

**Column for Manila Bulletin**  
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## **Of Trees and Forest**

### **A Fresh Look on Agriculture (Conclusion)**

Giving agriculture a fresh look, particularly in light of its potential to contribute to the tourism industry, also means going back to our roots and our most bountiful resource: agricultural land.

Our natural endowment makes us an agricultural country: the World Bank says about 120,000 square kilometers or 40 percent of the Philippines' total land area of a little more than 298,000 square kilometers are agricultural lands.

The agriculture sector also accounts for about a third of total employment — 12.27 million of the 37.19 million employed persons as of 2011, according to the Department of Agriculture.

The sector, however, contributed only 12.3% to the country's total output or Gross Domestic Product in 2011, compared with the industry sector's 33.3 percent and the services sector's 54.4 percent.

This explains why poverty is more prevalent in the agricultural sector than in the urban areas. Thus, giving agriculture a fresh look may also help improve the lives of our farmers and other rural folks, and contribute to poverty alleviation.

The International Food Policy Research Institute noted in an online paper on agricultural research and development in the Philippines that the agriculture sector's share of GDP had been declining, from as high as 23 percent in 1982 to 14 percent in 2005.

With about three-quarters of the rural poor dependent on agriculture for employment and income, the IFPRI stresses that agricultural R&D is "crucial in alleviating rural poverty."

Also, realities in the global economy, including competition from other countries, demand that we harness new technologies and intensify research to boost agricultural production and quality.

Developing research and capability in the field of agricultural research and development must begin in the educational system, but enrollment in schools offering agricultural courses is declining.

Information gathered from the First National Agritourism Research Conference conducted last July by the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture and the UP Institute of Tourism showed that only 4.7 percent of roughly 9,300 undergraduate students at the university were enrolled in agriculture courses this school year, down from 43 percent in 1995 and 51 percent in 1980.

Statistics from the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) show that a total of 63,679 college students were enrolled in agriculture courses during school year 2010-2011, representing 2 percent of total enrollment of 2.94 million.

On the other hand, students enrolled in business-related courses numbered 785,305, or 27 percent of total enrollment.

For school year 2012-2013, CHED estimates enrollment in agriculture courses at 61,901, still at about 2 percent of estimated total enrollment of 3.05 million; and enrollment in business courses at 857,562 or 28 percent.

We may be witnessing the disappearance of our farmers, as their children decide to leave the fields and move to the cities to take up office jobs. Experts are concerned, and rightly so, that this trend could affect the nation's food security.

Such concern adds relevance to my suggestion to give agriculture a fresh look. The first step, obviously, is to make agriculture courses attractive.

For practical purposes, salaries and benefits must be competitive. There must be a way to free faculty members in agriculture programs, and those involved in agricultural research and development from the salary standardization law.

Agriculture R&D must also be provided with direction, taking into account economic priorities, like improving the production of flowers and fruits to lower their costs, which would boost market access.

There are other initiatives that may be adopted to boost the agriculture sector and make it an important contributor to economic growth.

Our advantage is that we have the fertile land to nurture what our research people come up with. Let's not waste our natural treasure.

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