

Urban Food Security Policy: The Case of Belo Horizonte, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses the case of an urban, local government program for food security. The objectives are 1) to describe the main projects under this program; and 2) to suggest some of the factors leading to, or accounting for, the program's apparent success. Although it concludes that it is premature to see this experience as a "model", the paper argues that, as a possible, rare example of success in this area, the case of Belo Horizonte, Brazil deserves further scrutiny and wider attention.

Key words: food security, food and nutrition policy, municipal government.

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) have recently presented data and analyses confirming that the locus of poverty and malnutrition has been changing worldwide from mostly rural to mostly urban (Haddad et al., 1999). The "absolute number of poor and undernourished in urban areas is increasing and is accounting for an increasing share of overall poverty and malnutrition" (ibid., p.1891), they argue. Such trend has tremendous implications on how researchers and policy makers should approach issues of food insecurity and undernutrition. IFPRI's researchers suggest, for example, that it is time to give up the notion (held by many governments throughout the world) that urban food insecurity is primarily a problem of adequate supply of food. For most cases, it is not. Rather, urban food insecurity is primarily due to the inability of poor households in urban areas to access safe, quality food in sufficient quantities. They also suggest that more research is needed on urban poverty and undernutrition (ibid., p. 1898). In particular, there seems to be a dearth of models for policy and programs in this area, suggesting the need for documentation of best practices in local and national programs (Ruel, et al., 1999).

The case of an urban, local government program that introduces some innovative bases for food security policy is the subject of the present paper. The objectives are 1) to describe the main projects under this program, making this case more widely known; and 2) to suggest some of the factors leading to, or accounting for, the program's apparent success. Reflections on the possible lessons to be learned from the BH case for the development of effective urban food security policies elsewhere are offered in the conclusion.

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I. THE FOOD SECURITY PROGRAM IN BELO HORIZONTE, BRAZIL

Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais state, is the fourth largest city in Brazil with a metropolitan population of over 2.4 million. In the early 1990s it was estimated that 38% of families in the region lived below the poverty line (Lopes and Telles, 1996), and 44% of all children lived in poverty (CMCA, 1994). In 1995, close to 20% of children aged 0 to 3 years old showed some degree of malnutrition (SMAB, 1995).

In 1993, the newly elected municipal government of Belo Horizonte (BH) initiated a program to develop initiatives to reduce food insecurity in the city. From local public opinion polls, to expert observations and academic studies, the consensus seems to be that the BH program is addressing some of the most significant challenges associated with hunger and malnutrition, and that it could serve as a model for other municipalities in Brazil, in other developing countries, and even in developed countries. The BH program was the recipient in 1999 of the prize "Public Administration and Citizenship" promoted by the Getulio Vargas and Ford Foundations.

The key to the BH program is the Municipal Secretariat of Supplies (*Secretaria Municipal de Abastecimento - SMAB*) created by the City Government to develop and carry out an integrated policy addressing malnutrition and hunger in the area. All the projects designed by the staff at SMAB are guided by the notion of **food security**, interpreted as a principle: ***that all citizens have the right to adequate quantity and quality of food throughout their lives, and that it is the duty of governments to***

guarantee this right (SMAB, n.d.).

The program implemented by SMAB is divided into three main lines of action. The first encompasses policies geared to assist poor families and individuals at risk to supplement their food consumption needs. These are not simply emergency programs, but permanent initiatives whose progress is monitored by civil society groups.

The second line of action in the SMAB program is directed at the private sector in the food trade. Through partnerships with private food suppliers, the SMAB has been able to bring food to areas of the city previously neglected by commercial outlets. It has also adopted policies to regulate prices and control quality of basic staples, fruit and vegetables supplied under its program. The results obtained under these initiatives are being monitored by researchers at the Minas Gerais Federal University.

Attempts to increase food production and supply form the third line of action in the SMAB program. Initiatives here include technical and financial incentives to small producers, creation of direct links between rural producers and urban consumers, and promotion of community gardens and other forms of "urban agriculture".

The creation of the SMAB -- a separate administrative structure, with its own budget - was necessary to centralize the planning, coordination, and execution of all municipal food security policies. This centralization has allowed for a fundamental review of how nutrition and food-related programs are perceived: from emergency (read "temporary") and "assistance" (read "marginal") initiatives to regular policies deserving of the same status as other (more traditional) public policies in areas such as health and education. This, according to its founders and professional staff, has been SMAB's greatest accomplishment to date: to mainstream food security into municipal public policy (Pessoa and Machado, 1999).

SMAB's organization

SMAB is organized in three departments, each responsible for the development and administration of the projects and initiatives under the three lines of action of its program:
(Figure 1 goes here)

Department for Promotion of Food Consumption and Nutrition. The main functions of this department are to prevent and reduce malnutrition, specially among high-risk groups (children, pregnant and nursing women, and the elderly), and to promote healthy eating habits throughout the BH metropolitan region.

Department for Administration of Food Distribution. The main function of this department is to develop and administer market-intervention mechanisms for price control and quality check of food products made available in the region. It also aims at increasing the accessibility to quality food items in marginalized areas of the city.

Department for Incentives to Basic Food Production. The projects under this department have two main objectives: 1) to facilitate greater and more direct links between producers and consumers of basic food items, and 2) to promote urban agriculture. Through these projects, SMAB promotes higher incomes for small rural producers and greater access to quality food items for urban consumers.

COMASA (***Conselho Municipal de Abastecimento e Segurança Alimentar***) is the associated 20-member council created to advise SMAB on its projects and general program directions. It has representatives from other government sectors (municipal, state, and federal), labour unions (agricultural and industrial workers), food producers and distributors, consumer groups, and different non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In 1995 SMAB had a permanent staff of 122 or 0.6% of all municipal employees. It also hired another 105 contract workers employed in its many different projects (Coelho, et al., 1996). By 1998 its permanent staff had increased to 135 people; another 126 people were working under contract (Pessoa and Machado, 1999, p.4). Among its technical staff, SMAB employs nutritionists, social workers, food technicians, and economists.

SMAB's total budget for 1995 was US\$17.8 million. Out of that, 46% (US\$8.2 million) were transfers from the federal government (most of which were for the School Meals program), 45% (US\$8 million) came from municipal funds, and 9% (US\$1.6 million) were generated from its programs (Popular Restaurant, Popular Food Basket, and permit fees in the *Abastecer* and Worker's Convoy programs). The US\$8 million coming from the city represented 1.65% of the total municipal budget for that year (Coelho, et al., 1996). By 1998, municipal expenditures associated with SMAB's programs represented only 0.95% of the city's budget, and 11% of its total budget were covered by funds generated from its programs (Pessoa and Machado, 1999, p. 3).

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II. DESCRIPTION OF MAIN PROJECTS

A brief description of SMAB's main projects (Coelho, et al., 1996; Cunha and Lemos, 1996; SMAB, n.d.; SMAB, 1995; SMAB, 1997; SMAB, 1999; SMAB 2000) follows below.

Under the Department for Promotion of Food Consumption and Nutrition:

Preventing and Fighting Malnutrition: Free distribution of "enriched flour", a mix of wheat flour, corn flour, wheat bran, ground egg-shells and manioc leaf powder, rich in vitamins and minerals.

The distribution is done mostly through public health clinics to mothers of young children, pregnant and nursing women. Each woman receives 2 kg of flour per month, together with instructions on how to incorporate the mixture into common, everyday recipes. In the case of children suffering malnutrition, mothers receive 3 kg of a "special" enriched flour with powdered milk added to the mixture. In 1999, 19,658 children aged 0 - 5 years old were registered in the program - a significant increase from the 9,702 registered in 1994. Among pregnant and nursing women, 3,000 received the enriched flour packages through public health clinics in 1999 (Secretaria Municipal de Saúde, 1999).

The advantage of having the distribution of the enriched flour through public health clinics is twofold. First, it guarantees that the program reaches children at risk. Given the two-tiered health care system in Brazil, only low-income people receive care from public clinics with any frequency. The other advantage of this distribution method is that women and children under the program suffering from malnutrition can receive continuous medical attention. A study by the Municipal Health Department shows that, in 1998 75% of children diagnosed with severe malnutrition showed an improvement under the program. Only 5% of the children in the program presented some deterioration in their nutritional status (Secretaria Municipal de Saúde, 1999).

The enriched flour is also distributed to municipal public schools (as part of the School Meals program), and to day-care centers, nursing homes and hospitals which are run by charitable organizations and are registered into the program through the municipal Department of Social Work.

Federal government grants cover the cost of flour going to the School Meals program and the cost of milk added in the "special" enriched flour mix. But the bulk of the cost in the production and distribution of enriched flour is borne by the municipal government. In 1995, the regular mix cost R\$2.78/person/month, while the special mix cost R\$6.78/person/month. This was considered by SMAB's personnel to be a very cost-effective way of combating malnutrition among the people most at risk.

School Meals: Provision of nutritious meals to children (ages 6 to 14) enrolled in public municipal schools.

A federally funded school meals program has been in place in Brazil since 1954 under the Ministry of Education. The decentralization of the administration of the program was allowed only in the early 1990s when federal funds were transferred to municipal governments. In 1994 SMAB took over the administration of the school meals program in BH.

The program provides a meal per day to all students enrolled in the public school system. As in the case of the Preventing and Fighting Malnutrition program, the School Meals program presents a strong "self-targeting" feature given that public schools' pupils come mostly from low-income households. In areas of greater need (very poor neighborhoods), the "all-year-long" school meals program is extended to serve children at municipal schools during vacation time. In 1999, 175 schools were in the program, benefiting on average 152,937 children per day.

Under the SMAB, the school meals program in BH has significantly improved its cost-effectiveness. After the decentralization of the program, the federal government maintained its funding formula, transferring R\$0.13/day per child enrolled in the public school system. The caloric content of school meals in BH, however, increased from a daily average of 199.63 in 1993 (before SMAB's administration) to 376.61 in 1995 (an improvement over 88%).

A number of changes adopted in the program under SMAB can explain the improvements achieved after decentralization of the school meals program. SMAB increased the number of its potential suppliers (and, hence, competition among them) in order to get lower prices on its purchases. As much as possible, suppliers were recruited among local producers and businesses, significantly reducing transportation and distribution costs (with an added bonus of providing greater incentives to the local economy).

The increased nutritional value of meals came from a combination of factors which include the reduced use of industrialized products and the increased purchases of fresh fruit, vegetables, cereal, eggs and meat. A different menu is offered for each day of the week. Meals are centrally planned by a group of professional nutritionists, and prepared by each school cooking staff trained by SMAB. Enriched flour is added to many of the recipes followed in the school meals program. In 2000, the challenge to nutritionists at SMAB was to continue planning meals with caloric content of 300 or more within the same budget of R\$0.13/day per child that had not changed since the early 1990s.

Nourishment Support to Daycare Centers: Provision of enriched flour and other 26 food items to government-subsidized and charity-run community daycare centers.

Under this program, qualifying day-care centers (those serving low-income communities) can be registered with the SMAB to receive assistance. In 1999, 242 daycare centers participated in the program, guaranteeing 100% of the nutritional needs of children under their care. An average of over 34,000 children a day benefited from this program.

SMAB has also provided assistance to organizations working with street children. Altogether ("Preventing and Fighting Malnutrition", "School Meals", "Day Care" and

other programs), it is estimated that SMAB's programs aimed at children 0 to 14 years old reach 33% of all children in the metropolitan area.

Popular Restaurant: A government-run restaurant providing nutritious meals at affordable prices.

This modern, well-equipped, cafeteria-style restaurant functions in a government-owned building measuring over 1,100 square meters. It is located in a busy, central area of the city, close to bus and subway terminals. Its location is convenient to a number of low-income workers which commute from the periphery areas of the city to work. By 1999 the restaurant was operating close to capacity, serving an average of 3,433 meals a day, corresponding to 40 tons of food per month. Its success suggests the need for a second popular restaurant in the downtown area of Belo Horizonte.

The restaurant is open from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. for lunch, and 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. for dinner five days a week (Mondays through Fridays). Its meals are planned by SMAB's nutritionists and prepared by trained staff. At lunch it offers a meal of rice, beans, vegetables, salads, meat, juice and fruit at R\$1.00. At dinner time it offers soup (beans, vegetable, manioc, chicken, or meat) at R\$0.50. The subsidies required to maintain this operation have been increasing steadily from a low of R\$0.13 per meal in 1995 to R\$0.53 per meal in 1999. SMAB, nevertheless, is committed to maintaining its R\$1.00/meal price despite the budgetary challenge it presents.

Although the restaurant is open to anybody, a survey conducted in 1995 confirmed that 60% of its customers received monthly incomes corresponding to three minimum-wage salaries or lower. Thirteen percent of the customers reported salaries above five minimum-wage pay. The restaurant, however, has a clientele that includes individual retirees and whole families, bank clerks and street vendors, university students and street kids. They all receive the same treatment, pay the same price, and eat the same nutritious meal. They can also join the Association of the Popular Restaurant's Customers which provide suggestions on improvements for the menu and the restaurant's services through regular meetings with the restaurant's manager.

Under the *Department for Administration of Food Distribution*:

Abastecer (To Supply) and The Worker's Convoy: These are private-run, commercial outlets, licensed for operation and supervised by SMAB.

The objective of these programs is to increase the access of all consumers in the city to basic items such as fresh vegetables and fruit, cereal, coffee, meats and fish. Increased accessibility is achieved in two ways: by offering basic food items at prices lower than in other commercial stores; and by locating the outlets under the programs in low-income, periphery neighborhoods.

Under the *Abastecer* program, private operators were chosen (through a public, transparent, selection process) to run 15 fixed outlets located in poor regions of the city. Under the Worker's Convoy, outlets are mobile. In exchange for being allowed to operate in more profitable, central locations, sellers are required to serve periphery neighborhoods on weekends.

The programs were designed as innovative partnerships between the government (through SMAB) and private agents. Prices of 21 items are set by SMAB in periodic consultation with the operators, allowing for a negotiated profit margin which is typically lower than profit margins achieved in regular, commercial outlets. Prices of other, non-basic items sold in these outlets are not regulated. Besides prices, SMAB also monitors the quality of the products sold under the programs, and provides technical assistance and general information on how to display the products, safe storage and handling.

In 1999 the *Abastecer* program served an estimated 70.5 thousand families, while

close to 33.5 thousand families used the Worker's Convoy. Prices under these programs are, on average, 23% lower than those in other commercial stores. For many basic food items, prices are often 50% lower than in unregulated outlets, contributing significantly in reducing food expenditures for low-income families.

Popular Food Basket:

In this program, a monthly basket of 22 basic consumption items (food, toiletry and household cleaners) are sold directly to low-income families at subsidized prices through a bus visiting low-income neighborhoods on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. Families participating in this program must earn up to two minimum-wages salary, live in poor neighborhoods, and must be registered into the program through community associations or charity organizations. After the initial expenditures required to set up the program in 1995 (about R\$18,500), it is estimated that municipal subsidies are needed to cover only 2% of the overall cost in running it. In 1999, 4,200 families were registered in the program.

Through the Municipal Social Work Department, SMAB also distributes the popular food baskets to needy families for a maximum period of three months. In 1998, 13,560 baskets were distributed free of charge.

SMAB's Basic Monthly Ration:

Twice a week, SMAB publishes the prices of 45 basic household consumption items (36 food items, 5 personal hygiene products, and 4 household cleaners) found in 40 commercial establishments (supermarkets) in the city. The lists (compiled by researchers at the Federal University of Minas Gerais) are distributed to newspapers and posted in bus-stops throughout the metropolitan area. The information can also be accessed by phone or via internet. The intent of this project is to inform consumers and guide them on where to find basic products at lowest prices, thus increasing competition among commercial establishments.

Under the *Department for Incentives to Basic Food Production*:

Straight from the Country and the Harvest Campaign:

These programs aim at facilitating direct interaction between small rural producers and urban consumers. By eliminating the private and often oligopolistic intermediaries that normally operate in bringing the products of small rural producers to urban markets, SMAB hopes to increase the income of small farmers and still offer high quality products to consumers at lower prices.

Rural producers selected through a public process are assigned fixed sale points throughout the city (many times, in conjunction with the Worker's Convoy). As it happens in all other sale outlets under SMAB's programs, sellers in Straight from the Country and Harvest Campaign programs have their prices and the quality of their products closely regulated.

In 1999, 36 rural producers from 10 different municipalities around BH participated in these programs. They offered a variety of fresh leaf vegetables, roots, and fruits at lower prices than in other outlets.

The City Supplies Centre (CAM):

This is a "Fixed Fair", covering an area of 10,000 square meters, where farm producers trade 40,000 tons of horticultural commodities per year, through both retail and wholesale transactions. Recently, SMAB has also initiated the *Green Basket* program under which it serves as an intermediary between hospitals, restaurants and other institutional customers willing to buy vegetables and fruit directly from small rural

producers.

School and Community Vegetable Gardens:

SMAB promotes the creation of school and community gardens throughout the city, providing seeds and seedlings, as well as technical/educational support. In 1999 the project supported 40 school gardens and 37 community gardens. The gardens supplement school and community meals, and serve as "live labs" for science and environmental studies.

Pro-Orchard:

Promotes and supports the planting of fruit trees in low-income neighborhoods in partnership with community centers. In 1996 this project distributed 18,197 seedlings of nine different tree species.

Agroecological Experience Centers:

In partnership with the Municipal Secretariat for the Environment and the Network for Exchange in Alternative Technologies (an NGO), four centers were created primarily to supply seedlings and seeds for other SMAB projects. They are, however, developing into "agroecological" education centers, disseminating "agricultural techniques that preserve the environment and that use available resources rationally" (SMAB, n.d., p.6).

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III. FACTORS IN SMAB'S APPARENT SUCCESS

Not all SMAB's initiatives have been equally successful. The City Supplies Centre (CAM), for example, remains under-utilized as food traders refuse to move from the old and crowded (but central) "**Mercado Central**" to the more modern and spacious (but less central) CAM. Another "failure" might be the COMASA, designed to advise SMAB on its projects and program directions. Politics and personality conflicts intervened in preventing it to function as an effective advisory body.

Overall, however, SMAB's programs have been quite successful, reaching close to 35% of Belo Horizonte's population (Pessoa e Machado, 1999), mostly low-income families and individuals. And although further scrutiny and more thorough evaluations of its projects are warranted, a few salient factors may be suggested to explain SMAB's apparent success.

Food security as a human right. One of the most important factors in shaping SMAB's policies has been adopting the principle of food security as a human right. The relevant quotation here, appearing in many of its documents is: ***that all citizens have the right to adequate quantity and quality of food throughout their lives, and that it is the duty of governments to guarantee this right.***

The consequences of this for policy are quite profound. First, it stresses the responsibility of governments in upholding this right for all citizens. Government resources must be allocated to guarantee this right. Second, as far as access to adequate food is concerned, people are first and foremost citizens rather than consumers. This fundamentally undermines the role of markets in food security. As stated in one of SMAB's documents, "we must guarantee healthy, sufficient, and constant nourishment to those who are consumers and to those who, lacking buying power, cannot even be included in this category" (SMAB, n.d., p. 1).

Food insecurity as "market failure". SMAB has justified mainstreaming food security into public policy by having the identification of food insecurity as "market failure" - a traditional argument used for the necessity of public policies in the areas of health, education, public safety and national defense. Market failure happens when free markets are socially inefficient (Mankiw, 1998). It is the failure of free markets to bring about results that best satisfy the wants of society (McConnell et al., 1999). In the case of market failure, the "market clearing forces do not maximize social net benefits" (Kahn, 1998, p. 14).

One important reason for market failure deals with the provision of "public goods". Free markets fail to provide an efficient quantity of public goods because these goods tend to create very high beneficial "externalities" that cannot be captured by private markets. Once a public good is made available, it can be simultaneously enjoyed by many people, even those that have not paid for it. Markets do not do a good job in producing public goods because producers cannot prevent non-payers from enjoying it. There is, in general, no profit motivation to lead private firms to supply a socially efficient quantity of such goods. Public goods generate tremendous benefits to society, but free markets, governed by private, individual self-interest, will not provide them. Hence, the existence of a public good "presumes a legitimization of governmental activity" (Ver Eecke, 1999, p. 140).

Food itself is not a public good. It is a private good and, as such, private producers do have an incentive to produce it as they can prevent non-payers from accessing it. Food security, however, is a public good. Individuals living in a society where all people are basically well-nourished and healthy benefit from that condition, even if some were not contributing (paying) for its provision. In other words, food security can be simultaneously enjoyed by many people (a public good), in contrast to private goods (e.g., food), "which are marked by rivalness in consumption ... (and for which) property right enforcements prevent consumption if one does not pay" (Ver Eecke, 1999, p. 141).

Another consequence of the view of food security as a public good is that free markets may still not provide a socially efficient quantity of it even if enough income were distributed to low-income groups. Food security incorporates the notion of accessibility to food (which could be increased by providing enough income to all), but it goes beyond that to include food safety, quality, and diversity according to social/cultural norms. That is to say, as far as food security is concerned, market failure may not be overcome simply by turning people into consumers.

Much of SMAB's strategy in dealing with market failure seems to use the market mechanism itself as much as possible. It is attempting to correct market failure by improving market functioning. Without losing sight of the objective (food security), rather than substituting it, many of SMAB's projects tend to make use of the market.

This is most clear in the projects under the Department for Administration of Food Distribution. Recognizing that much market failure is the result of "imperfect competition" and "imperfect information", part of the intended objective of the projects is to increase competition (decreasing prices) and inform consumers. Reducing oligopolistic features in food production and distribution is also an open objective of initiatives under the Department for Incentives to Basic Food Production (Pessoa and Machado, 1999).

In the case of projects under the Department for Promotion of Food Consumption and Nutrition, the utilization of market mechanisms is much more limited. Here, efficient targeting (reaching the population most at risk) is essential for cost-effectiveness (Pinstrup-Andersen, 1988). SMAB targets low-income households by working through public health clinics, public schools, charity-run daycare centers, and through registration (by family income) in some of its projects.

Political feasibility

Realistically, right to food security, as many other human rights, are not always upheld. In the case of some poor countries, lack of appropriate resources may limit the capability of governments to guarantee basic rights. But lack of resources is not the limiting factor in Brazil (as it is not in many cases throughout the world). As the third largest agricultural exporter in the world, general availability of food, for example, is not a threat to the country's food security.

Guaranteeing food security as a human right becomes then a question of political feasibility (Pinstrup-Andersen, et al., 1995). At the national level, three factors came together in the first years of the 1990s to create a favorable environment for food security policies in Brazil:

1) ***Decentralization and The Workers' Party (PT) Platform:*** The PT, as a national party, had pushed food security to the foreground, as a priority policy (Bittar, 1992; Coelho, 1996). It is, thus, not surprising that the municipal government which created the SMAB was that of the Workers' Party. Resource decentralization established under the new constitution of 1988 has permitted municipal PT governments to promote many locally defined, socially progressive programs.

Decentralization has also benefited some social programs previously administered at the federal level. This is specially evident in the school meals program, financed by the federal government but administered locally by the SMAB. Such decentralization allowed for significant savings (in transportation costs, for example), as well as for having this project supporting local suppliers.

2) ***The Citizens' Action Campaign Against Hunger and for Life:*** In 1993 this campaign was created to mobilize people to assume their citizenship and fight malnutrition and poverty in the country. It was a huge success. At its peak in 1995 one of its creators and most visible campaigner, Herbet de Souza (Betinho), was voted the most admired Brazilian in a national survey (ahead of Pelé, the soccer player). After many years under authoritarian regimes, and much evidence of corruption among the political elite, people seemed eager to push for policies with high ethical values. The citizenship campaign provided that opportunity, mobilizing people from all classes towards a common cause (Souza, 1996; Sposati, 1996). The support of Brazil's powerful middle classes for food security issues gave an extra incentive for political action in that direction.

3) ***The Federal Government's Response:*** The federal government had to respond both to the popular mobilization under the Citizens' Campaign and the political pressures coming from the Workers' Party (and other parties on the center-left). In 1993 the federal government launched the Plan Against Hunger and created the National Council for Food Security (CONSEA), following some of the PT's proposals. Three principles in the federal government's program were solidarity, partnership, and decentralization (Coelho, 1996). These same principles were incorporated in the municipal government's proposal for food security in Belo Horizonte.

At the local level, political feasibility was facilitated by the very creation of SMAB, centralizing all decisions concerning food security. In the past, many aspects of municipal food security were spread over different agencies (health, education, environment, etc.) that did not have food security as priority. As a consequence, many projects addressing food security lacked the political commitment needed for successful implementation.

Partnerships and Participation

Another major factor shaping the success of SMAB is its commitment to develop and implement projects through partnerships and the participation of civil society groups. It is interesting to note that the initiative for partnership development came from the government itself. It sought out the participation of NGOs and civil society groups in the implementation of its projects.

Among SMAB's main partners are other government departments (specially Public Health, Education, and Environment), the private sector (small farmers, food manufacturers and store operators), NGOs (the Citizens' Action Campaign, the Network for Exchange in Alternative Technologies, and others), philanthropic groups (running day-care centers, community centers and nursing homes), community associations, and the University of Minas Gerais (which collects the data for SMAB's Basic Monthly Ration).

Such widespread and strong partnership network may be pointed out as the key factor in guaranteeing the continuity of the SMAB's program. It has survived two government transitions and it is now thriving under a new municipal administration (and a different political party). Its projects are not seen as "pet projects" of a given political party or local personalities. Although their administration is under SMAB's responsibility, they are "owned" by many different local groups and institutions. It is this widespread "ownership" that may guarantee their sustainability in the long run.

Education

Education may be the other main factor guaranteeing the continuity of the program. It is indeed a theme running through all SMAB's projects. It incorporates not only education on nutrition and good eating habits, but it extends to education on food safety, handling and presentation, environmental sustainability, and food security as a human right.

Local Commitment and Leadership

Finally, one must not undermine the importance of local political commitment to the idea of food security as a human right, and the importance of competence among the people developing and implementing the projects, specially during their initial stages. With a relatively small, but very dedicated group of people, and under the knowledgeable leadership of its first director, SMAB seems to have been able to achieve in a few years tremendous gains towards food security in Belo Horizonte.

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CONCLUSION

The main objective of this paper was to describe, in general terms, the food-security policy being developed since 1993 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The paper also highlighted some factors which could explain the apparent success of the SMAB program. In general, the BH case suggests that a successful policy in food security should be carried out in a comprehensive, integrated approach, involving aspects of consumption, distribution and production of food; use the market, as much as possible, in addressing market failure; make full and effective use of partnerships; and include education as an integral component in all projects.

A distinctive feature of the SMAB program has been its success in mainstreaming food security issues into public policy. This is possible, the paper has argued, by interpreting the right to food security as a "public good", and food insecurity as "market failure". Food security projects are then less "marginalized", less "charity-driven". They are justified in taking back some degree of control of food production and distribution from the dominant market system -- a feature which some experts in this field have pointed out as essential in establishing "best practices" (Welsh and MacRae, 1998).

It is, at this point, premature to identify the BH case as a model. Each of its projects, for example, are deserving of a more thorough scrutiny. Furthermore, too many questions are still to be answered. For example, given that much of the factors

responsible for the apparent success of the SMAB program were nation-wide (food security as a human right, decentralization), why haven't successful food security policies been implemented in other cities under the Workers' Party? How much of the success is due to local leadership and competence? One may also speculate that, if such policies were being considered in more cases, stronger opposition from established powers (agro-industrial, food manufacturers and retailers) could effectively prevent their implementation. While as an isolated case BH is not a serious threat to the political-economic norm in the country, one wonders how much of a revolution it would unleash if it were to be copied throughout Brazil.

Despite all the questions (which indicate how much more is to be known of this case), BH can be seen as a model in one sense. It has established a standard against which other initiatives in municipal food security policy can be measured. It is also against that standard that we may now evaluate the future conditions of food security in Belo Horizonte itself.

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