

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

Paradox of the Miracle Tree (Conclusion)

MANILA, Philippines --- The latest good news for the coconut industry was a report in local newspapers last May 27 that a major food importer from New Zealand has expressed interest in buying coco water and other coconut products from the Philippines.

The Department of Foreign Affairs identified the company as Ambient Product and Global Sourcing, a member of the Foodstuffs (Wellington) cooperative, which in turn is part of Foodstuffs New Zealand that imports \$2.025 billion of food products every year. Ambient accounts for \$891 million or nearly half of the Foodstuffs group's annual imports.

Another hot new product from the miracle tree is coconut sap sugar. Exports of this new product, according to the Philippine Coconut Authority, nearly doubled to 70,000 kilos last year from 36,310 kilos in 2010.

This year, exports of coconut sap sugar, which is being hailed as a safe sweetener even for diabetics, are projected to breach the 100,000-kilo mark. The new product is, of course, in addition to the traditional coconut products that make up one of our major export commodities, particularly coconut oil.

We also heard about the proposed multi-million-dollar investments from a couple of American companies that plan to make the Philippines a major exporter of coco water, which has gained popularity as a health and sports drink.

We have not seen this kind of positive development for the industry before. I believe this is a big opportunity that we must not allow to pass us by for the following reasons:

First, developing the coconut industry and involving coconut farmers, who are among the poorest of our poor, should give us a focused strategy on poverty alleviation; second, developing the coconut industry is a good response to the Asian Development Bank's recommendation for the Philippines to focus on boosting the manufacturing sector and not just rely on services like business process outsourcing to provide jobs and reduce poverty; and third, unlike other industries, which suffer from lack of development resources, the coconut industry has billions of pesos from the industry itself that can be utilized to help the industry and its stakeholders.

At least part of the coco levy funds could be channeled for the development of the coconut industry, such as a five-year program for a manufacturing facility for coco water, and we can also invite big players in the local business community to go into coco water production.

We may have to address the supply problem. The country, according to Trade and Industry Secretary Greg Domingo, needs to plant new trees to sustain the growing demand for coco water (estimated at 40 percent annually) alone. Most of the country's coconut trees, he said, are 80 to 100 years old and these yield only 20 percent of what they used to be. New trees would yield more coconuts.

With President Aquino himself endorsing coco water, his economic managers should take the cue and start crafting and implementing a program. Crafting a development program should not take long; we don't want to spend four years crafting a plan.

In my view, it can be an interim plan that can be amended overtime. It doesn't have to be comprehensive – just a basic and simple one that can be implemented readily. A massive and nationwide replanting of coconut trees, for example, need not be so complicated as to defeat its purpose: To plant and grow new trees.

We need more investments. Right now, the idea is to excite private investors to once again look at the coconut industry as an area for investments, which, according to Secretary Domingo, could generate tens of thousands of new jobs in the provinces.

For the past three weeks I have tried to present the current situation in the coconut industry, including the impact of developing the industry on our persistent poverty problem, the opportunities arising from new findings on the health issues linked to the coconut, as well as increasing interest from foreign markets and investors.

I hope my message will not fall on deaf ears, and all of us will do our part so that, eventually, the miracle from the tree of life will truly benefit our coconut farmers.

(Please send comments/feedback to: mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com)

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