

Column for Business Mirror
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The Entrepreneur

A focused strategy to eliminate hunger and poverty

It's good to be back. This column had served as the bridge of communication between the readers of this respected newspaper and me, and as a medium through which I am able to participate in the free discussion of ideas and developments affecting the national economy.

I have chosen the issue of the persistent and growing problem of hunger as my first topic. It's one problem that continues to affect a large part of the population despite the impressive growth of the economy. The government has reason to flaunt the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 7.6-percent for 2010 as the highest in three decades. Of course, the Aquino administration can only claim half of the credit, because the growth for the first semester was achieved under the Arroyo administration.

Prior to the change in the base year from 1985 to 2000, the first and second quarters of 2010 posted higher GDP growth rates of 7.3 percent and 7.7 percent, respectively. During the third quarter, which was the first quarter of the Aquino administration, GDP growth slowed down to 6.5 percent, before recovering to 7.1 percent in the fourth quarter, only to drop further to 4.9 percent in the first quarter of 2011.

But, ironically, the economic growth did not improve the lot of the poor. A survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) on March 4 to 7, 2011, showed that more Filipinos experienced involuntary hunger and considered themselves poor in the three months preceding the survey period.

According to the survey, 20.5 percent of respondents or about 4.1 million families said they went hungry at least once in the past three months. This was up from the 18.1 percent (an estimated 3.4 million families) recorded in November 2010. The latest hunger rate is also almost seven points above the 12-year average of 13.8 percent.

The survey also found 51 percent or about 10.4 million families that considered themselves poor, two percentage points up from November's 49 percent.

About 8.1 million families or 40 percent, meanwhile, claimed to be “food-poor,” up by four points from 36 percent in the previous survey.

The government has disputed the results of the SWS survey. It purportedly did not capture the impact of the conditional cash transfer (CCT) program, which had benefited more than one million people. The bulk of the CCT beneficiaries, administration officials said, were in the Visayas and Mindanao, but most of the respondents in the SWS survey were from the National Capital Region.

Now, who do you believe, the official statistics or what the people say? If you ask a person if he is hungry and he says he is, then you have to believe him. You don't tell him that he is not hungry because his income is at a level where he should not go hungry. When the people are hungry, then they are hungry.

In fact, even the government's own data placed the poverty incidence at 26.5 percent of the population in 2009, or about 23 million Filipinos. The SWS survey coincided with the slowdown in GDP growth to 4.9 percent in the first three months of 2011, compared with 8.4 percent in the same period last year. And the 4.9-percent GDP growth would have been lower if we did not have a bumper crop, which pushed the agriculture sector to a 4.2-percent growth, a significant turnaround from a 2.5-percent contraction year-on-year.

Quite clearly, we continue to have a problem with hunger and poverty. And having identified the problem, let's talk about the solution.

First, the government must realize that its resources are limited, and these resources must be allocated to address problems and public needs other than hunger and poverty. With limited resources, it is impossible to eliminate the problem of hunger and poverty in one clean sweep, on a country-wide scale.

Doing it on a wide scale is desirable, but, if you have limited resources and you want maximum impact, then you would want the strategy to be more precise. A focused strategy is more effective in attacking a problem because it does not spread your resources too thinly.

So there must be an analysis to identify the areas or communities where the problem of poverty and hunger is most serious. The government must not confine the basis of its analysis to its own surveys or statistics. This is where the results of surveys by the SWS and other private polling firms, which I believe are more objective, can be put to good use.

The SWS survey results are available, and government agencies like the National Statistics Office, the National Statistical Coordination Board and perhaps the Department of Social Welfare and Development may contribute their own data to come up with the specific area or community that will serve as the first target of the anti-poverty and anti-hunger project.

The beauty of a focused strategy is that you can do it within a short period of time. That means you can add another community as your next target, and so on and so on. The good news that comes out from each community where the hunger and poverty problem is licked will quickly spread, and will encourage other sectors, including local government units and even non-government organizations, to pitch in and maybe even replicate the strategy in other areas based on the list that came out of the analysis.

That's more or less the medium-term multiplier effect. For the long term, eliminating hunger and poverty in one community to another will take us to the goal that has been elusive for so decades now: a progressive country whose citizens enjoy a high standard of living.

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