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### **Philippines: Reducing population growth and urbanization through education and public policy initiatives**

The Philippines, located in Southeast Asia, is considered the 12<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the world with 96 million citizens. The archipelago of the Philippines consists of 7,107 islands with approximately 4,000 inhabited islands. Many of these islands are barely habitable because of the lack of safe water and natural resources that are needed to survive. The Philippines has population density that is approximately nine times compared to the United States with an increasing population rate of 1.8% every year. With some three million Filipino children born in poverty each year, the United Nations advised the Philippines to implement policies to prevent the growing population by 2025. The United Nations warned the Philippines that it is imperative for the country to deal with the population crisis because by 2025, the Philippines will not have enough resources to feed the starving Filipino children and their other constituents.

In the urban areas, an average Filipino family consists of five to seven people in one small household. According to a report written by Dr. Romulo Virola, secretary general, a Filipino family of five people only needs Php 231 per day to live above the poverty level. If a Filipino family of five lives on six dollars per day, the family is considered to be “not poor”. It is startling that just one dollar a day places families into an entirely different socio-economic bracket. The problem with this statistic is that it is simply unrealistic for a family of five to live under 6 dollars a day. It may be enough for food; however, considering their other needs such as electricity, housing and education, it is not substantial. The Social Weather Stations reports that although many families live off the minimum income and above the poverty line in Metro Manila, two out of ten million people living in Metro Manila are experiencing starvation.

Although the main part of a Filipinos dietary intake is rice, it does not provide the necessary nutritional value for an individual. The Food and Nutrition Research Institute reports that “In the Philippines, the proportion of household with per capita dietary intake lower than 100 percent dietary energy requires decreasing from 69.4 percent in 1993 to 56.9 percent in 2003 or an annual reduction of 1.25 percent” (Alave). The Filipino nutritional and dietary system needs to improve and will improve in time. As of now, four million children in Metro Manila are considered malnourished. The numbers are expected to increase due to high inflation on food which will force households to cut down on food.

In addition to lack of food and poor nutrition, six out of ten Filipinos die of sickness without ever seeing a doctor (Bernabe). Health care facilities in the Philippines are in the urban areas such as the National Capital Region while the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, which is the southern rural region of the Philippines, lacks access to health care facilities. Because of the lack of health care facilities in the rural areas, many Filipinos move to urbanized areas to seek medical care which leads to the overpopulation in the cities. Indeed, the inequality among the rich and the poor is affecting the welfare and health of its people. The people living in urban areas tend to have the benefit of health facilities whereas the people in rural areas do not. The Philippine government’s budget for health care is less than 3% of the country’s GDP while the standard health care allocation recommended by the World Health Organization is 5% (Bernabe). Unsurprisingly, in 2009, the infant mortality rate in the Philippines is 26 out of 1,000 babies being born while under-five mortality rate is 33 out of 1,000 according to UNICEF.

GMA news, a highly acclaimed TV broadcasting show, reported in 2008 that the Philippines has the highest income inequality in Asia: "This report shows conclusively that the gap between richer and poorer

households widened since the 1990s," said Raymond Torres, Director of the ILO's International Institute for Labor Studies. According to the University of Philippine professor, Rene Ofreneo, the correlation between population growth and income inequality "...has always been with us. The problem is that while there is great [population] growth there; it is also a jobless growth" (David).

As far as employment, according to the National Statistics Office of the Philippines, the unemployment rate in January 2009 was 7.7% compared to 2000 to 2005 which averaged about the rate of 11%; therefore, the unemployment rate of the Philippines had gone down by 4% during the reign of Former President Arroyo. In the rural agrarian sector, there are 11 million employed in an agriculture job such as fishery, farming and forestry. Although many of them are employed, most the farmers are underpaid and overworked. Most farming families in the rural area are landless: "Landless workers, however, have no similar security of tenure. As indicated in the table, 17-18% of landless workers pay rentals for their home lots; the rest who may still be occupying their home lots for free may soon be asked to pay rentals" (Ledesma). The unemployment rate in the Philippines may seem low; however, "...the percentage of people who are formally employed here in the Philippines is only 20 to 25 percent. All the rest who are informally employed, including the rural poor like farmers and fishermen, drivers in the transport sector, sidewalk vendors and factory workers, are not members of the government systems," says Von Mesina, vice-chair of the National Urban Poor Coalition. This means that although the statistics may show that the majority of Filipinos are employed, Von Mesina makes the observation that these are temporary under paid jobs that cannot possibly support a family. In 2004, because of low wages, 1.06 million Filipinos migrated to another country to find a better paying job. Compared to the United States, the average monthly income of a Filipino teacher is 237 dollars while a teacher in the United States earns 4,055 per month. Because of the demand of overseas Filipino workers, the literacy rate in the Philippine has gone up to 93% among citizens older than 10 years old. Although the literacy rate in the Philippines has been increasing and the Philippine education system has been improving, many Filipinos are not educated and unaware about family planning. Overpopulation is a major part of the food security crisis. Because agricultural workers cannot produce as much as is need for the people, the prices of grain and vegetables are inflating leading to more starving Filipino families.

As the population growth increases and urbanization spreads, the demand for food, for workers, and for the land on which to grow food also increases. Since the Philippine land area is approximately 298,170 square kilometers, the government and agricultural workers simply cannot afford having more people. A high population growth rate can divert resources to consumption and can reduce the resources available for investment, which is necessary for rapid economic growth. The average annual growth rate over the last several years of 4 to 4.5 percent of GDP is simply too low to keep up with a population that is growing by 2.04 per cent. An economic growth rate of 6-8 per cent is needed at the least, and if this is not attainable, resources and consumption needs will continue to rise with the increased population. Overpopulation is not only the problem in the Philippines, urbanization in fact reduces the farmers in the agricultural sector; therefore, because of people moving into cities, farmers and fishermen are reducing and the agricultural productivity in the Philippines are decreasing. Because there has been a little intensification in the rural areas under cultivation, the annual agriculture productivity growth averaged from 1.1% in 1993 to 2002. Although overpopulation and urbanization may not directly affect hunger per se, it is indirectly affected by the price inflation, poverty, and income disparities. Thus, in order to solve the food security crisis, the international community must solve the overpopulation and the increased urbanization and its causes because solving poverty is a prerequisite to solving hunger.

The issues that also need to be addressed to decrease the food insecurity in the Philippines are as follows: conflict and environmental unsustainability. Conflict plays a bi-directional link to poverty. Conflict may cause poverty and poverty may cause conflict. In the Southern part of the Philippines, particularly the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, two-thirds of the bottoms 40% of the population is uneducated. Although it is indirect, conflict leads to lack of education which leads to unemployment in

ARMM. Children in conflict areas are 10% less likely to finish elementary school. The quality of life is also being affected by conflict; 14% of families in the conflict areas are less likely to access portable drinking water. The increasing population contributes to be one of the major issues leading to the Philippines' pollution. Since there is an unemployment rate of 11% in the nation and desperation to live a better life, many workers create businesses that can ruin the environmental sustainability of the country. One of these is deforestation because of the demand for fine wood furniture. The state of the Philippine environment calls for concentrated efforts to arrest degradation. Biodiversity in the nation decreases, and the total area of forest in the Philippines has been reduced. Not only that is deforestation increasing, but also water quality is worsening. Studies show that 58% of drinkable underground water has been contaminated with coliform while 36% of river systems are suitable for drinking water. Pollution has been a major issue in the Philippines, and it also contributes to diseases. Due to poor sanitation and unhygienic environment, tuberculosis is widespread. In 1995, tuberculosis was the fifth leading cause of death. With a population of approximately 76 million in 2000, there were 120,000 to 240,000 cases of tuberculosis per year. The tuberculosis problem is due to the lack of health care facilities and urbanization because of the population density in the cities.

The Philippine government must keep in mind that solving the food security crisis means solving poverty first. As a Filipino citizen, in order to effectively address and reduce the population and urbanization in the Philippines, it is essential for the country to acknowledge the problem, pass legislations, educate the youth, motivate agricultural innovations, and properly allocate funds to programs that truly need it.

First, the government must recognize and acknowledge the problem in order to effectively solve it. For example, it is necessary for the Philippine government not just to look at numbers and statistics but to look at the current situation of their constituents. As previously mentioned, the government recognizes an individual living over a dollar per day to have a "decent" life. Thus, the poverty threshold is simply unrealistic and does not address the current problems that the Filipino citizens are currently facing. While it is true that over a dollar a day may be adequate for food; however, food is not the only needs of an individual in order to survive. The price inflation of grain specifically rice has been affecting the Filipino citizens greatly. Consequently, the Philippines ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in the hunger list by the Gallup University in 2008. Acknowledging the problem is a prerequisite in order to properly address and solve it.

Second, the Philippine congress must pass legislation according to what will serve the greater good in the society not according to other influences or to their favor. Majority of Filipinos are Christians with an astonishing 85% of citizens being Roman Catholic; the Philippines is considered the third biggest Catholic nation in the world. The Philippine government is a democratic republic like the United States. Because of the percentage of Catholic citizens, the church has a huge impact on the legislation and the government. In a democratic republic government like the Philippines, it is important to focus on the people's voice and their needs; however, the situation in the Philippines is different. Since the majority of Filipinos are Catholic, legislators allow the Catholic Church to influence their policies. Contraceptives have been a center of controversial debate among many societies such as the United States; however, in the Philippines, the debate remains acrimonious because of the Catholic Church's wide influence. An example of this is the Reproductive Health bill that has been stalled by the Catholic Church for the past 16 years. Although the Philippine constitution states that in Article II, Section 6 "The separation of Church and State shall be inviolable", this amendment is apparently not implemented in the legislation process. Many politicians have presented their view regarding the debate of the separation between the Church and the State including Kabataan Party list Representative Raymond Palatino. Rep. Palatino filed a House bill entitled "Religious Freedom in Government Act" which if passed, will legislate that the state cannot be seen as favoring one religion over another. It includes banning religious schools, classes, ceremonies and even symbols. However, this is not a good approach to the said problem within the Church and the state. The Philippines cannot simply enforce radical legislations that will destroy the culture of and identity of the country as well as cause chaos and disorder within the state. Although

dissent may occur, the Philippines should pass legislations such as the Reproductive Health Bill because it affects the needs of all the citizens. Many politicians, predominantly women, have shown their support of the reproductive health bill. In 2010, President Noynoy Aquino was elected president after pledging to sign the Reproductive Health bill; however, the president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, responded by threatening to excommunicate the president if he followed through with such commitments. For nearly four decades, the US Agency for International Development donated 400 million dollars for contraceptives in the Philippines. In 2008, the program stopped during the Bush administration saying, "it is time for the Philippines to take responsibility" (Weis). On the contrary, Mayor Lito Atienza of Manila, one of the most populous dense cities in the world, believes that population growth will actually help the Philippine economy: "When you have more people, you have a bigger work force". The Reproductive Health bill addresses allocating funds for maternal health care facilities, access to contraceptive, family planning, sex education and reducing the population growth. As previously stated, the United Nations already warned the Philippines that if the population growth pattern continues, the country will not be able to sustain their people. Therefore, it is imperative for the Philippines to pass the Reproductive Health bill since it is what the Filipinos want and need. According to a national survey, 70 percent of Filipinos actually want the RH bill to be passed. Because of the current overpopulation crisis and lack of knowledge in sex education and family planning, many children under the age of five die due to malnourishment, poor sanitation and diseases in the environment. Population policy should not only concentrate on contraception but rather on women's rights, reproductive health, and education because these are all critical elements in solving the population crisis. Because of the lack of legislation protecting the mother of the unborn, 11 mothers die due to maternal complications every day which means that 3,000 to 5,000 mother die in a year. Miriam Defensor Santiago, a senator, says at her sponsorship speech for the Reproductive Health bill stated that "reproductive rights are part of basic human rights", and she adds that it is imperative "...in achieving our Millennium Development Goal No.5. Our goal is in fact, to enable all pregnant women to have access to pre-natal care, to be attended to by a skilled health professional while giving birth, and to be given post-natal care for her and her newborn". According to the analysis of the UN Population Fund and Guttmacher Institute, an estimated 222 million women who wanted to avoid pregnancies used contraceptives; hence, the unplanned birth in those countries will be decreased by two-thirds. By passing this bill, the Philippine will certainly have progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals such as child and maternal health care, medical care for diseases, gender equality, and improvements in food security.

Third, education and awareness will not only help reduce the growing population of the Philippines, but it will also decrease the chances of spreading sexually transmitted diseases. The Reproductive Health bill will bring comprehensive sex education and family planning to schools; therefore, making the youth aware of family planning, contraceptives, and maternal health. It is the government's duty to inform and protect their citizens, and by mandating comprehensive sex education classes, this will be achieved. Although change for the Philippines will not happen drastically, by mandating a comprehensive sex education, the results will be seen in the future. Even though effects of comprehensive sex education may not drastically show in population reduction, the results will certainly show in reducing sexually transmitted diseases. The Philippine Headliner reports that HIV cases in the Philippines increased by 92 percent: "The Philippine National Aids Council (PNAC) warned up to 46,000 Filipinos could be diagnosed with HIV by 2015, unless the spread of the highly contagious disease is effectively checked" (Ison). HIV has not been a huge problem in the Philippines; however, because of the lack of knowledge about contraceptives and sex, the Filipino youth are unaware about these diseases. Due to the drastic increase in people affected by HIV or other sexual transmitted diseases, the Philippine congress is trying to pass House Bill 5312 to allocate Php 400 million of funding to start a new program and strategy preventing the spread of HIV in the Philippines. If the rate of the spread of HIV continues, Dr. Salvana states that the Philippine government will be forced to spend "P1 billion yearly by 2015, just to procure the antiretroviral drugs needed to treat Filipinos with HIV"(qtd in Ison). Rather than singularly focusing

on married couples, the government should heighten the emphasis placed on informing and educating the youth.

Fourth, in order to reduce urbanization and promote welfare, the government must motivate the agricultural sector and increase farmer participation to support and feed the overcrowding cities of the Philippines. According to the book *Poverty in the Philippines*, 34 percent of farmers live on the bottom 40 percent of the poverty line while urban workers such as technicians, clerks, and factory workers that are below the 40 percent of the poverty line are less than 8 percent. Because of the low wages of the farmers, they are lured to move to cities to find a better life. A majority of farmers in the Philippines are landless which contributes to the daily struggles of a farmer's life: "Much of the problems in agrarian reform implementation can be traced ultimately to lack of people's participation". The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program of 1988 issued by President Marcos, however, states that only 58 percent of the country's farmland has been distributed. The CARP, a state policy, promotes land ownership for agrarian workers to improve their life and sustain their families. Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program benefitted 2.7 million rural households or 44 percent of the peasant population. Because many landlords are opposed to this state policy, farmers and other agrarian workers are being threatened by violence. One example is the Hacienda Luisita massacre of 2004. The Hacienda Luisita, known as Asia's largest sugar plantation, is 6,435 hectare land owned by the Conjuangco family, and in 1988, it was issued to be distributed by the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program among the sugar farmers with the income of less than a dollar per day with 12 hours of labor. The Philippines still see violence among agricultural reformers. In November 2004, farmers went on strike and protested against the Conjuangco family demanding better benefits and wages. The Conjuangco family responded to the protest with violence. After 11 days, police and military took action and fired into the crowd resulting in 7 deaths, 50 gunshot wounds and 130 arrested farmers. Therefore, it is important to implement more laws to protect, benefit, and cultivate agrarian farmers in the Philippines to support and feed the increasing population and reduce urbanization.

Lastly, the government must properly allocate and invest funds to programs and facilities that will benefit the greater good of the society in the long run. These facilities include: health care and maternal clinics, food assistance facilities and agricultural programs. Because of the overpopulation, health care clinics in the Philippines are overcrowded; therefore, it is imperative for the government to not only build more clinics but also improve their facilities that support mothers during their pregnancy. Currently, Iran experienced the largest drop in fertility ever recorded. Khomeini, the Iranian leader, passed a decree called fawtas, which allowed for contraceptives to be assessable for all women in his country. Now woman are having less children- the numbers have greatly decreased. Perhaps the Philippines can follow Iran's example. In addition, maternal health care facilities must make contraceptives such as birth control and condoms easily accessible for couples, just as the Reproductive Health bill advocates. Funds must also be allocated to food assistance facilities in order to reduce poverty and hunger in the Philippines. President Ramos' administration tried to improve the quality of life for Filipino families by creating international competitiveness. The administration of President Estrada sustained development by social equity while the Arroyo's administration treated poverty by recognizing the causes: governance, agricultural productivity and growth. Each president had specific plans to reduce poverty and increase food security in the Philippines. "Tulong sa Tao", Executive Order No. 158, created opportunities of employment in low-income municipalities "about 183,500 new jobs were created and living conditions of 111,000 beneficiaries improve. The Social Reform Agenda of 1995 focused on rural development and poverty alleviation. It increases social equality among women, handicaps, and disadvantages students. The emphases of the social reform are the social groups: agrarian workers, fishermen, indigenous communities and the urban poor. "Lingap Para sa Mahirap" by President Estrada focused on the poorest families in the urban areas and allocated funds to support them while the KALAHATI program of 2001 prioritized rural areas which provided the barangays with portable water, micro-enterprise, day-care

facilities, and infrastructure. The improvements in both the urban and rural areas will help the Philippines to be self-sufficient and win the war against food security in the Philippines.

In conclusion, in order to properly and effectively solve and address the food security problems in the Philippines, the government must recognize its factors and causes. As Dr. Norman Borlaug stated in his Nobel Peace Prize speech, "The frightening power of human reproduction must also be curbed. Otherwise, the success of the Green Revolution will be ephemeral only". When this problem is acknowledged, then and only then can legislation be passed for the common good of the society. Educating the youth and properly allocating funds for programs are necessary for the population and urbanization to decrease. Without such a called action, the Philippines will continue to suffer the throngs of poverty, illness, and death.

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