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Philippines, Factor 14: Conflict Resolution

PHILIPPINES:

Igniting Peace, Enamoring Love, Harmonizing Great Father and Mother Nature

“The power of one, if fearless and focused, is formidable but the power of many working together is better.” Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, former president of the Philippines quoted this saying and reflected every man of the country to work together and to face the growing problems of the fatherland. In this society, we are facing different worldwide problems, one of it is poverty that affected most of the people in Asia, including the Philippines, and people have to work all day to provide what their family needs, some leave to work abroad and some move to urban places in the country to help support their family’s income. In the Philippines today, a deteriorating economic situation for rural households and a widening disparity in income distribution leads many, such as this young man, Richard Visto to seek work in abroad. The stench of manure, mud-filled paddies and back-breaking work are what most children of Filipino farmers, like him associate with farming. Visto worked on their farm in Catanduanes province at an early age. For years, he and his parents tilled the land that will never belong to them. Their life revolved around the changing seasons and the storms that threatened to wipe out their crops. Farming was the be all and end all of their existence. While it sustained Visto and his family, it never gave them a decent life. And Visto knew he could never live like his parents forever. Visto was fortunate enough to obtain a scholarship and he used his education as his ticket out of farming. He left Catanduanes and found work in Manila. But, conditions were not ideal, forcing him to find greener pastures abroad. Visto is one of 10 million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who sought a better life in a foreign land. He currently works as a welder for an oil and gas refinery and petrochemical firm in the deserts of Saudi Arabia. “This June I will mark my third year in Saudi Arabia. My earnings are not enough that is why I decided to go abroad,” Visto told the Business Mirror in an e-mail. Working abroad and earning dollars would allow him to save a little. Despite this, Visto said he is no longer keen on going back to farming should he decide to come home for good. “We now live in a modern era. If you go back to farming, you will be left behind,” Visto said.

Children of Filipino farmers could not be faulted for their apparent aversion to farming. For one, data obtained from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed that the average real daily wage of farm workers was pegged at only P122.01, or \$2.77, in 2011. Male farm workers earn higher at P123.57, or \$2.81 per day, while women earned an average of P115.54, or \$2.63 a day. The daily pay of farm workers in the Philippines is even lower than some of the favorite drinks of Filipinos sold in coffee shops. This is why farmers continue to be regarded as among the poorest of Filipinos. The nationwide average poverty-incidence rate among farmers was pegged at 38.3 percent in 2012, higher than the 25.2-percent national average. Among the regions, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao registered the highest poverty-incidence rate among farmers at 58 percent. In Catanduanes poverty incidence among farmers was at 33.8 percent in 2012. This was higher than the 29.1 percent recorded in 2009. These figures could be baffling to casual observers as the Philippines remain a predominantly agricultural country. While

agriculture's share in the country's GDP has dwindled to just 10 percent in recent years, it still accounts for 30 percent of the labor force.

Economists said the government's neglect of agriculture is the major culprit behind the difficulties currently confronting farmers. They said millions of farmers remain mired in poverty due to the government's underinvestment in agriculture. Also, economists said the government's "wrong" priorities made it more difficult for farmers to become competitive. For one, Philippine Institute for Development Studies research fellow Roehlano Briones said the national government has focused too much of its resources on planting rice, the country's staple. Many blame this on the national government's initiative of attaining rice self-sufficiency. In 2007 former National Economic and Development Authority National Planning and Policy Staff Director Dennis Arroyo said encouraging farmers to just plant rice is tantamount to "trapping farmers in poverty." Philippine Competition Commission (PCC) Chairman Arsenio M. Balisacan, one of the country's foremost rural economists, said the Aquino administration "erred" when it prioritized rice production. "Our self-sufficiency paradigm might have to be revisited. In some cases, it has been very costly," said Balisacan, a former Economic Planning secretary. "As we have seen in some cases, it has been very costly. For example, in the case of rice in 2013-2014, when domestic prices shot up as global prices were declining, our poverty incidence rose rather than declined, even as the economy grew faster," he added. The government's underinvestment in agriculture has also uncompetitive practices in the sector to flourish. In a 2011 study, *Harvests and Hardships: Analyzing Overseas Migration and Philippine Rural Development*, middlemen were found to have earned more than farmers. The study, authored by Ma. Cristina Carmina Gregorio and Jeremaiah Opiniano, said middlemen can earn anywhere from 66 percent to as much as 267 percent of farm-gate prices, depending on the commodity. Ateneo de Manila University Eagle Watch senior fellow Alvin Ang attributed this to the problems with the structure of markets in provinces and municipalities. "More often than not, [the problem] really is the market structure in rural areas, where it is heavily dominated by middlemen. Only a few farmers can really earn [from their produce]," Ang said. Due to the unattractiveness of agriculture as a possible investment destination, Ang said children of farmers who work abroad do not reinvest in the sector. More often than not, OFWs go into selling fast-moving goods and services such as consumer goods and construction materials.

The farmers' lack of education and their inability to access social services have also made it difficult for their children to appreciate farming. Visto said the possibility of not having savings or a nest egg after years of tilling the land was also a major factor behind his decision to go abroad. While farmers can become members of the Social Security System (SSS), SSS Vice President for Public Affairs Marissu G. Bugante said many of them fail to pay their contributions. As of December 2015, Bugante said 525,058 farmers are listed as either self-employed or employed members of the SSS. However, only 90,261 farmers are currently paying their contributions. She said the invariable income of farmers, which are almost always dependent on good weather, makes it difficult for them to pay their contributions regularly. Compounding the problem, Bugante said, is the farmers' inability to inform SSS and keep track of their contributions. Bugante said this is unfortunate as the SSS can provide loans to farmers to help them buy inputs and assist them with their medical needs. To address the needs of farmers, Bugante said the SSS has introduced various programs, including the AlkanSSSy program, where the SSS partners with various associations to collect daily, instead of monthly, SSS contributions from members. She added that the AlkanSSSy program can be tapped by farmers' associations to enable farmers to submit contributions and have access to SSS benefits. Bugante said the SSS has also has partnerships with local government units and the Department of Agriculture for the partial or full subsidy of farmer's contributions. "We are still studying ways on how we can best provide protection to the farmers," she added.

Currently in Manila, Philippines in order to emphasize the growing importance of family farming in Philippine agriculture, the government is now highlighting family farms as models of successful farming rather than large tracts of land that are “managed like a factory,” Agrarian Reform Secretary Virgilio de los Reyes said. This year, beginning last May 26, the country observes the International Year of Family Farming (IYFF). De los Reyes defined family farming as a farm owned and run by one family, with family members themselves working the land.

A plantation, on the other hand, is a “consolidated operation,” which may also be owned by a family but managed by a company. (The Hacienda Luisita sugar estate in Tarlac province, which is owned by the Cojuangco family, is not a family farm, he said, because “it is operated by a corporation.”). The typical farming family in the Philippine countryside consists of a father, a mother and three to four children who live on and off the land. They till the soil, plant crops like rice, corn, sugarcane or coconut, harvest these with the help of neighbors, and deal with traders to sell their produce. Using only their hands and applying traditional methods of farming, they compete with mechanized, company-owned plantations. It sounds like an underdog story without a happy ending, but there’s more to family farming than meets the eye, according to De los Reyes. “It isn’t automatic that the bigger the farm, the more productive it is. Size by itself is not a determinant of productivity,” De los Reyes said in an interview.

Consider this. A small family tending a tiny parcel of land will certainly not yield plenty. But if that family forms an organization with 10 or more small families, it can do wonders to their earnings as a whole, De los Reyes said. A farming family, on its own, can only take out a loan for P30,000 or P40,000 from a bank (coursed through a trader who can provide the collateral) at a prohibitive interest rate. “On the other hand, if 10 or 20 farming families band together, they can secure a loan for P800,000 at a lower interest rate because the cost to the bank is less,” De los Reyes said. Furthermore, “family farms tend to make use of every inch of their land,” he said. “They need to make it produce to make the family, as much as possible, self-sufficient and also to create a surplus for the market.”

The government, through the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) and the Department of Agriculture, provides support to family farms in three ways. The first is rural infrastructure in the form of irrigation facilities, roads, bridges and the like, all of which are meant to lower costs. The second is through extension services, such as the provision of credit, farm machinery and training programs to increase yield. The third is research and development to create new technology that will make life easier for farmers. De los Reyes said the ideal family farm is not just a self-contained unit, but one that cooperates with other family farms “to consolidate operation, not necessarily to consolidate ownership” to achieve greater yield and income. Based on figures from Country STAT, an online database on national food and agriculture statistics, there are some 12.09 million farmers in the Philippines, comprising 32 percent of the country’s workforce. Rice workers, on average, earn P249.19 a day, while corn workers earn P189.56, the data showed. De los Reyes said a “myth” in Philippine agriculture was that farming families lived only off the land. “Most of them are actually making a living on and off the farm. There will be members of the family who will go to the poblacion to be a tricycle driver, because their income from the farm is not enough,” he said. In 2011, agriculture officials told a Senate budget hearing that the average age of the country’s farmers and fishermen was 57, and many of the farmers were small landholders, tilling an average of 2.5 hectares.

Data from the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics also showed that farming is not enough to support a family. A farmer's average income is only about P20, 000 a year. De los Reyes said he considered the IYFF a great opportunity for the government to make life better for farming families. "The IYFF is important to us at the DAR because aside from our mandate of distributing land to farmers, we are also tasked to provide agrarian justice to oppressed farmer-beneficiaries and to provide support services to boost farming families' income," he said. "We want to be able to help our farmers achieve social justice, and the IYFF will help pave the way for policies and laws that are performers," De los Reyes said. He said the government was focused on addressing the concerns and supporting the long-term goals of farmers, particularly agrarian reform beneficiaries, by giving them access to credit, farm investment insurance and agricultural technology extension.

The theme of the IYFF is "Ang Family Farming ay Buhay (Family Farming is Life)," seeking to highlight the importance of farming families in food security and the protection of natural resources. The celebration is also aimed at stimulating active policies for the development of farming families, indigenous farming families, cooperatives and fishing families. Among the government's partners in pushing family farming are civil society groups, including the International Fund for Agricultural Development, Pambansang Kilusan ng mga Samahang Magsasaka, Philippine and Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resource in Rural Areas, Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, and Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Developments. "These civil society groups will greatly help us in drumbeating the issues concerning farming families and small-scale food producers," De los Reyes said. The IYFF was launched on Nov. 22, 2013, by the United Nations and the Food and Agriculture Organization in New York to highlight the importance of farming families in food security and in protecting the environment.

Above all, government and people need to work together and pay attention to agriculture in the rural areas and that will make it grow inclusively. The government should focus on the agricultural sector which employs a third labor force. "It is cheaper to create jobs in agriculture than in other sectors" in addition, pushing for the sector's development will lead to inclusive growth, especially as agricultural workers are the poorest in the labor sector. By ensuring that each area in the Philippines is prioritized through specific development programs, there will no longer be a problem of getting left behind. Each aspect will be tapped, leading to inclusive agricultural growth and eventually, economic growth. And if the productivity of those working on the agricultural sector is developed, a lot of opportunities will open that can ensure growth. Furthermore, uplifting the country's agricultural sector through industrialization and investments will yield significant results in rural development and poverty alleviation efforts. At this point I believe that at the end of the day, the welfare of farmers should be kept in mind when implementing agriculture programs and projects. They are, after all, the country's main food producers. What's more important is that we increase and diversify the income of farmers. Their income is very small and definitely makes it hard for a farming family to make ends meet. Being a country with rice as a staple, we cannot afford to lose our farmers. Their unproductivity can lead to a problem of food insecurity. It also seeks to strengthen the legitimacy of rural and farmers associations and to increase awareness of the importance of supporting family farming as a sustainable and effective way of producing food worldwide.

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