

# Nicaragua: Hunger, Malnutrition, and the Fight to End Them

February 14, 2013

School began this week for children all over Nicaragua, but even before children entered the classroom the Nicaraguan government had begun supplying its School Feeding Program as the Ministry of Education transferred food from warehouses to 10,000 schools in 153 municipalities. For many Nicaraguan children, the School Feeding Program is essential to preventing hunger and malnutrition.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recently recognized that Nicaragua has achieved more in the area of meeting its people's need for food than any other nation in the Caribbean or Latin America in the period between 1990 and 2010. Fernando Soto, spokesman for the FAO, reported that 55% of the population was malnourished in 1990-1992, but by 2010-2012, that percentage had dropped to 20%, "one of the most notable advances in the [Latin American] region." While acknowledging that this was still a high percentage of malnourishment, he said progress was being made and that the FAO would continue to help. Nicaragua, said Soto, "has the terrain covered" with multi-sector policies, appropriate laws, good governance, and efforts to coordinate local governments and their communities. The FAO, he said, will work with the Ministry of Family Economics on the Healthy Yard Program which this year will provide 120,500 families with seeds for vegetables, fruit, and medicinal plants in an effort to strengthen food security and better diet through family gardening in all the departments of the country. Government studies also show significant progress in reducing hunger, especially in young children. Without a doubt Nicaraguans have much, much more food available than they did in the 1980s during the Contra war when there was hardly anything on the store shelves and many commodities were rationed.

Yet, driving around Managua on the first day of school and throughout the week, at every major intersection I saw many school age children, youngsters between eight and 16, either begging or working washing windows. They're out in the dangerous intersections working and begging because they're hungry. Unfortunately, they will not benefit from the snack being provided at the schools. They work because they've given up on school or because they must also help provide for a younger brother or sister.

Despite the efforts of the government and non-governmental organizations, hunger remains a serious issue for many in this nation of 5.8 million people. Nicaragua was the second poorest country in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2012, second only to Haiti, according to the World Bank. The gross national income (GNI) per capita, based on dividing the national income by the total population, was US\$1,100 in 2010, but of course this is a nation of tremendous economic inequality, and many live on much less. The World Bank estimated that in 2012 48% of the population lived on less than a US\$1 a day (US\$365 a year) and 76% on less US\$2 daily (US\$730). According to the Nicaraguan government, the minimum needed for food and clothing in 2012 was 12,053 córdobas, 1,208.45 córdobas for clothing and 10,844.84 for food, or US\$502 altogether. (24 córdobas = US\$1.00) With incomes so low, hunger is a persistent, chronic problem, despite the government's school nutrition plan.

In addition to the government's school food program, some of the Catholic base communities informed by the Theology of Liberation also provide food through the Olla de Soya or Soy Crockpot. Community activists from the Catholic base communities organize volunteer mothers from various neighborhoods to feed children under the age of six whose weight is below normal. The Ollas de

Soya project in several Managua neighborhoods provides soy-based milk and food for these children every day during the school year. The project attempts to win parents and children to eating soy products, which are cheaper and more nutritious than their usual diet, while at the same time providing pre-school education and socialization to the mostly five-year-olds.

Not only is there malnutrition in Nicaragua, but there is also what we might call *misnutrition*, which is the adoption of less healthy eating habits. Traditionally Nicaraguans ate rice and beans, often mixed together in the national dish known as *gallo pinto* together with corn tortillas as well as yucca, potatoes and a variety of vegetables. Many Nicaraguans also ate a lot of meat since both beef and pork were plentiful and relatively cheap. The revolution, the Contra war, and the U.S. embargo that brought so much hunger and suffering to the country in the 1980s were followed by the conservative governments of the 1990s that turned their attention to enriching the wealthy while neglecting the poor. The Sandinista Front, which returned to power in 2006, though fundamentally adopting pro-business policies, also took measures to improve health, education and the basic welfare of Nicaraguans, the combination of conservative economic policies and somewhat progressive social policies that we have come to call “social liberalism.”

The dramatic urbanization of Nicaragua in the 1980s and 1990s lead to a decline in the consumption of pork as people began to eat more chicken and vegetables. Meanwhile, the opening of Nicaragua to foreign trade after the signing of the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement meant that local food stores began to carry more processed foods and junk foods, so that every *pulpería*, the ma-and-pa corner stores one finds in every *barrio* and town, now invariably stock not only soda pop made with corn syrup but also fried corn chips laced with salt, artificial flavors, and chemical preservatives. With changing food habits has come a rise in obesity throughout Latin America and quite notably in Nicaragua. Public health workers at the Aldo Chavarria National Rehabilitation Hospital in Managua report that more obesity has meant more diabetes and consequently more amputations.

The kids out in the intersections begging and working on the first day of school may take their *córdabas* to go to a little restaurant and buy *gallo pinto*, but there's perhaps a better chance that they will go to the *pulperías* and buy Coke and chips. Government efforts to get them back into school where they would be fed at least one more healthy meal a day will run up against the poverty of their families.

*Michael Kelly is an American writer living in Nicaragua. This is the fourth of an occasional series of Nicaragua Notes.*