

Exceptional Women are Our History and Our Future:

A New Ambassador Against World Hunger
Ertharin Cousin serves as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Agencies in Rome.

This is a blog post about hunger in her own voice, posted at the [US Department of State Blog](#). We think Ertharin Cousin will do well at the World Food Programme.

Improved Nutrition, Agricultural Development Helps Bring Hondurans Out of Poverty and Hunger

Posted by Ertharin Cousin / January 06, 2012

One of the most exciting moments in my recent media tour of U.S. and UN food security projects in Honduras came in the middle of a lush vegetable field in the township of Las Pavas. Surrounded by lettuce, broccoli, carrots and radishes, Nora Diaz told me that thanks to their home garden, her family -- unlike many in Honduras -- was able to stay together.

As part of the USAID ACCESO initiative that targets 18,000 poor rural households in Honduras, the Diaz family was given assistance in the form of training, fertilizer, seed, and irrigation that allowed them to grow better and more nutritious food for their family. It also allowed them to produce a surplus that can be sold to generate income. Thanks to this, Mr. Diaz did not need to leave his family in search of work in the city, or abroad.

Mario Corea Pineda has gone a step further. He is a small farmer -- a carrot producer -- who, with the support of the ACCESO program, has been able to improve the quality of his carrots so that they now meet market requirements, and are readily sold.

In my role as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Food and Agriculture agencies in Rome, I went to Honduras accompanied by five journalists from Central and South America to see the work the United States and the UN Food and Agriculture agencies are doing in the field. For me it is an opportunity to hear from U.S. and UN staff on the ground



about their challenges and successes and, more importantly, from the people such as Nora and Mario, who benefit from the programs.

For the journalists who accompany me -- in this case all young and eager -- the tours are a precious opportunity to learn hands-on about what the United States is doing to improve food security through USAID and the Feed the Future program, and how its strong financial support of UN agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is improving the lives of poor and hungry rural families in the region.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, with 65 percent of Hondurans living in poverty. It is sparsely populated and, as we discovered in just two days driving through the countryside, many rural communities are very isolated. It took us two hours driving on unpaved backroads through beautiful, mostly uninhabited green hills, and past very primitive isolated homes, to reach the town of Reitoca. There, very much in the middle of nowhere, is a lively town of 1,000 people with a committed mayor and Municipal Grain Bank supported by FAO.

The Grain Bank has changed the lives of the farmers of Reitoca. They now have a communal facility in which to store their maize and beans so they can weather fluctuations of price and times of scarcity. The Bank buys grains at harvest time, when prices are low, and loans grains to needy families when prices rise, contingent on their commitment to use sustainable agricultural practices and evidence of shortages in the household.

In the hills of Reitoca, we also met with a farmer involved in a FAO project that is making a difference in rural mountain communities. Local farmer Celso Sierra, dressed for the occasion in a brand-new shirt and shiny silver cowboy hat, explained how the agro-forestry techniques FAO advocates have enabled him to produce more, and in an environmentally sustainable way. "Now I re-harvest my own seed, I have planted trees to prevent soil erosion, and my maize yield has increased to four tons per hectare!" Celso Sierra told me.

WFP is the UN's "first response" organization for emergencies around the globe, providing timely food relief to areas hit by disasters as well as preventing hunger through programs to help communities become more food secure. In Honduras we visited a site that combined both of these roles. In Los Llanitos, a town hit by a flood last October, we observed WFP's School Feeding program in action. WFP's School Feeding program provides meals to school children, ensuring they get at least one nutritious meal a day and serving as an incentive for families to send their children to school.

Of the many promising projects that are making a difference in Honduras, the FAO/WFP organized urban gardens in the capital of Tegucigalpa were particularly striking. On the edges of an already poor city sit the colonias, or slums. In the heart of this slum of wood and tin shacks and mud, where there is no running water, vegetables are growing in the most unexpected places: truck tires, buckets, hanging coke bottles, suspended hammocks of plastic. 347 of these home gardens have been created in five poor city neighborhoods, providing women with vegetables, a sense of pride and accomplishment, and a community group. Twenty-year-old Zullema Ulloa, her best dress and heels contrasting with the shack behind her, told me how this garden made her feel good. "I not only spend less on these foods, and save money, but I am also contributing to the household economy, in addition to taking care of my son," she said.

All the projects we saw are making a difference. Now we must scale them up, so more people can participate and benefit, and ultimately break free of assistance. To do this we must work in partnership with UN agencies, NGOs, and national governments to ensure they invest in agricultural development and in women as well as promote involvement by the private sector. I was encouraged in Honduras by the active participation of the Minister of Agriculture and Livestock Jacobo Ragalado, who I thank, along with my fellow U.S. Ambassador Lisa Kubiske for accompanying us enthusiastically on the tour, as well as by the eagerness of the representatives of the U.S. government and the UN agencies to strengthen their work in the future.

And I am happy to know that Nora Diaz, her two children, and her husband will be together this year.