

FOOD SECURITY ASYMMETRIES IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: KEYS TO COOPERATION WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

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1. Introduction

The declaration of the Leaders' Summit on Global Food Security of 2022 said: "Food systems and global food security are at a critical moment. The compounded impacts from a global pandemic, growing pressures from the climate crisis, high energy and fertiliser prices, and protracted conflicts, including Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine have disrupted production and supply chains and dramatically increased global food insecurity, especially for the most vulnerable." (US Department of State, 2022).

These words reflect the global concern over food security, and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is no exception. While the region is rich in natural and agricultural resources, it faces significant challenges to guarantee all its inhabitants have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food (FAO, IFAD, PAHO, UNICEF and WFP, 2023: 106-108). Thanks to its diversity of geography and climate, it has a wealth of natural resources and biodiversity, as well as a broad range of agricultural products that, in theory, could support a robust food security. In fact: "The region accounts for 16% of the world's agricultural soils and 33% of unused agricultural land, which means it has the largest reserve of soils with agricultural potential in the world" (ECLAC, 2019). The agricultural sector is crucial for the region's food security and is a source of food for the rest of the world. "In 2021, the region's agricultural exports totalled US\$257bn, while imports amounted to US\$109bn" (ECLAC, 2023: 65).

The reality, however, is more complex given that LAC "is the region with the highest average level of income inequality in the world. In highly unequal countries, economic slowdowns and downturns disproportionately affect the food security and nutrition of low-income groups" (FAO, IFAD, PAHO, UNICEF and WFP, 2023: 2). And inside the region each country faces different realities with varying levels of asymmetries relative to poverty, income levels, inequality, agricultural production, exports and dependence on imports of certain food groups, inputs or fertilisers (*idem*).

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Thus, despite an abundance of natural resources, the unequal distribution of wealth and the lack of equitable access to agricultural land and resources has generated deep disparities, meaning that some communities face difficulties in accessing nutritious food. In such a setting, international cooperation plays a fundamental role in the search for effective solutions to LAC's food security challenges. And a key player in this cooperation is the European Union (EU), which has forged strategic ties with the region to tackle these challenges together.

2. Food security: asymmetries and challenges in Latin America

One of the most pressing challenges in LAC is the persistent *inequality in access to food*. Despite an abundance of natural and agricultural resources in the region and the progress made in reducing extreme poverty, in 2022, "22.5% of the Latin America and the Caribbean population cannot afford a healthy diet. In the Caribbean this figure reaches 52%; in Mesoamerica, 27.8%; and in South America, 18.4%" (PAHO, 2023). This inequality in access to food is compounded by the fact that the "rapid surge in food prices in recent years increased the cost of a healthy diet in the region. The greatest burden of this increase falls on vulnerable populations such as indigenous people, rural inhabitants and women" (FAO, IFAD, PAHO, WFP and UNICEF, 2023: 47).

Thus, *rural poverty* is another major challenge that directly affects food security in Latin America, given that a large proportion of people in rural areas rely on agriculture as their main source of income and subsistence. In addition, a lack of investment in rural development and limited access to credit and modern agricultural technology, as well as the volatility of agricultural prices, mean that many rural communities are more vulnerable to food insecurity when crops fail or food prices rise. (FAO, IFAD, PAHO, WFP and UNICEF, 2023). This is reflected in the disparity between the diets of rural and urban communities, as well as in the lack of access to quality food for the most vulnerable groups, which causes high rates of food insecurity. Rural areas in LAC "are home to more than 123 million people, 50 million of whom work, meaning that rural employment supports one in five working people in the region. Poverty (45.7%) and extreme poverty (21.7%) rates in rural areas are two and three times higher than in urban areas" (ILO, 2020). With those rates of poverty, the most vulnerable groups in rural areas lack sufficient means to obtain a basic basket of food.

A further challenge for food security is *climate change*. Latin America is vulnerable to extreme weather phenomena such as droughts, floods and unpredictable weather events that impact agricultural production and food availability. This affects the region's capacity to ensure a constant supply of food. Climate change can lead to a shortage of food and an increase in food insecurity.

Loss of agricultural biodiversity is another critical challenge for food security that threatens the resilience of food systems in LAC (WWF Colombia, 2022). As modern agricultural practices tend to focus on a limited number of cash crops, there is a risk of losing varieties of indigenous and traditional crops that are essential to food diversity and security.

Another challenge is *food inflation*, whose upward trend is hitting the purchasing power of more and more households in the region, putting their food security at increasing risk. “Average food inflation in 2021 was 3.7 percentage points higher in the region than the world average. This trend is highly relevant because high prices of nutritious foods are a critical barrier to healthy diets” (FAO, IFAD, PAHO, UNICEF and WFP, 2023: 47).

These priority challenges for food security highlight the need to tackle not just food production but also equity, investment in rural development, climate change adaptation, the conservation of agricultural biodiversity and controlling food inflation to ensure a more secure and sustainable future for food in the region.

3. Drivers of LAC-EU food security cooperation

Cooperation between LAC and the EU on food security has become an essential component of rising to the challenges mentioned above. The EU has played a prominent role in supporting initiatives that strengthen food security in the region. Below we shall examine some of the key drivers of this collaboration and how they are contributing to the improvement of food security in LAC.

An initial driver of cooperation is *support for the promotion of sustainable farming*. The EU has invested in programmes that foster the adoption of environmentally friendly farming techniques. This includes the promotion of conservation agriculture, which minimises soil erosion and reduces the need for chemical inputs, and crop diversification to increase the resilience of agricultural systems and the sustainable management of natural resources (European Union, 2023). Cooperation here seeks to improve natural resource management, reduce soil degradation and promote more sustainable and environmentally friendly farming practices in order to contribute not just to food security but also to the conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity.

Investment in agricultural research and technological innovation is a second key driver to improve productivity and food quality. The EU provides financial and technical support to strengthen these areas through cooperation programmes (AL-Invest 5.0, 2020). This includes promoting joint research among scientific institutions and universities in the EU and LAC. The collaboration promotes adopting advanced farming technologies such as efficient irrigation systems and post-harvest management practices to reduce food loss (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2018). Investment in research and technology is essential to increase agricultural productivity and ensure the availability of high-quality food.

Another pillar of bi-regional cooperation is *inclusive rural development* that seeks to reduce rural poverty and improve agricultural communities’ access to adequate land and resources. The EU fosters investment in rural infrastructure, the training of farmers and promoting inclusive development models. Thus, “support for the economic and social inclusion of rural communities is essential to improve food security in Latin America” (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2018). Cooperation

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programmes focus on strengthening local capacities and empowering rural communities so that they can manage their resources sustainably and improve their quality of life.

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4. Benefits of LAC-EU food security cooperation

Bi-regional cooperation in the field of food security provides a series of significant benefits that impact both Latin America and the EU and make a substantial contribution to improving food security in the region. These benefits range from strengthening food security to fostering sustainability and economic development. Some of the key benefits of this collaboration are detailed below.

Promoting **sustainable farming practices** is one key benefit of the cooperation. Investment in sustainable farming not only improves agricultural production, it also helps to preserve the environment (World Bank Blogs, 2021). This collaboration fosters the adoption of environmentally friendly farming practices such as conservation agriculture, which minimises soil erosion and reduces the need for chemical inputs, benefitting farmers and the health of the ecosystem.

Cooperation between the EU and LAC promotes more sustainable farming practices and **resilience to climate change**. This includes the introduction of drought and flood resistant crop varieties, as well as the deployment of efficient irrigation systems. In addition, strengthening investment in **agricultural research and technology** is crucial to improve productivity and food quality. Bi-regional cooperation promotes the adoption of advanced farming technologies, which helps to “increase agricultural productivity and ensure availability of high-quality food” (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2018). This collaboration boosts innovation in the farming sector as the EU provides its experience and advanced technology in agriculture and food security, which can be adapted to the specific needs of LAC.

Cooperation between the EU and LAC also has a positive impact on **inclusive rural development**. Financial and technical support for rural development seeks to “include rural communities economically and socially, which is essential to improve food security in Latin America” (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2018) and helps to reduce rural poverty and strengthen local capacities.

Fostering fair and sustainable trade is also a goal of EU-LAC cooperation. This refers to “the importance of open and fair trade based on internationally agreed rules, productive supply chains, and access to markets, and their contribution to promote sustainable development in its three mutually supportive dimensions: economic, social and environmental”. (Council of the European Union, Declaration of the EU-CELAC Summit 2023). In the post-COVID-19 context in the EU and LAC, the construction of “resilient economies also rests on rules-based

and sustainable fair trade, as well as on investment conditions with these characteristics. The above can only be achieved if the reconstruction context also takes into consideration issues relating to climate change and biodiversity” (Centro Alemán de Información para Latinoamérica, 2020).

These benefits demonstrate that bi-regional cooperation in the field of food security is a valuable investment that not only strengthens the region’s capacity to guarantee safe and nutritious food, but also contributes to sustainable development and the wellbeing of its people. This cooperation has resulted in a series of successful projects and programmes, some of which are outlined below.

Program “AL-Invest 5.0: Inclusive Growth for Social Cohesion” stands out as one of the EU’s most important international cooperation projects in Latin America. “It began in 1994 seeking to attract European investment to Latin America and with time, after seeing the realities in the region, it changed to promote internationalisation and to promote and encourage productivity in thousands of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Latin America” (AL-Invest 5.0, 2020: 8). Over its five phases it has focused “on strengthening the production, competitiveness and internationalisation processes of Latin American MSMEs, becoming the European Union’s flagship project for the private sector” (*idem*). It has succeeded in “benefitting over 49,000 MSMEs from 18 Latin American countries, thanks to the joint efforts of 110 business institutions in Latin America and the European Union” (AL-Invest 5.0, 2020: 5).

Euroclima+. For over a decade it has been the EU’s flagship regional programme on climate action in Latin America. “In 2023, it extended its footprint to the Caribbean and it is now being implemented in all 33 LAC countries. The initiative is part of the EU’s Global Gateway strategy that builds partnerships between the EU and the Latin America and the Caribbean regions as they lead the green and just transition”. (European Union, 2023).

AgroInnova 2020-2023, promoting innovative multistrata agroforestry systems for the Central American Dry Corridor, with which the EU seeks to improve the climate resilience and food security of at least 3,000 small producers of basic grains (IICA, 2023).

ProCadenas 2019-2023. A project to provide technical assistance to strengthen the regulatory, institutional and sanitary framework of sustainable livestock production. The goal is to reduce rural poverty through the economic diversification, improved competitiveness and integration into international markets of non-traditional livestock production in Paraguay (IICA, 2023).

Food security programme in the Caribbean 2013-2017. The beneficiary countries were the CARIFORUM members (Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, The Bahamas, and Trinidad and Tobago) and the objective was “to strengthen incentives, policies and programmes for smallholders in the region” (IICA, 2023).

These examples illustrate how cooperation with the EU has resulted in specific projects that address food security challenges in the region and promote sustainable agricultural practices, improve food quality and the resilience of local communities.

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These examples illustrate how cooperation with the EU has resulted in specific projects that address food security challenges in the region and promote sustainable agricultural practices, improve food quality and the resilience of local communities. In addition, LAC has assets and capabilities in the agri-food chain that have attracted foreign investment, hence: “European Union companies have led the announcements of investment projects in the food and beverage industry in Latin America and the Caribbean. Between 2017 and 2021, they announced investments worth close \$9bn, 38% of the total announced in the region in this sector [...] Brazil and Mexico accounted for the largest amount of investment project announcements by European Union companies in food and beverages (38% and 30%, respectively, between 2017 and 2021), followed by Argentina (11%) and Chile (11%)” (ECLAC, 2023: 65).

5. Latin America-European Union food security cooperation challenges and prospects

While significant food security achievements and benefits have been attained through bi-regional cooperation between LAC and the EU, there are challenges that could be addressed to strengthen it even more. Below are some of those challenges and possible projections.

First, *climate change and climate disasters* pose an ongoing and pressing threat to food security. As extreme weather phenomena become more frequent and unpredictable, it is necessary to adapt farming and food systems in LAC. Climate disasters like droughts, floods, forest fires and storms can damage crops, destroy transport and storage infrastructure and adversely affect agricultural production, causing a reduction in food supply and an increase in food prices. Therefore climate adaptation must be a priority of cooperation between the EU and Latin America in order to guarantee sustainable food security for the long term. (ECLAC, 2023)

In addition, *pandemics and health crises* like COVID-19 highlight the importance of resilient food systems. Therefore, since greater cooperation is crucial to strengthen the capacity to respond to health crises and ensure the continuity of the food supply chain, “cooperation must include the promotion of more robust food systems and better management of food crises” (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2020). LAC-EU cooperation can strengthen the capacity to respond, as well as support a constant food supply in emergency situations with resilience mechanisms that enable tackling future food crises effectively (ECLAC, 2023).

Another key challenge is investment to improve food security with a long-term approach in three major priority areas for LAC: *increasing productivity, decarbonising food production and improving equitable access for the most vulnerable*. This approach takes account of current concerns about growing food insecurity and hunger, future trends of greater pressure on agriculture and food production owing to population growth, and climate change (ECLAC, 2023: 62-63). Cooperation with the EU in this respect could focus on these three major areas. “To increase agricultural productivity, while reducing both emissions per unit of output and total sector emissions and

improving access to a healthy diet for vulnerable populations, the intensity and direction of technological change must be redefined, with major investments in digital technologies, infrastructure and training of actors at all levels of the food production chain" (*idem*).

Similarly, *conflicts like the war in Ukraine* have a significant impact on food security, with an asymmetrical effect on food price fluctuation and supply chains in a highly interconnected global food market (Aróstica, P., 2022: 7-10). Perceived shortage or instability in the supply of food may lead to speculation on commodity markets, which in turn can raise the price of food. This is why LAC-EU cooperation to tackle such scenarios is crucial.

The *transition towards sustainable food systems* is another key challenge. Cooperation can advance the promotion of organic farming, the sustainable management of natural resources and help to arrest the depletion of food supplies. So, an "approach that promotes sustainable farming practices and more environmentally friendly production and distribution systems" is required (European Union, 2023).

In addition, *digitalisation and farming technology* offer opportunities to improve productivity and efficiency in the agricultural sector. Bi-regional cooperation can encourage the adoption of digital technologies like precision agriculture and food traceability and in this respect investment in agricultural technology and the promotion of digitalisation can boost the modernisation of agriculture in the region (Sotomayor, O., Ramírez, E. and Martínez, H., 2021: 9-14).

In short, "there are three main drivers of food insecurity, and they are conflicts, economic challenges and climate-induced extreme weather" (World Bank, 2023). LAC-EU food security cooperation, then, faces constant challenges. Yet it also offers opportunities to tackle these problems together and develop innovative solutions. Cooperation and adaptation to changing circumstances will be key to attaining sustainable food security in LAC that benefits both parties.

6. Conclusions

LAC-EU cooperation has proven to be crucial in addressing the food security challenges facing the region and promoting sustainable development. This bi-regional cooperation has made significant advances: it has promoted the adoption of sustainable farming practices; it has boosted agricultural research and technology, and it has supported inclusive rural development. It has also helped to improve food availability and quality, as well as the resilience of rural communities in LAC.

Latin America "is an important food supplier, exporting 40% of its food production and representing 17% of the total world food exports" (FAO, IFAD, PAHO, UNICEF and WFP. 2023: 5). But challenges persist and they require constant attention. Climate change, inequality in access to food and health crises (like the COVID-19 pandemic) are significant obstacles to food security in LAC and cooperation with the EU can be adapted to address these challenges. Therefore, among other aspects, it is necessary

to “improve food crisis management and strengthen the resilience of food systems to extreme weather events” (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2020). Parallel to the challenges, the future prospects for LAC-EU cooperation in the field of food security are promising (ECLAC, 2023: 59-68). The transition towards more sustainable food systems, agricultural digitalisation and fostering fair and sustainable trade offers opportunities to develop a more robust bi-regional cooperation.

The Declaration of the EU-CELAC Summit 2023 noted the importance of joint cooperation, with statements such as: “We reaffirm that by working together as sovereign partners, we are stronger and better placed to face the multiple crises and challenges of our times including food insecurity, poverty, inequalities in both regions, supply chain disruptions, and rising inflation” (Council of the European Union, 2023). Clearly, the need for more resistant and efficient food systems is a priority and that is why it is necessary to develop resilience mechanisms that make it possible to tackle future food crises effectively (ECLAC, 2023; European Council, 2023). Cooperation must remain agile and geared towards concrete action.

Lastly, LAC-EU cooperation on food security is not only crucial to guarantee the availability of sufficient and nutritious food; it is also a key step towards sustainable development that will enable improving people’s quality of life. An ongoing commitment and adaptation to the changing circumstances are essential to the success of bi-regional food security cooperation.

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