

Hunger as Highlight



BY ROEL A. ANDAG

Jubilation

HOORAY! The Philippine economy posted a 7.5% growth in its gross domestic product for the second quarter of 2007. The country has defied analysts' projections and governments' own targets. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was incandescent when she announced the good news. After all, the economy appears to be the one bright spot in her beleaguered presidency.

It was reported that the mining and business process outsourcing sectors – stimuli that are argued too difficult to sustain – led the growth. While these sectors grew robustly, agriculture registered a point one percentage (.1%) growth compared to its performance in the same period in 2006.

The news encouraged two dominant and opposing feelings: one was self explanatory jubilation and another was doubt about the truthfulness of the data. The information was debated. When the dust settled, one question was in most minds: "Why can't I feel the improvement?"

Like a true cheerleader, President Arroyo did not waste time in letting Filipinos know the good news. The 7.5% GDP growth was



the season's favorite key message. Airtime was bought for the "Ramdam ko ang Pag-asenso" TV commercial.

Sorrow

The mood melted when, three months later in November, poverty drove 12-year old Mariannet Amper to commit suicide. She became an instant poster girl of hunger, a hunger felt by 3.8 million families at the time of Mariannet's death. These statistical findings by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) further explained that of this hungry population, 3.1 million families experience moderate hunger while 725,000 families suffer from severe hunger. Considering that the average Filipino family is composed of five members, those enduring severe hunger – feeling hungry often or always during the three months prior to the SWS survey – number 3.6 million Filipinos. The survey revealed that only one percent of the unfortunate 725,000 families said they received help from government.

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Cold statistics suddenly assumed a human face when Mariannet died. Government sprung to action, promising to aid the child's family. No less than the president ordered the review of her administration's Accelerated Hunger Mitigation Program (AHMP).

The government launched AHMP in January 2007 to address hunger in a comprehensive manner, cognizant of both supply and demand sides. Supply side elements include enhanced food production and efficient food delivery (Food for School Program, Programang Gulayan Para sa Masa, Tindahan Natin, Bagsakan ng Isda sa Barangay, promotion of good nutrition) while population management and income augmentation are promoted on the demand side. Various government agencies were tasked to carry out the program.

The Food for School Program (FSP) received almost instant criticism. As a response to child malnutrition and low school attendance, FSP distributes rice and noodles to Grades 1 and 2 pupils. The scheme is that at the end of each day for 95 days in five months, each child receives a ration of one kilo rice. No proxy is allowed to claim the

ration in case of the child's absence. Recipient schools were selected based on high incidence of families living below subsistence level, high prevalence of malnutrition among Grades 1 and 2 pupils, and high dropout rate.

Observers said that FSP promotes dole out mentality. At the same time, they predicted that the program will be hobbled by politics and corruption. Just as quickly, media reports narrated first-hand testimonies of implementation irregularities and leakages in the rice distribution program

The first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is to eradicate hunger by year 2015.

According to a study by the International Food Policy Research Institute, some 11 million Filipinos survive on less than \$1 (Php43 by the time the research was released) a day. The United Nations pegs \$1 as threshold of extreme poverty. Extreme or absolute poverty means "the lack of income necessary to satisfy basic food needs usually defined on the basis of minimum calorie requirements." This type of poverty is also referred to as absolute poverty. But for the 11 million Filipinos identified by the research, not all of the \$1 is spent on food. Non-food expenses such as transportation, healthcare and education also compete for a piece of the meager pie.

Hunger is simultaneously a symptom and result of poverty.

Pigs symbolize abundance and luck. But the second half of The Year of the Pig was anything but. The poor remained luckless. They continued to feel hunger pangs. During the period, three hunger highlights defined their plight.

1. CARP crap

As mandated by law, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) should have been completed in 1998. It was granted a 10-year extension to end in 2008. Today, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) is seeking *another* extension of 10 years to finally





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fulfill its mission.

From 1988 to 2007, 3.8 million hectares have been distributed to 827,000 farmers. The balance stands at 1.077 million hectares of undistributed lands intended for 633,846 farmers. Extending CARP will require the infusion of PhP150 billion additional funding.

After 20 years of CARP, and 10 more impending years, certain issues remain to be addressed once and for all. Some of these are demands for the provision of infrastructure (farm-to-market roads, post-harvest facilities, and irrigation) and other forms of critical support such as livelihood training, access to technology and microfinance. Most important, CARP implementation will benefit tremendously from good governance – a thing terribly missing.

Farmers remain desperate. The Sumilao farmers from Bukidnon who have been fighting for a 144-hectare land for decades now understood that for their voices to be heard, they need to do something dramatic. Thus, they decided to embark on an inter-island march from their hometown in Mindanao to the very gates of Malacañang in Manila.

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2. Genetics game

The government is intensifying its thrust to mainstream biotech crops.

Under the Ginintuang Masaganang Ani program, government grants farmers a subsidy of PhP1,200 for each hectare dedicated to *bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) corn. The amount may be negligible but the symbolism is significant. Government will slug it out with anti-genetically modified organisms (GMO) advocates.

The skirmish continues. In the latest round, non-governmental organizations (NGO) filed a petition to stop Bayer from commercially distributing in the Philippines its GE rice called Liberty Link Rice 62. Led by the Southeast Asia Regional Initiative for Community Empowerment (SEARICE), NGOs questioned the lack of transparency in the process of evaluating the said rice variety leading to its commercialization.

Undoubtedly, genetic engineering will improve agricultural production but it will never be able to liberate the poor from hunger. GE products are enmeshed in proprietary rights that are designed to dislodge the local and traditional rice and other crop varieties and force farmers to buy these commercial seeds. That's why GMO critics have been saying that cultivating and purchasing GE products will be financially devastating for farmers and the Filipino poor.

3. Food and fuel

There must be a balance between environmental integrity and food security. The emphasis on biofuels is endangering food production in the Philippines and elsewhere in the world. The World Bank warned of the dangers of indiscriminate production of biofuels.

Despite this, Mindanao is already being targeted as a viable site for jatropha plantations. At least one million hectares have been identified.

The Philippine Biofuels Act is fueling the excitement. The law mandates the mixing of 1% biodiesel in petro diesel and 5% bioethanol in gasoline. With the promise of higher profits, farmers may be lured into cultivating biofuels such as jatropha that is abundant in the Philippines.

Jatropha will soon supplant hectares of rice, corn, vegetables and fruits, and even forests thereby aggravating food insecurity in the country. Being green does not have to mean being hungry. A balance has to be found.

Hallucination

The rather shocking comeuppance provided by Mariannel's death following the exhilaration over a remarkable GDP growth rate shows how illusory the country's much touted economic development is. It is widely accepted that the Philippines needs a sustained annual economic growth rate of at least 7% to lift the poor out of the numbing poverty pit. Yes, numbers are starting to climb but a lot of hurdles have to be overcome, foremost of which are chronic





corruption, political instability and systemic inequality.

The last time I checked the official website of the Philippine government features this headline: '2007 spells gov't win over war vs hunger.' It explained that "the last quarter of 2007 has registered for the government a 5.2% win against the war on hunger" as revealed in the SWS November 30 to December 3, 2007 survey.

Glowing economic statistics notwithstanding, the fact remains that such figures exist alongside alarming ones. Hunger causes hallucinations. Happy statistics have the same effect. But the lull will never be long. A reality check will invariably present itself.

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