We can overcome Undernutrition: Guatemala Case Study
Supporting better governance to improve nutrition

Guatemala shows an unprecedented national movement —legal, political and institutional— towards making the fight against stunting a top State commitment for human development and poverty reduction. The law on the national food and nutrition security system1 received a new impulse in 2016 with the ratification of the national commitment to reduce 10% of stunting by 2020.

With 1 out of 2 children in Guatemala stunted, stunting is the most serious problem afflicting the nation and carries strong negative effects on human capital and economic productivity. Clearly, putting an end to this scourge in the long term will require significant additional support. Not only Guatemala’s progress against global WHA targets for stunting and anaemia remain off course, but the country faces emerging problems of obesity and chronic diseases.

In line with EC’s Nutrition Action Plan, the EU and Member States in Guatemala are firmly committed to supporting Government-led efforts to reduce undernutrition by maintaining a strategic focus of investments in the food and nutrition security (FNS) sector. In the past six years (2009-2015), EC’s budget support for implementing the plan of the Zero Hunger Pact2 proved crucial to sustain institutions responsible for nutrition across two governmental mandates and to mobilize national spending on nutrition, policy commitment and governance of FNS. Looking ahead, the EU has reconfirmed its support to FNS, prioritizing the areas of healthcare, small scale farming, FNS governance at municipality level, land use planning and climate change, all of which are components of the national FNS plan.

Effects of Stunting

Children who suffer from chronic malnutrition fail to grow to their full genetic potential, both mentally and physically. It significantly increases the likelihood of premature death, and those that survive are prone to ill health and are less able to contribute to an active and productive life. The condition is measured by stunting –shortness in height compared to others of the same age group—which manifests itself in the early life cycle of children, and the effects of which are irreversible.

Cover page: A young girl (Guatemala, Central America). Photo by: M. Mercier.

1 Through Decree 32-2005, the national policy of food and nutrition security has effectively become a State policy.

2 Launched in 2012 and signed by Government, business sector, international donors, civil society and opinion leaders.

Nutrition in Guatemala: context and trends

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<th>Targeted stunting reduction (million Under 5’s stunted children)</th>
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<td>Beginning prevalence (2012): 47.3%</td>
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<td>Target prevalence (WHA 2025): 24.4%</td>
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<td>Trend in stunting reduction estimated in 2012 = 0.84%</td>
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<td>Reduction needed to achieve WHA target = 4.98%</td>
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<td>Target prevalence (WHA 2025): 24.4%</td>
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Accelerating stunting reduction in Guatemala will require sustained efforts. Recognizing the imperative to act, the new Government is determined to reduce stunting and has established the target of 10 percentage points reduction of the prevalence in children under two years by 2020. To align with the 2025 World Health Assembly (WHA) targets, the country would need to set an additional target for children under five years. If Guatemala sets an additional target for children under 5, then the country could align to the WHA global target. In 2012, approximately 1 million children under five years of age were stunted and this number is projected to further increase unless the current trend is reversed. At the current rate of change in the country—less than 1.0% per year—it will take more than four decades to eradicate stunting in Guatemala. However daunting or difficult the task ahead of overcoming undernutrition is, it is not impossible and can be achieved faster with the right support.
Undernutrition - Existing State of Play

Despite Guatemala being the biggest economy in Central America\(^1\), the country ranks among the most vulnerable and with highest food insecurity indices in all Latinamerica. Nearly half (48%) of the children under 5 years of age in the country are stunted. This is the fifth highest rate in the world. Indigenous groups within the country are disproportionately affected, with stunting rates reaching above 70%. Stunting decreased from 2002 to 2008/09, particularly in indigenous populations but undernourishment (MDG indicator) increased in the same period.

Anaemia is a serious concern, affecting nearly half of children under age five and a third of pregnant women. On top of this, the country faces emerging overnutrition including obesity and chronic diseases. Over the last decade, there has been an alarming and rapid rise in both anaemia in children (all social groups and regions) and overweight and obesity among women (nearly double in indigenous women).

The economic cost implication of this growing malnutrition challenge should not be underestimated.

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<th>Stunting reduction by ethnicity</th>
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<td>80%</td>
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<td>Indigenous</td>
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Source: ENSMI 2009.

The challenge for Guatemala is to find a way to manage the dual nutrition agenda in an integrated and effective manner that will enable future generations to achieve healthy growth without falling into the trap of obesity.\(^2\)

Martorell R. Intervention and Policy Options for Combating Malnutrition in Guatemala (IADB, 2012)

\(^1\) GDP of US$ 50.8 billion and an economic growth of 3.4% in 2014.
Contextual factors underlying progress and challenges

The poor nutrition situation in Guatemala can be explained by a combination of factors:

1) Extremely poor breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices. Only half the infants 0-3 months breastfeed exclusively, and just 8.5% in 4-6 months old infants. This explains high diarrhoea rates in infants < 6 months.

2) The declining quality of diet consumed today — excessively high in energy (sugar, and other simple carbohydrates) and increased fats and oils — explains the rise in obesity and anaemia. Guatemala’s success in resolving deficiencies is still very limited, but the problem is starting to be recognized.

3) Undernutrition is unequally distributed across social and ethnic groups. Child stunting and short stature in women are strongly associated with household wealth and ethnicity (71% stunting in indigenous groups). The country has the highest percentage of Indigenous Peoples in Central America (approximately 50%) and inequality levels, with poverty indicators — especially in rural and indigenous areas — are among the highest in the region. Marginalization limits access to both services (water and sanitation included) and opportunities for improving living conditions.

4) There are complex links among poverty, limited education and early pregnancies. Quality health services including family planning and maternal-child healthcare are lacking. In addition, cultural, social and economic barriers deter indigenous women from accessing health and education facilities, resulting in great disparities between indigenous and non indigenous populations.

5) Endemic food insecurity as a result of a series of structural causes including the historically high level of concentration of land ownership, lack of access to capital and extension services, low levels of productivity in small and marginal land and low crop diversification. Adding to this, climate change and recurrent natural disasters exacerbate social and food vulnerabilities (“seasonal hunger”), with dramatic deterioration of rural livelihoods and living conditions of poor households. The “dry corridor” areas are prone to regular outbreaks of acute malnutrition (reaching up to 8%) due to cyclical succession of droughts and floods.

The participation of Guatemala into SUN movement contributed to generate consensus on what needs to be done to fight child chronic malnutrition. Our challenge now is to make it happen at national level, with millions of mothers and children.

Mr. Luis Enrique Monterroso, Secretary of SESAN (August 2012)

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5 SESAN/Unicef 2014. Factores socioculturales que inciden en la desnutrición crónica.
6 The risk of stunting is 25-50% higher in children whose mothers were under age 20 compared to those whose mothers were above age 20 (Martorell, 2002).
Guatemala renews its commitment to overcome undernutrition

The current Government has prioritized the fight against stunting within its mandate as the cornerstone of its human development for poverty reduction policy. A consolidated legal and institutional framework to address stunting is in place since 2005.

Signed in 2012, Guatemala’s Zero Hunger Pact gave new impulse to the national policy on food and nutrition security (FNS) and was ratified by the new administration in 2016. The Zero Hunger Plan 2012-2016 implementing this State Pact, with EU budget support, serves as the common results framework and focuses on the municipalities with the highest stunting rates. Guatemala’s commitments and the institutional set up, which in the past received EU budget support, won recognition from international development experts.

How does the political commitment of Guatemala fare?

In 2012 and 2013, for two years in a row, Guatemala came first in the HANCI global hunger index that ranked 45 countries on their hunger and nutrition commitment. The Zero-hunger Plan was one of the reasons for Guatemala’s top ranking in 2012, along with:

- Investing substantially in health and having a separate nutrition budget line to make its spending accountable to all;
- Ensuring that public policy is informed by robust and up-to-date evidence on nutrition status;
- Establishing a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism that is regionally recognised as an example of good practice.

The National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONASAN) is the body responsible for implementing the Pact, with the Secretariat for Food and Nutrition Security (SESAN) acting as the coordinating institution under CONASAN. Multi-stakeholder governance structures have been set up at both departmental and municipal levels. Remarkable efforts have been made to develop the FNS operational plans from local to national levels, with a web-based open tracking system. Guatemala is viewed as a model of accountability and monitoring of food and nutrition security for other countries. A comprehensive FNS information system is in place to monitor nutrition indicators and budgetary allocations by ministry, Zero Hunger Plan item and department. This information is regularly uploaded and accessible on the internet.

The success of Guatemala’s tracking system

- A strong political commitment from all stakeholders, and especially the government, increasing the chances of continuity across election cycles;
- A strong coordination within and between different stakeholders and institutions;
- An implementation plan clearly linking nutrition targets and budget allocations (drawn from Peru’s experience);
- Continuous monitoring and reporting of implementation at national and local levels;
- The creation of technical groups to support technical and financial management in key institutions;
- Local (municipal) monitoring of progress toward the goals;
- Measures to ensure greater openess in public spending, such as the site www.guatecompras.gt


Women with children (Guatemala, Central America). Photo by: R. Canessa.
Results achieved so far by the Zero Hunger Plan are encouraging but significant additional efforts will be needed if the 2025 WHA
targets are to be achieved.

Impact of Guatemala’s Zero Hunger Plan

In the 166 high-priority municipalities where actions of the Zero Hunger Plan are focusing, the prevalence of stunting in children under age 5 years was reduced by 1.7% and the prevalence of anaemia by 4.5%. This reduction was achieved in just one year (from 2012 to 2013).

Source: 2nd Monitoring Survey Results of the Zero Hunger Pact Plan (July 2014).

European Union support to scaling up nutrition in Guatemala

Through the European Commission funds, the EU is the biggest donor in development cooperation in Guatemala. The EU presence has increased since the 80’s, initially through a strategy of poverty reduction, support to marginalized populations and defence of human rights among others, and gradually moving towards institutional strengthening in recent years. EU support to food and nutrition security (FNS) in Guatemala dates back to 2000. In 2009, €40.3 million budget support and technical assistance helped fund the implementation of the FNS policy and strategy (Government of 2008-2011) and the Zero Hunger Plan (Government of 2012-2015) —a strategic investment contributing to Guatemala’s top ranking in the HANCI index.

Recognizing the imperative to maintain and accelerate progress on nutrition indicators in Guatemala, the 201-2020 Multi-annual Indicative Programme has identified food and nutrition security as one of its priorities with an indicative budget of €80 million. One specific objective is explicitly to improve the nutritional status of women and children under five years of age, with child stunting as the main indicator for tracking progress. How this will be implemented has yet to be defined, but preliminary areas for support and factors to consider in relation to nutrition challenges are highlighted below.

In line with the European Commission’s Action Plan on Nutrition, the focus is on three strategic priorities, which can also be harnessed as opportunities for joint programming with other Member States.

Strategic Priority 1: Enhancing mobilisation and political commitment for nutrition

EU’s €40.3 million budget support for the Zero Hunger Plan implementation came about in response to the clear national commitment to fight undernutrition. The positive effect of this timely and strategic funding for nutrition is evident at two levels:

1) First, EU funds helped spur the national budget. Ensuring predictable funding sources to sustain and protect funding for nutrition interventions in national budgets is essential, especially in the case of Government funding shifts with different political priorities and during times of economic crisis.

First innovative experience in budget support

The impact of EU financial support to the national food and nutrition security (FNS) budget line was most evident in 2010-2013. In this period, EU and the national budget for FNS had a similar evolution pattern indicating a clear link.

The EU budget support provided significant stimulus for increased public spending on FNS and also helped to increase transparency in FNS policies. Governmental share in the FNS budget has consistently grown since 2009.

2) Second, EU funds consolidated the Food and Nutrition Security Secretariat (SESAN) and strengthened FNS information systems —both of which were key for effective intersectoral governance on nutrition and accelerating progress on undernutrition reduction.

The EU will consider this type of financial support for 2014-2020.

EU’s support to the FSN Secretariat strengthened Guatemala’s nutrition governance

Guatemala has made huge efforts in improving accountability. Three cross-cutting drivers behind effective nutrition governance have received EU budget support:

1. Executive leadership to promote effective intersectoral cooperation

Thanks also to the EU support, the institutionalisation of the national FNS system was reinforced, in particular by strengthening the SESAN Secretariat in its capacities in planning, implementation, coordination, and monitoring and evaluation systems. Staff technical and analytical competences were strengthened (e.g. on seasonal hunger, cultural aspects of food security, anti-hunger safety nets and budget tracking), as well as providing innovative tools to monitor acute and chronic malnutrition (e.g. endemic corridors of acute malnutrition and Sentinel Sites). Since then, the Secretariat has gained a higher political profile, becoming already a very respected and functional coordinating body.

2. Accountability and a results-based approach with effective and transparent budget implementation

EU is measuring progress with well-defined targets and indicators. The release of variable tranches of budget support is linked to progress in the indicator of stunting reduction. (More details on this in the next box).

3. Monitoring and advocacy

Budget expenditure and progress on results indicators are carefully reported on in a timely fashion and published online by SESAN. Monitoring and advocacy are critical to maintain political commitment. This also allows civil society to participate and undertake monitoring and advocacy.
So far, intersectoral coordination has been hindered and favoured food distribution as a strategy for preventing chronic undernutrition. The Joint Programming efforts by EU and Member States have made stunting one of the five priority areas for 2014-2020 programming. The EU continues to be a fully engaged partner in the political and policy dialogue on nutrition, from both a health and food security perspective. It will be important to redress the way in which nutrition issues are dealt with in the framework of the Food and Nutrition Security policy. Any policy development support therein will need to clearly address rising new problems of the nutrition transition (obesity and chronic diseases related to diet and lifestyle) which already affect Guatemala and are closely linked to stunting.

Strategic Priority 2: Scaling up actions at country level

Over €80 million is foreseen for food and nutrition security in the 2014-2020 period. As in the past four years, the EU is determined to continue being a game-changer for sustaining nutrition progress in Guatemala. A dual approach will be adopted to address the needs of the most vulnerable:

a) **Nutrition-specific** interventions: To have an impact on stunting reduction, EU’s support will focus on the first 1,000 days of life. Maternal-child health care services will be prioritized, increasing their coverage, cultural sensitivity as well as demand and use by those most in need.

b) **Nutrition sensitive** approaches: EU support through the Ministry of Agriculture aimed at sustainably improving small scale farming is a pillar of the new stunting reduction strategy. Given stunting is closely related to poverty and ethnicity, additional measures will clearly need to be taken to reach most vulnerable groups.

**EU’s €21 million for small scale farmers is one pillar of the new stunting reduction strategy**

Signed last December 2014 with the Ministries of Agriculture (MAGA) and Public Finances (MINFIN), this agreement for €21 million EU budget support will sustain interventions for small scale farmers living in rural areas. Livelihoods support for improved household food security is a key programmatic pillar of the new stunting reduction strategy. The support for sustainable small-scale agriculture is part of the framework of the Programa de Agricultura Familiar para el Fortalecimiento de la Economía Campesina (PAFFEC) that aims to help directly those households most in need.

**EU support to results tracking**

The impact evaluation of the Zero Hunger Plan was made possible also with EU support. Given the standard national nutrition surveys (ENSMI) are carried out every five years, a more frequent data source was required to track progress on the stunting indicator linked to EU’s budget disbursement (see EU’s support box). In 2012, an agreement was signed with the Government to carry out annual surveys allowing for periodic evaluation of progress on the Zero Hunger Plan. Since 2012 Guatemala established a solid methodology, based on scientific criteria, developed by SESAN and the National Institute of Statistics (INE) with technical assistance of renown international institutions like IFPRI and CEPAL. The comprehensive sampling base of key nutrition indicators (stunting, wasting, anemia and obesity) covers 166 municipalities prioritized in the Zero Hunger Pact. In 2013, a first baseline was undertaken and a first progress report was published mid-2014. The next progress report is expected mid-2016.

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