

Hunger in the Midst of Economic Growth



Hunger: A violation of the right to food

THE RIGHT to food is a human right which is inseparable from the right to life. For a person to enjoy the right to life, food should be adequate, nutritious, safe, affordable, physically accessible, and culturally acceptable (UN, General Comment No. 12. The right to adequate food).

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food defines the right as follows:

The right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and free access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 9 February 2004).

In a country like the Philippines where 11.63 million individuals (or 36 percent of the country's total labor force) rely on agriculture for their means of livelihood (Department of Agriculture, 2-9-006), the issue of hunger may seem unimaginable. Yet during the last half of 2006, the state of the people's right to food had been further compromised and placed in a precarious situation.



Based on the Social Weather Station November 2006 family hunger survey, 3.3 million households have reported experiencing hunger at least once in the past three months. The SWS survey further revealed that 52 percent of the families interviewed considered themselves “poor in general”, while 40 percent said they were “poor” because of the type of food their families consumed. Moreover, according to the SWS, the hunger incidence among households remained at double-digits from 16.9 percent in both March and September to 19 percent in November 2006 (Pedroso, 12-20-06).

Among the 40 percent who classified themselves as “food poor”, 30 percent said they had experienced hunger in the past three months, while 25 percent of those who rated themselves as “poor in general” experienced the same condition during the past 3 months (Pedroso, 12-20-06).

The November survey results were consistent with the results of an earlier nationwide survey (September 24-October 2) conducted by SWS where 16.9 percent of about 17.4 million households experienced hunger at least once during the third quarter of the year. Mindanao registered the highest incidence of hunger at 21.3 percent (Tubeza & Aning, 11-3-06).

Yet amidst the non-realization of the people’s right to food with the persistence of hunger and malnutrition, the government through the Department of Agriculture (DA) reported growth in the agricultural sector in 2006 (notwithstanding the series of typhoons, namely Milenyo, Paeng, Queenie, Reming and Seniang which hit the country during the second half of 2006). According to the DA’s Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, the agricultural sector experienced a 3.88 percent growth in 2006. Except for poultry, all subsectors, i.e., crops, livestock and fishery, registered an increase in output amounting to PhP887.6 billion at current prices with fishery remaining as the top gainer (DA, 2-9-06). This is 8.62 higher than what the agricultural sector gained in 2005.

Obviously, the reported growth in the agricultural sector has not been felt by the people, especially the farmers, fisherfolk and rural

workers. Even the growth in the country's GNP of 6.5 and 6.6 percent during the first two quarters of 2006, has not been translated into improvements in the food situation of most Filipinos (Pedroso, 11-22-06). They continue to suffer in poverty and deprivation, with children being hit the hardest.

According to studies done by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) of the Department of Science and Technology, more than 6 million Filipino children are suffering from hunger and malnutrition. Out of this figure, about 3.67 children of preschool age are underweight (Pilapil, 10-9-06).

A prevalent violation of the people's right to food is manifested in the deterioration in the quality of food consumed by ordinary families in many parts of the country through the years. The incapacity of many household heads or breadwinners to earn enough to meet the basic requirements for decent survival has forced families to stretch their meager income, become innovative and resourceful in the choice and preparation of their daily meals. Thus, it is not surprising why in the recent years, the typical meal consisting of rice with fish and/or vegetable has been replaced by rice-with-instant noodles, owing to the rising cost of food products in the market. With a PhP6.00 pouch of instant noodles combined with rice, a family of 5 can satisfy a meal for the day. With the poor nutritional contents of food consumed on a daily basis by many families, the health and well-being of citizens have been compromised, making them vulnerable to various kinds of diseases.

Band-aid solution to hunger

The GMA government recognizes that hunger is a problem among the people and that finding solutions to the problem is said to be a top priority of the administration (Tubeza & Aning, 11-3-06). Yet, instead of dealing with the rootcauses of the problem like widespread landlessness, backward production tools and equipment, and trade liberalization, the government has opted for band-aid solutions to the hunger problem in the country.

The shortsighted view of the government on the problem of hunger is demonstrated by the combination of short-term and temporary



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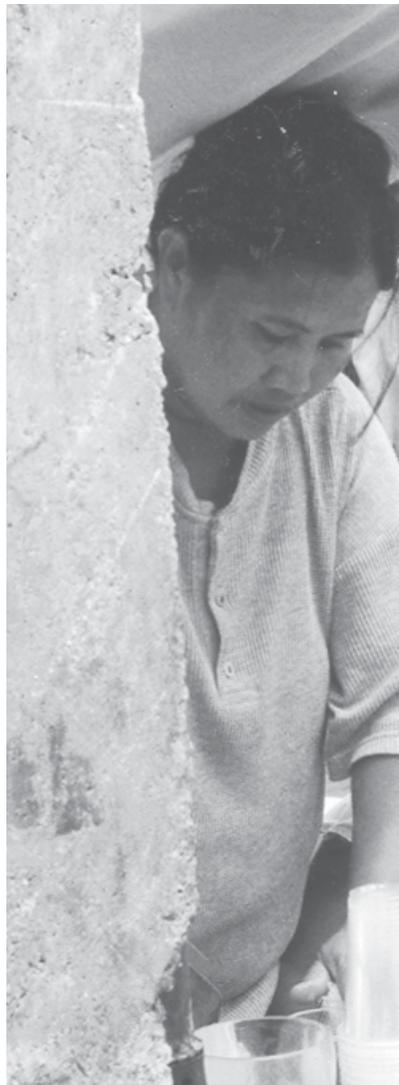
measures it has taken as means of solving the problem. These include the putting up of rolling stores which sell food items at relatively low prices in poor communities; providing emergency employment through projects like road improvement; setting up of agricultural extension services to the poorest agricultural households; and facilitating foreign assistance such as the UN World Food Program in conflict areas in Mindanao (Tubeza & Aning, 11-3-06).

In addition to the above measures taken by the GMA government to alleviate the problem of hunger and malnutrition, it has also earmarked PhP3.5 million for a school feeding program in 2007, a program that has been questioned and viewed with suspicion by legislators. According to the government, the amount will be used to import one million tons of rice for distribution to school children.

Instead of opting to provide the much needed agricultural and credit assistance to farmers and agricultural workers to enable them to increase their production and to assist them in becoming economically self-reliant, the government has most conveniently taken a quick and short-lived but high-profile and expensive solution to the problem. The food-for-school program envisioned by the government clearly demonstrates the erosion of the country's capacity to produce food items, specifically rice, for its people since the program will entail importing rice from neighboring countries. Not only does the program heighten the country's dependence on imports, it also does not provide a comprehensive and lasting solution to the hunger and malnutrition problem.

The signing of the Public Law 480 agreement between US Ambassador Kristie Kenney and Finance Secretary Margarito Teves and Agriculture Secretary Domingo Panganiban on July 14, 2006 was another measure taken by the GMA government to remedy the food problem of the Philippines. The Public Law 480 also known as the US Agricultural Trade Development Assistance Act and enforced since 1991, involves extending food aid to developing countries like the Philippines which are having "difficulty providing for the food needs of its citizens through commercial sources because of foreign exchange problems". Under the agreement, commodity loans are extended to the country and are to be paid for a period of 30 years, with a grace period of seven years.







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With the renewal of PL 480, 69,000 metric tons of rice (worth \$20 million) which are expected to arrive in early 2007 will be sold on concessional credit terms to the Philippine government. The imported commodity will in turn be sold to the public through the National Food Authority (NFA) (http://archieve.inquirer.net/view.php?db=1&story_id=10555).

Proceeds from the sale are intended for use in four agricultural development priority areas, namely, 1) post-harvest handling and infrastructure development which includes building of farm-to-market roads and warehouses, purchase of equipment and provision of training to support harvest, post-harvest product storage and non-spoilage; 2) biotechnology research and commercialization; 3) livestock development; and 4) capacity building including training aimed at providing modern technology to farmers.

Although the combination of measures adapted by the GMA government may have temporarily alleviated the difficult food situation of Filipino families, the problem remains. The reality that people are unable to access food, i.e. physically and economically, indicates the government's failure to fulfill its human rights obligations in as much as being able to formulate policies, develop programs, enhance capabilities, allocate resources and create structures and mechanisms that will effectively address the rootcauses of poverty and hunger in the country.

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Trade liberalization on the loose

The implementation of neo-liberal policies in the agricultural sector, particularly the lowering and/or removal of trade taxes and quotas to encourage the unhampered entry of imported agricultural products and food items have seriously affected the food situation in the country. This is true especially for those heavily dependent on agriculture for their means of livelihood.

With trade liberalization, the Philippine market has been flooded with relatively cheap and imported agricultural commodities like onions, garlic, fruits, vegetables and poultry products. Consequently, local producers of these products have been faced with serious

problems and difficulties in the marketing of their products due to oversupply and undue competition. With low income, the capacity of farmers and agricultural workers to provide for the needs of their families, primarily food, had been severely compromised.

A good illustration is the case of local onion producers in four provinces, namely Nueva Ecija, Pangasinan, Nueva Vizcaya and Mindoro. Due to the oversupply of imported onions in the market during the second half of 2006, about 27 million kilograms of onions have remained intact in cold storage facilities. Moreover, local onion producers have been confronted with the much lower price of imported onions. Whereas locally-produced onions are sold at P40 a kilo, imported ones mostly from India and China cost from P18-20 a kilo in the market (Roque, 8-22-06).

Members of the Union of Growers and Traders of Onions in the Philippines (Ugat) complained that in July 2006 alone, the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI), the government agency responsible for issuing importation permits, had released 77 permits, mostly to Chinese businessmen, without prior consultation with their group. Each permit is authorized to import as much as 50,000 kilograms of onion (Roque, 8-22-06). With a glut in the market, local producers have encountered difficulties in selling their onions, resulting in the erosion of their incomes.

The same situation had been experienced by Filipino rice producers with the rice importation policy of the GMA government. For instance, in Kalinga, the Cordillera's rice granary, out of the total 402,000 cavans of rice imported in 2005, 200,000 cavans were distributed in the province (Caluza, 10-17-06).

Aggravating the situation of Filipino rice farmers in the last half of 2006 had been the government's efforts through the DA to intensify the use of imported hybrid rice varieties by expanding the areas devoted to rice production (Caluza, 10-17-06). To boost the country's food supply, the GMA government intends to increase lands devoted to rice production by 40,000 hectares in 2007 (Caluza, 11-27-06).

However, instead of addressing the major problems faced by most



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rice farmers, i.e., low income, low yield vis-a-vis high production cost, poor and inefficient distribution and marketing system of their produce, the government had intensified the burden shouldered by farmers particularly in the rice producing areas like Central Luzon, Cordilleras and Northern Luzon.

History has shown that the propagation of hybrid rice varieties means higher production costs on the part of farmers. For farmers using hybrid rice varieties, so much has to be spent on fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemicals in order to reach the maximum yield per harvest per hectare. Failure to do so would mean lower yield during harvest season.

According to Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap, the harvests of farmers using hybrid rice varieties could reach from 180 to 200 cavans per hectare compared to the national average rice yield per hectare of 75 to 90 cavans (Caluza, 11-27-06). Meanwhile, assuming they are able to maximize their yield, another problem which farmers have to hurdle is the marketing of their produce with the domestic market dominated and controlled by big rice traders and middlepersons. With no leverage and power to negotiate, rice farmers are placed at the mercy of these big rice traders and middlepersons who are also able to manipulate and dictate the prices of the commodity.

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The State's inutile response

The state of Philippine agriculture in the second half of 2006 aptly reflects the State's inutility in protecting and promoting the rights of the country's food producers, many of whom are poor tenants and small landowners. The GMA government through its neo-liberal policies of trade liberalization, privatization and deregulation, has consistently jeopardized the livelihood of its people and eroded their earning capacity. It has dismally failed to safeguard the country's food producers against unfair trade and competition with the rising cost of agricultural production, influx of cheap imported agricultural products and food items in the local market, and protectionist agricultural policies of developed countries. Moreover, the development paradigm as reflected in the overall direction and orientation of the agricultural sector has transformed the country

from being a net food exporter, specifically rice, to that of a net food importer. It has made the sector highly dependent on imported agricultural inputs and vulnerable to the fluctuations of the international market with the emphasis of its production on high value crops like tropical fruits, cauliflower, asparagus, cut-flowers instead of food staples. Consequently, a state of food insecurity among the people has persisted.

It is ironic that the country's food producers continue to suffer from hunger and malnutrition. Their right to adequate food has been violated because of the State's inability and/or failure to create an enabling environment aimed at raising the people's capacity to provide for themselves and their families adequate, safe, nutritious, affordable and culturally acceptable food. It is therefore an urgent task and responsibility of the people and their organizations to rise up in defense of their rights and their survival as individuals and members of society.

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