What’s on Your Plate? The Food Situation in the Philippines

By Raffy Rey Hipolito*

The right to adequate food is one of our economic, social and cultural rights. Like other human rights, it is for everyone, of whatever social status, color, gender, nationality, religion, political belief, or educational attainment. The right to food is an essential part of our life. Without it, we will not survive.

Unfortunately, many people are not aware of this right and are unable to realize it.

Legal basis

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) provides for “the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living . . . including adequate food, clothing and housing.” To this end, all State Parties, “recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international cooperation, the measures, including specific programmes, which are needed.”

At the 1996 World Food Summit held in Rome, participating States reaffirmed “the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.”

The Philippine government is a signatory to the above ICESCR and other international agreements. As such, it has a corresponding obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the right to adequate food, as elaborated on by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

* The author is the Policy Advocacy Officer of the Foodfirst Information and Action Network-Philippines (FIAN-Philippines).
The Food Situation in the Philippines

The Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) reported that in 2003, for every 100 pre-school children, 32 were anemic, 30 were underheight and 28 were underweight. For every 100 school-age children, there were 37 anemic, 36 underheight and 27 underweight. Overall, around 5 million pre-school and school-age children are underweight and 7 million underheight and anemic.

The above data are hardly surprising. 13.8% (or around 11-12 million) of the population as of 2003 were living below the subsistence food threshold. The food threshold (the minimum income needed by a person to satisfy his/her nutritional requirements) was set at P8,134 per capita per year, or P3,389 per month for a family with an average of 5 members. The top five regions with a high incidence of the population living below the food threshold are the following:
Why are many Filipinos hungry?

**Lack of job opportunities**

FIAN-Philippines believes that one major reason why many Filipinos do not have access to adequate food is the failure of the economy to provide employment, especially in the rural areas. In the rural areas where agriculture is the main source of livelihood, people do not have work between the planting and harvesting seasons. As of October 2005, the unemployment rate was 7.4% (or 2.6 million unemployed). Underemployment, on the other hand, affected 21.2% or 7 million of the estimated 35 million labor force. NEDA Director General Augusto Santos said most underemployed workers are in agriculture, wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, transport, communications, storage and fishing.

Unemployment has affected mostly the youth and women. Female workers between 15-24 have the highest rates of unemployment.

Existing jobs are also threatened or lost by the flooding in of imported consumer and agricultural products. Local manufacturers and producers unable to compete have been forced to close. For example, from 2,000 registered shoe firms operating in 1994, only 237 remain. This was due to the massive entry of imported shoes, from 28 million pairs in 1997 to 60 million pairs in 2002.

The unhampered entry of imported agricultural products, specifically food items, into the local market has, ironically, affected the food rights of farmer-producers. Vegetable farmers and poultry owners have lost their livelihoods due to the legal and illegal entry of imported products. Board Member John Kim of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan of Benguet claimed that in 2004, 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 illegally imported and entered through the South Harbor. There were also 36.42 million kg of assorted vegetables which were legally imported. These imported items, sold cheaply in the local markets, crowd out the products of local farmers.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>REGION</th>
<th>% OF POPULATION LIVING BELOW SUBSISTENCE FOOD THRESHOLD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region 9 (Zamboanga Peninsula)</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Region 13 (Caraga)</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 5 (Bicol)</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Region 10 (Northern Mindanao)</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARMM</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
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(Source: Second Philippines Progress Report on the Millennium Development Goals, p. 32)
Aside from curbing the legal and illegal entry of imported vegetables, farmers from the Cordilleras are also demanding that Congress conduct an investigation on the provisions of the 47 trade and investment agreements that have been signed with other countries like China and others. These trade pacts could have a negative impact on the vegetable industry like the Early Harvest Program agreed upon by the Department of Trade and Industry and China in July 2005.

**Monopoly of land and other resources**

Lack of access to land and other resources that would enable the people to produce food for their own consumption and for the market is also another reason why people suffer from hunger and are unable to buy nutritious food. Seven in ten families in the rural areas do not own the land they cultivate.

According to the Medium Term Development Plan of the Department of Agrarian Reform, it must still acquire and distribute 771,384 hectares from 2005 – 2008. An average of 192,000 hectares must be distributed per year to complete this backlog. But in 2004, only 104,069 hectares were given to farmer beneficiaries. For 2005, DAR reported having distributed 130,000 hectares. If the government is to complete land distribution by 2008, then it must acquire and give at least 179,000 hectares/year from 2006 to 2008. This would be a tall order, considering that the Arroyo administration has the lowest annual land distribution accomplishment, compared to the Ramos and Estrada governments which averaged 300,000 hectares and 130,000 hectares/year, respectively.

The biggest backlog (610,760 hectares) are in the provinces of Negros Occidental, Negros Oriental, Camarines Sur, Camarines Norte, Albay, Leyte, Iloilo, Cotabato and Lanao del Sur. “Landowners have really been fighting to keep their haciendas. These are the ones who have managed to evade CARP coverage all these years,” says former DAR Secretary Rene Villa. In other areas, landowners and rebels belonging to the New People’s Army have strongly opposed landless tenants demanding CARP coverage. For instance, at the Bondoc Peninsula, Quezon province, the NPAs have harassed coconut farmers petitioning the DAR to stop the share tenancy relations and to cover the lands of the Uy, Reyes and Matias families.

Aside from the above, one other reason why landowners have evaded Republic Act 6657 is because the law itself provides them with a way out. This is best exemplified by the Stock Distribution Option (SDO) provision implemented at the Cojuangco-owned Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac City in 1990. The 6,453-hectare hacienda was not distributed among the farmworkers. The 5,300 workers instead became stock owners, owning 33% of the corporation and entitled to profit while at the same
time working in the hacienda. But the SDO has not improved the lives of the farmworkers who receive an average of P194/day. The farmworkers are able to work only a day or two in a week, forcing them to get loans or cash advances from the management. Their individual shares of the profit, based on the number of hours they work, are much smaller compared to the regular, office-based employees. The conversion of about 500 hectares into industrial and commercial use has further reduced the work opportunities at the hacienda. About 1,009 workers have also been retrenched.

It’s not surprising that a strike erupted at the hacienda last November 6, 2004, during which seven farmworkers were killed and 26 others wounded after Labor Secretary Patricia Sto. Tomas ordered the police and military to enforce the return-to-work order she issued. The workers were demanding for the implementation of the Collective Bargaining Agreement, the reinstatement of retrenched workers, wage increase, a stop to further land conversions and the revocation of the SDO agreement.

The political squabble between PGMA and the elite opposition had a beneficial effect on the struggle of the Hacienda Luisita farmworkers. The Presidential Agrarian Reform Council (PARC), the highest decision-making body on agrarian reform matters, decided last December 20, 2005 to revoke the SDO scheme. Agrarian Reform Secretary Nasser Pangandaman took pains to explain that the decision was not a political revenge on former President Cory Aquino who joined the other political forces calling for Arroyo’s resignation. PARC decided that 4,915 hectares be distributed to the farmworkers. DAR has issued 4 Notices of Coverage for the 4 titles covering Hacienda Luisita to the office of Hacienda Luisita Inc. at Makati City. HLI can retain 5 hectares, according to Undersecretary for Operations Narciso Nieto. A Motion for Reconsideration was filed by HLI before the PARC.

The concentration of land and other resources among a few families has resulted in gross inequality. The income of the richest 1 percent (about 150,000 families) was equivalent to the income of the lowest 38% or 5.8 million families.

**Misallocation of funds**

The priority being given by past administrations and the present Arroyo government to debt payments has taken its toll, especially on the delivery of basic services to the people. Many programs that could contribute in realizing the right of the people to be free from hunger and to adequate food are being sacrificed. In the proposed 2006 national budget (amounting to P1.05 trillion), P721 billion has been reserved for principal and interest payments.
Debt servicing has been done at the expense of social welfare programs that could alleviate hunger, like the Food for Work program. After the Social Weather Station came out with a survey in October 2004 showing that 15% of the population are experiencing hunger, the Arroyo administration said it would implement a Food for Work program that would benefit 500,000 families. This was later on pared down to 50,000 families in five provinces, namely Camarines Sur, Eastern Samar, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao and Sulu. The beneficiaries were supposed to receive a monthly food coupon worth P1,200 over a period of six months in exchange for rendering community service.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) budgeted P360 million for six months of implementation. According to a staff of the Program Management Bureau of the DSWD, the program only ran for one month because there were no more funds to continue the program after the department spent P60 million. The government is spending billions for debt payments but it cannot sustain a program worth only P360 million. This is the more “honorable thing to do,” according to Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye.

The emphasis on debt payments has also deprived millions of Filipinos of a basic item – water. 632 out of the 1,500 municipalities have no access to potable water according to the Local Water and Utilities Administration. Lorenzo Jamora, administrator of the LWUA, said their agency would need P3 billion yearly in order to ensure water supply for more than 600 towns nationwide that have no water supply.

**Low productivity**

The right of the people to adequate food will be affected by the availability or quantity of food products. Considering the fast growing population of the Philippines, it is imperative to improve agricultural productivity, particularly rice, the staple food. The country’s palay productivity is quite low, when compared to other Asian countries. For example, as of 2003 the Philippines’ average yield per hectare is 3.43MT per hectare. Indonesia produces 4.54mt/hectare; Vietnam, 4.63mt/hectare and China, 6.07 mt/hectare. This low productivity has made the Philippines a rice importer in the past two decades, importing between 800,000 to 1 million metric tons per year. In 2005, the country imported 1.8 metric tons of rice at a cost of P27 Billion – double the rice imports of 2004.

A country that cannot produce its staple food in sufficient quantities is a country that is in bad shape.

To increase productivity and the availability of rice, the government, through the Department of Agriculture, has been aggressively promoting the use of hybrid seeds. From 230,00 hectares in 2004, the DA targeted
398,000 hectares for 2005 for its hybrid seed program. To motivate farmers to use the hybrid seed, the government has been subsidizing the seeds at P1,200 – P2,400 per 20 kilogram. The SEARICE cautioned the government in promoting hybrid seed, citing a study done by Dr. Cristina David of the Institute for Development Studies, which concludes that “only in Nueva Ecija has hybrid rice performed significantly well over inbred rice …. The main reason for this seems to be Nueva Ecija’s agro-climatic conditions such as good soil fertility and relatively stable climatic pattern. In Davao del Sur, hybrid rice had a much lower yield advantage of around 11% over inbred rice . . . In Isabela and Iloilo, hybrids had the same or much poorer performance over inbreds.” Farmers using hybrid rice also had to shell out more for fertilizer and pesticides, according to the study. They must also purchase new seeds every planting season unlike before when they stored from their own stocks or exchanged seeds with other farmers. The increased use of fertilizers and pesticides has likewise caused environmental degradation.

Environmental destruction and land conversions

Aside from low productivity, the availability or supply of food products is also affected by other factors such as land conversions and environmental destruction. Thousands of hectares of prime agricultural lands have been converted to other purposes. Based on DAR records, 35,687 hectares have been legally approved for conversion. Another 38,908 hectares have been converted under DOJ Opinion #44. About 200,000 hectares have been illegally converted into other uses. The total area devoted to farming has been decreasing, according to the National Statistics office. In 1991, the country had a total farm area of 9.97 million hectares; by 2002, only 9.67 million hectares remain.

The remaining agricultural lands would also be affected by water shortage due to the massive cutting of trees in the mountains and watersheds. Forest cover has reportedly increased from 5.4 million hectares to 7.16 million hectares as of 2002. But the World Bank said that the Philippines still has one of the lowest forest cover per capita among 11 tropical countries.

The country’s remaining forests is in grave danger due to the aggressive promotion of mining by the Arroyo administration. The Chamber of Mines of the Philippines reported that eight big Japanese companies and financial institutions have expressed interest in investing in the mining sector. The government’s total investment target is $6 billion in 23 priority projects. Pan Pacific, Japan’s biggest metal firm, has already poured an additional $15 million into Philex Mining. The strong warning of church and environmental groups that mining would cause massive damage came true when a mine spill occurred at Rapu-Rapu, Albay last October 2005. The waste spills of Lafayette Phil. Inc., an Australian
company extracting copper, gold and silver, leaked to the creeks, rivers and seas. A fish kill occurred that adversely affected the livelihood of fisherfolks.

Mangroves and coral reefs, the breeding ground of fishes, have also been destroyed. Only 4 percent of coral reefs are in good condition. Representative Juan Zubiri reported that 75% of the country’s mangroves have been destroyed. From 450,000 hectares in 1918, the country has only 110,000 hectares of mangroves. The main causes for this the conversion of mangroves for shrimp production; pollution coming from houses, industries and mines; dredging and other destructive methods of fishing.

One area which has been strongly affected is the Lingayen Gulf of Pangasinan. Provincial Governor Victor Agbayani claimed that fish catch has declined by 50% since the 1980s. He blamed the use of fine mesh nets by commercial fishers and the use of illegal fishing methods by municipal fisherfolks. The Sagip Lingayen Gulf Foundation and fisherfolks from Bolinao, Anda, Bani and Alaminos City, together with local government units, have been establishing marine protected areas to rejuvenate the fishing areas.

### Food safety

Another major food issue is the large volume of pesticides and chemical fertilizers being used by farmers on palay, corn, vegetables and other crops. In 2004, for example, the Philippines imported a total of $101.4 million worth of technical materials and formulated products of pesticides, just a little lower than the 2003 figure of $101.87 million. This has placed at risk the health not only of farmers but likewise of consumers. Dr. Charles Cheng, director of the Baguio Filipino Chinese Hospital, said that “diseases among farmers seemed to have a direct relation to the frequent use of commercial pesticides and insecticides.” He likewise warned that “chemicals used in the uplands could go down to the major rivers and this could trigger a major environmental problem.”

Despite such warnings, organic farming has not been popular in the country. At present, only 14,401 hectares are being planted to organic rice.

Environmentalists have also warned consumers of genetically-modified products/plants which may affect their health. Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Breed and Syngenta, for instance, have introduced the Bt corn. As of 2004, 55,000 hectares have been planted with Bt corn. The said corn produces its own poison to kill pests. If these corns are used as feeds for pigs and cows, then it could adversely affect the people’s health. A Norwegian geneticist who conducted blood tests on 38 tribal residents
of Sitio Kalyong, Brgy. Landan, Polomolok, South Cotobato found that their blood contained *bacillus thuringiensis*. Meanwhile, 51 residents of Marbel, South Cotobato who were living near a Bt corn field complained of headache, flu, nausea, fatigue and skin allergies.

Environmental groups, church organizations and farmers have joined hands in opposing Bt corn and other genetically-modified organisms (GMOs). The Samahan ng Magsasaka sa Timug Kutabato, for instance, has been urging Congress to do something about Monsanto’s “stacked-trait corn”. It has been pushing for the passage of House Bill 2124 or the GMO-Free Food and Agriculture bill which has not been acted upon.

Mindoro farmers and Greenpeace staged a rally at the national office of the Department of Agriculture to protest genetically-engineered corns. Municipal Agriculturist Ely Vargas of Naujan town said “we will continue to tell the government that we reject GMOs until they listen.” Aside from the ecological and health costs, farmers are opposing the Bt corn because of the exorbitant costs (P4,000 – P5,000 per 50 kilos), which further reduce the income of farmers.

The Social Action Center of the Diocese of Ilagan and Greenpeace have jointly urged Governor Grace Padaca of Isabela province to ban GMOs just like the provincial governments of Bohol and Oriental Mindoro. They instead urged the DA to promote the Trichogramma wasps which are natural enemies of the corn borer.

The recipe

The Arroyo administration said it will implement a food voucher system to respond to the growing hunger of poor households. While this would temporarily answer the needs of families, FIAN-Philippines believes that these stop-gap measures are not enough. The Philippine government should instead:

(a) Vigorously implement agrarian reform and other asset reforms to enable the people to plant basic food crops for their own consumption and the market. Irrigation facilities should be repaired and expanded.

(b) Create employment opportunities, especially in the countryside. A genuine industrialization program that would process our raw materials and enable us to produce consumer and industrial goods should be pursued to create jobs and reduce our dependency on imports. We should protect existing jobs and industries from imported goods.

(c) Initiate a serious reforestation program to prevent soil erosion,
flooding in the lowlands, siltation of rivers and destruction of coral reefs. Our remaining mangroves and coral reefs should be protected to ensure the supply of fish.

(d) Enact a comprehensive land-use plan to put a stop to the indiscriminate conversion of agricultural lands.

(e) Encourage organic farming to ensure that the food we are eating are free from adverse substances. This would also rejuvenate the soil and reduce the expenses of farmers.

(f) Enact a Minimum Income or Basic Income Law. Through this, poor families would receive financial support from the government which they can use in buying food.

(g) Allot the national budget for basic services and agricultural production, instead of pouring a huge percentage of the people’s money on debt payments. More than 30% of the budget goes to paying the interest of our debt while millions of Filipinos are hungry, sick, homeless, unemployed and uneducated.

(h) Repeal the Oil Deregulation Law which has been abused by the 3 major oil firms and the new players to increase oil prices. Prices of food commodities has increased as a result of the non-stop increases in gasoline prices.

(i) Strongly promote nutrition education, breast-feeding and dietary-based approach to combat vitamin deficiency.

These are just some measures that can be implemented to realize the right to adequate food. As can be seen, a comprehensive approach is needed. It is not enough to increase agricultural output, although it is a necessary step towards realizing the right to food for all citizens. The economic condition of the people must be improved to ensure their access to food. Social justice measures need to be implemented. The environment should be protected. Most of all, the people must become aware of their right to adequate food and struggle for its realization.
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