

Mexico Crusade on Hunger Raises Questions

E. EDUARDO CASTILLO, ASSOCIATED PRESS

COCHOAPA EL GRANDE, Mexico (AP) — On a recent weekday afternoon, half a dozen children crossed the main square on their way home from school in this dusty farming town of 2,600 people high in the pine-covered mountains of southern Mexico.

Their bellies ached from malnourishment and their arms were as skinny as those of children half their 8 or 9 years of age.

A few feet away a menu pinned to the wall of a government-run kitchen promised cookies, eggs with meat, rice and juice. But the kitchen was closed and the five large tables were empty, with dozens of plastic chairs stacked against a wall. Residents said it had only been operating sporadically since it opened, with no explanation from the officials who were supposed to be running it.

More than a year after President Enrique Peña Nieto launched what he called a national crusade against hunger, the government says 3 million Mexicans are eating better. However, independent experts say that number is questionable and the crusade against hunger appears to be doing far less than advertised.

On visits to three of the community kitchens supposedly operating in Guerrero, one of Mexico's poorest and most hunger-plagued states, Associated Press reporters found not a single one in operation. State officials said they had no knowledge of a fourth community kitchen in the city of Acapulco, despite federal government claims that one had been set up.

Since independence more than two centuries ago, Mexico has suffered from persistently high levels of poverty and economic inequality, but Peña Nieto is the first president to focus so intently on hunger, which his administration calls the most pressing problem facing the country's poorest citizens.

In the 400 poorest and most malnourished of the country's 2,400 municipalities, the Peña Nieto administration has been trying to enroll more people in existing social programs such as Opportunities, which provides a small monthly stipend to qualifying poor Mexicans. The only completely new element of the program is the creation of government-run cafeterias known as community kitchens.

The United Nations defines a hungry person as someone who for at least a year is not able to eat enough to cover their basic energy needs. The Mexican government has a much looser definition, saying that a hungry person is anyone who is in extreme poverty and suffers from what it calls "a lack of food." And the Mexican government acknowledges that for at least another year there will be no way to measure whether the program is actually addressing the problems of those it's supposed to benefit — 7 million Mexicans the government says are suffering from a

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combination of extreme poverty and malnourishment even as the country also suffers from among the world's highest rates of obesity.

"Our task will be measuring the situation out in the field to verify that this is true," said Gonzalo Hernandez Licona, head of the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy.

That hasn't stopped the government from claiming success.

"After a year it's very encouraging to see and appreciate the progress, that out of these 7 million Mexicans, 3 million Mexicans today, a year later, are assured of better nutrition," Pena Nieto said in late January.

Critics say many of the government's claims about the crusade's success are based simply on the continued enrollment of Mexicans in programs that began under previous administrations. Some of those enrollment figures have even been dropping, raising further questions about the three million figure.

Critics also charge that the Pena Nieto government is claiming a dramatic achievement without real proof — a preference for style over substance that spills over into a variety of areas, from security to political reforms.

"There's been success in the sense of passing controversial legislative reforms, but there haven't been any results yet," said Edna Jaime, director of the think-tank Mexico Evaluates. "We aren't seeing any evidence that things are going better."

The government says Guerrero was the first state to receive community kitchens to help the already poor state recover from the damage wreaked by Hurricane Manuel last year. The kitchens are supposed to open from Monday to Friday and provide free food for breakfast and lunch.

On a recent morning, no food was being prepared and no residents showed up all day in Cochoapa El Grande. Another kitchen in the nearby village of San Miguel Amoltepec, was closed.

The federal secretary of social development says the administration also has installed two kitchens in the city of Acapulco. A recent visit by an AP reporter found one out of service and state officials disavowed any knowledge of a second. Officials and residents said the three kitchens seen by the AP had operated at some point, but not consistently.

Florentino Vazquez Lopez, a 44-year-old farm worker, said he occasionally sent some of his six children to the community kitchen in Cochoapa el Grande, but kitchen employees demanded a fee of two or three pesos from each person, or firewood from those without cash.

Residents of San Miguel Amoltepec, a 20-minute drive away on a narrow dirt road, said they were similarly asked to pay a small fee in cash or firewood. Some said the kitchen had closed two days earlier after it ran out of food.

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Much of the food is canned and shipped from major cities, a practice experts and indigenous advocates called a missed opportunity to help the development of local agriculture.

"It's a charity model that in some ways perpetuates cycles of poverty," said Xaviera Cabada, director of the nutritional food campaign for the group Consumer Power.

Regardless, say social scientists such as Gerardo Esquivel, a College of Mexico economist, such figures are a bad way of measuring whether people are actually being helped. Instead, officials could measure the physical effects of nutrition, such as anemia, weight and other indicators of proper diet.

"Up until now," Esquivel said, "all we have are actions, program and resources dedicated to creating more people receiving aid."

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AP writer Jose Antonio Rivera in Acapulco contributed to this report.

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