

Social Dimensions of Philippine Agriculture 2020

“PEOPLE” CHARACTERISTICS OF PHILIPPINE AGRICULTURE

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Philippine Agriculture 2020 is not starting tabula rasa. Although looking forward to a 2020 which envisions “robust and vibrant agricultural and natural resources production systems and ecosystem services that improve and sustain the Filipino’s well-being,” Philippine agriculture has a past and a present which either stands in its way or leads it toward a future as a new way of life. A science-based strategy requires that we look at what was and what is so we can chart the future with “eyes on the road”.

Some “people” characteristics of Philippine Agriculture could be relevant in this regard.

1. Poverty

A. Balisacan describes Philippine poverty as “still largely a rural phenomenon. While the share of agriculture in the total labor force has gone down from about one half in the late 1980s to only a little more than just one-third by the mid-2000s the sector continues to account for 60 percent of total poverty.”

The incidence of poverty is also much higher in some regions than in others. Moreover, farmers do not always regard farming as a way out of poverty. They send their children to school so they do not have to become farmers.

2. Land tenure

From the mid-eighteenth century when a class of landless peasants emerged until most of the 20th century to the present, social justice by equalizing access to land has been a recurrent social theme. P.U. Gordoncillo’s study of the comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program showed that despite the fact that share tenancy has been declared illegal, about

16.5% of rice farmers were still share tenants. C. Reyes on the impact of agrarian reform on poverty reduction found the following positive factors: length of time being agrarian reform beneficiaries, smaller household size, higher educational attainment, living in an agrarian reform community, tilling irrigated lands, and having access to credit or no need for credit. However despite this positive impact of agrarian reform on farmer-beneficiaries, poverty incidence remains high (more than 50 percent).

In estimating available hectareage of land for agriculture, it would be prudent to look at claimants, not just occupants. For historical, political, and inequity reasons, there is probably not much land still unclaimed by government, ancestral domain, private individuals, corporations etc. This makes land use decisions more complex. Furthermore, even in land-reformed areas, new subtenancy arrangements have emerged. Some agrarian reform beneficiaries who acquired land treated it as a tradeable asset to be used not necessarily for farming but as investment for work abroad or for children's education so they could move out of poverty. "Land to the tiller", an old battlecry does not seem to be the dominant value anymore. Land reform is asset reform, no matter what the asset may be used for.

3. Farm Labor Arrangements

At present, there are two types of farm labor: those hired on a long-term contract are called UPAHAN; and those hired on a daily basis are called "MAGPAPAUPA". There is no landlord-tenant relationship even for the UPAHAN. Hired labor rather than family labor is the predominant way of getting things done in the farm. This is the practice even in small farms. In general, BAYANIHAN as exchange labor in farming has "gone out of style" except in remote upland areas.

For a country which has a high rate of population growth, labor shortage is a frequent complaint of farmers. Agricultural technologies which are labor-intensive are less likely to be adopted. For PA2020, what will be required is not the traditional bayanihan but the new imperative of collective action for joint individual interests and for the common good. The use of water and other natural resources would increasingly become contentious common property resource issues requiring new norms and relationships between different users, within and beyond agriculture

4. Social Structure of the Farming Community

Population pressure, agrarian reform, new agricultural technologies,

increasing educational attainment, and new non-farm income resources have changed the social structure of the traditional farming community. In the past, farming was the major, if not the only source of income and landlord-tenant relationship determined the power structure. Nowadays four social classes have emerged as observed in rice growing areas:

- (a) the large farmer (2 ha. or more)
- (b) the small farmer (less than 2 ha.)
- (c) the landless agricultural laborers who have no farms but earn wages as casual farm workers; and
- (d) the new social class called non-farm workers

In general, access to farm land for new farmers has practically closed; given all the factors cited above, plus land conversions for non-agricultural uses. Only children of farmers tend to have such access although most of them, if educated would not opt to enter farming. The farming population is also an aging population.

5. Rural Livelihoods

One question we have often been asked is: "Who is the Filipino rice farmer? Or the coconut farmer? Or the corn farmer? Of the sugarcane farmer? This is not a simple question which produces an instant answer. The reply involves an analysis of who has access to the land with respect to tenure status; who actually works the land; who operates and makes decisions in the farm; what the farm consists of; and the institutional arrangements with respect to the use of land, labor and capital etc. Along with the changing definition of "farmer", is the changing concept and reality of rural households' livelihood systems. It is no exaggeration to say that nowadays, the purely rice farmer is a rarity, if not a non-existent entity. Instead, we have someone who grows rice as one way to make a living or to secure the household's rice supply. This is done along with producing other crops, livestock, trees, engaging in off-farm work, non-farm jobs, and are recipients of remittances from the city or from abroad.

In coconut lands, quite often those referred to as poor coconut farmers are actually caretakers of the coconut farms which are owned by somebody else. In some instances they are allowed to plant crops or raise livestock under the coconut trees, with or without a sharing agreement with the landowner. Under such arrangement, the caretaker has temporary access to the land, but he is not a tenant.

Sugarcane workers in sugarland are not farmers. They are landless agricultural workers. Ironically, sugarland owners call themselves SUGAR PLANTERS but they are not the ones who plant sugarcane.

The definition of “farmer” is quite crucial in determining the stakeholders in agriculture; their roles as decision makers, tillers, manager and who are likely to benefit from PA2020. Most of these stakeholders are net purchasers of food and other agricultural products.

Village-level studies have shown that the structure of rural household income has shifted from mainly agriculture to multiple livelihood sources, including earnings from more urbanized occupations and remittances from household members working in urban areas or abroad. Almost half of rural households studied receive remittance as a source of income although agriculture continues to be a source of income for almost all rural households.

In other words, most farming households are now engaged in part time farming and the rural and urban are no longer the separate worlds we have always defined them to be.

6. Subsistence and Commercial Farming

Agriculture experts are very prone to divide farmers into subsistence or commercial. Actually it is not a dichotomy but a simultaneous existence with either of them more prevalent than the other in the same farm. In most instances one enterprise supports the other. For example, sweet potato in Tarlac is a cash crop, earnings from which helps purchase inputs for rice production for subsistence.

As long as income security is not available to the farm household, top priority in their lives is household food security. The usual strategy is, to sell cash crops or livestock to buy rice. But if they grow rice, the first priority is to set aside some amount for household consumption. Even in predominantly rice producing provinces, households allocate more than 22 percent of rice harvest for home consumption. Households in rice-deficit provinces keep above 42 percent of their harvest for food. When supply runs out, they end up being net purchasers of rice. But it is always a source of pride for farm households to say that they do not have to buy rice.

7. The Emerging Protagonists in the Land Issue

Population growth and urbanization has led to changes in patterns of land use. What is most interesting is the new protagonists in the land issue. While in the past, it was landlord vs. tenant, now it is farmers vs. real estate

developers. The land market has tempted even agrarian reform beneficiaries to part with their land for much better earnings than the rice, corn, or sugarcane harvest.

The real estate developer has a powerful argument for land conversion. They say that a three-hectare rice farm can house hundreds of urban dwellers but it could provide livelihood for only a few farmers.

8. A New Breed of Farmers

“PA2020 rests on three pillars, namely: organizing and managing agriculture as a business; alleviating poverty through asset reform; and nurturing the values of nature and community in our people.”

Because of the knowledge management, organization-intensive, and value-laden nature of these pillars, we need a new breed of farmers. The slogan “to see is to believe” will no longer suffice. Some, if not most of what will be involved in this agricultural transformation will not always be immediately experienced and may not always be directly visible to the naked eye. Seeing and thinking not only in the abstract but also in the future and for the common good must be learned. The pedagogy of this learning process particularly the social learning part has scarcely begun to unravel.

As a society, we need a new ethic of sharing and collective action for the common good as Filipinos. Despite our romanticized bayanihan, these values do not come to us easily. They have to be translated into tangibles for development, so people can experience the difference in their lives.

