.

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That same idea may now get a global tryout as world food prices spike, economies everywhere sputter and a horrific famine desolates East Africa.

The United Nations's Food and Agriculture Organization recently elected as its next leader Jose Graziano da Silva of Brazil, a former Brazilian food security minister and one of the creators of the nation's "Zero Hunger" social programs that include Bolsa Familia.

He has said eradicating hunger is his first priority for the FAO, which is the UN's biggest specialized agency, with a \$1-billion budget. While that is dwarfed by the budget of Brazil's Bolsa Familia alone, the FAO plans to spread the knowledge of how to create such programs to governments around the globe.

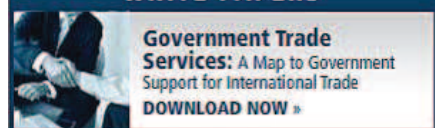
Mr. Graziano, 61, said last week in Brasilia that Zero Hunger should be a



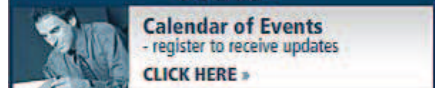
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model for other nations. Over the past eight years, the effort has helped lift 19 million Brazilians out of poverty. In Silva's case, the aid meant her daughters could stay in school.

The strength of Zero Hunger, Mr. Graziano said, is its "strong institutional framework," such as the recent inclusion of the right to food in Brazil's constitution. The government also works closely with civic groups.

"These two pillars are what make the Brazilian program so attractive for the world," Mr. Graziano said.

Brazil's effort also seeks to change behaviour by requiring parents keep their children in school or get medical checkups to receive aid.

The choice of Mr. Graziano heartened hunger and poverty activists, who have watched his programs reduce the inequality and extreme poverty that have long hampered growth in Brazil. The big question now is whether that success can translate to countries with different governments, cultures and problems.

The UN food organization estimated 925 million people worldwide suffered from undernourishment last year, a jump from less than 800 million in the mid-1990s. While 2010 marked the first drop in undernourishment rates in more than 15 years, experts fear rising food prices will soon push the figure higher.

The change in Brazil has been dramatic: According to a May government report, the number of Brazilians living in extreme poverty has fallen from 17 million in 2003 to nine million six years later. Such households had an average income of less than \$30 a month.

Studies by the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a Brazilian think tank, say Bolsa Familia itself accounts for about 20 per cent of the drop in poverty and inequality. In July, the program was used by more than a quarter of Brazil's 190 million people.

The percentage of undernourished people in Brazil was cut by nearly half to 6 per cent from the early 1990s to 2007, according to the FAO.

Mr. Graziano says that record shows he can successfully lead the FAO.

His critics, however, say Brazil's accomplishments came after he was ousted from the program's management.

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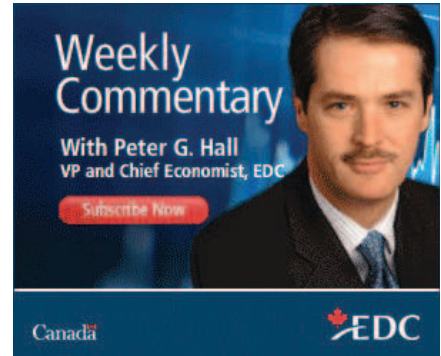
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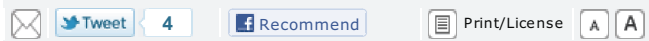
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