

## **Eradication of extreme poverty and the right to food**

02/11/2011

**By Renato S. Maluf**

The Federal Government has just announced new measures to be implemented, aiming to eradicate the extreme poverty in Brazil. President Dilma Rousseff has established in good time a target which re-energizes the social and political dynamics induced by “Fome Zero” (Zero Hunger) and other initiatives in the social field, increasing the horizon and aiming to eliminate the most odious marks of our deep social inequality.

Food should continue to receive prioritized attention, regardless of the focus adopted to characterize poverty and to line out the corresponding instruments. It is known that poverty has multiple dimensions and has various forms of manifestation, making the universe of those who can be considered poor in Brazil very heterogeneous, as well as in any other society. However, the conditions of access to food will always be in the parameters which measure the conditions of existence of individuals, families or social groups, in particular, of those in extreme poverty.

It is then expected, that the announced actions, have the social legitimacy and make use of the experience of integrating public policies which have already been accomplished in Brazil, by promoting food and nutrition security in light of the principles of food sovereignty and of the human right to adequate and healthy food. The latest was recently consecrated among the social rights foreseen in the Federal Constitution, gaining visibility as society’s mobilizing reference as well as a guide of public programs. In this sense, the presidential decree 7272/2010, signed by former President Lula, determined the elaboration of a national plan of food and nutrition security until the end of August this year.

I emphasize three types of contributions for the eradication of extreme poverty among the proposals elaborated by Consea (National Council on Food and Nutrition Security), which is a bonding space of an ample variety of society and government sectors. First of all, data collected by IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) points out that 30, 2% of Brazilian homes still suffered, in 2009, of some kind of food insecurity, from hunger episodes until the reduction of the composition of their food. This demands us to universalize the transfer of funds from the “Bolsa Família” (Family Grant) program and social security as well as the access to education and health, combined with specific policies for population groups such as the indigenous peoples and other traditional people and

communities, rural North and Northeast populations, populations who live on the streets and other forms of urban poverty. In all these actions, it is the children, elderly and women who demand special attention.

Secondly, Brazil needs a food provisioning policy with an active role by the State, articulating in a decentralized manner, the increase of the access to adequate and healthy food with the promotion of family farming on agro ecological base. To promote deep alterations in the ways to produce, commercialize and consume food includes, on one side, the control in the uses of agrochemicals in a country which has become the largest world market of these products, promotion of a diversified agriculture, with an incentive to agro ecology, protection of the socio biodiversity, defense of the rights of the family farmers, land reform and the access to land and water. The rural families unite the double condition of a social group with a very high incidence of extreme poverty and producers of food.

On the other side, the promotion of an adequate and healthy food requires educational actions (associated to prevention) and the facing of the health issues caused by malnutrition, by means of the nutritional care in the SUS (Unified Health System) and of the regulation of publicity on food. Official data from 2009 reveals that over weight among the adult population reaches 50, 1% of men and 48% of women, obesity already affects 12, 5% of men and 16, 9% of women. Among the teenagers, over weight affects 21, 5% of men and 19, 4% of women. The significant gains already obtained in relation to hunger and malnutrition were accompanied by the incorporation of these other problems among the public health issues which, as noted, falls on heavily on the poorest.

The international food crisis maintains the food and agriculture in the center of the world debates. The international market is characterized by the great volatility in the prices of the agricultural commodities. The food price index, calculated by the World Bank was, in December 2010, only 8% below, in real terms, of the peak reached in June 2008. Corn, wheat, rice, soy, barley and sugar are responsible for the recent elevation in prices.

If there were still any doubts, it is confirmed the need to strengthen internally the State's regulating capacity and the establishment of the National System of Food and Nutrition Security, foreseen in Law no. 11.346/2006. There is no successful eradication of extreme poverty when the prices of food are dependent on speculation and the logics of the private sector. Between June 2007 and May 2008, the cost of the "cêsta básica" (basic food basket), measured by Dieese (Inter Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies) in 16 state capitals represented an annual elevation between 27, 24% and 51, 85%.

In the international plan, even if the elevation in prices is greeted by the benefits it brings to a handful of exporters, Brazil also has responsibilities to face in promoting the food and nutrition sovereignty and security of peoples. Consea has begun debates to this effect. The focus turns to cutting the links among speculation with financial assets and food prices, as well as to evaluate the proposals which aim to give more transparency to the world stocks and establish mechanisms to face price oscillations.

The third and fundamental contribution is about the participation and social control of the programs and public actions already accomplished in the field of food and nutrition security, as well as in various other areas of Brazil. The intersectoral composition of spaces for social participation, such as the Conseas (national, state and municipal) offer a particularly useful mechanism in the articulation among the government sectors (horizontal integration) and government spheres (vertical integration), simultaneously with the interaction between the government and civil society. It is possible and desirable that the commitment with the building of the National System of Food and Nutrition Security, in an agreed manner, among the three government spheres and social representation, comes to reinforce the goal of eradicating extreme poverty in our country.

It would not be realistic – even worse, it would sound demagogic – to plead the elimination of social inequality and its corollary, which are the relative forms of poverty. Even more serious, we live in a society that is an insatiable machine which generates inequalities in private relations and eager to appropriate itself of the advantages of the government apparel by means of the Executive, Legislative or Judiciary powers. However, it is perfectly possible to extirpate the extreme manifestations which deny to the vast contingency of the population, the possibility of living a life which is minimally dignifying. For this purpose, clear commitments are required not only in the Federal government but also involving the three spheres of government, the other powers, as well as counting on decisive participation and social control.

*Renato S. Maluf is a Professor at the Rural Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, President of Consea and a member of the Steering Committee of the High Level Panel of Experts in Food and Nutrition Security of the Committee of World Food Security (CFS/FAO).*