The Right to Food

IT IS ironic that hunger hounds many Filipinos in spite of the Philippines being chiefly an agricultural country. The reality is, economics and politics interact with other factors in shaping the content and direction of the nation’s food policy agenda.

Although the major thrust of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s Ten Point Agenda is to fight poverty, allocation for the implementation of the food agenda is only a crumb of the budget pie. An overview of the 2005 General Appropriations Act shows that debt service payments alone took away over a third of the national budget.

Still, the existence of such an agenda clearly conveys that the issue of hunger is highly relevant both politically and socially in the Philippines. Before advocating policy measures and crafting instruments that would aid the fulfillment and protection of the right to food, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which the national government is a party, it is useful to take a closer look at the hunger situation in the Philippines.

According to the World Food Programme, 17 million Filipinos or more than one in five persons are undernourished.¹ The World Bank estimates that half of the estimated 84 million population of the country lives on less than $2 a day. Moreover, the United Nations reported that about 34 percent of the Filipinos are living below the poverty threshold, the highest in Southeast Asia.²

Pulse Asia, a public opinion research group, also pointed out that food accounts for over 50 percent of all household expenditures in the Philippines, making this latter statistic all the more dismal.³ Their March 2005 survey, in fact, found that 33 percent of the Philippine population claimed “their food is inadequate.”⁴ Lastly, a Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey conducted the same month, showed that 13.4 percent of respondents, or 2.1 million Filipino families experienced hunger, marking “the highest ever hunger incidence in 20 years.”⁵
It is useful to frame the food situation in the Philippines in terms of the minimum requirements and elements crucial for the realization of the right to food. These requirements include food that satisfies dietary needs, free from adverse substances, available, and accessible.

**Nutritional Adequacy**

Nutritional adequacy requires a diet that contains a combination of nutrients for physical and mental growth, development and maintenance, and physical activity that is in compliance with human physiological needs at all stages of life.

The Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) of the Philippines found in its 2003 national nutrition survey that although there was a general improvement in the country’s nutrition situation between 1998 and 2003, including reductions in underweight and stunting among children under 10, and reductions in chronic energy deficiency among adults, it identified a trend towards increasing number of overweight adults and children. The problem of anemia, especially among infants (6 months to 1 year), toddlers (1-2 years) and pregnant women has also escalated, with alarmingly high prevalence rates of 66 percent, 53 percent and 43.9 percent respectively. The FNRI report recommends a national policy on iron supplementation for infants and young children due to lack of awareness on this matter.

In the light of the Medium-Term Philippine Plan of Action’s (MTPPAN) targets and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the report also calls for strengthened efforts by the government to reduce malnutrition, anemia, overweight and obesity trends, especially those affecting women and children. Dr. Cecilia Florencio, a nutritional expert from the University of Philippines, estimates that given the actual rate of reduction in the prevalence of the aforementioned food deficiency problems, it will take over 20 years, rather than the projected 12 years, to achieve the MDG.6

**Food Safety and Quality**

In addition to nutritional adequacy, the right to food also entails that the State must be able to enforce quality standards and acceptability indices to safeguard against adverse reactions to food.7 In many ways, the Philippine government has failed to implement effective measures to remove threats and hazards to food safety.

The bioaccumulation of heavy metals, the presence of chemicals in food, and parasitic infestation are all safety issues that the State has not addressed. Another major issue is the large volume of pesticides and chemical fertilizers being used by farmers on palay, corn, vegetables and other crops, a practice that places at risk the health of both farmers and consumers. Presently, only 14,401 hectares of agricultural lands in the country are planted with organic rice.
In regard to genetically modified foods, the Philippines has not adopted the “precautionary principle” nor has it adopted laws on labeling products to ensure the right to information and choice of consumers. The US multinational Monsanto, for instance, has introduced the Bt (bacillus thuringiensis) corn, which produces its own poison to kill pests. If this corn is used as feed for pigs and cows, it could have adverse effects on people’s health. Already a study by a Norwegian genetic scientist found that the blood of 38 tribal residents of Sitio Kalyong, Barangay Landan in Polomolok, South Cotobato contained Bt. Furthermore, 51 residents of Marbel, South Cotobato living near Bt corn fields complained of headaches, flu, nausea, fatigue, and skin allergies.8

Food Availability and Sustainable Production

This indicator refers to the possibilities of either feeding oneself directly from productive land or other natural resources or from a well functioning distribution, processing, and market systems that can move food from the site of production to where it is needed based on demand.

According to the Bureau of Agriculture Statistics (BAS), agricultural output in 2004 amounted to P783.9 billion, 18.4 percent more than the previous year’s level. Moreover, a Department of Agriculture (DA) report on the country’s self-sufficiency index from 1996 to 2003 revealed that only a marginal deficit has to be met to full self-sufficiency.

Based on average dietary supply available per person from 1996 to 2000 (between 2,265 and 2,455 kilocalories), there is more than enough food to meet the national recommended dietary allowance (RDA). Food availability, then, is more than enough to meet the food needs of the population.

Yet, people are still going hungry in various parts of the country. One important reason for this discrepancy is the country’s relatively poor balance of trade in the agricultural sector and its low agricultural productivity, particularly rice, the staple food. Compared with other Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia, the Philippines exports far less rice, a fact that gains even greater salience when one notes the relatively larger amount of rice the country imports every year. As of 2003, the Philippines’ average yield per hectare is 3.43 metric tons (MT) while Indonesia and Vietnam produce 4.54 MT/hectare and 4.63 MT/hectare, respectively. The rising acidity of agricultural lands, especially those used to grow rice, has encouraged farmers to use more chemicals to boost productivity. However, the high price of chemical fertilizers has at the same time deleterious effect on productivity.

Low productivity is also a result of decreasing land areas devoted to palay and corn farming as well as underinvestment in infrastructure such as irrigation, farm-to-market roads, post-harvest facilities, marketing support, and technology. Water sources essential for irrigating farms in particular are instead diverted to mining use while irrigated areas are being subjected to land conversion. Based on the Department of Land Reform (DLR) records, 35,687 hectares have been legally approved for conversion while about 200,000 hectares have been illegally converted to other uses. Such land
When soup kitchens become popular: Spiraling food prices, shrinking farm areas, and low productivity for an agriculture sector that is reeling from the onslaught of a globalized market economy are leaving more and more people hungry and malnourished. *Pagpag* – food scraps scrounged from the garbage bins of fast-foods, washed and re-cooked – are now daily fare for indigent communities in Metro Manila.
conversions drastically affect the availability and sustainability of food production in the Philippines.

Environmental Issues Affecting Sustainability

There are many environmental factors that are inextricably tied to agricultural sustainability and food production. The extent of deforestation in the Philippines is especially relevant in this regard. Current estimates show that only 18 percent of the country’s land area is covered with forest, less than a third of the cover level during the first half of the 20th century. The necessary forest cover needed to sustain a growing population and economic activities, according to environmental groups, should at least be 40 percent. The Arroyo administration’s aggressive promotion of mining, however, has put even the country’s remaining forestlands in grave danger.

The depletion of marine resources and the fall in sustainable fishery production have also contributed to the serious violations of the right to food. According to the UN Development Program’s (UNDP) Common Country Assessment of the Philippines, only four percent of coral reefs are in good condition. Mangrove forests have been hardest hit. Of the 450,000 hectares of mangroves in 1918, only 110,000 hectares remain. The drastic reduction in mangroves has been caused by conversion for shrimp production, dredging, pollution from household waste, industries and mines, and destructive fishing methods. Though positive growths in aquaculture and in commercial fishing were recorded, the declining number of municipal fisheries resulted in an average annual growth in fishery production of only 1.3 percent between 1993 and 1998.

Finally, although the Philippines has 5,470,000 hectares of freshwater resources (i.e., swamplands, rivers, streams and lakes), massive deforestation, industrial pollution, and the use of chemical inputs are gradually destroying them.

In sum, the Philippine state has not been able to ensure sufficient food to its people due to the low funding for agriculture that currently stood at 3.6 percent of the national budget based on the 2003 level. Hence, agriculture has not been able to grow at a rate consistent with the needs of feeding the country’s growing population. Moreover, the government has remained passive in the unabated destruction of the country’s environment and natural resources.

Food Accessibility

For food to be accessible, it must be both economically affordable and physically accessible. Since the right to food requires that food prices should be at a level such that the attainment of other basic needs are not threatened, one need not look farther than the poverty levels in the Philippines in order to assess the economic accessibility of food. Compared to China, which has reduced its absolute poverty level by almost half, from 30 percent in the early
1990s to 16 percent, and to Vietnam, which reduced this statistic from 15 percent to close to 2 percent in less than a decade, the Philippines has experienced only sluggish poverty reduction rates.

The big gap between the minimum and living wages in the different regions of the Philippines also affects the economic accessibility to food. A recent study found that minimum wages around the country are for the most part a third, and in some instances a fifth as in the case of the ARMM (Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao), of what the corresponding living wage for a family of six should be. Rising prices for basic goods and services have only exacerbated the problem. The rise in the year 2000 living wage estimate from P461 to P663 in 2005 is a direct result of rises in food and non-food expenditures, which rose from P160 to P190 and from P259 to P413, respectively, in the last five years.

The aforementioned survey cited that a third of the population saying “their food is inadequate” also points to the effects of economic barriers on the food situation in the Philippines. A self-rated poverty survey conducted by SWS in May 2005 further showed that the number of Filipino households acknowledging that they were poor rose across the board in all regions, with Metro Manila, in particular, reporting a record 55 percent.

By comparison, one can imagine the plight of those without a job altogether. The failure of the national economy to create jobs to keep pace with the growing population, especially in the rural areas, is the main reason why most Filipinos don’t have adequate economic means to feed themselves. According to the National Statistics Office, there were 4.03 million unemployed or 11.3 percent of the labor force, in January 2005, or an increase of over a million since last year. Unemployment has most significantly hurt women and youth. Female workers between 15 and 24, for instance, have the highest rates of unemployment.

Another reason why people suffer from hunger is the lack of physical access to land and other resources that would enable them to produce food for their own consumption and for the market. The DLR reports that there are still 627,760 hectares to be distributed to land reform beneficiaries in 10 provinces—Negros Occidental, Negros Oriental, Camarines Sur, Camarines Norte, Albay, Leyte, Iloilo, Cotobato and Lanao del Sur—which have the biggest backlog in terms of land acquisition and distribution.

Aside from land distribution backlog is the inadequate access to necessary resources of certain segments of society. Fisherfolks, for example, depend on boats and fishing grounds for their livelihood. However, according to the nationwide federation of fisherfolk organizations, Pamalakaya-Pilipinas, only 464,000 out of 1.2 million small fisher folks have boats, which are typically small and non-motorized. Although existing laws are supposed to protect the interests of these people, competition from foreign trawlers and big local fishing business that have penetrated even the municipal waters has hindered fisher folks from earning a decent living.
Another vulnerable group is the indigenous population whose access to their ancestral lands is being threatened. Although the passage of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) in 1997 was a positive step towards providing access to ancestral domain that can provide a means of subsistence for this population, insufficient funding and conflicting laws and policies negate the intent of the law.

The Mining Act of 1995, for instance, allows foreign mining companies access to and ownership of ancestral lands, while Executive Orders issued by different administrations further aggravate confusion as to which agency has the primary authority to address the needs of indigenous communities.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Central Mindanao, who are severed from their means of subsistence by militarization in the area, also lack access to food sources. The plight of children of already impoverished IDPs is even worse, as their access to nutritious food during wars is almost nonexistent. Their families are only able to eat once or twice a day, often having only dried fish for five days a week and some vegetables planted within evacuation centers. The National Nutrition Council (NNC) in Region XII reported that about 38 percent of children in the various evacuation centers were severely to mildly underweight.16

**Agrarian Reform**

Lack of property rights to land of many potential agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs) has also resulted in violations of their right to food. According to the latest UN Development Assistance Framework for the Philippines, more than seven of 10 families in the rural areas do not own the land they cultivate.17 The slow and discriminatory implementation of the national Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) has crippled many people's capability to feed themselves.

Despite stipulations that all certificates of land ownership agreements (CLOAs) should be issued to both spouses, government records show that only 11 percent of CLOA-holders are women. Moreover, agrarian reform communities (ARCs) and their correlative organizations are composed of 72 percent males, reflecting further the under-representation of women in the implementation of CARP.

**Trade Agreements on Agriculture**

Trade agreements and international economic trends have far reaching consequences on the right to food in this country. In order to comply with the World Trade Organizations' (WTO) agreements, the Ramos administration enacted Republic Act 8178 in 1996, effectively replacing the Magna Carta of Small Farmers of 1991—a law protecting products of small farmers and replaced all quantitative restrictions on agricultural imports with tariffs. As a result of its membership in the WTO and in AFTA, by mid-1990s the Philippines became the only ASEAN-4 country to turn from an agricultural exporter to
importer. The country’s food import bills rose from US$43.5 million in 1994 to US$972 million according to the National Statistics Office.

The losses sustained by small domestic producers in the agricultural sector due to the entry of cheap imported consumer and agricultural products have been especially salient. Locally produced garlic at P110 per kilo, for instance, could not compete with Taiwanese garlic priced at P40 per kilo. In addition, assorted imported vegetables from Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands are now competing with Benguet vegetables, with farmers in that province claiming losses of up to P21 billion.

Vegetable farmers and poultry owners have lost their livelihoods due to the illegal entry of imported goods. A board member of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan of Benguet asserted that in 2004, about 768,000 kg of onions, 632,008 kg of carrots, 216,000 kg of garlic, 18,000 kg of potatoes, and 7,500 kg of broccoli were all illegally imported through the South Harbor.

The overly optimistic projections on increased agricultural and industrial expansion under both the WTO and AFTA-CEPTA, then, have yet to materialize.

Conclusion

In sum, food availability in the market does not automatically guarantee access to adequate and nutritious food. In looking at food accessibility, it is important to consider the non-market and structural determinants, such as ownership rights and the terms on which people trade, of resource allocation outcomes.

Understanding the right to food in the Philippines through the key issues of nutritional adequacy, food safety and quality, availability, sustainable production, and accessibility is the first step in ensuring that the government adheres to its obligations as defined by international standards and treaties to which it is a party.

After reading about the current situation, it is not surprising that there are no specific laws that address the right to food of every Filipino. Instead, a piecemeal approach is pursued to respond to the food and nutritional needs of vulnerable populations. The Philippine Plan of Action on Nutrition and Republic Act No. 8435 of 1997 or the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act (AFMA), are just examples of how the government has used food security and self-sufficiency as policy strategies in promoting the right to food.

The Arroyo administration has said it will implement a food voucher system to respond to the growing hunger of poor households. While this measure may serve to temporarily alleviate the needs of the food-deprived, more systemic policy changes are necessary in order for the Philippines to respect, protect and fulfill its obligations to progressively realize its peoples’ right to adequate food.
Endnotes


19 Regalado.