Brazil-Canada Partnership: Building Capacity in Food Security

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1. Introduction

As the project Building Capacity in Food Security in Brazil and Angola enters its 6th and last year (it started in 2004), this article provides an opportunity to share with a larger audience some of the findings of an external evaluation. The positive lessons learned from this project may help others attempting to engage in international partnerships for development and capacity building.

Although the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights included the right to food, food insecurity continues to be a major problem worldwide. Food security is considered to exist “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 1996). An estimated 854 million people suffer from hunger and malnutrition in the world today (FAO, 2006a), but many more are food insecure when one considers the incidence of inadequate diets, inappropriate foods, unsustainable food production, and undignified ways in which people secure food. Thus, a definition of food security adopted by Ryerson University’s Centre for Studies in Food Security (CSFS) interprets the right to food as more than just the right to be free from hunger. It emphasizes five components of the concept (CSFS, 2007), all of which must be present for food security to be achieved: Availability – food in sufficient amounts to meet people’s needs; Accessibility – assured physical and economic access to food; Adequacy – food that is nutritious and safe, needed to maintain health, and produced in environmentally sustainable ways; Acceptability – food that is culturally acceptable; food produced and obtained in ways that do not compromise people’s dignity, self-respect and human rights; and Agency – policies and processes that enable the achievement of food security.

Brazil has over 40 million people affected by food and nutrition insecurity (IPEA, 2007). It has, however, shown important advances in the area of food and nutrition security in recent years (Rocha, 2009). What is happening in Brazil is of interest beyond its borders for three reasons: First, Brazil’s federal Hunger Zero policy sets the country apart as one of the few developing countries to initiate and implement aggressive anti-hunger strategies at the national scale (Brazil, 2007; FAO, 2006b). Second, Brazil appears to be on track in achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, particularly in reducing extreme poverty and malnutrition. The country’s poverty rate decreased by 19.18% between 2003 and 2005, reaching 22.7% in that year, a historic low (Neri, 2006: 3). Third, a predominantly urbanized country, it seems to be achieving much of its success through innovative channels for popular participation at the municipal level, from participatory budgeting to local tripartite (government, private sector and civil society) councils (Baiocchi et al, 2008; Nylen, 2003). These initiatives and their impressive accomplishments have placed Brazil in the forefront of innovations regarding governance of food security in the world.

Brazil’s definition of food security has been enshrined in the National Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN), passed by the Brazilian congress in 2006. Article 3 defines food and nutrition security as consisting “in realizing the right of all to regular and permanent access to food in sufficient quantity and quality, without compromising access to other essential needs, on the basis of food habits which promote health and respect cultural diversity, and which are environmentally, culturally, economically, and socially sustainable” (Brazil, 2005). Article 1 of LOSAN “establishes definitions, principles, guidelines, objectives and composition of the National System for Food and Nutrition Security – SISAN, through which the State,
with the participation of organized civil society, will formulate and implement policies, plans, programs and actions towards ensuring the human right to adequate food” (Brazil, 2005; emphasis added). The importance of a participatory approach and of the inclusion of civil society in designing and implementing food based schemes is also recognized in the United Nations Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of Food Security (FAO, 2004). The UN Guidelines point out the significant effect civil society can have on operationalizing the right to food by pressuring all spheres of government, assisting vulnerable groups to empower themselves and claim their rights, and improving access to recourse mechanisms including courts.

Conceived to address the issue of food and nutrition insecurity, the project Building Capacity in Food Security in Brazil and Angola (2004-2010), funded by a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), was designed in response to significant needs for human resources identified by Brazilian government institutions, civil society and NGOs, as they were considered key to transform Brazilian innovative food security policies into actions, programs and projects in the sector. The advances Brazil has made in developing innovative mechanisms for participatory governance in food security are in jeopardy due to the lag in human resources formation in this area. How effectively LOSAN can be implemented depends on how prepared civil society and government personnel are to work together. The project proposed to make a contribution in the further development of training and educational mechanisms in Brazil for the formation of human resources in this area.

Building Capacity is managed by the Centre for Studies in Food Security (CSFS), Ryerson University (Canada), in partnership with the Reference Centre for Food and Nutrition Security (CERESAN), an initiative of researchers from the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, Fluminense Federal University, and the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analyses (Ibase). The project focuses on building capacities in three Brazilian cities, Araçuaí (MG), Juazeiro (BA) and Fortaleza (CE). It also aims at being a catalyst for international collaboration in food security education, by replicating the capacity building activities undertaken in Brazil in other Portuguese speaking countries. The project, thus, also seeks to develop a model of South-South cooperation.

2. Project Description

The main goal of the project is to empower local civil society and governments to form effective and sustainable food and nutrition security councils. It provides community-based education and training models that respond to the development challenge of increasing food security for the most vulnerable populations in developing countries. As stated in CIDA’s Action Plan on Health and Nutrition (November 2001), one of the primary causes of mortality and morbidity in the world today is malnutrition, and a critical cause of malnutrition is food insecurity.

The project, therefore, addresses one of CIDA’s social development priorities -- health and nutrition -- and it is consistent with CIDA’s programming theme of basic human needs. By promoting partnerships between civil society organizations and local governments in the creation of local food security councils, the project also addresses CIDA’s priority in democratization and good governance practices. Through its focus on capacity building in the poorest region of the country, the project is consistent with CIDA’s overall program objectives for Brazil, which aim to contribute to the achievement of greater equity among the regions and socio-economic groups.

The project is also consistent with CIDA’s programming theme of gender equality. Food security is a determinant of health, particularly linked to poverty and gender. A gender analysis methodology has been integrated into the design and implementation of all aspects of the project. The project team has adopted this methodology understanding the particular need for education and training for women in food security issues given the following reasons:
• As in many other parts of the world, in Brazil women and children are the most affected by malnutrition and general food insecurity;
• Women are largely responsible for making food available for the household, either through producing or purchasing it, or finding other coping strategies;
• For the above reasons, women are the main entry point for addressing food security and nutritional well-being at the household level;
• Women also dominate the field of food security as professionals, either as nutritionists, health professionals, or social workers. Yet, a disproportionately small number of women reach positions in decision-making bodies, be it at local, state, or national levels.

Food insecurity is also a major concern in southern Africa, where close to 13 million people risk starvation. Through a partnership with the Angolan NGO ADRA (Ação para o Desenvolvimento Rural e Ambiental – Action for Rural Development and the Environment) and the School of Agrarian Sciences of the Agostinho Neto University, the project replicates in Huambo, Angola some of the capacity building activities developed in Brazil. It is expected that the project’s impact will thus be felt beyond Brazil itself, and that the project becomes a catalyst for international collaboration in food and nutrition security education and training among Portuguese-speaking countries.

Part of the methodology adopted in the project was to invite a non-governmental organization (NGO) and a university to work as local coordinators and facilitators in each of the focus cities. As the project progressed, other local partners were invited to join in for different activities. Main partners in the project so far have been the following:
• In Araçuaí: Fenix Institute; the Jequitinhonha Valley Foundation for Education (Fevale); the Municipal Government of Araçuaí; and the indigenous village Cinta Vermelha Jundiba.
• In Juazeiro: Support Services to Popular Rural Organizations (SASOP); State University of Bahia (UNEB); and the Regional Institute for Appropriate Small Agriculture (IRPAA).
• In Fortaleza: Vida Brasil; State University of Ceará (UECE); and Mesa Brasil – SESC (Social Services of Commerce).
• In Huambo: Action for Rural Development and the Environment (ADRA); and the Agostinho Neto University (UAN).

Project beneficiaries in Brazil and Angola include university instructors and students, as well as staff of local civil society organizations and governments. Community members also benefit through their participation in local workshops. Most of the project's participants and beneficiaries are women. Through “public engagement” activities, project beneficiaries also include many Canadians such as students, researchers, food security activists, and institutions such as universities, NGOs and government departments who have had the opportunity to interact with their Brazilian colleagues and counterparts.

Main activities in the project are as follows:

**Online University Courses**
Four university courses (Conceitos e Principios em Segurança Alimentar, Gênero e Segurança Alimentar, Políticas e Programas em Segurança Alimentar, and Métodos de Pesquisa Aplicados e Avaliação em Segurança Alimentar) have been jointly developed by Canadian and Brazilian professors. Online courses are targeted to senior university students and graduates, particularly in the health and social service fields (nutrition and social work, for example), as well as practitioners and government employees working in this area.

**Workshops**
Workshops on “Local Public Policies and Programs for Food Security” in each of the three regions in Northeast Brazil have been offered. The goal of the workshops is to support the creation of effective food
security councils by training local civil society organizations and government staff in public policy for food and nutrition security. The specific themes addressed in such workshops were determined in consultation with local organizations and government agencies which identified the particular needs in human development capacity for the respective regions. In a “train-the-trainer” model, participants in the online courses helped design and deliver workshops.

**Pilot Projects**
This activity provides yet another opportunity for all the trainees (from university courses and workshops) to come together to work on a practical project in food security. Each local team has planned and has been implementing a particular project: training of community members (women) to work as community agents for food security in a low-income neighborhood in Fortaleza; implementing food security education in rural elementary schools in Araçuaí; training of community members to participate in the formation of a regional Food and Nutrition Security Council in Juazeiro.

**Public Engagement**
The public engagement strategy planned in the project is based on sharing information with the general public, as well as with civil society organizations, government agencies, and academics in Canada, Brazil, and Angola. This is achieved through a series of lectures and seminars, conferences, and the project websites in English ([www.ryerson.ca/fsbra](http://www.ryerson.ca/fsbra)) and in Portuguese ([www.ryerson.ca/fsbra_port](http://www.ryerson.ca/fsbra_port)). Conferences and seminars are also tools in the training and education of participants in the project.

So far, the project has sponsored seven seminars (one in Canada, one in Angola, and five in Brazil) and one major conference (in Toronto, Canada), drawing over 50 participants each time. Of notice we can point out the *Diversity in Gender: A Seminar on Brazilian Best Practices* held in Rio de Janeiro in August 2005, and the Conference *Encounter in Food Security: Canada, Brazil and Angola* held in Toronto in June 2006. Reports on the gender seminar and the conference in Toronto can be found in the project’s websites.

The project also has provided opportunities for Canadians to visit and learn first hand about the food security policies and programs being developed in Brazil. In 2005, thirteen Canadians were in Belo Horizonte to learn about that city’s success in improving the food security situation of its citizens. And since 2006, 7 students from Ryerson University have had the opportunity to spend six weeks in Fortaleza learning about food security initiatives in that city.

**Spin-off Initiatives**
The project has also inspired a number of spin-off research and educational initiatives. Among those, one of the most exiting is a project bringing together Indigenous youth from Canada and Brazil to explore together issues of identity and the role of food. Partnering with the Mi'kmaq community of Elsipogtog First Nation in New Brunswick, Canada and the community of Aldeia Cinta Vermelha Jundiba in Araçuaí, Brazil, this project intends to identify commonalities and differences in how food and food security impact on the cultural identities of Indigenous peoples, in different geographic locations in the Americas, with distinct (and yet, similar) colonization histories, living in different social, political, economic, and natural environments. In particular, we want to identify how Indigenous youth are impacted by their relationships with food and by their conditions of food security (see report at [http://www.ryerson.ca/fsbra/docs/](http://www.ryerson.ca/fsbra/docs/)).

**3. Results and Lessons Learned**
Key results of the *Building Capacity* project include the development and delivery of four online university courses in Portuguese, with over 200 registrations (80% women). Another 34 Angolans (22 male/12 female) have taken a one-week intensive course in Huambo. Seven instructors and eight workshop leaders have been trained in Brazil, and two workshop leaders are being trained in Angola. The project has also initiated the training of Brazilian participants in gender analysis and research techniques. Six workshops on
policies and programs for food security have been held, attracting over 250 participants. Seventeen workshops for the formation of community agents were conducted, with over 220 people (majority women) trained. Twenty-five Canadian students visited projects in food security in Brazil, seven have held summer internships with a Brazilian agency, and 15 have worked as research assistants in the project. The planned graduate program (Specialization) in Food and Nutrition Security at the State University of Ceará will serve to provide one of the institutional bases for the sustainability of many of the initiatives. Many other collaborative projects are being developed to give continuity to the working partnerships established.

An external evaluator hired by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), the project's financial administrator, pointed out that the project's performance, the progress made and the results reached were due to its many strengths, which include (Marcondes, 2007):

- **A project design that is flexible, and a bottom-up/participatory management approach:** the evaluation participants unanimously applauded the absence of a top-down approach to project development and implementation. There is a great degree of trust among the project partners, understanding and respect towards the local knowledge. This has enabled local ownership to flourish and facilitated the design of a project (and activities) responsive to Brazilian needs.

- **The high quality of the on-line courses and instructors:** the use of instructors that have much experience undertaking academic and research work and come from various disciplines (economists, nutritionists, social workers), has been invaluable for a project that focuses on a multi-disciplinary issue such as food security. The instructors value the practical knowledge in each student, using them as a source of information. This enhances the quality of the courses immensely and contributed to the production of course material that is innovative and quite rich. The use of two instructors in each course has also been quite useful and appropriate for on-line courses workload.

- **Local teams made up of Universities and NGOs worked extremely well:** this combination has been quite effective in terms of eliminating long bureaucratic processes at the level of the universities and at generating synergies based on the complementarity of skills of the team members and on the resources available in each set of institutions.

- **The project is well connected with the most important food security networks in Brazil:** the Brazilian partner institutions are active participants of a number of regional and national level policy making networks (such as Articulation in the Semi-Arido-ASA, RESAB, CONSEA, etc.). The project local coordinators are also well positioned to occupy leadership positions both at the local level (as the Local Councils are established) and within these established networks, through the knowledge gained in the project. The project partners are also used to work in networks and participate regularly in the regional and national conferences on the topic. As such, the project is well positioned to influence regional/national policy-making and to disseminate knowledge about the topic.

- **The development of a strong network of food security professionals in Brazil:** the project has enabled the building of connections among institutions, the exchanges of knowledge and the creation of spaces for discussions and learning from each other. The project network also has a variety of professional skills (individuals with political background, former and current municipal officials, university professors, activists, of various backgrounds including economists, teachers, health professionals, nutritionists, etc), which are resources upon which the project team members can draw. Linkages with Canada and Angola strengthen the network substantively, providing additional opportunities for learning and exchanging.
• The involvement of Brazilian-Canadians at various levels: many of the Canadians involved in the project are also Brazilians or have lived in Brazil. This helps to break up the cultural barriers of top-down (north-south) approach to capacity building. The issue of Canadians teaching Brazilians is non-existent and the project is able to encourage all involved to find solutions jointly. This has worked extremely well at the level of the Canadian Gender Coordinator and at the level of the Canadian Project Director – who are also Brazilian. In particular, the in-depth knowledge of Brazil at the level of the Canadian Project Director has been key. She was able to recognize the high level of capacities existing in Brazil and develop a project that uses that as a point of departure for knowledge transference and the building of a critical mass. The project is based on the fundamental that Canadians can play a role facilitating the replication of Brazilian capacities where they are needed in Brazil and in Angola.

• Opportunities to observe the Canadian reality: Many of the trainees have had the opportunity to visit Canada. The project provided them with exposure to the issues affecting Canadians and Canadian food security policies. The experience enhanced their knowledge, provided them with re-assurance and enhanced their skills to undertake their day-to-day jobs.

• Knowledgeable, dedicated and committed instructors, local coordinators, faculty and staff: the quality of the results achieved and the project successes are attributed to the presence of strong individuals in all of the participating Brazilian institutions and the Ryerson University faculty members, who are the “driving forces” behind the successful interventions.

Other lessons learned include:

• A good understanding of the local context is key to enable successful project design and implementation: the local partners’ knowledge of their own context has been incorporated in the project design and in its on-going implementation, through a management approach that is horizontal and participatory. This enabled the development of a project that is responsive to the Brazilian needs and acknowledges the existence of Brazilian expertise to draw upon. This does not eliminate the use of Canadian resources when appropriate, but it builds on existing local knowledge, while at the same time developing a model for south-south cooperation, with Canada (and Canadians) contributing to broadening the opportunities to bring in Brazilian knowledge to more needed areas such as the Northeast of Brazil as well as to other Portuguese-speaking countries. This is a very important lesson learned through the project.

• Canadian universities benefit from such experiences: The project has provided opportunities to increase Ryerson University’s capacities at the level of faculty and students. It has enhanced the quality of teaching, increased exchanges and linkages among faculty members, and contributed to the building of international project management capacities at the level of Ryerson’s faculty members. Through internationalization, Ryerson University is building its international research capacity and expanding graduate programs, by offering the students exposure to a range of experiences internationally. The project also contributes to enable Ryerson University to leverage additional funding from other sources and to increase Ryerson’s reputation internationally and in Canada.

• Local assemblies facilitate the identification and articulation of local demands: The project workshops were originally conceived to support the creation of effective food security councils by training local NGOs and government staff in public policy for food and nutrition security. As such, the workshops expose people to a new topic area and help to raise awareness about food security as a holistic approach. However, they also contribute to creating space for collaboration among the participating institutions, bringing together local institutions that do not necessarily know each other, engaging local actors, and collecting local demands. Once capacities within the NGOs are enhanced, for example,
their capacity to dialogue also enhances and the nature of the relationship NGO-public sector changes. In addition, a uniform language is created among the workshop (and pilot projects) participants, which also contributes to the establishment of the basis for the mobilization of interests to occur.

- **Trust and confidence are the basis for strong partnerships**: the project could not have succeeded without the development of trust and confidence among the participants. Cooperation develops gradually as it takes time for relationships of trust and mutual interest to evolve and mature. It is however quite important that partnerships not only involve individuals but that they also involve their institutions fully in the process.

4. Conclusion

This article is offered as a reflection on the many positive results obtained in five years of project implementation. During these five years not everything has worked perfectly. The number of student drop-offs in the on-line courses was higher than expected, and the difficulties to replicating some of the activities in Angola (from technological disruptions to bouts of yellow fever among local project partners) created challenges not fully foreseen during project idealization and design. Still, those were relatively minor shortcomings, given the size and complexity of the proposed endeavor.

5. References


FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization (2006b), *Brazil: Major Lessons from Fome Zero (Zero Hunger)*. Background paper. FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, August.


