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Philippines: Agricultural Improvement

The Philippines are an archipelago of over 7,000 islands lying about 500 miles off the southeast coast of Asia. The overall land area is comparable to that of Arizona. The islands are of volcanic origin, with the larger ones crossed by mountain ranges. Volcanic soil is some of the best plant and crop growing soil. When a volcano erupts, it throws out an abundance of ash. The ash layer, which contains many useful minerals, will be converted to a very fertile soil. Arable farmland comprises more than 40% of the total land area. Since the end of World War II, the Philippines slid into an unfortunate economic downfall, going from one of the richest countries in Asia, to one of the poorest. Almost 50% of the population lives under the poverty line, making approximately \$2 a day. Most families work in fields, mainly harvesting rice. The average family size is about seven to nine, and this includes: grandparents, cousins, or sisters/brothers-in-law (Bureau). The Philippines are rich in agricultural potential; however, inadequate support, lack of financing, and government policies have limited productivity gains (Philippines).

I believe this can change if the Philippines were to recreate Future Farmers of the Philippines (FFP) or make positive changes to their agricultural research program, the Student Technologists and Entrepreneurs of the Philippines. STEP is an organization formed by the consolidation of the former Future Farmers of the Philippines, Future Homemakers of the Philippines and Future Agricultural Homemakers of the Philippines organizations. Its membership is composed mainly of high school students and out-of-school-youth (STEP). As noted, the Philippines have agricultural potential; however, the potential starts with investing in agricultural education and training that may fuel agricultural research and technologies.

“Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future,” stated President John F. Kennedy. Until age twelve, Filipino students are required to go to school. For this reason 90% of the Philippine population over the age of ten is literate. Until middle school, education is free. The drop-out rate comprises 13% of students who are from poorer families; they drop out to become farm workers- people who work in crop fields- to provide for their sometimes starving families (Philippines). One would think that since these students drop out to become farm workers that they would have some knowledge about agriculture, however, this is not always the case. As an example, one could work in a McDonald's fast food restaurant, but it does not mean that he/she can go home and know how to cook a hamburger properly. Occasionally, all the farm workers of the Philippines simply have to do is harvest or turn on the irrigation system. In my opinion, in America as well as the Philippines, most students are not educated concerning agriculture. When Agriculture education is offered, either they do not enroll, or they do enroll and do not try to learn its importance. Agriculture education is not a major subject; it is offered as an elective. Some students merely believe that agriculture education is a waste of time.

Children in Ponchatoula, Louisiana, from Kindergarten through eighth grade simply fall in love with agriculture, and Future Farmers of America; they anticipate taking the class and joining the club in high school. This was proven by three years of my personal experience. I participate with “Aggie on the Road” and “Aggie Day,” which is an agricultural outreach program presented by our agriscience students for elementary age students in Title One schools. We teach young children about agriculture and the FFA. The boys and girls remain interested the entire instructional time through both programs. These students invariably take agriculture education and join FFA in the future when they reach high school; I was one of those children. In the organization, students learn where their food originates and how to grow food suited to their location, which helps to give the students and their family food security. This also creates job opportunities beyond crop fields in the many areas included in agriculture. Through Future Farmers’,

students learn leadership qualities, and they meet people who share similar interests. Not only is Future Farmers a great organization for American students, but it could also be great for the growth of Filipino students as well in the areas of agriculture and leadership. Let us not forget, history proves the Agricultural, or Neolithic, Revolution was the most important technological development ever to occur in human history. By comparison, agriculture, even in fairly primitive forms, provided large surpluses that could supply a much larger population per square mile. The Revolution was also a new era of thinking. For that reason, research and new technologies were developed, and technology evolved into the luxuries that America has today. It is time for the Philippines's "Agricultural Revolution" to be implemented as soon as possible. The possibilities of advancement and productivity of the country are limitless.

Future Farmers makes a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education. Agricultural education prepares students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, and natural resource systems (National). In 1917, Congress passed the Smith-Hughes Vocational Education Act that not only provided federal funds to high schools nationwide for agriculture and other vocational courses, but also it led to the idea for an organization that is known today as the National FFA Organization.

The Philippine government, a reflection of our own American government, could pass a similar Act to reinstate and fund the program. An educationally backed experiment could be performed on a poverty stricken area of the Philippines with funds from the Filipino government, and, possibly, from the National FFA Organization. Roughly by 2015, the Filipino government would see how much the organization could affect that particular area. As I cannot stress enough, the Philippines have such agricultural potential. The reintroduction of Future Farmers' of the Philippines would relatively increase food security; students would learn to grow and maintain gardens and animals. When the government witnesses how much more advanced and prolific that area becomes, they will be confident and exuberant about spreading the organization throughout the entire country.

Currently, agribusiness is categorized as having "hard to fill" jobs (Proud). Most graduating students aspire to become government officials or businessmen for the economic status because they do not understand the existing possibilities through agriculture. They do not want to learn agriculture because they do not want to become "low income" farmers, which is one of the most common excuses for not learning or having interest in agriculture. The organization is not meant simply to make one a farmer, because many jobs are introduced to students enrolled in the organization. Many of these jobs would pay the students, the future Philippine work force, for agricultural research and development of improved technologies. Some students may become farmers, but a knowledgeable farmer would have the possibility of being paid far more than the average local farmer. Presently, 34% of the thirty-five million employed in the Philippines work in agriculture related jobs, which is 12,250,000, and the unemployment rate is at 7.4 %, which is 7,535,712 people unemployed (Trading). Let us remember many of those 12,250,000 employees who work agriculture related jobs, work in fields making less than \$2 a day.

The unemployment rate is almost equal to the Philippines agriculture related work force. If Filipino children were reintroduced to the Future Farmers organization, it would possibly cause them to build more interest in school and give them a reason to stay in school. The longer students would remain in school, the better their future could become. Approximately, 90% of jobs are agriculture related. The reintroduction of Future Farmers to Filipino children may spark an interest in those agricultural jobs. As a result of Future Farmers, perhaps a minimum of 50,000 of those "hard to fill" jobs could be filled, putting families in a more secure economic situation. That is comparably a miniscule prediction compared to the potential; the employment of agriculture jobs is an annual process. A goal should be that by 2015, a quarter of a million "hard to fill" jobs receive workers. The more employment, the more stable the Filipino economy.

The Future Farmers Organization is a true student led organization. The sense of control over projects gives the students leadership experience and builds their ownership in the organization. The organization offers many experiences that students desire to repeat. They take those experiences and put them to positive use- at their homes for personal use, in their community for others, or in their country for all. The great thing about Future Farmers is that no two chapters, or cities, are alike. As a result, one has a surplus of students who can contribute different talents to an area or to the whole country at one time. The more the students put into their chapter activities, the better they can help their communities. This is a proven personal experience. In Ponchatoula, Louisiana, strawberries are prolific. They are grown on local farms, in our high school land lab, and in the backyards of many of Ponchatoula's population. We have the annual Strawberry Festival; our chapter grows strawberry hanging baskets and sells them to the public. Our chapter members sell their berry plants to people from all over America. We teach the people from different parts of America how to care for the strawberries so that the berries continue to produce for nearly two months after leaving Louisiana. We contribute to our community with "Adopt a Family," which is a program for unfortunate families who cannot buy their children gifts for Christmas. Each agriculture education class chooses one to two families and purchases the gifts for them. Our entire chapter adopts twenty to thirty families. Our chapter has even contributed internationally with "Hope for Haiti." We made over a hundred care packages for teenagers in Haiti. These efforts give the students a chance to experience helping others, and as they work to help others, they are empowered to make a difference in their community. If the FFP were recreated, the students could not only help themselves, but also help so many others within their own communities because those young people would have a structure and basis to work from as they implement service and service learning into the school's program of study through the FFP.

Future Farmers of the Philippines should be reinstated starting with the sixth grade just as many states in America start their FFA/agriculture programs. From the experiences I have had at my school, students at this age have proven to have a lot of interest in the Future Farmers experience. From Kindergarten through fifth grade, outreach programs, similar to the FFA's PALS Program could be implemented to teach students about their food and natural resource systems as well as encourage leadership development through healthy lifestyles and character building activities. Science proves that a child learns better when young. We should start a child's education about agriculture as soon as possible. As stated by the Ponchatoula FFA Chapter's Advisor, Alice Dubois:

My high school students complete several agriculture literacy outreach programs for young students spanning the ages of head start pre-K to fourth grade each year. These young students will still remember their experiences with the high school agriculture students when they themselves become high school students. This not only influences them to be interested in agriculture classes, but also it has proven to influence them to appreciate gardening and has encouraged them to include fresh produce into their food choices. Thus, their life styles are healthier and children will grow into healthier and happier adults.

The Future Farmers Organization envisions a future in which all agricultural education students will discover their passion in life and build on that insight to chart the course for their educations, careers, and personal futures. Future Farmer members are on a journey that will help shape the rest of their lives. Students get the most from their Future Farmer experience by exploring career options, participating in award programs, attending leadership conferences, and organizing community service activities (National). Amber Smith, a Ponchatoula FFA member says:

Because of my experiences in the FFA I am aware of the many careers available in agriculture. In addition, I have built leadership skills and gained knowledge that will allow me to go much further in life.

To motivate the recreation of Future Farmers of the Philippines, an exchange program could be created. Many chapters, including my own, could be available to this challenge. The Philippine students could observe firsthand how to implement and operate a successful program. With the success of their Future Farmers Organization, there is no doubt that the students of the Philippines could influence the success of agriculture production making their country better as a whole. Students of the Philippines could tremendously fuel agriculture research, production, and technology- thus, realizing the tremendous potential of the abundantly fertile soil of the Philippines.

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