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PLANNING A FAMILY FOOD PRODUCTION PROGRAM

Some Alternatives and Suggestions for Plan Sierra

San José de Las Matas
República Dominicana

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PLAN SIERRA/ALTERNATIVES FOR A FAMILY FOOD PRODUCTION PROGRAM

I. Background

Plan Sierra is a natural resources conservation project designed to check soil erosion and the rapidly-accelerating silting of the rivers of the Cibao. Agricultural practices in the highlands are endangering not only the livelihood of smallholders in the Sierra itself, but commercial food production in the lowlands as well because of the deforestation of the mountains. Plan Sierra's principal activity is the conversion of subsistence food-producers to cash-cropping with trees so that soil will be disturbed at a minimum, if at all.

Encompassing some 120,000 mountain people and 80,000 acres of land, the Plan is the joint effort of civic-minded private sector and university people; progressive churchmen and the government of the Dominican Republic.

Women of the region are already organized (as are male farmers and youth) in 102 active groups (in one region women's "clubes de amas de casa" have formed a federation) which are presently working out ideas for future activities. Plan Sierra assists women's groups in identifying their own resources for action in the family and community and seeks support for projects the women themselves define as priorities. Because of an expressed interest on the part of many of these women's groups in family nutrition and food production, the authors of this report were invited to spend two weeks at Plan Sierra assessing the possibilities for a Family Food Program. Funding for the consultancy was provided by the Office of Women in Development, U.S. AID Washington, at the request of the Rural Development Office, U.S. AID, Santo Domingo.

II. Rationale

A. The Economic Impact of Plan Sierra

Plan Sierra's program of changing "slash and burn" food production to cash-cropping with trees in order to conserve soil and water also is intended to bring benefits of increased income and improved quality of life to the Sierra. However, as the Plan Sierra leadership has recognized, there are social and economic aspects of the program that could be hurtful for the campesino family.

First, and most obvious, is the fact that the family no longer will be as self-sufficient in food, and

will move from some degree of independence to dependency in a basic human need. Expectations are that the improved cash position of families will minimize the problem, but any family dependent on cash from a single crop in a world commodity market is in a vulnerable position. In years of crop failure or low world prices from even the slightest production over demand, the family will be particularly vulnerable where food is concerned. Families may not have sufficient income to buy good nutrition, resulting in an enormous drain on the Dominican economy if substantial food must be imported.

The changeover in production patterns also affect women's productive roles. They will have less participation in growing and processing the family food as they turn to the market economy (and often to commercially-processed and less-nutritious food), thereby reducing their economic productivity. It follows that there may be a reduction in women's role in the allocation of the family resources, i.e., decisions on what part of the production to eat and what to sell; what to plant and how much; what to process and store. Most important of all will be women's greater economic dependency since the return to the economic endeavors of the family will be in the form of cash rather than food -- and cash is seen as belonging to the men.

Not only does cash cropping undercut the women's economic productivity and position, but improving cash income can be a mixed blessing to people with little experience in handling money or in budgeting. Budgeting is especially hard for producers paid in lump sums for the year's work. More cash going through the farmers' hands opens the way for irresponsible and unwise use of these new resources and the undermining of the campesino family.

B. Economic Value of Home-Produced Food

Food prices in the Sierra are going up -- as they are everywhere in the world -- according to comments in the women's meetings about "these difficult times". There can be little realistic expectation for prices to decline; there will be ever greater demand for food because of population growth and because of the improved economic wellbeing resulting from successful development efforts.

This means that the improved cash position of the campesino family may not translate into improved

quality of life if the people of the region become totally dependent upon the market economy for food. Concomitantly, any food produced by the family will have increased cash value. Moreover, the potential for inflation in food prices in the local situation is enormously increased as new cash-crop income competes for a smaller quantity of locally-produced food -- again enhancing the value of home-produced food.

Additional factors contribute to raised food prices. Local market prices must reflect increasing costs of distribution and delivery tied to rising crude oil prices. There is another energy cost to the family -- human time and exertion, as well as fuel costs, expended in getting food home over difficult terrain. It follows then that in evaluating energy expended in home food production, energy expended in the alternatives must be considered. While it is difficult to measure exactly the cash savings in a family food production effort, the validity of the argument is evident.

C. Economic Use of Women's Time

Some economic arguments also can be made for family food production linked to nutrition/health education in terms of economic uses of women's time, as well as of project resources. We want to suggest that the Family Food Program is a far more economic use of time and inputs than sewing or even artesanía (although the latter might be made profitable under very special conditions).

In these days of mass-produced, reasonable well-made garments, created in durable, soil-repelling materials which look good for years without ironing, it may be that in terms of "female economics," store-bought food is more expensive than purchased clothes. One must then ask if it is not more reasonable for women to use labor time available to produce food, and to spend cash for clothes. In terms of the materials needed -- especially the initial investment in sewing machines -- and time expended, making clothes at home (or in a dress-maker's workshop) may be a luxury within the reach of only the middle-class.

One still would need to deal with the apparently universal and lively interest of Dominican country women to learn sewing. In the groups we visited, however, while many members couched their interest in terms of

"sewing for the family," it did seem to us that many others hoped that learning to sew might be a means to earn money and might even lead to a job in the garment industry (if such industries were to come to the rural areas). Unless there is an unfulfilled market for some specialized items not produced in factories (for example, those involving handwork) or unless women's clubs could obtain contracts to sew school⁺ or military uniforms where the market is guaranteed, we do not see, at this stage, that sewing would fulfill women's sometimes unstated, but probably ever-present first priority in wanting to learn dress-making to earn money. As Steve Vetter of IAF put it to the women in Juncalito, every woman in Latin America wants to get herself a maquina and learn sewing; all have the same dream: to earn cash.

We are sure that the last word has not been said here on sewing, but we at least want to suggest a rationale for concentrating first on family food production. We think food is not only an obvious first priority, but that it is important for women to choose (from an almost endless variety of possible enterprises) a limited number of activities. Particularly in the first years, if any impact is to be achieved, it will be important to concentrate efforts. The women and the women's clubs -- and their communities -- can only absorb so much information. And those who are to instruct and transfer techniques will also be able to master only a few things well, at least in the beginning. Learning basic nutrition and principles of family and community health, linking this knowledge to the cultivation of even a fairly limited number of vegetables (each with its own characteristics), and mastering the art of teaching adults represent a tremendous undertaking. One reason for the failure of "home economics" in developing countries is the difficulty of training persons in any depth in the myriad activities carried out in the household. "Home economists" in developing countries often have had superficial training in a multitude of things, and the women with whom they work get discouraged about really learning anything from them.

So far as community impact is concerned, we also want to suggest that women's time will be better spent in a limited number of interrelated activities revolving

⁺ In Chile, for example, all school uniforms are made by the clubes de madres, which pick up the uniforms already cut out at a central depot, and distribute them to their members.

around growing food and nutrition. For a fairly long period, everyone concerned must talk about these ideas and activities, run meetings and workshops and seminars on them, dramatize them, illustrate them on posters, sing and dance about them, put them on the radio, design handouts on them, and who knows -- perhaps put them in a pot, cook and eat them!

Returning to the idea of female economic, and of food as an important priority for Plan Sierra, we would like to make the following points:

1. A patio garden means tremendous savings in time: picking what is needed for cooking the dinner is easier than going to a store or distant garden;
2. Good nutrition means less sickness which means less expenditure of time and money;
3. Supervising and educating children through including them in the work on a family garden plot near the house is an economical use of the mother's time, and a good device for educating children in nutrition and responsible agricultural practices.
4. A patio garden is an economical method of "storing" vegetables because food in the earth retains its nutritive value and will last a long time -- it only needs to be picked when it is to be eaten. Vegetables bought in the market have lost a great deal of their food value by the time they are put in the pot to be cooked.

D. Family Food Production Program as a Demonstration Model

We believe that an interesting and important side effect of implementation of an FFP would be to provide a useful demonstration for the community of the effects of restoring and building the soil. Through techniques of intensive, organic cultivation; concentrated application of inputs and soil conditioning techniques, and frugal use of water resources, the potential for a modicum of self-sufficiency on limited land can be available for all to see.

III. Objectives

The Family Food Production Program might encompass the following objectives:

- A. Recognition of women's contribution to family and community through (1) helping women come to some notion of self-worth; (2) giving women's menfolk and children new perspective on the value of what women do, and (3) increasing community appreciation of women's economic, social and cultural contributions. Especially emphasized could be women's role in the family economy, in both income generation and income conservation.
- B. Education of women and the community in applied nutrition and health through Family Food Production, according to the needs and the climate/ecology/agronomic situation of each region.
- C. Instruction of women and women's clubs in intensive gardening through the Family Food Production Plan, a cycle of year-round nutritious vegetables which complement staples to provide a complete diet.
- D. Training of women and the women's clubs in simple cost-accounting and budgeting to give the family an accurate notion of costs and benefits of the vegetable gardening, and also help the men in the more complicated task of keeping track of costs in the cash-cropping operation: inputs, outputs, profits and losses, and loan repayments.
- E. Introduction of improved methods for cooking and preserving foods to retain their nutritive value and to provide for seasons of lower productivity.
- F. Diffusion of strategies of household management -- for example, the production and purchase of clothing in the most economical manner; planning of work-saving methods and aids (construction of a multi-use kitchen work surface, with compartment for dishwashing; construction of simple storage cabinet to preserve food against waste); design of simple catchment schemes for capturing rain-water or laundry water for later use.
- G. Use of all possible forms of communications and media to re-enforce the concepts and subject

matter of Family Food Production and allied topics as outlined in A-G above.

IV. Implementation

To carry out the objectives outlined above, we suggest the integration into Plan Sierra of nutrition and health education through a Family Food Production Program, as an additional area in which the Plan can extend on request from women's groups technical assistance, inputs and supervision.

To build a successful new program in nutrition and health education through Family Food Production, we suggest that the women's groups might carry out the following activities:

1. In each community, the women would sponsor an initial campaign on the urgency of family food production and its relationship to good nutrition and health.⁺
2. Every family would learn enough basic nutrition to understand why certain practices are important, why certain vegetables are chosen in their region, and why certain combinations of food are emphasized.
3. Every ama de casa would learn how to grow the recommended vegetables in a planned cycle keyed to staple crops available so that there would be a supply of vegetables to be used (and in some cases processed for future use) to prepare nutritious meals throughout the year.
4. The ama de casa would learn the cultivation of the recommended vegetables through intensive gardening techniques which emphasize high production in small land spaces, improving soil structure, and economical use of water and fertilizers.

⁺ Such a program should be built around involvement of all the people, including not only the amas de casa, but husbands and older sons; agrónomos and promotores; mejoradoras, health aides and nutritionists; schools, and any community networks, including radio programs.

5. The ama de casa would learn ways to prepare foods to maintain their full nutritive value, as well as their attractive color and taste.

In order for Plan Sierra to effectively respond to requests from women's groups, it could train and hire a corps of técnicas trained in the above activities of nutrition/health education through intensive vegetable gardening, and in the techniques of non-formal adult education including one-to-one interaction; group dynamics, and use of mass communications such as radio, newspaper and handouts (broadsides). Such técnicas might carry out their activities as follows:

1. They might be deployed in three Family Food Production brigades, one in each sub-zone.
2. Each brigade could consist of several FFP técnicas who would travel around the zone, spending several days in each community (when they had visited all the communities requesting this type of help from Plan Sierra, they would start over again perhaps adding additional areas of activities as the women's clubs defined other needs).
3. The técnicas would assist the community groups in running a community information campaign (collaborating closely with the promotor(a); upgrading the competency of the mejoradoras so that they could continue the program after the FFP brigade moves on; assist (with the cooperation of the agrónomo) in planting demonstration gardens; develop materials for further diffusion of nutrition/health education through family food production.

To assist the técnicas in their program, it would be important to provide or create basic materials:

1. Kits to launch the program in each community -- such kits might consist of slides, posters, flip charts, flannel boards, etc.
2. Simple follow-up lesson plans for the mejoradoras.
3. Illustrated handouts, at times a single sheet

emphasizing only one simple idea from the lesson, for the mejoradoras to give the amas de casa to take home so that the lesson learned is reenforced. These materials could be designed to go into an FFP notebook so that the ama de casa has a permanent resource of information for her future reference.

Such materials might be developed, refined after try-out, and produced in a central place, for example at the Institute Superior de Agricultural (perhaps as student projects?), with the close collaboration of the FFP brigadistas. Or in the training courses, including the one-month course mentioned below, there might be instruction for the future brigadistas in methods of constructing their own kits and followup materials.

V. Training Técnicas in Family Food Production

A. Short-range training:

We suggest a one-month course for the future tecnicas so that an FFPP can be launched soon afterwards. This might be accomplished as follows:

1. Plan Sierra and ISA decide who should make up the trainees, as this is a question we cannot answer. However, we do believe that several potential supervisors of the brigades should participate in the planning of the course, as well as in following it for content, i.e., the two female agrónomos recently hired to work with the women, and the director of health and education as she is able.
2. The course be held in Las Matas so that agrónomos, promotores, and key Plan Sierra staff can sit in as their time, interest and responsibilities allow; this would also serve as good internal public relations for the new program.
3. ISA be involved in the design and planning of the course, and in conducting it, so that the training is institutionalized from the beginning and so that ISA and Plan Sierra can build on the experience for continued

training of the brigadistas and for the development of the intermediate and long-range training programs for rural development workers ISA is contemplating.

4. Several outside experts in nutrition, health, adult education and intensive gardening be "imported" to help develop and plan the course with ISA and Plan Sierra, and that each works with a Dominican counterpart.
5. That Texas A & M be approached to provide several of the outside technical assistants so that a link can be forged from the beginning among this institution, ISA and Plan Sierra, not only in the short-term training, but for the longer term. Such a cooperation might include exchange of students and professors; collaborative research; collaborative development of materials and teaching aids, and perhaps a "Texas" semester for the students in the intermediate range program.
6. A careful review of the indigenous expertise in each of these fields be carried out (including resources in other parts of the Caribbean, i.e., CFNI in Jamaica, and the II Integrated Rural Development Project in Jamaica where a similar Family Food Production Program has been initiated), and that as many Dominican resource people as possible be included in the planning for the FFPP and for the course, in order that they are introduced to Plan Sierra and are available for future training needs.
7. A continuing training program be planned as a follow-up for the técnicas; it could consist of an afternoon a week and a full day each month with the topics to be determined as problems and possibilities develop, but that for the first year at least, the training days be devoted to going more deeply into nutrition, health and family food production in all its aspects.

B. Middle-range training:

Building on the one-month training program and the follow-up training, we suggest that:

1. Plan Sierra and ISA work together (and invite Texas A & M to participate) to develop a new technical career in FFP with an emphasis on nutrition/health, requiring one or two years of post-secondary training.
2. Several of the original tecnicas be included in this program.
3. The curriculum be enlarged to include several of the areas of need expressed by the clubes de amas de casa and FERONCA, as well as other competencies important to the Dominican countrywoman. Such topics might include child care and development, simple household and farm accounting; community development, and other topics which are mentioned under the objectives in No. II above.

C. Longer-range training:

In order to link the pioneering training program in FFP to be developed and tested in the Plan Sierra region to broader goals and needs in the Dominican Republic, several other possibilities might be explored -- again building on the short-term and middle-range training experiences:

1. A new minor for the ISA program in agronomy at the university level.
2. Development of a course and curriculum materials to introduce family food production, nutrition and health and several of the other key topics in rural primary and secondary schools.

VI. Next Steps and Possible Funding Sources

We should like to discuss this with you verably, as there are several reports we must make and several persons we should see before we outline specifics. We also need to know whether you would like to proceed and in what manner.