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Philippines, Factor 14: Conflict Resolution

Philippines: Opportunities to Eradicate Hunger through Peace Processes against Violence

"There is no food security without peace and no peace without food" stated World Food Program Executive director. The statement had been considered factual as a surprising amount of evidence has surfaced worldwide. There is a shocking number of the global population currently affected by the inhumane actions posed by numerous rebellions and terrorist groups resulting to violent tendencies and results. More than 1.5 billion people are direct victims of conflict daily, and the existence of conflict is generally considered one of the most influential cause of hunger and overall poverty. The number of conflicts, as found by major studies also reflect the sustainability and security in terms of reliable access in a sufficient quantity of consumable goods, in the world and in a troublesome country. This is a major threat to a widely agricultural but currently displaced nation in the southeastern area of Asia. With a 4.53 percent drop in agriculture in the first (3) months of 2016, the Philippines remain as a country with significant problems of agricultural decline and mass malnutrition and hunger, also with the threat of conflicting situations involving numerous armed groups, clans, criminal gangs and political elites.

Known as one of the most populous countries in the world, there are 106 cities and 57 municipalities with a severely dense and packed population exceeding 100,000 people for as of the 2010 census. The Philippines is a country that is somewhat labeled with a notion of it being unequal and vulnerable, despite its average income status. As the majority of the Philippines is in a somewhat controllable state, the southeast part of the country, Mindanao, which holds the country's muslim minority, suffers from a great deal of poverty, landlessness and hunger. The 2015 Regional Overview of Food Insecurity in Asia and The Pacific state that approximately 17.5 million Filipinos are still undernourished and 33.6% of children are stunted. In 2014, the Philippines was the 13th most populated country in the world with a population of 107 million and 24.9% of Filipinos - 1 in 9 - lived below the poverty line. This is known to also be caused by the ongoing conflict, preventing most Filipinos from the realizing their right to food and economic security.

There are quite a number of statistical data that can provide evidence to this. And a quick overview of the country's hunger profile prove that all of them point to the realization that the nation has a serious hunger problem that the local and national government has failed to respond to. The persistent and severe hunger situation is a direct result of the conflict between the government and the main adversary in Mindanao called the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). This has caught the citizens of the Philippines in the middle of poverty and hunger.

In Mindanao, the MILF has a presence in the Bangsamoro region of the Philippines, the Sulu archipelago, Palawan, Basilan and other neighboring islands. These areas share poverty indicators far below the national average. Over 50% of the population in the region is living below the national poverty line of 60 cents per person per day. Approximately 30% of the children under five years of age are stunted and the rate of children completing primary education is 33% half the national average. The country also did not meet the required achievement of the World Food Summit target of reducing the number of malnourished people by half. This was reported as "slow progress". With the Mindanao region's ongoing conflict, significant progress in food security is still a slow and steady process.

In addition, another relevant cause to the deteriorating economic and nutrition status of the people is that conflict fuels hunger by forcing people to migration, dismantling societies and reversing economic gains all together. Conflicting laws and policies regarding land use and ownership, ineffectual implementation of aggression reform and protection of indigenous people's rights; a

systematic overlooking of the agricultural sector and a recognizable scarcity of comprehensible climate change adaptation and decision risk reduction strategies, are few of the more obvious effects these armed groups have deprived the people of.

The Philippines as a huge agriculturally inclined country and its Muslim region of Mindanao, has forgotten their Right to Food leading to Food Insecurity. The United Nation defines the Right to Food as the "right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchase to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear." And the people have known otherwise.

In connection, the people suffering from hunger, fear and overall insecurity are mainly children and women. In a typical Filipino family, the father remains the head of the family, whereas the mother is characterized as the one in charge of domestic matters. It is difficult to classify the Filipino family as it tends to vary in composition at certain times, but recent statistic shows that a typical family would normally comprise of three persons (three females and three males). The amount a family would consume daily relies much on their economic status and availability, accessibility, adequacy and food safety, a hard possibility for most; especially those in rougher parts in Mindanao also defined as "conflict affected" areas where people have been affected by serious and successive grievances and beyond.

Apparently, for any typical Filipino family, the news of a family member sudden strike of an illness can be viewed as a calamity. Five out of ten Filipinos who are diagnosed by a sickness die without even seeking professional medical aid, according to the University of the Philippines National Health Institute. This is another national problem that risks the country from ever improving. Situations like these are frequent and evident in Muslim Mindanao, with unhealthy parents unable to provide and malnourished children that cannot attend school. The ongoing conflict between the rebels and law has not only sparked problems with hunger and poverty, but it has also triggered a catastrophe among the poor who have no access to medication. Though humanitarian organizations are making names as they as they secure help for the people, AmeriCares and CARE being support organization for some time now.

In terms of the agricultural sector, and farm size of the Philippine's land and water sources, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority, The Philippines has a total land area of about 30 million hectares and approximately 9.67 million hectares of which represents 32.22% of the total land area of the country. This data clearly states that the Philippines is a highly agricultural country.

The country's main agricultural crops are rice, corn, coconut, mangoes, banana, pineapples, coffee, mangoes, tobacco and abaca (a banana like plant). The Philippines is the 8th largest rice producer in the world, contributing to 2.8% of the global rice production; also being the world's largest importer in 2010. But having been greatly contributory to rising the country's agricultural status, it is currently a major predicament to maintain the farming business. War torn communities and internally displaced populations have farmers leaving their farms dry. They might even be deprived of their right to land at all.

Weak government policies and programs, an obvious excessive reliance on worldwide imports, corruption, and serious, unrelenting conflict, have taken the toll on the agricultural sector, says experts. Sadly making the fisherman, farmers and children the poorest basic sectors. According to the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, the agricultural sector employs an estimated 12 million people making up 33 percent of the country's laborer force. And about 70% of the rural poor are farmers and fishermen. The average daily wage of a farmer is \$6 versus the national average of \$10.

Focusing on the point of conflict, where the case is most evident in conflict affected areas of Mindanao, it still remains insecure. The effect on the traditional family mainly points at food insecurity. According to the Food and Agriculture Association, food security depends not only on the availability and access to adequate food, but also on political stability and the absence of violence and terrorism, which may give depth and support the fact that these conflicted areas are "more vulnerable" to hunger.

Having stated that conflict plays a vital role to the steady decline of the people and of the country's status, there are a couple more varying factors which add dearly to the problems. Sudden increases to supposedly affordable retail goods make these items immediately unavailable to the households which are deemed poor. This makes it near impossible to meet their daily needs.

Another factor to be addressed is income, the part of the population who have dedicated themselves to the agriculture sector are more likely to go to bed hungry. More so those caught in unlawful conflicts. This is because low rural incomes, and lack and absence of needed productive resources such as land and capital. With the recognition of varying troubles such as climate change, unexpected weather calamities, pests, and disease aside, these factors influencing hunger must be brought to attention. The government must not overlook these small but powerful problems that arise in the rural farm areas, especially those who suffer from poverty due to violence. Meagre wages must not become hindrances to accessible food.

These small farmers, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, feed the globe. But they are only able to provide all of what they intend to give if they are indeed supported by programs that protect them from landlessness, policies that promise them an adequate and affordable food supply, and most importantly, the agricultural sector of the Philippines must create a comprehensive, effective and absolute resolution to the violence that could finally contribute to peace and development in the South and in the country. May it be one farm, one family, one person at a time.

This can only be considered plausible in the next decades if the violence will come to a stop or better yet an agreement that would bring about peace, prosperity and food security in the country. These conflicts sole purpose is to bring recognition to the moro people of the Philippines and they intend to seek an independent presence and autonomy from the central government. According to the framework, this Muslim area will be semi-independent and would have a share of revenues from the extraction of the land's own resource, budgetary autonomy, its own police and Sharia law only for muslims. If the government acknowledges these conditions and abides by the MILF's expectations, the group will willingly surrender and halt armed movement against the government and will finally allow the national government to take hold of national security and foreign policy. In the recent years, the autonomy was agreed to be implemented gradually, the deal would also rename the region as "Bangsamoro." On October 7, 2012 former president Benigno Aquino announced this peace deal with the MILF hoping for a "final and endearing peace in Mindanao."

However, progress on the implementation of the peace agreement has been slow and drawn out. It was decided that it be named "Bangsamoro Basic Law", which, up until present has not been passed and it seems unlikely that it would be announced official anytime soon. But in 2016 article of the Philippine Star, it is evident that the congress is running out of time, and the MILF has vowed not to give up on their purpose. The government sees this as a singular opportunity that they must seize, they also firmly believe that the situation might become worse than it already is.

The current trend for the conflict and its resolution factor is presently constant, with the unmoving stalemate between the Philippine government and the insurgence forces of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The biggest question now is not whether or not the agreement will be made law or if the rebellious group will achieve their purpose, but would the peace agreement really bring political stability and progressive peace in the south?

The resolution to this decade's long crisis would bring about numerous and drastic changes in every sector of the country, more so in the agricultural sector which had been impacted devastatingly. The people would once again be able to produce food and have a reliable access to an adequate and safe food supply. It could also empower the entire populace of the Filipino farmers and food producers who rely solely on agricultural productivity for their dietary needs and household income.

Assistance is greatly needed to support the cause. The World Food Programme has re-established a presence in the Philippines, and it has become one of the most contributory to lending the country its initiatives. They have rebuilt programmes designed to support the ongoing peace processes in Mindanao. As the agency supports providing assistance to the conflict-affected areas, they have also prioritized the large number of internally displaced people and the dangerously high rates of malnutrition. The World Food Programme has worked closely with government counterparts in varying levels, may it be national, provincial or local. The programme has also been in collaboration with non-government organizations, donor agencies, UN partners and communities.

The solutions to these problems won't come as easily but the WFP, together with its partners, would work hand in hand to implement the resolution against the factors threatening the security of the people in all aspects. To solve these, great advancements must be made: The number one being the contribution not only the government must initiate, but the contribution of everyone who is concerned. If power and knowledge could be shared, the prospect of success can be too.

Addressing the food security needs of the vulnerable communities living in conflict affected areas is the key. These can be addressed by supporting the restoration of farm lands and common livelihoods of the people who were struck by the conflict. If the peace pact between the government and the rebellion would push through, community assets, medical treatment programmes, effective food assistance, educational activities and improving of nutritional status might be achievable in the years to come.

If all the possibilities of these measures were made true, and should both conflicting parties find common ground, for both viewpoints seek peace and progress, the decline of the country's economic and agricultural status might come to a stop and produce an enduring peace the people have yearned to know. Any agreement must have strong and stable foundations and agreeable mechanisms. It is known that peace processes in the past have come up with likely agreements yet were found out to be ineffectively implemented. The government and the MILF must look beyond their shallow perspectives and search for workable alternatives for setting their problems with the law and the country's deteriorating state and food insecurity.

The Philippines has always been a country fueled by their strong will to survive amidst the disasters that befall them. It is a country that is a gateway of tropical typhoons and hurricanes of the Pacific which have ravaged their labored land and communities. With the added danger of violence and extreme terrorism keeping them from meeting their needs of productivity, education, health care and food availability, the country has been scarred by years of enraged and unneeded conflict. The Philippine minority is left malnourished and hungry. The Filipino farmers are a dying breed. But in hardship there is always relief, and in conflict there is always a resolution, hiding in the hands of a country aching to be reborn.

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