

Picking Up the Crumbs

The Right to Food Situation

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AHMP Framework

IN JULY 2006, the Arroyo government launched the Accelerated Hunger Mitigation Program (AHMP). Its main goal was to cut hunger incidence by half within one year. An Anti-Hunger Task Force was created through Executive Order # 616 with the National Nutrition Council (NNC) as the oversight agency. The AHMP's basic framework is that hunger is caused by two factors: the unavailability/insufficiency of food (supply side) and the lack of money of the people to buy food (demand side).

To address the supply side, productivity programs for crops and livestock, Food for School program and an efficient delivery system (highways, ports, bagsakan centers, 'Tindahan Natin' outlets) were seen as the answers. For the demand side, the programs formulated were micro-financing, vocational/technical trainings, emergency employment programs, planting of rubber and jatropha in upland areas, inter-cropping in coconut lands, promoting breastfeeding, nutrition education in schools and population management.

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The priority areas of the AHMP are the top 10 food-poor provinces based on subsistence incidence, including the National Capital Region (NCR), the top 20 poorest provinces based on the 2003 Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES) and other food-insecure provinces and those with existing hunger mitigation measures.

Reported Accomplishments of AHMP

Based on the reports of the members of the Anti-Hunger Task Force, the following were the accomplishments:

- More than 81,000 individuals were hired by the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) from 2007-2009 for its road maintenance project.¹
- The National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) said 292,000 persons were given vocational/technical skills trainings to enable them to find high-paying jobs.²
- 10,761 individuals were able to work in the repair or construction of irrigation projects.³
- 176,254 children between 3-5 years old in 5,043 day-care centers were served under the Healthy Start Feeding Program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).⁴
- 3.5 million families with children attending day care centers and public elementary schools benefitted from the Food for School program. Each child received 1 kilo of rice/day for every day that they attended school.⁵
- 2.4 million poor individuals received micro-finance loans for livelihood projects.⁶
- 1.6 million families were provided with vegetable seeds under the Gulayan Para sa Masa program of the Department of Agriculture.⁷
- There were 692,798 beneficiaries of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), the World Bank-supported conditional cash transfer program of the government. Each beneficiary

received P500/month for health and nutrition and P300/month per child for education (a maximum of 3 children per family). The 4Ps covered 664 towns and 60 cities in 80 provinces.⁸

An Assessment of the AHMP

Did the AHMP achieve its overall goal of cutting by fifty percent the hunger incidence? Was the number of food-poor individuals in the top 10 food-poor provinces reduced? It might be difficult to answer these questions, since the official 2009 poverty and subsistence incidence report will be issued by the National Statistical Coordination Board in March 2011.⁹ Whenever hunger rates go down in the Social Weather Stations' survey, the past administration would claim that its anti-hunger programs were effective; but whenever the figures increase, the Arroyo government would claim that SWS surveys are "mere perceptions" of the respondents.



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At this time, the best evidence would come from the 7th National Nutrition Survey (NNS): 2008 conducted by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) and the hunger surveys of the SWS.

The 7th NNS covered 5,014 households between May–December 2008. Using the Radimer/Cornell instrument for the Food Insecurity Component of the survey, FNRI found out that 28.6% of mothers and 17.9% of children experienced food insecurity in the 3 months prior to the survey. Food insecurity was manifested by skipping meals, not eating even when hungry, or not eating for the whole day. Indicators of food insecurity at the household level included the following:

Table 1: Percent of Households Experiencing Food Insecurity in the 3 Months Prior to the Survey

Indices	% of Households
“I worried that food would run out before we get money to buy more.”	69.80% of 5,014
“The food just bought did not last and we did not have enough money to get more.”	58.50% of 5,014
“The children were not eating enough because we did not have enough food and cannot afford to buy more.”	45.80% of 4,569
“We could not feed the children nutritionally adequate meals because we did not have enough food and enough money to buy more.”	50.40% of 4,569

Source: NSO 2000 and National Demographic and Household Survey

The FNRI said the national estimate of households experiencing food insecurity in the 3 months prior to the conduct of the survey was 72.7%; the national estimate for households with children who experienced food insecurity was 52.8%.



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The 7th NNS also revealed that the number of underweight children between 0-5 years old increased from 24.6% in 2005 to 26.2% (estimated at 3.35 million) in 2008. The same is true with children 6-10 years old: from 22.8% in 2005, the number of children aged 6-10 who were underweight increased to 25.6% (2.58 million) in 2008.

The SWS quarterly surveys on hunger also reveal the same trend. In 2006, the year AHMP was launched, the average hunger rate was 16.67%. Yet the hunger rate in the next three years increased.

Table 2: Annual Average Hunger Rate

Year	Overall Hunger Rate
2007	17.80%
2008	18.50%
2009	19.20%

Source: Social Weather Station, Degree of Hunger in Households, Philippines: July 1998 – December 2009, 4th Quarter 2009 Social Weather Report

Program Implementation

The AHMP obviously has not made significant inroads into the country's hunger and malnutrition problems.

Food for School Program and Tindahan Natin Outlets

In their study on the Food for School Program and the Tindahan Natin Outlets, Rosario Manasan and Janet Cuenca of the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) observed that “the inclusion of all the cities and municipalities in the NCR results in a substantial leakage of FSP benefits to non-poor beneficiaries.” In school year, 2006-2007, there were 418,308 beneficiaries in Metro Manila while the poorer regions like the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), a region that experiences hunger and poverty at its most acute, had only 62,864; Bicol had 97,233 beneficiaries and CARAGA, 27,947.¹⁰ Manasan and Cuenca also pointed out that the under-coverage and leakage rates would have been substantially reduced had the targeting of beneficiary municipalities been based on the 2003 City and Municipal Level Poverty Estimates (National Statistical Coordination Board). Instead, the targeting of beneficiary areas was based on the FIVIMS (Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information System) priority provinces and municipalities.

Manasan and Cuenca likewise observed that the Tindahan Natin out-

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lets are mostly in urbanized areas. 180 or 40% of the targeted 452 local government units (LGUs) have Tindahan Natin outlets in poblacion barangays. They estimate that about 66% of the benefits of the Tindahan Natin program go to non-poor families.¹¹

Many poor families are not able to buy sufficient low-priced rice from TN outlets because the National Food Authority (NFA) has been reducing their rice deliveries. Those with Family Access Cards issued by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) are supposed to be entitled to purchase 14 kilos per week from TN stores. But this has been gradually reduced from 14 kilos/week to 7 kilos/week to 5 kilos/week.¹²

In Region 6 (Western Visayas), the Commission on Audit (COA) reported that each TN operator should get 70 sacks of rice/week to sell. However, the NFA delivered only 10-30 sacks per week.¹³ The reduction of the rice supply has negatively affected not only the consumers but also the income of the TN operators whose sales have dwindled.

Seeds distribution

The Department of Agriculture (DA) is in charge of palay, corn and vegetable seeds distribution under the AHMP. The COA audit found out that only 109,786 bags of palay certified seeds (or 21% of target) were distributed out of 522,699 bags targeted for distribution under the Rapid Seed Supply Financing Project. It also discovered some irregularities: in Region 6, the signatures of 35 persons (or 13% of beneficiaries) were different from the ones appearing in the distribution list; in Region 10 (Northern Mindanao), 186 farmer-beneficiaries interviewed were not the original farmer-owners, they were traders or mortgagors who had somehow come in possession of the farms; in Region 2 (Cagayan Valley), farmers who were already dead, who had migrated to other provinces or have sold their farms were still in the distribution list.¹⁴

Micro-finance

As for the micro-finance program, it is hardly expected to make a difference in the lives of the target beneficiaries because:

- The sustainability of the program was uncertain because collection of repayments was not adequate enough to bring back the capital;
- Lack of monitoring of the beneficiaries by the implementing government agencies;
- Lack of documents to track down the NGOs/Micro-Finance Institutions that got the loans for re-lending to individual clients;
- Non-liquidation of the funds by the NGOs/MFIs.

COA's audit revealed the following:

- The Microfinance and Enterprise Development Loans is one of the micro-financing programs being implemented by the DSWD. The COA noted that out of P13.32 million loans due and demandable in Regions 6, 7 (Central Visayas), 11 (Davao Region) and 13 (Caraga), 59% or P7.9 million remained uncollected.¹⁵
- The past due loans of the People's Credit and Finance Corporation (PCFC) has been increasing from P104.42 million in 2007, P186 million in 2008 and P222 million in 2009.¹⁶
- The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) also had loan projects such as the Tulong sa Tao (Self-Employment Loan Assistance) Program for the poorest of the poor and the Micro-Enterprise Development Program which are coursed through the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP), Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) and Philippine National Bank (PNB). According to the COA, the government banks in Regions 1 (Ilocos Region), 3 (Central Luzon), 7 and 12 (SOCCSKSARGEN) could not provide a complete list of NGO beneficiaries

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with unsettled accounts “due to the absence of subsidiary ledgers of NGO loan beneficiaries and other documents such as Memorandum of Agreement or loan documents.”¹⁷

Animal dispersal program

DA’s Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) was tasked with livestock dispersal under the AHMP. One of the problems documented by the COA was the lack of/inadequate monitoring of the livestock distributed. The usual agreement between BAI and the recipients is that the latter would give one offspring of the goat/cow/carabao he/she received. But BAI failed to collect the offspring which would have been further dispersed to other persons. P464,000 worth of high-breed goats were given to Cristina Farm in Bantay municipality, Ilocos Sur. But there was no monitoring and payment was not demanded. The farm closed down in 2005 but BAI was not even aware of it. The same thing happened with the 25 goats provided to the Pangasinan provincial government. There was no monitoring and the payment was not collected from the beneficiaries.¹⁸

Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4 Ps)

In its 2009 audit report on DSWD, COA noted that “The lack of sufficient monitoring system to determine compliance by all beneficiaries of the conditions imposed...and to constantly validate the eligibility of selected beneficiaries may hinder the achievement of the objectives of the program.” In Caloocan City, COA discovered that 5 beneficiaries did not belong to the “extremely poor families.” One is a dealer of dried fish and owns apartments; one has an income of P15,000/month and another one has a lending business. In Region 9 (Zamboanga Peninsula), the audit team found out that there were some poor families who were not enrolled in the program while some families that did not belong to the poorest of the poor were included.¹⁹

In Tanza, Navotas City, the usual complaint of the 4Ps beneficiaries was the long-delayed release of their cash benefits. In 2009, for instance, the January-March cash transfer came only in the 2nd quarter of the year, and only after a letter was sent to the DSWD Secretary by an international human rights organization.²⁰

Aquino's Anti-Hunger, Anti-Poverty Program

The President's State of the Nation Address touched on job creation; conditional cash transfer and other social services. The revival of the emergency employment program, implemented during former President Corazon Aquino's term, the construction of irrigation, provision of extension services and marketing of products of farmers were also mentioned in the SONA.

The continuation of the conditional cash transfer program has generated much attention not only from food rights advocates but also from legislators. It is, after all, a multi-billion peso undertaking. The DSWD's budget more than doubled from P10 billion to P34 billion as it aims to target more than 2.3 million beneficiaries in 2011.²¹ The Food for School Program, however, seems to be on its way out. The appointed Agriculture Secretary, Proceso Alcala, declared that his department's goal is to become self-sufficient in rice in three years. Agrarian Reform Secretary Virgilio de los Reyes said his department would focus on eight priority areas where there are still huge backlogs in land distribution. These areas are Western Visayas, Bicol, ARMM, Central Visayas, Central Mindanao, Eastern Visayas, Southern Mindanao and Northern Mindanao.²²

A Comprehensive, Long-Term Anti-Hunger Plan

The main weakness of the AHMP is that it was implemented by a government that was not serious in wiping out hunger but was more concerned in salvaging its popularity among the people. Its lack of sincerity can be seen from the improbable target it set – that of cut-

ting by half the incidence of hunger within a year.

If the Aquino government wants to give the more than 12 million food-poor Filipinos a greater chance of freeing themselves from the grips of hunger, it must formulate a comprehensive, long-term plan that would address short-term needs as well as long-term ones.

Equally needed in the elimination of hunger and poverty is the democratization of the economic resources through agrarian, aquatic and other asset reforms, provision of adequate social services to the marginalized sectors, creation of jobs through industrialization, fair wages for workers, provision of livelihood credit to the poor, and political reforms that would allow more people participation in decision-making, especially on budget spending. "Public-private partnerships" or anti-corruption measures would not suffice to achieve these goals. It is only by having social justice, wider ownership and control over economic resources, and transparent and participatory political processes that would enable more Filipino families to feed themselves with dignity.

NOTES:

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