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### Statement submitted by Franciscans International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council<sup>1</sup>

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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<sup>1</sup> The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

This statement is endorsed by FIAN International, a non-governmental organization on the Roster with the Economic and Social Council.

A main conclusion of the report meant to initially inform the fifty-third session of the Commission on Population and Development, and now the fifty-fourth session due to postponement, was that “the world was not on track to eliminate hunger by 2030”. Instead, the number of undernourished individuals was found to be increasing, while the global food system was deemed “environmentally unsustainable”.

Critically, this report was published on 16 January 2020, months before the most severe impacts of the current COVID-19 pandemic were being felt globally. Since then, food insecurity and other systemic issues that had already disproportionately impacted marginalized populations, including indigenous peoples, were exacerbated. At the same time, other factors linked to food insecurity identified in the report, including environmental degradation and climate change, have received increased attention. For example, on 9 April 2020, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet underscored that “protecting the environment ... is the best way to protect human health and wellbeing,” and went on to link the current pandemic to biodiversity loss and environmental degradation.

In this submission, Franciscans International examines Guatemala’s state policies and measures, as well as the impacts of COVID-19 and climate change, in light of Sustainable Development Goal 2 on “zero hunger.” In doing so, our organizations aim to highlight the links between the right to adequate food, environmental degradation, and climate change, and the consequent adverse impacts born on entire populations, and indigenous peoples in particular.

## Context and General Policies

With nearly half of Guatemala’s population unable to “afford the cost of the basic food basket,” the World Food Program has underscored the severe challenges faced by Guatemala in achieving “zero hunger.”

One major overarching concern identified by partners is the failure of the government to have a medium to long-term vision in regard to supporting the right to adequate food; programs often only contend with immediate needs as welfare programs. This is partly as a result of the current government’s dismantling of institutions that were established under the 1996 Peace Accord. This includes the Secretariat for Agrarian Affairs, which deals with agrarian conflicts, and the Ministry of Peace, which aimed at monitoring human rights. Other entities have remained stagnant or ineffective, such as the Land Fund, which has not led to real access to land for peasant communities, while others have not been efficient, such as the Support Program for Peasant Family Agriculture, PAFEC. Instead, one new ‘proposal’ is for the government to close PAFEC.

A more recent program identified by partners is the 1000 Day Window program, established in 2013, which targets malnutrition in mothers and children. According to the World Food Program, Guatemala has one of the highest rates of stunting due to malnutrition. Although the program has had some success, partners in Guatemala have highlighted that the manner in which it is implemented will inevitably impact its reach. This is in part due to an absence of a traditional or cultural approach in relation to certain communities, as well as the program’s failure to take a long-term view to consider the development and support for sustainable food systems.

Our partners have underscored that sustainable food and food sovereignty are central to realizing the right to adequate food, and in turn, combatting malnutrition in

mothers and children. However, the government has instead prioritized an approach to food security – instead of food sovereignty – that in its application violates the possibility of peoples to decide on their food. It has also brought the introduction of transgenics or hybrids that threaten biodiversity and native seeds.

Partners instead continued to underscore that decision-making processes clearly favoured businesses and the presence of a “business-state alliance.” Franciscans International, along with local partners, have previously highlighted the adverse impacts of megaprojects in Guatemala via various UN submissions. We have also noted our concern regarding whether such projects have met with the standard of free, prior and informed consent.

For example, hydroelectric projects in Guatemala have caused nearly 30 kilometres of the Cahabón River to dry. This has adversely affected numerous communities who had used the river for fishing, and to provide water for their personal consumption, as well as for their crops. This has had profound consequences for peasants, including entire families, who depend on the river to carry out their activities. Water loss is total, particularly during the dry season.

It remains unclear as to what steps the State has taken to ensure that environmental impact studies are carried out during all stages of the bidding, licensing, construction and operation of megaprojects, and if such studies also consider possible impacts on the realization of the right to adequate food.

Alongside megaprojects, the government has supported agro-businesses to the detriment of smallholder and indigenous peasants. Recently, indigenous peoples denounced the sugarcane industry’s aerial spraying of pesticides which contaminated food and water sources, and the diversion of rivers to irrigate sugarcane fields without consideration for the needs of nearby communities. The impact of these practices were aggravated during the pandemic.

### **Impacts of COVID-19**

In its two statements on the effects of COVID-19 on human rights, Franciscans International highlighted how the pandemic exposed the already present gross inequalities in access to food, shelter, and health care, and exacerbated existing human rights issues. As outlined above, such inequalities and violations of human rights were present in Guatemala before the start of the pandemic, and led to much of the population, including indigenous peoples, facing an even more precarious position as cases began to increase.

Even before the Guatemalan government issued a curfew, families, communities, and even entire municipalities “self-isolated” in order to minimize the spread of the virus. This self-isolation, however, created other problems for communities, including lack of adequate food.

Partners in Guatemala have previously documented the establishment of self-sustainable food models, where communities plant corn, beans, chili and other basic foodstuffs. Notably, it is usually women and children who produce this food and also sell to nearby communities. As a result of the pandemic, public transportation services were officially closed, as were markets. The State did not take action to support these independent produce sellers; women were forced to carry their produce, often times while also caring for their children, to reach the few nearest open markets during curfew restrictions. In some instances, peasants protested in order to allow for the passage of their food. In Sololá, demonstrations blocked various sections of the inter-American highway. The mobilization of peasants eventually succeeded in ensuring that food produced in the countryside could reach its intended destination, especially in the region of Sololá and Totonicapán.

Restrictions, coupled with a failure to provide assistance, not only adversely impacted the livelihoods of small-holder and subsistence farmer families, but also the ability of indigenous and rural families in particular to have adequate food. In contrast, during the lockdown, food and service companies were authorized by the government to move throughout the country via a transport permit protocol. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has recognized similar patterns globally and has called on States to support smallholder farmers.

Community programs supporting food sovereignty had been initiated, and indeed increased during COVID, including: the National Network for the Defense of Food Sovereignty in Guatemala (REDSAG), Food Sovereignty, Organization and Land Rights for Women and Men of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal; and the National Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA).

However, the Executive Branch has not supported these community associations, and the media has tried to indirectly portray these groups as being responsible for spreading the coronavirus, including by referencing portions of the population that “do not stay home.” This narrative has sought to target self-employed individuals, street vendors, and rural peasants and producers, and portray them as the source of the contagion. In parallel, the reality that agro-industries, mining, and other large-scale commercial activities continued to operate as usual during the pandemic has been concealed.

Partners have more generally also underscored the failure of the government to fully implement programs during the COVID pandemic which could have a positive impact on the rights to an adequate standard of living and on other economic and social rights of indigenous and peasants. For example, one partner noted that by October, the Ministry of Agriculture had only used approximately 33 per cent of its budget for the year. This was viewed as exemplifying how the government does not fully support populations in need, including indigenous, and do not use the maximum of the available resources as it should to comply with its obligations under international human rights law.

### **Climate Change and Food Security**

The report for the Commission noted “climate change is likely to decrease the stability of food systems, with a potential for simultaneous failures in multiple regions. Resulting threats to food security and nutrition will be greatest among poorer populations and those living closer to the equator.”

These warnings are already being felt in Guatemala, which is identified as “one of the top ten countries most affected by weather extremes” and other effects of climate change. The World Food Program has noted in particular these impacts on agricultural productivity and food security, with especially severe impacts being seen in Guatemala over the course of the past three years.

In November 2020, hurricanes Eta and Iota both struck Guatemala further aggravating the right to adequate food. Al Jazeera reported that, “[m]ore than 100 Indigenous villagers were buried in landslides in several regions after the storm, and subsistence crops were destroyed across vast swathes of the country.”

In a communication from 25 November 2020, partners underscored that the real impact of the disaster is not currently quantifiable; river levels have not decreased, hundreds of homes remain under water, and orchards, corn, and bean crops, and seeds for next season’s planting have all been lost. Partners emphasized that the “future situation will be one of crisis,” especially in regard to access to adequate food. As previously noted, many families depend on the crops they themselves grow, and sell

their surplus; these individuals and families, as well as the broader peasant economy will face significant challenges as a result of the storms.

Given the aforementioned, Franciscans International remains concerned that the state of Guatemala is not taking all measures to respect, protect, and fulfil the right to adequate food, and toward achieving the goal of “zero hunger.” While we recognize that issues such as COVID-19 and climate change impact the right to adequate food, and that these threats also require a global, unified response, as noted in the report there is “no one-size fits-all solution” to transforming food and agricultural systems. We underscore that local communities often have the best knowledge in how to ensure sustainability, including through food sovereignty and communal initiatives that should be supported by states.

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