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Father of Brazilian food programme to lead FAO

By Javier Blas in Rome, 26 June 2011

The father of Brazil's much-praised Zero Hunger programme has been elected the next head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, just as the surge in agricultural commodities prices is increasing the relevance of the body.

The election split the FAO membership largely among southern and northern groups, highlighting the challenge facing José Graziano da Silva to bring together developed countries, which provide the bulk of the $2.2bn two-year budget of the organisation and have demanded profound reform, and emerging nations.

"The traditional split between north and south has, once again, become clear," said a western diplomat in Rome, where the FAO is based. "The new director-general has been elected with the votes of the nonaligned nations. Now, he needs to obtain the support of top donor nations in the west."

Mr Graziano da Silva, 61, defeated Spain's former foreign affairs minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos by 92 votes to 88 to win the director-general election.

The FAO was for years one of the most low-profile UN agencies. But since the 2007-08 food crisis and the price shock of 2010-11, the organisation has been catapulted to the centre of global policymaking.

The US, the European Union and other donors such as Canada, Australia and Japan have been frustrated by the slow pace of reform under Jacques Diouf of Senegal, who has headed the organisation for nearly 20 years.

Diplomats said donor countries largely supported the Spanish candidate, who campaigned on a reform-led platform.

Following Mr Graziano da Silva's victory rich countries pledged to work with the president-elect, but demanded that the former Brazilian minister move quickly to implement the reform programme.

Andrew Mitchell, UK international development secretary, said the "FAO must improve its performance", adding: "Strong leadership is now required to drive through the ambitious and comprehensive change needed."

The new head of the FAO was in charge of Brazil's Zero Hunger programme, created by former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2003. The plan, which has been widely praised, reduced hunger in Brazil by half in six years.

Although Mr Graziano da Silva does not start his new job until January 2012, he will face an initial test of influence this week during the FAO's budget negotiations. Donor nations, which support the bulk of the $1bn general budget, which covers FAO administrative costs and salaries, and the additional $1.2bn voluntary budget, which focuses on development projects, are demanding deep savings in the administrative budget.

Kathleen Merrigan, US deputy secretary of agriculture, said Washington would propose to freeze the general FAO budget for the 2012-13 period. Adjusted for inflation, the proposal, which has the support of other donor nations, would mean a reduction in real spending. "The FAO faces a budget dilemma," Ms Merrigan told the Financial Times. "We need great efficiency."

The FAO has seen a small budgetary increase since 2005, but its spending declined between 1994 and 2005. In that period, FAO financial resources declined in real terms, adjusted for inflation, by 31 per cent.