



USSOUTHCOM Interagency Meeting on Food Security

BY BRENT BANKUS AND MARCELA RAMIREZ

U.S. Southern Command hosted an Interagency Meeting on Food Security in Miami, Florida, from 29-30 October 2008. The meeting was a collaborative effort between USSOUTHCOM, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the National Security Issues Branch, Center for Strategic Leadership, U.S. Army War College.

This interagency event brought together participants from a variety of national and international organizations in addition to the Department of Defense (DOD). Participants included members from the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the USDA, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) and World Vision. The event garnered accolades from the attendees and represented an excellent beginning of cooperative efforts between the many and varied organizations operating within the SOUTHCOM Area of Focus (AOF, is a new doctrinal term coined by USSOUTHCOM Commander, Admiral Stavridis, in place of Area of Responsibility or AOR).

BACKGROUND

The 1994 United Nations Development Program's "Human Development Report" surfaced the concept of *human security*, which suggests that global and regional stability increasingly turns on the welfare of the individual. Regional security is best achieved by providing "freedom from want and freedom from fear" for the people, for which food security is an essential component.

The most common definition of food security is one established by the UNFAO: "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." This is a tall order, but one that speaks to the enhanced importance of human security and its importance to governmental legitimacy and stability.



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Under USSOUTHCOM's current strategy, the U.S. military seeks to build partnerships with other U.S. Government (USG) agencies also operating in the region. This includes establishing public-private partnerships to tackle the issues affecting national and regional security issues such as food security. The issues of food availability, food access and utilization, the situation of the agricultural sector, impacts of climate change, energy consumption, and increased oil prices represent daunting challenges facing the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) regions.

PURPOSES AND OBJECTIVES

The chief purpose of the meeting was to promote interagency dialogue among the attending USG organizations, discuss each others' roles and priorities and to understand the funding cycles for each. From this dialogue, the stake holders sought to facilitate the development of a joint, coordinated and comprehensive plan for food security activities in the LAC region.

The conference objectives were:

- To identify opportunities for agencies to jointly plan and coordinate food security efforts within the region
- To highlight the USSOUTHCOM food security activities that can advance or compliment efforts by other USG agencies in the Caribbean and Latin America

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE AND HIGHLIGHTS

GENERAL AND REGIONAL OVERVIEW OF FOOD SECURITY

The participants identified key short- and long-term factors impacting food security (including environmental security/sustainability, climate change, biofuels); defined the global food security problem and conceptualized the problem with the focus in the LAC region. The most significant highlights included:

- USSOUTHCOM's objective is to "launch ideas instead of missiles." Admiral Stavridis, made a presentation to the group outlining the importance of interagency coordination and emphasized that "regional challenges require cooperative solutions."
- Food security, a multi-faceted topic, includes food availability and consumption, population access to food, management of natural resources, and regional stability.
- It is estimated that the "middle class" in developing countries will increase 160% by 2020, causing several second and third level impacts on food security.
- Food insecurity in Latin America is more a problem of access to food rather than availability; in the Caribbean, it is predominately a health problem.
- There is a direct link between energy and food. Higher energy prices have increased costs of basic commodities, processing, and transportation of agricultural products.

USG STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES

Each stake holder organization made a presentation of their food security strategies, outlining their current programs, resources, and partners that support the USG food security strategy. As well, there was a robust discussion in



sharing lessons learned ending with suggestions for improved collaboration among all conference stakeholders. The most significant comments were:

- Producers are net buyers, not net consumers, so they are affected by increases in food prices.
- In the Latin America region it is important to assist farmers to make them more competitive (increase technical capabilities of the economies of scale).
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) works to assure access to food in times of supply and price constraints in rural economies.
- "The nature of food security has not changed, it's the world conditions that have changed" – Gary Eilerts, USAID, Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET). Those conditions are: poverty; drought; global markets and trade; structural changes in food availability, access, and consumption; climate change; and global transmission of information.
- USAID, USDA, and other institutions help to develop microcredit and other financial services to rural economies in the region.
- Biotechnology presents great potential to enhance food security.

PERSPECTIVES OF OTHER REGIONAL PARTICIPANTS

The third and final panel consisted of briefings from the International Organizations (IOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and Private Volunteer Organizations (PVOs) stakeholders who identified their long-range food security initiatives for the region. This panel was highly informative as it not only outlined the NGO and IO community's projects, but included the methodology on which their decisions were based. Highlights included:

- Interagency partnering is key to start linking the strategies of the different USG agencies and other organizations at a higher level.
- There is wide concern on the decline of resources for international assistance (Title II Programs).
- It is very important to bring in the private sector for development assistance.
- NGOs focus on measuring the impacts of food security programs in the region, i.e., nutritional measures.
- Each country's cultural values should be considered in order to make an effective strategic plan in the region.

Several important interagency questions came from this event. "How do we, as the interagency, move forward in terms of coordinating strategy and planning activities? How do we maintain open communication on food security issues throughout the region?" In answer to those questions several suggestions were made and include:

- Regional development programs should be long term in nature. In the event of a disaster, USSOUTHCOM could be a valuable assistor supporting other USG organizations with transportation assets and their proven track record in humanitarian relief operations;
- In the LAC region, monitoring activities, accessibility, and vulnerability studies face certain political sensitivities; therefore, regional strategies by USG organizations should be well thought out, properly vetted and coordinated prior to execution;



- Participation by “country teams” in the LAC region is a good segue to distribute information and develop strategies for the host nation;
- The U.S. military should work with host nations’ security forces and government agencies in building capacity to deal with contingencies such as food and energy insecurity.

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