

Belo Horizonte: Regional Food Security Supporting Rural Sustainability

In the southeast of Brazil, a few hundred kilometers from the major cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the municipal government of Belo Horizonte has presided over sustained improvements in nutrition and food security for its 3 million citizens for over a decade. Created in 1993, the Adjunct Municipal Secretariat of Food Security has developed programs which not only promote food security within the city, but which also show promise as a model for maintaining the livelihoods of local small farmers. Over the 13 years of the Secretariat's existence, millions of citizens have participated in their programs, thousands of jobs have been created, consumption of fruits and vegetables has increased in the greater municipal area while it has decreased in other major Brazilian metropolises, and infant mortality, often attributable in large part to malnutrition, has fallen by over 41%. Indeed, the United Nations has declared Belo Horizonte a "model city" for progress that meets and in many cases exceeds the UN's Millennium Development Goals (*Diário Oficial do Município, Belo Horizonte, Ano XII, Nº: 2.578, 04/01/2006*).

Belo Horizonte, the capital of Brazil's Minas Gerais state, initiated its city-wide food security program in 1993 under the leadership of its then-Mayor, Workers' Party member Patrus Ananias de Souza. Following on a period of high public attention to problems of hunger, poverty and nutrition in Brazil, Ananias held coordinating meetings between community leaders and professionals in health, education, nutrition, and social assistance in order to create a new government office to comprehensively administer all of the city's food security-related programs. This new office, the Secretariat of Food Security "Supply" (*Secretaria Municipal Adjunta de Abastecimento – SMAAB*), developed new programs and redesigned and improved old ones. In cooperation with the Secretariat of Social Assistance and with aid from the Federal government, it reinvigorated a decades-old Brazilian institution, the Popular Restaurant. Today, with 2 main facilities and several smaller "lunchrooms", the Popular Restaurant program serves over 12,000 meals each day, primarily lunches – traditionally the largest meal for Brazilians. The menus are prepared from fresh ingredients and planned by both local chefs and nutritionists. Each 1,000 calorie-plus lunch consists of rice, beans, a meat or vegetarian option, and salad or fruit, and costs the consumer one Brazilian Real (R\$1 = US\$0.47). (The small breakfasts and dinners at the Restaurants are R\$0.25 and R\$0.50, respectively) To maintain the low cost of the meals, which is meant to promote "food with dignity", the federal and municipal governments subsidize the program to cover staff, training, and equipment costs that exceed the Restaurants' incomes. The popular high-quality, low-cost meals draw in a mixed clientele: approximately 86.4% of those who eat at the restaurants could be considered low and very-low income citizens (earning up to ~US\$10,000/yr, with 34.9% of all patrons earning below US\$4,000/yr), but the rest of the patrons are a mix of students and professionals from the middle- and upper-middle class, meaning that there is little or none of the social stigma sometimes associated with assistance programs.

Like the Popular Restaurant program, the School Meals program serves meals made from fresh ingredients to thousands of citizens each day – all of the 157,000 children in the municipal school system. Also subsidized by the federal government, the School Meals provide at least 15% of the daily nutritional requirements of the children in municipal schools (Brazilian schoolchildren only attend school for half the day). Younger children who attend private daycares that partner with the city receive 100% of their daily nutritional requirements, and programs are underway to supplement the meals of older public schoolchildren for whom the School Lunch may be their only or primary meal. This program and the Popular Restaurants require a significant amount of food each day, especially vegetables – of which nearly 100% is provided by local farmers. Local, small and family-owned farms in Greater Belo Horizonte are primarily vegetable producers, and in cooperation with 5 municipalities in the area, SMAAB buys as much produce as possible from associations of such farms. This avoids sales through 3rd-party intermediaries, meaning that the city receives a lower price while the small farmers receive a higher income. This tactic has the added benefit of promoting rural social sustainability – especially important in a country that saw poverty and social policy push it from approximately 60% rural to 80% urban in the past 50 years.

And indeed, in interviews of several of the approximately 40 partner farmers, they consistently note that since joining the SMAAB program, they have seen an increase in the amount as well as in the reliability of their income. Interviews with their neighbors reveal that reliability of income, as well as the increasingly lower prices demanded of many producers, are of great concern to those who sell primarily to wholesalers and retailers.

In addition to selling directly to the city, the SMAAB partner farms, which are all less than 10 hectares in area, have the opportunity to participate in the “Direct from the Countryside” program. In this program, farmers are granted sales spaces throughout the city of Belo Horizonte, usually close to major thoroughfares and other highly frequented areas. Many farmers supply the Restaurants, School Meals, and other SMAAB programs, but others participate only in Direct from the Countryside or the Organic Fairs throughout the city, which have the same dual purposes of supporting local production and encouraging direct interaction between the consumers and the farmers. Such interactions have proven very valuable in other programs more familiar in the Global North, such as the recent trends towards CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture groups).

As was noted, various gains have already been realized under the Secretariat, including the astonishing decrease in infant mortality between 1993 and 2006 from 34.4 deaths per 1,000 live births to approximately 3 deaths per 1,000 live births – an achievement that surpasses the United Nations’ Millennium Development goal. This dramatic reduction has been due in no small part to cooperation with the Municipal Secretariats of Health and Social Assistance, working with their professionals and clinicians to identify at-risk children and families, and to supplement the diets of expecting and nursing mothers at little or no cost to the families. The distribution of enriched flour – wheat along with manioc, pulverized egg shells, and seeds – has been of especial note in improving the diets of expectant and recent mothers and their young children.

Another thrust of SMAAB, and very importantly in terms of institutional growth and sustainability, is the high importance it places on education of adult consumers and children, through school programs, community shows, average and lowest food price lists for consumers, workshops, cooking classes and more. These activities look to promote citizen ownership of the basic human right to food security (guaranteed under the UN Charter, among other international agreements) and to teach fundamental principles of nutrition to those who might not otherwise have received it. This is an especially important component in a world climate where increasing wealth is leading to obesity and nutrient-poor, high calorie diets in not just the Global North, but also in other countries that are still simultaneously dealing with persistent under- and mal-nutrition among their population.

Lastly, it’s important to note that these are only some of the most prominent programs, and that all of the food security secretariat’s programs in Belo Horizonte have made up less than 2% of the city’s annual budget, at approximately US\$7 million dollars per year – and even given the current level of success, there is ample opportunity to expand the comprehensiveness and size of the programs. Although SMAAB’s successes are not to be taken as a direct blueprint for cities the world over, one can draw at the very least cautious hope from their example: a municipal government program cooperating across traditional health/nutrition and city/countryside boundaries, while supporting local and organic food, small farmers, addressing childhood and adult malnutrition and hunger, access to food, and nutritional education, all under a modest budget in a large city in the Global South. From this example, we must be open to the wondrous idea that food security and small, family-farmer based rural sustainability may be mutually reinforcing, given sufficient and appropriate efforts across the many traditional borders we find between the two principles.