

Just How Hungry are the Filipinos?

A Right to Food Situationer



BY **BERNARDO D. LARIN**

BANKING ON the prospects of East Asian economic integration and tighter economic relations with China tackled during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit held in Cebu last January, President Arroyo confidently declared 2007 as the “boom year for the economy” and a time of “great hopes and expectations.”

Little did she know that two months later, her high spirits would be dampened by the reality that despite her pronouncements and projections of economic growth, a substantial number of Filipinos are still food insecure, a glaring reminder that the economic prosperity the GMA administration has been harping on for almost six years now remains a pipe dream.

In March this year, the Social Weather Station (SWS), an independent research institution, revealed that based on its survey for the first quarter of 2007, involuntary hunger remained at a record-high of 19% (or an estimated 3.4 million Filipino households).

According to SWS, the all-time high 19% hunger incidence was first recorded in November 2006. It has remained at double digits since June 2004.



Mixed signals

Days after the SWS study was made public, GMA and Social Welfare Secretary Esperanza Cabral tried to refute the survey findings by implying that missed meals do not signify food insecurity. Still, the President promised to wipe out hunger in six months.

In relation to this, she instructed anti-poverty commissioner Domingo Panganiban, Health Secretary Francisco Duque III and other concerned government officials to take immediate steps that would impact on poverty and hunger within six months. Officials were also warned to “shape up or ship out” after the said deadline.

The President also allocated P1 billion to fund anti-hunger measures being implemented under the government’s Accelerated Hunger Mitigation Program (AHMP). On April 3, GMA signed Executive Order 616 creating the Anti-Hunger Task Force that will spearhead and coordinate efforts of agencies tasked to implement the AHMP.

Socio-economic Planning Secretary Romulo Neri also announced the plan of Malacañang to use the possible P25 billion proceeds from the sale of government-sequestered shares in telecommunications giant Philippine Long Distance Telephone Co. (PLDT) to wipe out hunger.

However, Malacañang also admonished the public, saying that hunger does not solely stem from poverty and lack of opportunity but could also be attributed to unwise spending patterns. Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye had this advice for Filipino families who barely make ends meet: cut down expenses on alcohol, tobacco, texting, and other ‘luxuries.’

Other hunger study

After a few weeks, government officials mellowed down on its criticisms against the SWS study and tried to focus on the real issue, that more and more Filipinos were getting hungry and poor everyday.

In fact, according to World Bank's latest data as presented in the World Development Indicators 2007, at least 14.8 million Filipinos were barely surviving on less than 1\$ a day and another 43 million live on 2\$ a day.

It's also quite intriguing that the government is casting doubt on the SWS survey, when all along it has its own study on the extent of hunger among Filipinos, results of which paint almost the same scenario.

Recently, the National Nutrition Council (NNC) revealed that 49 provinces (63.6%) or roughly 6 out of 10 provinces in the Philippines are food insecure or vulnerable. This data was produced using the Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information and Mapping Systems (FIVIMS) indicators as prescribed by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The FIVIMS analysis validated the results of the 2003 National Nutrition Survey (NNS) conducted by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) indicating that 7 out of 10 Filipino households are food insecure.

The FIVIMS study also noted that food vulnerable provinces also registered higher percentage of underweight population both for 0-5 years old and adults.

As early as October 2005, President Arroyo was handed a copy of the highlights of the FIVIMS results. In fact, she utilized these to identify beneficiaries of the hunger mitigation measures of the government such as the Food for School program.

So, the curious thing is, why did she try to dispute the SWS survey when all the while she was well aware of the FIVIMS study which basically indicates the same results? The answer lies in the fact that the SWS findings caught media attention and could further jeopardize her already dipping popularity.



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Accelerated Hunger Mitigation Program (AHMP)

AHMP is the primary response of the government to hunger and also one of its major mechanisms to achieve the country's commitment to eradicate deprivation by 2015 under the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of the United Nations (UN).

Currently, AHMP has two major components: the Food for School Program (FSP) and *Tindahan Natin*. FSP provides a rice ration of 1 kilo per day for 120 days to families who are experiencing severe hunger through students in Grade 1, preschools, and day care centers. At the same time, the 1 kilo rice also serves as incentive for these pupils not to miss class to be able to avail of this benefit.

In the field, FSP is being supplemented by feeding programs for malnourished children in daycare centers of the social welfare department.

Meanwhile, *Tindahan Natin* (rolling store) ensures the availability of cheaper basic commodities (such as rice and noodles) to poor families.

According to the President and the AHMP, the government's strategy in addressing hunger is by attacking it from both the supply side and demand side. According to the AHMP matrix, the supply side could be improved by increasing food production and enhancing the efficiency of food delivery.

On the other hand, demand side imperatives include increasing income, promoting good nutrition, and managing the population.

Concretely, among the supply-side approaches of the government are the intensification of productivity programs, construction of Barangay Food Terminals (BFT) and farm-to-market roads such as the planned P2 billion 'national grains highway' of the Department of Agriculture (DA).

Meanwhile, plans under the demand side solution includes increased productivity and income in coconut areas, aggressive micro-

financing, maximization of employment opportunities during infrastructure construction, aggressive training, upland distribution, social marketing, promotion of breastfeeding, nutrition education in schools, and promotion of responsible parenthood.

AHMP under scrutiny

Perhaps the government's anti-hunger program deserves to be commended, if only for its holistic approach to the issue at hand. But viewed from a human rights lens, it becomes obvious that many fundamental food-related issues were left out of the program.

Foremost of these is the question of land reform which has been proven to be very crucial in increasing agricultural productivity and ushering in real industrial growth, and in augmenting income of the farmers that still comprise a major portion of the country's food consumers.

When the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL) was enacted in 1998, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) targeted 8 to 9 million hectares of land that should be distributed to millions of farmer beneficiaries. Now, less than a year before the program expires, DAR reported that it has already covered 6.7 million hectares of private and public lands, benefiting 4 million peasants.

But the 85% CARP completion as claimed by DAR is questionable because of 'recycling' of accomplishments and arbitrary removal of landholdings from the target, says a study done by three peasant organizations, Philippine Ecumenical Action for Community Empowerment Foundation Network (PEACE), Partnership for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development Services (PARRDS), and Pambansang Ugnayan ng Nagsasariling Lokal na mga Samahang Mamamayan sa Kanayunan (UNORKA). The study ("19 Years of CARP: Gains, Reversals, and Uncertainties") estimated CARP's performance at 40% of the target hectares of agricultural land.

The three peasant groups joined the snowballing calls for the extension of CARP but they also cautioned that reforms should also be implemented, including the removal of questionable mechanisms



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such as the stock distribution option (SDO) used in Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac, leaseback based on voluntary land transfer or voluntary offer to sell, and exemption of livestock areas, among others.

Agrarian-related violence

Another major stumbling block for CARP that has been there since the beginning is the resistance of landowners and their persistent efforts to prevent their landholdings from being covered by the program. Their methods of defiance range from finding legal loopholes to outright deception and use of violence against agrarian reform beneficiaries.

A classic yet tragic example of this is the story of the farmer-beneficiaries of the 120 hectares out of the total 455-hectare Hacienda Velez-Malaga owned by Roberto Cuenca in La Castellana, Negros Occidental.

As early as 2002, the farmers were already issued Certificate of Land Ownership Award (CLOA) for the said portion of the plantation, but the Cuencas were able to prevent their installation in the property by filing a case in regular court.

Last year, the Supreme Court decided in favor of the farmers by nullifying the lower court decision of removing the power of DAR to distribute the Velez-Malaga estate. Despite this ruling, the landowner continued to defy the authorities and resorted to harassment and violence against the farmers.

On January 25, 2007, Pepito Santillan, 60 years old, one of the CLOA holders of the disputed land, was murdered by armed goons in his own house inside the Velez-Malaga landholding.

Angered by this incident and frustrated by the powerlessness of the government to install them to the lands that rightfully belong to them now, the farmer-beneficiaries who are also members of Task Force Mapalad (TFM) staged a hunger strike in front of the DAR main office in Quezon City.

One month later, after 16 of the hunger strikers were hospitalized, DAR Secretary Nasser Pangandaman finally managed to install 57 of the 122 CARP beneficiaries in Hacienda Velez-Malaga, despite stiff opposition from the landowners and another group of peasants that was also claiming the land. The farmers and DAR both claimed victory with the establishment of the peasants in the portion of the land covered by the CLOA.

However, three months later, on the first week of June, the farmers' struggle for land was again tainted by blood when two from their ranks were shot and killed and another six were wounded allegedly by the guards of the Velez-Malaga plantation. The farmers were on their way to till the land where they were just recently installed when the shooting happened.

Increasing income

Back to the AHMP, a major solution identified to ease hunger was to "put more money in poor people's pockets" but the program was silent on the long standing demand of the workers for an increase in the minimum wage.

Right now, the minimum daily wage in Metro Manila is pegged at P350. The rate is even lower in the provinces. But according to the National Wages and Productivity Commission (NWPC), a family of six, with two members working, needs to earn P768 per day to survive in the National Capital Region.

In the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, with the lowest minimum wage at P200, a family of six needs P1,008 to stay out of extreme poverty. But to make it worse, the real value of this P200 wage, after factoring in inflation rate, is only P136.71.

Similarly, NWPC also revealed that the P350 minimum wage in Metro Manila, when adjusted due to inflation, only amounts to P245.61.

During the last sessions of the 13th Congress, just before the May polls, labor leaders urged the Senate to approve the P125-hike in



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the minimum wage because a similar proposal was finally approved by the Lower House in December.

The P125 wage hike has been stalled in Congress for six years because of the strong opposition from the business sector, which claims that while wage increases would benefit workers these would hurt the bigger populace because of the ensuing inflation.

According to Joshua Mata, Secretary General of the Alliance of Progressive Labor (APL), they agree with industry leaders that the minimum wage is just one of the solutions to labor woes. Other measures include respecting union rights, substitution of regional wage boards by industry wage boards, and the elimination of contracting and subcontracting.

The government tended to agree with the businessmen since the P125 wage hike had never been included in the priority legislation measures of Malacañang. There were also fears among the workers that GMA would veto the P125 bill even if it is passed by Congress.

It turned out that the President need not reject such law because the proposal died a natural death with the closing of the 13th Congress.

Corruption

Another focus of the government's hunger program is the construction of infrastructures that would increase productivity and facilitate efficient transport of food products such as farm-to-market roads, irrigation, etc.

However, government leaders should also factor in and seriously deal with graft and corruption that have been causing delays and problems in the accomplishment of public infrastructure projects and other agriculture-related undertakings, aside from draining public coffers of much-needed funds.

Recently, the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) employees expressed suspicions over the diversion of almost P500 million for the repair of irrigation facilities to the construction of farm-to-market









roads. NIA officials denied any irregularity, saying that the building of roads was a legitimate component of the irrigation repair project under the P2 billion loan from the National Development Corporation.

Related to this, a Commission on Audit report revealed that P419 million CARP funds generated from the sequestered wealth of the Marcoses was used for phones, food, and travel of Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Implementing Agencies (CIA) in 2004 and 2005. These offices include the Departments of Agrarian Reform, Agriculture, Environment and Natural Resources, and Public Works and Highways; the National Irrigation Administration; and the Land Registration Authority.

Similarly, the Caucus of Development NGO Networks (Code-NGO) reported that Nueva Ecija lawmaker Aurelio Umali's Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF), notoriously known as pork barrel, was used to buy overpriced fertilizers and irrigation pumps. Representative Umali naturally denied these allegations.

Code NGO also made public its findings on its evaluation of 68 road and information technology projects funded by PDAF. This prompted Sen. Panfilo Lacson to challenge the said watchdog to identify legislators whose pork barrel funds were used to finance overpriced computers and poorly built or non-existent roads.

Trade liberalization

In dealing with hunger, the government should also be firm and should not compromise the interest of local food producers during multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations.

A positive development on trade was the decision of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to allow the country to have quantitative restrictions on rice imports until 2012, thereby extending the protection of the local rice industry against cheaper imports.

According to agriculture secretary Arthur Yap, we need the extended quantitative restrictions to improve the productivity and

efficiency of the rice industry before it becomes fully liberalized.

However, Secretary Yap also admitted that due to lack of finances, the country was not able to maximize the WTO provision allowing governments to allocate agriculture subsidy equivalent to 10% of the sector's gross value receipts, which in the Philippines' case would amount to P85 billion.

Still, Yap remained optimistic that the country would achieve its target of being self-sufficient in rice by the year 2010.

Meanwhile, farmers already reeling from the influx of smuggled cheap imported vegetables asked President Arroyo to continue supporting the demand of developing countries within the WTO to retain the special products (SP) and special safeguard mechanisms (SSM). These were safety nets that would permit developing countries to set the pace of tariff reduction on sensitive agricultural products affected by free trade.

Based on its importance to food and livelihood security, an agricultural product could be included in the SP list.

Benguet Board Member John Kim expressed fears that Mrs. Arroyo might change her mind on the retention of SPs and SSMs in the light of recent government talks with WTO Director Pascal Lamy, who visited the country in his effort to break the impasse on trade negotiations that collapsed last year.

The agriculture department also declared that it wants the country's vegetable industry to be protected from cheap imports through various protection mechanisms including the SPs and SSMs.

According to Undersecretary Segfredo Serrano, the department has already included vegetables in the SP list but only onions and chickens are considered 'sensitive.' The government has yet to produce data on important vegetables.



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Global warming

The state of the environment is another factor that directly impacts on the country's food security.

Last February, the World Wide Fund (WWF) issued a warning that the effects of global warming were already being felt in the country and this would likely lead to shortage of food supply.

According to WWF-Philippines chief executive officer Lorenzo Tan, since 40 million Filipinos rely on the Philippine seas for food, the danger of hunger is very real because the damage brought by climate change on marine resources would further affect the already deteriorating fishing industry.

He also stated that the country's staple food, rice, is also in danger because of the alarming decrease in fresh water sources. Rice shortage would also most likely be felt this year because of the impending drought, Tan added.

Earlier, it was reported that P10 million worth of vegetables were destroyed by frost in northern Benguet. The temperature in the said area dropped to 5 degrees Celsius.

The incident raised speculations of increases in the price of vegetables but the farmers and agriculture officials warned traders and middlemen not to exploit the situation to gain excessive profit.

The farmers also warned businessmen not to use the cold spell and the damage it created to justify importation of vegetables. According to them, locally produced vegetables were still enough to satisfy consumer demand.

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)

True, addressing hunger is an urgent concern of the government. But it should not take rash actions that would compromise the health and safety of its citizens. Take the case of the country's current rice policy, in which officials are prioritizing hybrid varieties, some of

which are genetically modified, over traditional types of rice.

Early this year, despite farmers' appeals for the government to finance traditional rice and corn varieties, agriculture officials announced that P43 billion of a P240 billion Chinese investment would be used to partly finance the production of hybrid rice and corn. According to a DA official in Northern Luzon, the investment would be allocated to hybrid varieties because the government is bent on achieving food security.

This has been the focus of DA regarding rice despite the repeated warnings of farmers' groups and scientists against the entry of genetically modified organisms in the country. Dr. Chito Medina of Magsasaka at Siyentipiko para sa Pag-unlad ng Agrikultura (Masipag) also said that rice should not be subjected to genetic modification.

According to Dr. Medina, the use and importation of genetic rice might endanger the health of Filipinos because GMOs have never been thoroughly tested and yet, the government is already approving the entry of these in the local market.

In February, Masipag claimed that 19 GMO products were already in the Philippines. The group appealed to the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) and the DA not to approve the application of Bayer, a German company, for the direct use of LLRICE 62, a hybrid rice which is herbicide-tolerant.

Conclusion

It may be recalled that under the government's *Tindahan Natin* food program, rice and noodles are being sold to poor people at lower prices. Also during calamities and evacuations in times of conflicts, affected families get mainly rice and noodles from relief agencies.

But the question is, what nutrients could people get from noodles?

This might sound a bit trivial, except to nutritionists and dietitians,



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but somehow it indicates just how mechanical, disjointed, and publicity-driven the government's response to hunger is. It must be emphasized that solving the hunger problems of the people is not simply a matter of filling stomachs with food.

It may be remembered that at the height of the public attention generated by the SWS survey on hunger, GMA immediately ordered the release of P1 billion and created a task force to lead the government's war on hunger. She also ordered key Cabinet officials to 'make a dent' on hunger within six months or else be prepared to 'ship out.'

These were clearly publicity stunts. GMA herself, being an economist, should know that solving widespread hunger is not an overnight job. Hunger is just part and parcel of deeper socio-economic infirmities that beset the country.

Although budgetary allocation is very crucial in dealing with food insecurity, no amount of public funds would also be enough if policies and programs are not addressing fundamental food-related issues such as agrarian reform, workers' rights, environmental degradation, corruption, and unfair trade.

In the same vein that food programs, no matter how comprehensive they are such as the AHMP, would not be effective in easing hunger pains unless people in government regard food from a rights-based perspective: *that people have a right to economically and physically accessible, safe, nutritious, and culturally acceptable food.*

Lastly, food problem or any socio-economic issue for that matter won't be solved if treated as some sort of an 'eyesore' to the much ballyhooed economic boom, because as long as substantial numbers of people are food insecure, declarations of prosperity are essentially hypocritical and farcical.

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