

The City that Ended Hunger

by Frances Moore Lappé

Pre-reading:

1. Find Brazil on a map. Find Belo Horizonte. What do you know about this area?
2. Discuss “absolute poverty.” What do you think it means?
3. What rights do we have in the U.S.? Do you believe that food is a right?

Food is a Right in Belo Horizonte

There is a very large city in Brazil called Belo Horizonte. It has 2.5 million people. Sixteen years ago, 11 percent of its population lived in absolute poverty. Almost 20 percent of the children were hungry. Then in 1993, the people elected a new mayor, Patrus Ananias, who said to the people of Belo Horizonte: Food is a right. Everyone should have enough good food to eat.

The City Looks for Ways to Feed Everyone

Patrus Ananias invited citizen, labor, business, and church representatives to work with him to create a new food system. Together, they created new programs to help both farmers and consumers. Here are some of the ideas they tried:



People's Restaurant. Photo by Bruno Spada/MDS



Belo Horizonte

- The city made sure that the healthy food was available at a cheap price. This benefitted customers, who now had access to fresh, affordable food.
- The city gave farmers the good public spots for “farm stands” in the city to sell their vegetables if they agreed to keep the prices affordable. They made good money because they were in good locations. One farmer smiled as she told us, “I am able to support three children from my five acres now. Since I got this contract with the city, I’ve even been able to buy a truck.”
- The city also worked with food store owners to drive a truck filled with vegetables out to the poor neighborhoods. Poor people in these areas could buy food off the truck. They too gained access to good food at low prices.
- The city set up “People’s Restaurants.” These restaurants serve 12,000 or more people every day. They use food from local farms. A healthy meal costs less than 50 cents. No one has to prove they’re poor to eat in a People’s Restaurant. Everyone gets their food with dignity.

- The city created community gardens and school gardens as well as nutrition classes.
- The city made healthy meals available for children in city-run nursery schools.
- The city used federal money to buy whole food from local farmers rather than processed food from big corporations.

What is the Result of all this Work?

In ten years, Belo Horizonte cut its infant death rate by more than half. Today, these anti-hunger efforts benefit almost 40 percent of the city's 2.5 million population. Infant malnutrition in a sample group went down by 50 percent. And Belo Horizonte was the only city in which people ate *more* fruits and vegetables between 1993 and 2002.

The biggest surprise? It is not very expensive to feed everyone. In Belo Horizonte, it costs around \$10 million per year. That's about a penny a day per Belo resident.

And It's Easy

When I was in Belo Horizonte, I talked to Adriana Aranha. She worked for the city agency to stop hunger. I asked her what she thought about her work.

While she was answering, she began to cry. "I knew we had so much hunger in the world," Adriana said. "But what is so upsetting, what I didn't know when I started this, is it's so easy. It's so easy to end it."



Children at a Belo Horizonte government nursery school where food is a human right. Photo by Small Planet Institute

Adriana's words have stayed with me. They will forever. They hold Belo's greatest lesson: it is easy to end hunger if we are willing to try new ideas and solve the problem together.

This article, adapted for The Change Agent by Cynthia Peters, originally appeared in the Spring 2009 issue of YES! Magazine. Frances is the author of many books including Diet for a Small Planet and Get a Grip. She is co-founder of Food First and the Small Planet Institute.



Take it Further...

What do you think about the idea that food is a right? Do you agree with the Mayor of Belo Horizonte when he said that everyone should have enough good food to eat?

Would the ideas they tried in Belo Horizonte work in your community? Why or why not?

Check the math: Does a penny per day per Belo resident come out to about \$10 million? (Don't forget to convert from cents to dollars at the end.)

Do the numbers make sense? How could it cost only a penny per person per day to solve hunger in Belo Horizonte?