

## CENTRAL AMERICA:

# Anti-Poverty Programs Abound, but Poverty Deepens

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**MEXICO CITY, Sep 17, 2005 (IPS) - Government anti-poverty initiatives in Central America tend to pick up speed around election campaign time, then quickly lose steam.**

They are almost always tainted by the blot of corruption - and with a very few exceptions, they have been completely ineffective, say researchers and local activists.

The last decade has seen a succession of new programs replacing old ones every four or five years, usually coinciding with general elections.

The next changes are therefore most likely to be seen in Nicaragua, where voters will cast their ballots in October, Honduras, where presidential elections will take place in November, and Costa Rica, whose next elections are scheduled for February.

A total of 43.2 million people live in Central America, and over half of them are poor. The lowest levels of social development are seen in El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, where the proportion of the population living in poverty - as measured by the possibility of satisfying basic needs - is over 60 percent.

The situation is especially grim in Honduras and Nicaragua, where 45 percent of children live in extreme poverty, deprived of the resources required to meet even minimum nutritional needs.

Apart from a few exceptions in Costa Rica and Panama, the Central American nations with the highest degrees of economic and social development, there are no long-term strategies to combat poverty in this subregion, observed both Pablo Sauma, a development expert at the University of Costa Rica, and Alfredo Ruiz, research coordinator at the Central American University in Nicaragua.

The vast majority of anti-poverty policies are short-term, ad hoc initiatives, and many are tainted by corruption, they concurred.

"If we truly want to eradicate injustice at its very roots, we would have to do away with these disposable programmes that basically provide charity and serve the purposes of political corruption, since they are implemented to buy votes or hand out favours to business owners," said Rafael González, a Guatemalan indigenous activist and chair of the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC).

According to a recent report from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), titled "The Millennium Development Goals: A Latin American and Caribbean Perspective", it appears highly unlikely that El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua will meet the poverty reduction targets set by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2000.

The first Millennium Development Goal (MDG), to combat extreme poverty and hunger, establishes the specific targets of reducing by half the proportion of people living on less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, between 1990 and 2015.

Although Central America has experienced consistent growth in gross domestic product since the late 1990s, ranging from 4.5 percent in 1999 to 3.8 percent in 2004, this economic progress has not translated into a significant decline in poverty or improvements in the areas of employment and education, according to ECLAC.

Central America, the poorest region in the hemisphere, is still plagued by the after-effects of the civil wars, political upheavals and natural disasters it has suffered over the last three decades.

"Anti-poverty programmes change from government to government, they are constantly being replaced, and many are just window-dressing used to capture votes," maintained González.

Guatemala lived through a bloody civil war stretching from 1960 until 1996, which left 200,000 dead (including 45,000 "disappeared"), the vast majority of them at the hands of government security forces.

During the course of the war, half a million people were displaced within Guatemala, 500,000 sought refuge in Mexico alone, and 250,000 children were orphaned.

El Salvador was also engulfed in a civil war throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, when clashes between leftist guerrilla forces on one side and government security forces and paramilitary groups on the other left 75,000 dead and 7,000 disappeared.

Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship and subsequent armed conflict between the ruling left-wing Sandinistas and the U.S.-backed Contra rebels claimed 50,000 lives in the 1970s and 1980s.

The 1990s brought an end to civil strife throughout the subregion, and peace accords established wide-reaching commitments to bring an end to the injustices that were the root cause of the armed conflicts.

But whatever progress was achieved towards promoting greater development and social equality was soon wiped out by a series of catastrophic natural disasters.

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch caused more than 9,000 deaths and massive damages in Honduras and Nicaragua.

In 2001, El Salvador was hit by two earthquakes, which left 1,142 people dead, over 8,000 injured, and more than 1.6 billion dollars in economic losses, the equivalent of 13 percent of the country's GDP, according to ECLAC figures.

The international community began to focus attention on Central America in the 1980s. Dozens of multilateral agencies and non-governmental organisations established aid, cooperation and advisory programmes aimed at combating poverty in the subregion.

"Unfortunately, the end result has not been an improvement in the situation, but on the contrary, a deepening of poverty. And that is because there are no structural anti-poverty programmes, only isolated and short-lived initiatives," stressed Ruiz, who is currently participating in a project undertaken by Catholic universities to combat poverty in Central America and the Caribbean.

Of the various social programmes currently implemented by Central American governments with funding and loans from multilateral agencies, one of the most laudable is the Family Allowance Programme in Honduras, said the University of Costa Rica's Sauma, a consultant on poverty-related issues.

Aimed at breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty, the programme provides income assistance to 350,000 people on the condition that the children from the families receiving this aid attend school and receive basic health care.

But there are elections coming up soon in Honduras, which means there is a good possibility that this policy will undergo changes, noted Sauma. Moreover, there is no clear means of financially sustaining this programme over the long term, he added.

"What we have observed is that there are varying and insufficient resources for the majority of government anti-poverty programmes in Central America, and they do not attack the root causes of the problem," said Sauma.

"But I believe that the main problem is corruption," he stressed, noting that governments do not adequately account for the funds placed at their disposal, and many of the resources that are meant to be used to combat poverty are actually used to win votes. (END/2005)