

15th July 15, 2010 Caracas - Standing between two wooden planks that shore up the front of her small makeshift house, 40-year-old Maribel Huerta talks about her family.

She lives with her husband, a bricklayer who earns the minimum wage, and her three sons. The eldest wants to be an engineer, but all she wants is bricks, to replace the planks, posts, cardboard, plastic sheeting and corrugated iron walls of her home.

"We spend the little money we have on food and sending the boys to school. We've lived here for 10 years. Now we need to fix up the house a bit and find a way of earning some more money," Huerta told IPS.

Her house is crammed together with half a dozen other dwellings, some brick-built, some made out of very flimsy materials, on the slope of a mountain so green it looks like a picture postcard, on the road to El Jarillo in an agricultural area west of the Venezuelan capital, which is 50 kilometres away by winding highways.

Several families in this tiny hamlet are eligible for the "Zero Hunger" programme, launched this year by the state government of Miranda, an 8,000-square-kilometre province comprising mountains, plains, rivers, Caribbean beaches, part of the Caracas metropolitan area and some of its outlying dormitory towns.

The programme includes vouchers worth between 5,000 and 15,000 bolivars (1,170 and 3,500 dollars at the official exchange rate) to exchange for building materials, as well as distribution of food packages, health care and education, job training and support for micro-businesses.

The plan targets the lowest-income households that are not in receipt of pensions, allowances or subsidies provided by the social programmes established by the national government of President Hugo Chávez, in office since 1999.

"The plan is inspired by Brazil's programme; we adapted it to local circumstances in Miranda, and this year we implemented it, benefiting the first 7,500 families who were in a situation of critical poverty," Juan Fernández, its coordinator, told IPS.

"As in Brazil, we don't want to just give out charity handouts, but to integrate people into society, with a plan that brings hope to the needy," he said.

The Zero Hunger Plan that Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva launched in 2003 consists of up to 60 programmes aimed at five large groups of families living in extreme poverty. They receive cash transfers, land for cultivation, education and health services, integration into the labour market and, of course, food.

Lula and Chávez constantly refer to the political affinity between them. They have signed hundreds of cooperation agreements, and they repeatedly voice their concern for the plight of the poorest.

Paradoxically, it was not the Chávez administration that took up the Zero Hunger Plan idea, but the young state governor of Miranda, Henrique Capriles, of the opposition Primero Justicia (Justice First) party, a centrist party with Christian Democratic roots.

"Ours is the first state to institute a formal programme to fight hunger. It is wrong to say that there are no hungry families in Venezuela; we cannot hide the truth, which is that many people have nothing," Capriles told IPS.

"The plan includes providing food for needy families, but it goes much further than that, because people can only escape from poverty by becoming productive," Capriles said.

Fernández said that by 2011, the plan aims to reach 15,000 families of the 25,800 households living in extreme poverty in Miranda, according to the National Institute of Statistics (INE). Nationwide, seven percent of Venezuela's 28 million people are extremely poor, INE says.

The first of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by the member states of the United Nations in 2000, is to halve the proportion of extremely poor people, and of the hungry, by 2015, compared with 1990 baseline indicators.

The programme in Miranda, which has a budget of 5.5 million dollars for this year, is based on family case studies: a list of unmet needs is used to identify households that are eligible for assistance. The plan calls for coordinated action by state government agencies in charge of health, housing, employment and education.

The food sacks delivered each month contain several different cereal grains, powdered milk, salt, oil, sugar, beans and tinned sardines, tuna and pork.

Again as in Brazil, a joint responsibility agreement is entered into by the state government and the beneficiary, who undertakes to participate in job training workshops over the course of one year, among other commitments.

"More than 80 percent of the beneficiaries are women, most of whom are heads of households with children and old people in their care," Fernández emphasised.

The training programme, called "Plan Crecer" (roughly, Plan for Personal Growth), provides education and help for setting up community agriculture cooperatives, and courses in personal care, childcare, sewing, crafts and catering for tourists.

"I'm going to attend a workshop to learn how to make fresh fruit ice-cream," Celia Gavidia, a neighbour of Huerta's, who has received a subsidy for a new roof for her house, told IPS.

Although they were born and raised in this fertile area where plenty of fruit and vegetables are grown, families like Huerta's or Gavidia's only possess the few square metres of steep ground that supports their precarious houses. They are greatly interested in all aspects of the Zero Hunger Plan, and appreciate the fact that Capriles personally handed them the "certificates" they will exchange for building materials.

Political loyalties, in this country that has been sharply polarised for over a decade, appear to have been laid aside for the moment. Two red T-shirts, the trade-mark of Chávez supporters, bearing slogans from recent campaigns hang from a hook in Huerta's living room, and by Gavidia's house, a tattered pro-Chávez poster drips in the light rain.

But something has changed: on the makeshift roofs of the huddled houses there are two pay-television antennas. Why spend at least 20 dollars a month for this service? "Because of the national broadcasts," three women reply in chorus, and one explains: "When the president takes over the television network to give his long speeches, now we can switch to another programme."

Source: [IPS](#)