

## WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME EXPERIENCES IN DEVELOPMENT AND FOOD POLICIES IN COLOMBIA

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**SUMMARY** The World Food Programme of the United Nations has as its responsibility the implementation of food distribution projects as a compensatory strategy for socially vulnerable groups. In the last 26 years, since the programme was started, the emphasis has been on attending rural areas. However, in the light of recent demographic changes, some regional offices are considering interventions in urban areas. In this context an experimental project was started in Cúcuta, Colombia in the border area with Venezuela. The objective was to distribute food to Colombians that were migrating to Venezuela and also to Colombians that were returning back home because of economic changes. Both groups were stationed in Cúcuta.

The project had 3 basic components:

1. The sale of subsidised packages of food to families in Cúcuta who showed nutritional deficiencies.
2. The exchange of food for work performed in projects for social welfare.
3. Operation of a rotating fund for the development of micro-industries in Cúcuta and the support of social welfare projects in the area.

The results were extremely satisfactory. In addition to combating nutritional deficiencies, 170 microindustries were created, 17 schools and an equal number of health centres were built. On the basis of this success, the possibility of implementing similar projects in Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla and Cartagena, but on a larger scale, are under study. Another pilot project was also started in the City of San Carlos, next to Medellín, geared also to fighting nutritional deficiencies and stimulating self-constructed housing projects, based on the concept of self-help.

### EXPERIENCES

The World Food Programme, as its name indicates, is a United Nations agency whose main objective is to transfer commodity surplus (food) from developed countries, which are willing to donate them, to those countries quite well disposed to

accept these commodities through WFP, to alleviate nutritional problems, as well as to improve development programmes, in which the commodities contribute to the implementation of infrastructure work.

The World Food Programme initiated its activities in 1963, when the Annual FAO Conference of 1961 set up an international institution within the United Nations system, capable of implementing activities in a multilateral manner and therefore apolitical.

In 1963, after exhaustive discussions, the WFP was created with a food commodity fund equivalent to 20 million dollars and an initial five-year trial period.

After three years of its implementation, the absolute need of its continuation was obvious and the United Nations General Assembly fully supported the WFP as an unlimited duration agency to function with the support of voluntary food commodity contributions from donor countries.

Considering the severe situation the world was facing in the sixties, the Programme covered mainly two areas: the first one, emergencies due to natural disasters (the majority) or human action (the minority) and the second, rural development in which the Programme was implemented, through projects aimed at covering nutritional deficiencies in these rural areas.

Generally speaking, 30 years ago —mainly in Latin America— 70% of the population was located in the rural area, and 30% in urban areas. The changes have been so important in the last three decades, that at present we find ourselves facing an opposite situation, i.e., 70% is living in the cities and only 30% in the rural areas. In this sense, the WFP has emphasised its development action, taking into account that “development projects” in rural areas are more important for the Programme than projects designed to cover only nutritional aspects.

However, the Programme has never stopped assisting the most vulnerable groups, such as pre-school children, pregnant

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and lactating women, etc. In this regard, the WFP strategy is increasingly emphasising the self-improvement of those groups, so that when the WFP projects come to an end, dependency on food assistance will be complemented and improved, by the production of local food commodities, bearing in mind the benefits of self-sufficiency.

Speaking of urban areas, the actions carried out by the WFP are not yet significant since this is a new working phase for the Programme, and most of its projects, implemented by the WFP, in urban areas are designed towards the granting of food assistance to cover nutritional deficiencies of poor urban groups, such as the traditional "glass of milk", etc.

Here I would like to convey to you, two slightly different experiences on the matter of WFP activities in urban areas, which took place in Colombia, in which development aspects were emphasised as a priority.

The first experience refers to a relatively small project implemented in the city of Cucuta, near the border with Venezuela, with a cost of approximately 1.5 million dollars in food commodities.

When the Venezuelan economy was extremely attractive, Colombian citizens used to enter Venezuela in search of the positive economic opportunities offered by that country.

Due to changes in its economic policy and, mainly, to the abolition of subsidies in Venezuela, the City of Cucuta (the meeting point of the Colombian emigrants to Venezuela), was affected, by such a situation of emergency, that the Colombian government had to request WFP assistance to cope with the emergency. Thousands of Colombian emigrants to Venezuela were held back in Cucuta, apparently in transit to Venezuela, causing this situation of emergency. The problem was augmented by the arrival of hundreds of Colombian citizens returning from Venezuela into Cucuta.

The WFP accepted the challenge proposed by the Colombian government, and implemented an emergency project, whose strategy was slightly different from the usual WFP regulations of providing food commodities to affected populations.

The project was designed, based on three fundamental components.

The first one was the non-free distribution of food commodities, but instead —once the affected families were selected, using as an identification parameter (family) nutritional factors—, the WFP food basket would be sold to those families, at a very low subsidized price.

The second component was the distribution of the food basket as a compensation for various jobs to be performed by one of the members of the selected families. The work to be carried out was planned and coordinated by the "Corporation of the north Santander District", with the assistance of the

Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar).

The third component was that, from the proceeds obtained from the sale of the food commodities, two thirds of this fund would be used to establish a rotatory credit fund to support the implementation of small productive projects, i.e., urban micro-enterprises; and the third portion, from the same funds would be applied to a "lost fund" (a fondo perdido) to purchase construction material and carry out social infrastructure works such as health centres, schools, sewage improvement, road repair, etc.

The Project proved to be so successful, from its implementation, that the WFP was able to obtain additional funds to continue its operation, as well as to increase the rotatory and social funds, when only half of the project duration had elapsed.

Perhaps the most interesting phase of the project was the creation of microenterprises, since —considering that the majority of the Colombians planning to emigrate to Venezuela had different types of training or, at least, basic education— when they were offered funds to create microenterprises, they had very little problem implementing them. This was so evident that at the end of the project, that is, after a year and half we found that there were more than 170 active microenterprises. The fund is still operational and I am certain that new microenterprises continue to be created.

The other interesting aspect is that during the life-time of the project it was noted that families suffering from nutritional deficiencies, who received WFP food support during the food-for-work-phase and also through the purchase of food rations, showed, as was expected, an important improvement in their nutritional level. However, the most important point was that when the project commodities were exhausted, the families' nutritional improvement did not remain steady, but —on the contrary— continued to rise. This was possibly thanks to the support provided by the infrastructure and rotatory funds as well as to the nutritional education (dietetics) received by the beneficiaries of the food basket. This, in fact, means that the proceeds/profits obtained by those families when they were given the opportunity to develop, which when added to the social infrastructure work performed (by them) for their own benefit and to the education they received, allowed them to become not only self-sufficient but productive.

This emphasised something very well known, i.e. that undernourishment is one of the consequences of poverty, and that, as a corollary, if we fight against poverty, undoubtedly we will improve the levels of nutrition.

Recapitulating, it could be stated, paradoxically, that the emergency operation of the City of Cucuta really became a development project, at the moment in which the food commodities were exhausted and the WFP assistance, as such, came to an end.

Based on the experience achieved with this project by the WFP Office in Colombia, a second pilot project was carried out in the municipality of San Carlos, near the City of Medellin.

This project, with a total value of commodities close to one hundred thousand dollars, was executed by the non-government Agency called "Antioquia Presente" and also supported by the Government authorities of the Antioquia Department (capital, Medellin).

The City of San Carlos was in a pathetic state, mainly due to the violence that had affected the area for a long time, as well as to the natural disasters that worsened the already dramatic situation of this city.

The WFP, in conjunction with the authorities of Antioquia, decided to intervene with a pilot project, which was the "seed" to attract programmes of higher importance.

The project had as a base two fundamental parameters:

The first, to provide a balanced diet to cover, in part, the nutritional requirements of the population through communal restaurants, called in Colombia "almorzaderos", and, the second, to provide a family food basket to the beneficiary families covered by the project, a member of which would be willing to

carry out work in compensation for the food received.

The project, being so small, was basically focused on the resettlement of the families that had lost their houses or possessions, mainly due to the flood caused by the overflowing of the river; and to assist some other families that, in some way, were escaping from violence. In this regard, the organisation "Antioquia Presente", and the government authorities of Antioquia, were both responsible for the design of the new housing areas, the acquisition of the land, and the purchase of the necessary construction materials and inputs. The families interested in the project were registered and included in the programme and, once they were participating, they started receiving the programme's benefits, that were, in the first place, the "almorzaderos", and in the second place, the food basket for their participation in the self-help schemes.

In view of the previously mentioned success, three major projects covering the cities of Medellin, Cartagena and Barranquilla were implemented in Colombia.

The project objectives remain the same, the fight against poverty and, thus, against malnutrition, and additionally in the three last cases, the rehabilitation of poor groups.