**Case Study 3. Belize: Causes of undernutrition and poverty, and plans to address them**

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| **Abstract**  The case study of Belize shows the interaction pattern between food and nutrition insecurity and poverty, and how all are impacted by the dominance of the export crop policy by government which has prioritised plantation crops. This is seen by many to lead to national economic growth at the expense of local-level socio-economic development. The southern districts, Toledo and Stann Creek, suffer most from poverty and undernutrition, and it is here where most of the indigenous people live (mainly Garifuna and Maya). Despite producing most of the staple food for these districts and the richer northern districts, market forces together with government policy and regulations are largely responsible for their food and nutrition insecurity. In Toledo, the stunting rate of children under five years of age is 45 percent. The condition of plantation workers across the country, living in workers’ villages (slums) is also dire. Despite the negative development indicators, the government, together with its development partners, has made significant progress in formulating national preparedness and action plans to address them. |

Key words: export crop policy; bananas, oranges and sugar cane plantations; worker slums and poverty; Garifuna and Maya; Toledo and Stann Creek; hurricane; low smallholder productivity; job creation; anthropology; welfarism

**3.1. Geographic and socio-economic condition in Belize**

Belize is located on the Caribbean coast of Central America, with Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south. 95 percent of Belize’ land mass is on the mainland, with the remaining 5 percent distributed across more than a thousand islands in the Caribbean Sea (Map 3.1). Its population was 330,200 in 2009 (Statistics Institute of Belize, 2009), and is increasing annually at 2.4 percent (World Bank, 2014b). More than half of the population is Mestizo, with Creole, Maya, Garifuna and Mennonite being the other largest ethnicities. Agriculture is the country’s most important economic sector, contributing more than 12 percent of GDP, generating 66 percent of foreign exchange earnings and employing around 25 percent of the formal labor force. The 2013 Human Development Report ranks Belize as number 96 out of the 186 countries which presented comparable data on three basic dimensions of human development: health, education and income (UNDP, 2013).   
   
  
Map 3.1. Map of Belize, Central America, displaying the six districts (with permission www.freeworldmaps.net)

The country weathered the 2008 global economic crisis fairly well, compared with other Caribbean countries, helped to a large extent by buoyant export prices of its oil. However, the 2008 crisis did put a dampener on private investments in the country, which when combined with a 2.65 percent average population growth per year between 2000 and 2010, led to weakened social indicators of wellbeing. Unemployment is 23.3 percent, as indicated in the population census of 2010.

The 2009 Country Poverty Assessment revealed that overall poverty rate rose from 34 percent in 2002 to 41 percent in 2009, with a further 14 percent of households deemed vulnerable to poverty. There is uneven access to resources across groups and communities according to age, gender or ethnic groups. Poverty was defined on the basis of minimum food requirements plus an element of non-food expenditure. Poverty incidence in rural areas is twice that of urban populations. The annual indigence[[1]](#footnote-1) line was around B$ 2,000 per adult male while the poverty line is around B$3,600. Poverty has increased substantially in 4 of 6 districts: Corozal, Cayo, Stann Creek and Orange Walk Districts, it decreasing only in Toledo, but this district still remains the poorest of the country. The Government of Belize (GoB) has nominated poverty reduction and sustained economic growth as the main pillars of its economic development strategy, using the rationale that benefits will accrue by bringing the marginalised segments of society into mainstream economic activity.

**3.2. The poverty-food insecurity dual causality**

In the year 2000, Myrtle Palacio of the Buyei Juan Lambey Institute of Belize presented a paper at the International Food and Nutrition Conference in Alabama (Palacio, 2000). In it she gives a situation report of the food security situation in her country as it then was, drawing attention to its location-specific nature and it’s socio-economic and anthropological parameters. She disaggregated some of the causative factors of the prevalence of food insecurity (which she equates to nutrition security for the purpose of her paper), including ethnicity, food beliefs and the poverty that has resulted, in her view, from the government decision to prioritise export crops like banana and citrus (FAO, 2014)[[2]](#footnote-2).

Palacio noted that whilst fertility rate was decreasing, nutritional indictors were worsening, with both under- and over-nutrition (obesity) increasing. In the south of the country (Stann Creek and Toledo districts), where most of the indigenous people live (Garifuna[[3]](#footnote-3) and Maya), low birth weight prevailed, particularly with Maya children, and micro-nutrient deficiencies (Vitamin A, zinc and iron-deficiency anaemia) were prevalent, compared with the two northern districts (Corozal and Orange Walk) in the country, which have a high percentage of Mestizo ethnicity (Box 3.1).

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| **Box 3.1. Child undernutrition in Belize**  Stunting is a well-established child health indicator for chronic undernutrition, related to environmental and socio-economic circumstances (WHO, 1995), defined as having a height (or length)-for-age of more than two standard deviations below the median of the WHO growth reference. It represents the aggregate effect of nutritional, health and socio-economic conditions which impact the growth rate of a child. A low height-for-age figure is a primary indicator of sub-optimal health and nutrition in children. The Belize Ministry of Health epidemiology department has published data on growth retardation prevalence in schoolchildren in 1996 and 2009. The data summarised in its paper of 2010 show this to be marked in all districts (apart from Belize district), especially in Toledo. The Living Standard Measurement Survey of 2001 showed stunting rates in children under five years of age to be 17.9 percent countrywide, yet 45 percent in Toledo district. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey of 2006 showed stunting rate in children under-five to be 17.6 percent. |

Since the early 1970’s, both northern districts (Corozal and Orange Walk) were selected by the State and multi-lateral agencies for agricultural expansion in sugarcane production for export. This led to an immediate decline in food production in the north, as large landowners established plantations and some smaller farmers left their small plots of land to become laborers on the plantations. **The labor on plantations in the north, however, largely comprises ‘cheap’ labor imported from neighboring Central American countries, to the exclusion of local labor, thereby undermining GoB’s economic development intent that plantations would create employment for local communities.**

The change from the previous subsistence agricultural economy to ‘marginal capitalism’ brought about a dependence on imported food, and drastically altered social relations, diet and eating patterns at household level, with increasing local food prices (both locally-grown and imported food) being uncoupled from the local sugar plantation wage rate, and increasingly unaffordable. *The sudden advent of waged income therefore provided only an illusion of prosperity*. Moreover, sugar plantation work is seasonal, so there are periods when demand for labor is low and wage income stops. Those hit hardest are those who have foregone their subsistence agricultural activities for plantation work, and depend on imported food.

The situation of subsistence farmers was worst in the southern districts, in which banana plantations had become established. Though they were producing much of the local staples to feed both themselves and the new sugar cane plantation districts of the north, government price controls on locally-produced foods since 1974 and lack of organised markets in the south has effectively led to the south subsidising the north. Imported goods first enter the country through Belize City, and as the south is further away from the entry point, those food items are more expensive in Toledo than in the north. Thus, the breadbasket districts of the south are also the poorest, and most vulnerable to food insecurity. This situation is accentuated by traditional society beliefs about food, as Mrs Palacio explains, this value system contributing to food insecurity.

In Toledo, 32 percent of households are headed by women, according to the 1991 census, and one in every 5 births is to young women under 20 years old, at that age not having developed the cognitive, linguistic, and other educational and job-related skills to enter the official work economy. Hence, they and their children are hugely disadvantaged and vulnerable to poverty and undernutrition. At the household level, even when there is a male head of household, it is the women who are responsible for managing household resources and devising strategies to provide food[[4]](#footnote-4).

Mrs Palacio points the finger at government export-oriented development policy which prioritises plantation crops, leading to national economic growth at the expense of socio-economic development[[5]](#footnote-5). FAOSTAT for 2011 shows that Belize’ top three agricultural commodity exports were concentrated orange juice ($US46.3 million), raw sugar (centrifugal)($US41.4 million) and bananas ($US33.9 million).

As mentioned above, poverty in Belize is geographically-concentrated in the southern district of Toledo (one of the two banana districts), and is ethnically-concentrated within the dominant Maya population. Belize has a dual poverty structure, with areas in which structural poverty prevails (Toledo district), and other areas having transitory poverty depending on the overall economic performance of the country. Stann Creek district, dominated by the Garifuna people, is not quite as poverty-stricken as Toledo. A more detailed consideration of Toledo is given in Box 3.2 below, indicating development challenges based on past experience.

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| **Box 3.2. Profile of Toledo District, Belize**  Toledo, the southernmost administrative district is the poorest in the country. Its current population is around 31,000, some 10 percent of the country’s population. Toledo’s residents are ethnically diverse, approximately two thirds being Mayan, with the remainder split between Mestizos, Garifuna, Creole and East Indian. While the latter are concentrated in the district capital Punta Gorda and other coastal settlements, the Maya dominate the hinterland. Toledo’s rural population is widely dispersed, being spread over a wide area in over 50 villages. The district’s population is young with 43 percent being under the age of 15, compared with 34 percent nationally, while the average household size, 4.9 persons, is larger than the national average of 4 persons.  Agriculture is the main economic driver of the district, followed by a small mining sector and an emerging tourism sector. Agriculture accounts for over 42 percent of the employed population, compared with 16 percent nationally. Cultivation is predominantly small scale based on the *milpa* system of rotational agriculture which the Maya have developed over the centuries. Livelihoods are supplemented by small scale trading and off-farm work.  The combination of restricted markets due to its peripheral location (despite the opening of the Southern Highway in 2002), dispersed population and low agricultural productivity, compounded by an absence of local market towns to buy and sell goods, has led to a low level of socio-economic development. This has resulted in a very high level of poverty, as well as housing and health conditions being substantially below the national average. Despite a reduction in poverty since 2002, Toledo remains the poorest district in the country with by far the highest level of extreme poverty (38 percent of households, and 46 percent of its population).  Successive governments have been concerned with the development of Toledo. From the late 1970s until the turn of the Millennium, several major rural development projects were implemented, with a total investment of more than US$30 million. When these were reviewed in 2004, the overall conclusion was one of failure, due to four principal factors: (i) the peripheral location and dispersed population (ii) the complex Mayan social and cultural context (iii) inadequate project design which failed to take into account these complexities, especially in relation to land, and (iv) lack of effective participatory processes. The Toledo Development Corporation that was set up in 2002 to co-ordinate development in the district has also failed, allegedly through lack of a formal mandate, inadequate finance and corruption. It is believed that the overall impact of even small NGO programs has been small for several reasons - failure to appreciate the complexities of Mayan society, over-estimation of the absorptive capacity of beneficiaries, funding constraints, insufficient markets for products, land issues and political interference.  The majority of ‘poverty’ interventions, and certainly those that have the widest coverage, are not related to the key issues of employment and income. There is thus a mismatch between the rhetoric of poverty reduction policies and the actuality which, allied to political interference and the unrealistic promises of politicians, have led to a pervading feeling of apathy and mistrust of the overall governance system.  Yet there have been successes: poverty has reduced, infrastructure has improved as have education and health indicators; current programs are better designed and better implemented. None of these is, however, likely to have a substantial impact on poverty reduction without major scaling up or the *identification of new economic drivers – the very priorities of most village leaders. In short, the priority has to be programs that increase income generation, agricultural productivity and job creation. This means more and better agricultural support, greater availability of credit, identifying and developing markets, and more emphasis on linking relevant skills training to market opportunities*. There is no escape from the need to have a participatory strategic plan for reducing both poverty *and* food insecurity, the two conditions being bi-causally related. |

**3.3. Economic and non-economic factors underlying poverty and undernutrition in Belize**

The underlying causes of poverty in Belize may best be understood by disaggregating the causes into *economic* and *non-economic* factors. The former factors largely apply to those who are *able* to work (whether or not they actually *are* working), whilst the latter mostly apply to those who *cannot* work for reasons of family duties, age, disability or illness. In most cases, the causes of poverty are primarily economic. This bears out recent research undertaken by the World Bank in Belize which shows that economic issues were the reasons why two thirds of households fell into poverty, through lack of employment, low wages and high prices. For the ‘non-economic’ group, the required support is most frequently provided by family and friends, with government and other organizations stepping in to assist those who are alone or whose families are unable or unwilling to support them. Direct assistance from government is however limited, meaning that the majority of this group has to rely on family and friends, or by resorting to other coping strategies.

At community-level, another reason for the entrenched structural poverty is the high growth rate of the low-income population, particularly so in the banana belt, due to immigration from elsewhere in the country or from neighboring countries, resulting in unplanned slums springing up. The immigrants have no savings either, and most do not earn as paid work is scarce, and if land can be found, there are costs in developing it, with no income coming in to cover those costs[[6]](#footnote-6). Again, this represents a zero-savings situation, and without savings it is difficult to be accepted for a loan. The 12-18 percent interest rates on offer by local (under-capitalised) banks represent a risk too far for most residents so they do not apply for one. Public services cannot keep pace with the increasing population, until a crisis of one sort or another pushes the government to allocate funds, which are never sufficient. Thus, slums remain slums, and the poverty trap enmeshes ever more people, who do not have adequate access to good houses, roads, piped water, electricity, schooling or health care.

In relative terms, Belize is the Central American country that has received the largest foreign population since 1983. In 2000, foreigners constituted 14.8 per cent of the population. This migrant population has heavily impacted services, access to land and job opportunities, particularly in major urban centers like Belize City. This is an important challenge to the government, particularly in terms of social integration and cohesion. Central American immigrants (who have no capital, are poorly educated and lack skills), partly contribute to the increase in unemployment, under-employment and poverty, especially in Cayo and Toledo districts.

Belize, as a signatory of CIREFCA[[7]](#footnote-7), agreed to host Central American refugees. Moreover, given the high level of poverty in neighboring countries, Belize provides an irresistible allure to those seeking escape from economic and social deprivation. The porous borders offer no barrier, with the result that Belize has suffered an uncontrolled influx that has strained its social and other services.

**3.4. Structural poverty and its causes in the southern banana zone**

3.4.1. The banana industry in Belize

The banana industry in Belize is privately-run and commercialised, and comprises eight growers/ management companies who between them own 23 farms, having a total area of about 7,250acres, all in two districts - Stann Creek and northern Toledo in the south of the country. These growers are organised in a single unit, the Banana Growers Association (BGA). The industry contributed $US65.7million to GDP in 2011, and employs 2 percent of the labor force.

The 2009 Country Poverty Assessment (Halcrow, 2010) shows a sharp increase in poverty and extreme poverty (indigence) in both districts of the banana producing areas, which suffered strong negative impacts from the 2008-09 global recession. This was compounded by decreased banana productivity, specifically related to simultaneous extreme weather that led to heavy production losses and related loss of earnings by farm workers. Tackling this poverty directly is one of the goals of the Banana Accompanying Measures (BAM) 2012, as well as its address through attempts to make agricultural enterprise more productive and profitable, thereby increasing disposable income.

Banana production in Belize, mainly for export to United Kingdom, is crucial to the livelihoods of thousands of people, with multiplier effects in the rest of the economy, creating even more livelihoods. However, frequent natural disasters and a burgeoning population have conspired to impact on the gains which the rural population makes from the banana industry. At plantation level, crops are annihilated and feeder roads washed away by hurricanes and tropical storms, requiring rehabilitation investment that cannot be afforded. Old equipment and irrigation/ drainage systems need upgrading, but lack of finance precludes this. Such recurrent costs are predictable yet cannot be planned for, as disposable income is already stretched to the limit, so accumulating savings is out of the question. The profit margin for banana producers has also been cut by the reduction in EU-import tariffs for the non-ACP (African Caribbean and Pacific States) banana producers in South America and USA. Competition is thereby more robust for Belize exporters, further inhibiting capital investment by farmers.

3.4.2. Hurricanes

Hurricanes are the bane of the banana belt. Because the banana plant and plantations offer such a large surface area to winds, and that the plant is not deep-rooted, many are destroyed if a hurricane or storm passes through. Rehabilitating the destruction is very labor- and cost-intensive, absorbing massive funds without the possibility of an early return.

The onset of the rainy season begins in early May in Toledo, progressing north to Stann Creek, Belize, Cayo and Orange Walk Districts in late May, followed by Corozal District in early June. Tropical storms and hurricanes move westward through the Caribbean from June to November, with peaks during the months of September and October, even though they vary in number from year to year.

Because of Belize’ geographical position bordering the Caribbean Sea, its extensive coastline and acute exposure of its major city, Belize as a country is going to suffer in future as it has in the past, at the hands of violent wind and storm damage, with accompanying flooding and saline intrusion into aquifers and onto farm land. Some 45 percent of Belize’ population, who live at low elevations, are particularly vulnerable to storm surge and coastal flooding. The banana districts have frequently taken direct hits, especially Stann Creek, and in a worst-case scenario, the entire banana industry could be obliterated, including the infrastructure of plantations and dependent human settlements. Though the country was spared damage in 2013, Table 3.1 below gives four examples of severe weather experienced in Belize, and the damage sustained.   
  
**Table 3.1. Four weather-related events affecting Belize (2007-2010).**

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| **Given Name** | **Date** | **Agricultural damage** |
| Hurricane Dean (Category 5) | August 21, 2007 | $US131.1m (40.4m direct damage, 90.7m indirect loss) |
| Tropical Storm Arthur | May 31, 2008 | $US25m, including 11.7m direct loss to farmers |
| Tropical Depression (TD)-16 | October 30, 2008 | $US7.8m |
| Hurricane Richard (Category 2) | October 21, 2010 | $US34.68m |

*Source: Damage and Needs Assessment (DANA) reports, Belize National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO)*

When sustaining a direct hit, as happened for the hurricanes in 1975 and 1978 for example, the havoc comprises degradation of the plantations and their irrigation and drainage infrastructure, and devastation of the physical and social infrastructure of workers’ homes, villages and towns, roads, water, sanitation and communication networks. Livelihoods and food security for the workforce can be wrecked very quickly, and the damage take long to repair, only for the same to happen again even before the previous damage is made good. The occurrence of hurricanes in the Caribbean area is predictable, save the precise intensity, when exactly they will occur and where the storms will make landfall.

The vulnerability of the agricultural sector is partially due to shortcomings of the Disaster Risk Reduction and Response mechanisms to effectively prepare for and mitigate the impacts, despite there being a basic set of measures in place to minimise the impact on human populations. Moreover, Belize is one of the Small Islands Development States (SIDS) classified as most vulnerable to climate change, which includes the likelihood of ever more extreme events and increased levels of damage. Much of Belize’ land area is at a very low elevation, with population concentration in coastal areas, and the economy is reliant on natural resources. Belize has less institutional experience than it needs to tackle such future impacts, or to adequately plan disaster risk reduction/ preparedness and climate change adaptation measures. This clearly puts the sustainability of development processes on the line.

A natural disaster could lead, at a minimum, to a change in government priorities, putting at risk some of the investments and expected benefits of previous and current development projects. If the natural disaster were to be extremely costly, it could trigger a macroeconomic crisis. Not only does Belize have significant economic exposure to natural hazards, it also has little room for absorbing them. With a public debt equivalent to 81 percent of GDP (April 2012) and fragile fiscal sustainability, it can ill afford a major negative fiscal shock. Despite recent improvements, international reserves provide coverage for only two months of imports of goods and services.

To mitigate the risk, more resilient farming and coastal resource systems need to be planned and promoted, as well as sound coordination of agencies, and exchange of information on methodologies and tools amongst them, at national and local levels. At the technical and organizational level, mitigating this high risk is needed in order to improve farm and community resilience and disaster risk preparation. Technical measures could include the planting of windbreaks on strategic alignments and around the borders of land blocks, such as the indigenous jungle bamboo. Another mitigation strategy would be to develop alternative income sources within the banana growing communities, to diffuse the risk of the banana crops being destroyed. Thirdly, communities can be assisted towards improving their own mitigation management institutions, at community level.

A plan of action for Disaster Risk Reduction was prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF), with FAO in 2011, listing *inter alia* its six institutional partners towards this end, and GoB disaster risk policies and legislation (MAF, 2011). The country should be better prepared than ever to absorb the hit when it comes, but there is still a long way to go to implement damage control and mitigation best practices.

3.4.3. Low banana productivity

*Poverty and low productivity are bi-causally related. A* prime goal of the BAM provision is to increase banana productivity in the sub-sector. Productivity gains may be measured by increased production or product quality per unit of land, labor or investment (or available water in the dry season – December to May).

FAOSTAT provides reliable data on banana productivity across the globe, Table 3.2 below showing some comparative figures.

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| **Productivity (mt/ha) bananas – average over 2009-2011** | |
| Belize | 27.8 |
| Panama | 39.9 |
| Costa Rica | 42.1 |
| Brazil | 14.3 |
| USA | 18.8 |
| Israel | 46.9 |

Table 3.2. Comparative banana productivity data from six countries (2009-2011)(FAOSTAT)

There is a clear gap between Belize and Costa Rica or Panama, the latter showing the productivity to aim for in the first instance. The figure for Israel indicates what could be possible, yet Belize is way ahead of productivity levels in USA and Brazil.

The key to increasing productivity is the provision *and* application of appropriate improved technologies related to land preparation, irrigation and drainage, soil fertility and weeds, and control of soil and aerial pests. Clearly, tackling the challenge of poor productivity depends on farmer’s knowledge of its cause (the particular pest or mineral deficiency, say), through symptoms exhibited by the banana plant, and matching these with the appropriate *cost-effective* remedy. Yet that is only half the story. Next, the means of remedy has to be available to the farmer, and be affordable, and the technique of applying the remedy do’able by him/her.

BAM is primed to bring improved technologies to the farmer in the banana belt of Belize, including control measures against the dreaded Sigatoka disease, though the associated control program is apparently under-funded. It seems that extension systems currently available are not very effective.

Other reasons behind low productivity are infrastructural, including inadequate and degraded irrigation and drainage infrastructure, broken cableways and insufficient capacity of packing facilities, all of which increase production costs.

**3.5. National preparedness to address food security challenges of poor southern districts**

Since the date of Palacio’s classic paper, very little improvement in the prevalence of chronic undernutrition in Belize is apparent. The MDG1c goal was not achieved and slow progress noted in halving the proportion of undernourishment in the whole population (FAO, IFAD and WFP, 2015, and see Case Study 8 below). This shortfall was despite worthy institutional preparation - the National Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents (2011), the National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan (NPESAP) of 2007–2011, the Food and Agricultural Policy of 2009 and the updated National Food and Nutrition Security Policy of 2010. Additionally, the Medium Term Development Strategy(MTDS) 2010-2013 entitled “Building resilience against social, economic and physical vulnerabilities” incorporates measures to improve the economic and social structures, the capacity of its citizens to embrace economic opportunities in the face of the ongoing economic crisis, and to proactively manage economic shocks and natural disasters. The MTDS encapsulates government policies and is part of a long-term strategic development effort called Horizon 2030. Furthermore, a raft of initiatives has been implemented over the years by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with various agencies.

The Belize Food and Nutrition Security Policy of August 2010 *ibid* seeks to ensure food security and sovereignty through sustainable production, supply, accessibility and use of safe, high quality, nutritious, diversified and culturally acceptable foods for all Belizeans. The related Strategy comprises six basic programs: information and communication; diversified food production, processing, marketing, storage and credit; maternal and child care, school feeding and nutrition for the elderly and the indigent; creation of employment and income generation at local levels; food safety, and analysis and reform of national policies for food and nutrition security.

The Belize Ministry of Health (MoH), based on a SWOT analysis which it conducted, is of the view that the overarching constraint at the macro level is that the **government has not recognised that nutrition is a key determinant underlying the country’s economic and social development, which requires a committed joined-up multi-sectorial approach.** MoH has also acknowledged that it has an insufficient and incomplete national nutrition surveillance system for the early detection of nutrition-related health problems in children. It further accepts *inter alia* that its nutrition programs do not properly target the poorest of the poor, and that there is insufficient participation and empowerment of women in advocacy, policy formulation and decision-making in matters of nutrition, health and development.

In response to this analysis, MoH (2010) has, with the help of WHO and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), prepared an Action Plan for the Reduction of Chronic Malnutrition in Belize (2011-2015). In pursuit of its goal to combat chronic undernutrition in Belize, the Action Plan underlines the importance of the institutional leader of the Action Plan (the National Food Security and Nutrition Commission under the Ministry of Agriculture), to generate public awareness on the key issues involved, and advocate best practices to reduce the manifestations and causes of chronic undernutrition. Six strategic objectives have been devised to address the issues which were identified in the SWOT analysis *ibid*, all of which identify the action, expected result, agency responsible and partners, and the completion date.

Specifically concerning the banana sub-sector, an holistic Belize banana sector National Adaptation Strategy (NAS) has been devised, called “Belize Country Strategy for the Banana Industry and the Socio-economic Development of Stann Creek and Northern Toledo Districts, 2011-16”. The two strategic pillars are to *improve the industry’s competitiveness and environmental sustainability*, and secondly, *to improve socio-economic development of the two districts*. On the one hand it specifically promotes best agronomic practices, improved capacity to produce high quality planting material, strengthened research/ extension and development services, enhanced access to credit, and improved marketing capacity of the BGA. The Strategy also fosters social sector developments, through investments in social-physical infrastructure (roads, electricity, water, school education and vocational training, developing agricultural markets, and capacity building for local-level governance and planning).

GoB’s Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries’ *National Food and Agriculture Policy (2002-2020)* of April 2003 makes little mention of bananas, save to say that it will seek EU’s assistance. Following intensive consultation between EU and GoB, formulation of the BAM Technical Assistance Team’s (TAT) intervention has been informed by past EU experience under the Banana Support Program which implemented the provisions of the Special Framework Agreement (SFA) (1999-2008). During this program, farmers were provided with inputs such as fertilizers, nematicides and meristems, together with an extension service. Though the immediate purpose (to help farmers recover from Hurricane Iris) was achieved, the approach was deemed unsustainable, the benefits overwhelmed by the huge needs of the rapid population growth. Government accepts that there must be more emphasis on generation of incremental income within the community, enabling farmers and villagers to invest in their own inputs to improve their enterprises and village infrastructure. Training in practical business skills (and agriculture as a business) is one option to enable this, thereby empowering the people to help themselves.

The recognition by GoB of national shortcomings and its resolve that, together with development partners, it will do something about it, is to be complimented.

**3.6. Holistic action needed to combat food insecurity in Belize**

In October 2012, Belize hosted the 23rd meeting of International Cooperation Directors from Latin America and the Caribbean. This event attracted scant attention in the local media, yet its importance was huge. Its topic was ‘Regional Cooperation in the area of Food Security’, and it addressed ways in which the region could cooperate to improve its food security as well as take stock of existing agreements to achieve this goal. The two-day meeting was led by the *Sistema Económico Latinoamericano y del Caribe* (SELA) organization and attended by *Sistemade la Integración Centroamericana* (SICA)*,* UNICEF and the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) *inter alia*. SELA’s Director of Relations Carlos Vivero was quoted as saying “Our region is one of the largest food producing regions in the world but out of its 589 million inhabitants, 218 million live in poverty and 53 million still suffer from hunger and malnutrition”.

FAO Belize has a large program directly targeting food and security (FAO Belize, 2011). In addition to a priority area addressing policy advice, FAO also has a priority area called “Innovations for food and nutrition security”. FAO is mindful of the food riots which erupted in 2008 in poor and middle-income countries around the world, that in 2011 corn and soybean inventories were very tight, and that prices had been rising and did not fall from their 30-month highs. In Belize, poverty is increasing, and those at the bottom of the ladder will suffer most from any increase in food prices. Population has expanded, income levels have grown, and diets are shifting. People are eating more meat, which is grain-intensive to produce. Production costs are increasing, driven mainly by high fuel cost, and growing interest in biofuel crops is competing for food production land.   
  
The EU Country Strategy and National Indicative Program for Belize (2008-13) states that the most serious threat to Belize’s ambition to achieving a better standard of living for its people, continues to be the incidence of poverty, exacerbated by major “resource adjustments” in agricultural exports. The Country Strategy explains that GoB has committed itself to a broad-based approach to rural development, with specific resources to address poverty reduction and support the efforts of marginalised populations to enter the mainstream of economic activity. GoB deserves recognition for having dedicated increasing resources to the social sector, which have contributed to increased life expectancy, universal access to primary education and progress towards achieving most of the Millennium Development Goals.  
  
The focal area of EC support strategy is *poverty reduction with institution and capacity building, in support of integrated rural development*. This will be effected through a two-tiered approach, including a) Local (district, community and group) level measures to promote market-led rural enterprise development, and b) strategic infrastructure measures to create an enabling environment for rural development.  
  
The EU, through intensive consultation with stakeholder groups, has also developed a Strategy which is intentionally convergent, even congruent, with the National Adaptation Strategy (NAS), called the Multi-Annual Support Strategy (MSS), which seeks to remove constraints on the banana industry and mitigate the socio-economic hardships of communities in the two banana districts. The TAT project proposed in 2013 for BAM 2012 comprises the action resulting, aimed at ensuring wise use of the portion of the Euro190m budget allocated to Belize. The priority given to socio-economic improvement in the MSS was informed by a study financed by the Alliance of Liberal and Democrats for Europe which showed that *only 2* percent *of the purchase price paid by EU consumers goes back to the banana workers in the fields* (ALDE, 2010). Ways in which the food security of plantation workers could be improved is covered in Box 3.3 below.

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| **Box. 3.3. Socio-economic improvement of plantation workers’ conditions in Belize**  It is not only for Government, donors, international organizations, NGOs and the communities themselves to improve the food security of plantation workers (largely sugar cane, oranges and bananas). There is a lot that the large commodity plantation companies could also do to better the lot of their field workers through development initiatives in their villages or living quarters, if they are so minded. If productivity and competitiveness increases lead to greater profitability for farms, this benefit should be shared with the workers, in both fairness and as an incentive to them, and also that companies would be seen as less exploitative than they sometimes are. Interventions need to be based on a thorough assessment of what constraint is best targeted and has the greatest impact for as many people as possible, whilst also being the most cost-effective.  For the energies of the workers themselves to best be harnessed, any given intervention needs to be designed in a user-friendly way for the ethnicities / clans being targeted. The mediation of a Spanish/ vernacular-speaking social anthropologist (s) is seen as adding huge value to the exercise, from the design stage upwards, to maximise the ownership of the marginalised group designated for assistance. This is in recognition of the complex ethnic mix in Belize, each ethnicity differing from another in its needs and aspirations. Even amongst the majority Maya in Toledo district, for instance, there is a complex clan structure. The anthropologist can record the anthropological parameters which may condition socio-economic impact of a range of interventions. In this way, the latter will more likely be demand- rather than supply-led. Any intervention is inevitably conditioned by what is anthropologically possible.  For this, the anthropologist will need good logistical support, including a team of local enumerators. The anthropologist will identify windows of opportunity along with the workers’ elected representatives. One option of many could be training in SME business skills, such as how to write bankable ‘business plans’ which could be forwarded to credit agencies. In the case of banana, the Banana Grower’s Association, the Irish multinational marketing company Fyffes based in Stann Creek and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development need to be kept in the loop, and indeed support improvement initiatives. |

To be efficient and competitive to assure food and nutrition security, Belize needs to build on organizational, market, technological and diversification systems and innovations to support a smallholder-led productivity growth in food production and distribution. For markets to work effectively, the organization of small producers is the key starting point in terms of dealing with the main constraints identified by farmers such as price stability, intermediaries and transportation. Marketing innovations must be explored, such as joint input purchase, farmers’ markets and contract farming, and contracts with tourism agencies, processing establishments and supermarkets. In this area, alternative models can be tested with small producer organizations that improve market access and cash income.

To increase food production at competitive prices and quality, developing and adapting technological components can be achieved by using better genetic material, drip irrigation and nutrient recycling, for instance. There are valuable economic growth hubs for emergent small entrepreneurs throughout the country, such as the production of vegetable, dairy, small livestock, fisheries, agro-processing and marketing. In this area there is need to build the capacity of women and young entrepreneurs, avail credit through user-friendly microfinance, develop Public-Private-Partnerships (PPPs) for post-harvest and value-adding infrastructure and technologies, and perhaps to implement projects with the poorest or vulnerable groups to improve their access to better crop and livestock products in order to optimize nutritional and health impacts.

Some of the poverty-related lessons learned in Belize include:

* The existence of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy (NPESAP), originally scheduled to cover the period 2009-13, is no guarantee that poverty can, or will be, reduced. The current author understands that this Ministry of Finance and Economic Development program has yet to be funded. Poverty reduction results from successful *implementation*, not strategies or action plans.
* Poverty reduction is primarily dependent on the performance of the economy, which is determined by markets and largely outside of the control of the GoB. Every effort should therefore be made to encourage the *private sector*. The bitter experience of the public sector Banana Control Board (before it was privatised to the BGA in 1991), in which the banana sector nearly collapsed, is within living memory.
* Social and infrastructure spending (whether by government, NGOs or others) will lead to improved living conditions and enhanced general wellbeing, but will have a very limited impact on reducing income poverty in the short term.
* Government has to de-politicise the implementation of its services and development programs.
* Elected representatives must refrain from interfering in the selection of beneficiaries for targeted/ discretionary programs.
* The public has to realise that government, irrespective of its political persuasion, cannot provide all its needs. It must reject the tendency towards dependency and ‘welfarism’ that is becoming increasingly prevalent. Instead the public should look more towards itself, its neighbors and communities to identify ways in which it can contribute to the successful implementation of government, NGO and other programs. Politicians should contribute to this by not making promises that are over-ambitious, thereby unrealistically raising the population’s expectations.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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