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AGRICULTURE

Activists hope ex-Brazil official can replicate success in hunger fight worldwide

Bradley Brooks, The Associated Press

SAO PAULO - 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 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 Bolsa Familia (Family Grant) program often means the difference between starvation and survival.

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 U.N.'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 U.N.'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.

Graziano, 61, said last week in Brasilia that Zero Hunger should be a 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, 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," 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 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 U.N. 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 19 million in 2003 to 9 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.

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.

Graziano helped create the Zero Hunger program but was removed from his post as the minister in charge of it after a year amid complaints about a lacklustre start. He remained an adviser to Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and in 2006 became Latin America's top representative at the FAO before being elected to replace Jacques Diouf of Senegal as head of the U.N. agency. He assumes the post Jan. 1.

"He was the first director of Zero Hunger, it's true, but he was a failure," said Alexandre Barros, a political analyst in Brasilia. "Zero Hunger was also a failure when it started and it was quickly ended and replaced."

Marcelo Neri, the Rio de Janeiro-based director of the social policy centre at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, said the program's first-year problems included an inability to help different social programs work together and growing public perceptions that the plan wouldn't work.

"Zero Hunger began in a naive manner. It started to improve, but not much, and was rapidly upgraded by Bolsa Familia by the Lula government," said Neri. "Zero Hunger just became a big slogan."

Regardless, activists hope Graziano will bring fresh energy and ideas to the FAO.

"At the end of the day, he participated in the construction of Zero Hunger under President Lula and he comes from a country that has created one of the world's largest social protection systems," said Adriano Campolina, country director for the ActionAid charity in Brazil.

President Silva launched Zero Hunger in 2003 after saying at his inauguration that ending hunger was his administration's main goal. The effort united several social programs and introduced new measures, such as Bolsa Familia. Dozens of other initiatives fall under the plan, including support for small farmers, running restaurants serving 50-cent meals and job training for women.

Brazil spends 0.4 per cent of its gross domestic product on the Bolsa Familia program, yet it has a bigger impact shrinking inequality than far costlier programs, such as Brazil's version of the U.S. Social Security effort.

Brazil's programs, which borrow partly from a Mexican initiative, have inspired other government initiatives around the globe, including 16 conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America and at least 14 outside the region.

"Brazil's experience is hugely inspirational to a lot of developing countries that are themselves battling with a lot of issues around food security and hunger," said Asma Lateef, director of the Washington-based anti-hunger Bread for the World Institute. "That it could be done and done so quickly is a wonderful success story and gives hope to a lot of people around the world.

Ian Walker, the World Bank's lead economist for social protection in Latin America, said Bolsa Familia is "one of the best designed and operated" cash transfer programs.

"But it is by no means unique in terms of quality and impact. There is no 'right' way to design such programs and policymakers need to respond to local conditions," Walker said.

Local involvement is, in fact, one of Bolsa Familia's strong suits: It empowers local officials and aid recipients themselves to determine how best to use the money.

Walker notes that Brazilian city governments are offered financial incentives to closely monitor adherence to the program's requirements of keeping children in school.

Silva, a single mother, said her desire to see her daughters lead a better life than her own is what pushed her to sign up for Bolsa Familia.

"I had no choice. I was unemployed and had three mouths to feed, three girls to clothe and buy school supplies for," said Silva. "If it had not been for the government's help, I would have gone under. It's been a miracle for me."

Associated Press writer Marco Sibaja in Brasilia contributed to this report.

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