

GUATEMALA Food Security Alert

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Food security at risk in the west

The food security of many households in the western highlands is at risk (Figure 1) due to crop losses caused by this year's climatic irregularities as well as the low yields from 2008. Food access is hampered by reduced remittances and limited employment, and high food prices. Nutritional and food security assessments suggest the need for timely interventions to avoid escalating food insecurity and to stem cases of acute malnutrition.

The western region has only one annual harvest, in October-December. Due to high input prices, fertilization was poor and yields were below average in 2008. The food reserves of the poorest households were finished by March, making them dependent on market purchases one month earlier than normal. Moreover, rainfall was deficient and irregular this year, especially since July, with accumulated negative anomalies of up to 75 percent, thus reducing maize and bean yields. Reserves will be exhausted as early as January or February, making households dependent on the purchase of food three months earlier than normal.

Remittances sent by migrants, especially from the United States, have diminished ten percent this year. Households that receive remittances typically dedicate 41 percent of them to the purchase of food. Another important source of income, unskilled agricultural labor, accounts for 60-93 percent of the income of the poorest households; those same households acquire between 50 and 100 percent of their staple cereals from market purchases. This year, dry conditions affected coffee production, reducing the amount of labor required for the harvest. On the other hand, sugarcane producers report that demand for unskilled labor during the harvest will be normal. Maize prices were lower this year than in 2008, but are still higher than the long-term average. In the department of Quiché, maize prices were 68 percent above the national average, and bean prices were significantly above those of last year in the west, especially in Totonicapán and San Marcos.

According to the Ministry of Health, between January and September, the acute malnutrition rate for children under five in the departments of Totonicapán, Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango, and parts of Quiché was above the national rate. Title II programs in the region report increases in global malnutrition (weight/age) of up to 12 percent among participating children under 36 months of age. The nutritional status of children is expected to decline as the hunger season sets in.

As a result of climatic problems, this area will have smaller harvests, causing households to run out of food reserves by January/February and making them more dependent on the purchase of food. Households that depend on coffee labor and remittances will also be affected. Food security is expected to deteriorate beginning in February 2010 and last up to the August/September harvest. Nevertheless, due to limited information about this area, more detailed assessments of the current situation are required for timely decision-making.

Figure 1. Main livelihood zones in the west



Source: *Livelihoods Study, 2007*