

## URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS, MEXICO CITY

# FEEDING THE CITY

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**F**or Daniel and Rosa Fernandez of Mexico City, providing for their family of four has always been a struggle. Their country's "economic crisis" means higher prices for their basic needs, but they say they have never expected survival to be easy.

Their growing monthly food costs, 10 000 pesos (or about 85 Canadian dollars), leave little over from Daniel's minimum salary of 16 000 pesos (about CA\$135) as a factory worker. Fortunately for them, Rosa recently found work doing laundry four days a week at 350 pesos (about CA\$3) a day and their eldest son, Juan, still at school, works in the afternoon helping out with odd jobs at a local clinic. "He can pay for all his expenses now," his mother says proudly.

Several mornings a week, Rosa takes advantage of the subsidized prices for basic food at the nearest CONASUPO outlet (Compania Nacional de Subsistencias Populares). Before going to work, she lines up at six in the morning to buy milk, beans, rice, noodles, coffee, sugar and cooking oil. Although even CONASUPO prices are rising — oil by 300 percent in the last year — Rosa says they are cheaper than her local store, which she uses "only in an emergency."

Once a week, Rosa sets off on the four-hour round trip to a new market in Atizapan on the city's northwestern outskirts. With the two youngest children to help her carry things, she tries to buy enough fruit and vegetables to last the week. If there is money left over she buys eggs, red meat, or chicken as well.

Sometimes, when she is able to, Rosa invests in a piglet that she raises on scraps for a few months — not for the family's own food, but to sell to a meat buyer for profit.

Compared with others who live in their working class district, or to the estimated three and a half million living in the city's "colonias perdidas" or slums, the Fernandez family is well-off. Daniel's job seems secure. So far they have managed to pay for the books and paper required at their children's "free" school. And apart from regular and expected bouts of gastrointestinal infections they have not had any major illnesses.

In its concern over how well families such as the Fernandez's were managing to feed themselves,



*Mexico City food market: Caught in the economic squeeze, the urban poor are forced to spend a large part of their income just on food. Many are malnourished.*

the Mexican government launched an ambitious farm and food program in 1980. Known as SAM (Sistema Alimentario Mexicano, or Mexican Food System) the program was based on a comprehensive food profile completed in 1979. Results indicated that, in a population of 67 million, 35 million were undernourished and 18 million seriously malnourished. Of the latter, 6 million lived in urban areas.

Because of its size, holding a quarter of the country's population, high priority was given to analyzing the food system of Mexico City. Following the completion of an econometric study,

SAM, with the help of IDRC, began a detailed 18-month socioeconomic study in January of 1982. The project focused on the groups involved in the flow of food supplies from wholesaler to consumer within the city, and paid particular attention to the urban poor.

"Urban food problems are rooted in the basic urban problems the federal district is facing," says Cynthia de Alcantara, leader of the project and author of several socioeconomic studies of Mexico's food system. "They are not new, but the economic difficulties of the last few

years have thrown them into sharper relief."

## MONOPOLY MARKETS

Mexico City has been a market centre since the time of the Aztecs. Transportation has always been a problem. But it is only in the last 30 or 35 years that the transport system, or lack of it, has approached chaos. At present, food supplies — not only for the city's 17 million inhabitants but also for the rest of central Mexico (the states of Mexico, Queretaro, Michoacan, Guanajuato and Jalisco) — are first concentrated in the federal district's market before being moved on. Until recently all the produce arrived at la Merced, the old warehouse, market, slum and red light district in downtown Mexico City. Because of its traffic snarls, inadequate storage and poor sanitation, successive governments over the decades planned to move the market to a better location. It was only at the end of 1982 that a giant new market, Central de Abastos or "Supply Centre," was opened in the eastern part of the city.

"In many ways what has happened is that the same old problems have just been shifted to another location," commented Hector Castillo, a sociologist with the urban food system study. He grew up in the Merced area himself, and is author of a book on its history.

The new market was, ironically, built on almost the last remaining agricultural land within the federal district. The cost of pumping concrete into the swampy soil to support the new market added enormously to its construction costs, 600 percent more than estimated, which have resulted in higher warehouse and, inevitably, retail prices. But the problem of concentration remains and, according to Mr Castillo, should have been avoided by decentralizing wholesale operations.

He believes, however, that such concentration was greatly in the interest of the traditionally powerful wholesale monopolies whose control keeps prices artificially high. In his estimation as much as 1000 percent can be added to the price between producer and consumer. His studies show that, although the government tried to free the new market for fair competition by limiting each wholesale company to one storage unit, the established monopolies easily saw their way around the limitation. Often, they purchased the extra space they sought in the name of different family members, "even newborn babies and dead grandfathers."

But the high prices resulting from construction costs and monopolistic practices have affected more than the domestic food budget. They have begun to alter the nutritional quality and even the safety of prepared food.

Owners of the city's many *fondas*, the small restaurants that serve inexpensive hot lunches to workers unable to eat at home, are under pressure to keep their prices affordable to their



*A street vendor sells boiled and roasted corn: convenient and cheap, but of uncertain quality.*

equally pressed clientele. Research carried out by urban anthropologist Carmen Bueno shows that the *fondas* have been keeping their prices within limits by lowering food quality. They have had to buy spoiled vegetables, which are cheaper, and substitute fillers, often potatoes, for meat. The meat that is used is often a low-cost uninspected product, part of the illegal trade to which Rosa Fernandez will eventually sell her home-grown pig.

If the test of an urban food system is safe and adequate nutrition, how well is Mexico City's system working? Not very well, according to Cynthia de Alcantara. With an estimated 80 percent of deaths in the under-five age bracket attributable to malnutrition or gastrointestinal infections, "It is clear that in Mexico one can die from eating as well as from not eating," she says. If a child has been weakened by years of inadequate diet, a gastroenteric attack from contaminated food or insanitary food handling is often fatal.

Precise figures on how many Mexicans are suffering from poverty and malnutrition, or on how the numbers are changing, are not certain. Since 1940, seven different groups have produced 14 different estimates using eight different sets of criteria.

Cynthia de Alcantara, basing a 1970 estimate on families spending more than 65 percent of their income on food, put the figure (for that year) at 41 percent.

More recent figures from Mexico's National Institute of Nutrition indicate that although over a million of Mexico City's inhabitants fail to get the minimum nutritional requirement set by FAO of 2000 calories per day, conditions in rural Mexico are much worse: 90 percent of the rural population fail to get the minimum calorie requirement.

## A CONTINUING CONCERN

The SAM program, which initiated the food system study and for whom it was carried out, held great importance for President Lopez Portillo, whose term of office expired before the study was completed. Although Mexico's current president, Miguel de la Madrid, has

not reinstated SAM, there are signs that his government also gives high priority to resolving many of the problems pinpointed in the study.

"The food supply must continue to be one of the highest priorities in the government's programs... there is no doubt that all the country's people should share in a food supply that is assured, adequate and affordable," he said in a recent book outlining his strategies for addressing the country's problems.

In his government's National Development Plan, policies are outlined to ensure a stable supply of basic foodstuffs, controlled prices, and better nutrition. The policies being adopted to achieve these ends include providing basic producers with financial guarantees; supporting farmers' and fruit growers' associations through the storage, transport, and wholesale systems; reducing or reversing rural-to-urban migration through rural development and industrial decentralization programs; and developing a nutrition education program for the poor with emphasis on mother and child health.

Evidence that the government is putting its policies into effect came with a crackdown on market speculators in August last year. The pending sale of 250 warehouses in the Central de Abastos was cancelled on the grounds that the potential buyers did not represent growers or retailers' associations, but entrepreneurs and speculators. The warehouses will be sold only to bona fide farmers' and fruit growers' associations, local retailers, merchant organizations and consumer cooperatives.

In the meantime, private initiative has started to lead the way to decentralization of the city's market, a movement that Hector Castillo regards as an essential first step. Objecting to the high cost of warehouse space in the Central de Abastos, a group of wholesalers planned to open another market on the other side of the city in the northwest. The group was refused permission by a government that, understandably, preferred attracting business to its large and costly new market. Undeterred, the group joined forces with farmers and workers' unions and succeeded in opening a new market in Atizapan, in the metropolitan area and just beyond the federal district's boundary. The wholesale space is cheaper and the food prices are lower as well. "It was an unusual combination of forces that brought it about," comments Hector Castillo, "entrepreneurs, workers, and farmers all united. Karl Marx certainly wouldn't believe it could happen. But it works."

The new market gives hope that, if it can bring together the spontaneous efforts of the people most affected, and the leverage of government policy, Mexico may be able to move some of the obstacles in the path of an equitable, efficient food distribution system. □

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