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Of Trees and Forest

Poverty remains a serious problem

MANILA, Philippines — It is understandable for administrations to paint a pretty picture of the nation today, but sometimes it can be ridiculously insulting to the senses.

Take, for example, the changes in the basic meals that people in the National Capital Region (NCR) eat to stay just above the poverty level.

Under the old method, NCR residents had for breakfast, tomato omelet, coffee for adults, and milk for children, and fried rice. Under the new method, NCR residents have scrambled eggs, coffee with milk, and boiled rice. The milk for children was taken away.

For lunch, under the old method, NCR residents had fried galunggong, mongo guisado with malunggay leaves and small shrimps, and boiled rice, plus banana latundan for dessert. Under the new method, NCR residents have boiled mongo with malunggay leaves and dried dilis and boiled rice, plus banana latundan.

For dinner, under the old method, they had pork adobo, but, under the new method, this was replaced with fried tulingan, pechay guisado was replaced with boiled kangkong, and the banana latundan for dessert was taken away. The margarine that made pan de sal more enjoyable for snacks under the old method was also eliminated.

I tend to agree with the observation that the change in the meal composition effectively downgraded the quality of their diet in order to lower the food threshold.

The “refinements” also included the lowering of the official poverty income threshold for a family of five to R7,017.00, down by 11.8 percent from the old R7,953.00 for a family of five.

That’s what the new methodology achieved. The poverty rate in 2009 (the last official poverty rate) which was 26.3 percent for families under the old method, went down by 5.4 percentage points to 20.9 percent.

The poverty rate in terms of population, which was at 32.6 percent under the old method, is now officially at 26.5 percent, down 6.1 percentage points. In nominal terms, the number of officially poor families was reduced by one million, or from 4.9 million to 3.9 million.

Based on the population, the number of poor Filipinos went down to 23.1 million from 28.5 million. By just refining the methodology, 5.4 million Filipinos were suddenly “lifted” from poverty.

In reality, however, nobody can deny that poverty remains a serious and persistent national problem. No amount of refinements can change that fact.

I don’t agree with changing the threshold unless they’re prepared to change everything. Even in business, when you change the method of accounting, for example, you must be ready to recast everything under the new formula because it is very important in analyzing trends.

If you're not ready to recast everything, then don't change the methodology already in place. Also, let's look at the context. Even under the "refined" methodology, there are 23.1 million poor, still way too many.

Anyway, we are looking at the poverty problem not to criticize the administration, but to measure the gravity of the problem that we are facing because, in reality, this is a problem for all of us Filipinos.

Those who try to minimize the problem are not doing us any good because this can lull us into complacency.

A doctor cannot treat a disease unless the patient accepts that he is sick. In the same manner, the government must accept that we have a serious poverty problem. Otherwise, we will not be able to solve it.

In my view, every Filipino should take the high poverty rate in the context of a challenge and each one must do his share in reducing the number of poor among us.

Of course, it starts with being accurate about it, being realistic about it. Don't take the milk away from the children or even the margarine from the pan de sal. Instead, let's spend more on infrastructure to generate more jobs, raise family incomes and improve the people's purchasing power.

The "refinements" in determining the poverty rate should come from the rise in the people's standard of living as a result of an inclusively growing economy, not from juggling numbers of revising menus.

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