

Subverting the Objectionable Politics of the Agricultural Workers' Systemic Marginalization in the Philippines

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The formation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), envisioned as a common market, became a reality in the year 2015. Generally viewed to catalyze development in the region, the proposed economic integration is ASEAN's response to the rapidly changing world that is geared towards globalization (San Juan, 2018). While the policy is seen to facilitate free flow of goods, services, as well as capital and skilled labor, the ASEAN economic integration is considered by some to be detrimental to smallholder farmers in the long run rather than beneficial. The ASEAN economic integration can undermine the welfare of smallholder farmers insofar as it will "increase cheaper agricultural imports and shift agricultural production away from meeting the country's food and industrial needs, towards producing high-value export crops" (IBON International, 2015, pp. 12-13). Unable to compete with the entry of less costly agricultural products, local farmers, especially those who are landless, become highly vulnerable to various socio-economic risks. The dislocation of marginal farmers and fishery producers in their businesses is more likely to happen as prices of their agricultural products will be lower than their production costs (Clarete & Villamil, 2015).

Despite the remarkable changes observed in the Philippine economy as shown by its recent economic growth and strong macroeconomic fundamentals, agricultural development leaves much to be desired. Misdirection of funds, faulty program designs, and resource leakages hamper sectoral progress despite the relatively high expenditure on agriculture (Clarete & Villamil, 2015). Lack of access to basic services as well as poor state of local infrastructure discourage transition of the Philippine economy towards being efficiency-driven. Coxhead and Warr (1995) believe that “agricultural growth is central to poverty alleviation in developing Asia” (p. 1). Even in the international arena, the development potential of the agricultural sector is recognized. In the Philippines, however, farmers remain poor as rural poverty is hitherto a dismal problem that has long prevailed in local economies. Farmers are still beleaguered by the same problems only because remedial measures are not as effective and sustainable as they are expected to be. Former Agriculture undersecretary Ernest Ordoñez (2014), in particular, reveals the shortcomings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements in improving the lives of the farmers. Instead of providing impetus for growth and development, WTO proved injurious to the welfare of farmers. The failure of the Philippine government to deliver competitive enhancement measures brought catastrophic effects to the sector. Clarete and Villamil (2015) cites the rice industry as an example of how the WTO agreements are not fulfilling its intended goals for the agricultural industries:

When the country joined the WTO in 1995, the government asked the WTO for a 10-year special treatment, which allowed it to maintain its quantitative import restriction on rice because the rice farmers were not ready yet for import competition. After ten years, the government sought an extension of the QR for the same reason. The WTO gave the country until 2012. When the extension expired, the government asked for a waiver from its obligation under the WTO agreement on agriculture to tariffy the rice QR [quantitative import restriction], the reason being is that the rice farmers are still not ready for competition. The WTO allowed the waiver but only until 2017.

The approach to temporarily protect the A&F [agriculture and fisheries] sector first while the government puts in place the measures that would make the sector competitive is not working (p. 85).

Ordoñez (2014) laments how the growth rate of Philippine agriculture has declined through the years. In contrast with the manufacturing sector, which registered a 10.3 percent growth, agriculture pales in comparison with 1.2 percent growth for the year 2013. Revisiting previous years, the agriculture industry posted zero percent growth rate in 2009 to 2010, 2 percent in 2011, and 3 percent in 2012. These growth rates are despicably low, especially for a country that prides itself on having a predominantly agricultural economy.

Lack of access to resources vital for livelihood and basic social services forms part of the social and political reality of an agricultural worker in the Philippines. That the farmers and the rest of agricultural workers, such as the fisherfolk, are a neglected sector is demonstrated by empirical data. Data obtained from the National Statistical Coordination Board (as cited in Cayabyab, 2013) show that the contribution of the agricultural sector to the gross domestic product (GDP) has decreased in 2012. From 20 to 30 percent commencing from 1969, it went down to a staggering 11 percent. Government neglect in terms of development and investments has contributed much to the impoverishment of farmers and the fisherfolk through the years. As one of the three primary sectors of production (the other two sectors being services and industry), agriculture is where the poorest of the poor in the country can be found. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2017) reports that the farmers and fisherfolk had consistently registered the highest poverty incidence among the sectors since 2006. At 34.3 percent, the farmers had the highest poverty incidence among the sectors in 2015; the fisherfolk came in second with 34 percent (Table 1). High poverty incidence in the agricultural sector can be attributed to low productivity and relatively slow growth (National Economic and Development Authority, as cited in Cayabyab, 2013).

Table 1: Poverty Incidence for Basic Sectors: 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015

Sector	2006			2009			2012			2015			Increase/Decrease
	Poverty incidence (%)	CV	Poverty incidence (%)	CV	Poverty incidence (%)	CV	Poverty incidence (%)	CV	Poverty incidence (%)	CV	2006-2009	2009-2012	
Philippines	26.6	1.9	26.3	2.0	25.2	2.1	21.6	3.5	(0.3)	(1.1)	(3.6)		
Farmers	38.5	2.1	38.0	2.1	38.3	2.5	34.3	3.0	(0.5)	0.2	(4.0)		
Fishermen	41.2	4.6	41.3	4.0	39.2	4.7	34.0	5.8	0.1	(2.1)	(5.2)		
Children	35.2	1.7	35.3	1.4	35.2	1.7	31.4	1.9	0.1	(0.1)	(3.8)		
Self-employed and family workers	30.6	2.2	29.9	2.0	29.0	2.4	25.0	2.8	(0.8)	(0.9)	(4.0)		
Women	25.9	1.9	25.7	1.6	25.6	1.9	22.5	2.1	(0.2)	(0.1)	(3.1)		
Youth	21.1	2.2	21.6	1.8	22.3	2.2	19.4	2.4	0.5	0.7	(2.9)		
Migrant and formal sector workers	16.0	2.5	16.8	2.1	16.6	2.6	13.4	2.7	0.7	(0.2)	(3.2)		
Senior citizens	16.9	3.1	16.1	2.5	16.2	2.9	13.2	3.1	(0.7)	0.0	(3.0)		
Individuals residing in urban areas	12.6	4.0	12.6	3.3	13.0	4.2	11.5	5.0	0.0	0.4	(1.5)		

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA)

What should be done to ensure the protection of Filipino agricultural workers such as farmers and the fisherfolk against various socio-economic risks? This brief commentary argues that farmers should not be merely viewed as recipients of policy but as active participants in policies that would directly affect their sector. A grassroots counter hegemonic action is necessary as state autonomy in the Philippines has been rendered weak due to dysfunctional political institutions (Dressel, 2011) and high democratic deficit (Hutchcroft & Rocamora, 2003), which contribute to the longstanding failure of the government to respond to the needs of the marginalized sectors of society, especially Filipino workers from the agricultural sector.

The Politics of Citizen Involvement and Participation

The participation of citizens in governance is a way of promoting public support and involvement in matters affecting them. Participation is a distinctive feature of planning and decision-making processes that can promote citizen empowerment and enhance the quality of decisions to be made (Turnhout, Bommel, & Aarts, 2010). The UN Economic and Social Council (2007) gives paramount importance to the role of public participation in politics as “participation can help deepen democracy, strengthen social capital, facilitate efficiency and sustained growth, and promote pro-poor initiatives, equity and social justice” (p. 4).

However, the pursuit of participatory governance can be marred, deliberately or otherwise, by the interaction or non-interaction of both citizens and the government. Knowledge and information are essential in evaluating decisions and policies, without which sound assessment cannot proceed. It is implied in this process that the interaction is not unilateral and is a joint effort of both actors.

In the case of the ASEAN economic integration, it can be said that the participation of the farmers in the process of formulating the AEC blueprint is limited, if not none at all. Why is this the case? As early as 2007, the inception of pursuing an ASEAN common market was already in place. Apparently, the ASEAN's reliance on each member's head of state and its own mechanisms to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of economic

integration were enough to launch the ship. Foreign policies are, after all, the prerogative of the heads of state as they are the chief architects of foreign policy. In reimagining this established order, Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony offers an alternative explanation. Gramsci conceptualized hegemony as the diffusion throughout society of the value and knowledge systems of a particular group, in this case the ruling entity or class. There is a diffusion of a particular way of looking at the world. As a result, this affects the dominant values and beliefs of a system. This appears in the form of a dominant ideology, which invades the most personal, private aspects of their lives (Jison, 2013).

Policymaking direction and decision-making processes have always been top down, be it national or international in scope. That the crafting of policy is the exclusive domain of the policymakers, of those who are in power, and not of the farmers, had been the ordinary view of looking into the world. There has always been a lack of effort to go down the ivory tower to at least reach out into the knowledge and depth of the marginalized. The farmers are only viewed as recipients of policy, and nothing more. This worldview has diffused throughout society, through our educational institutions, legal systems, and foreign policy, rendering this phenomenon normal and commonplace. There is no other way but economic integration because this is what the economists, political scientists, and technocrats say. In a credential-oriented society such as ours, the voice of the farmers will not be heard unless they obtain a postgraduate degree.

Needless to say, the experience of some countries in democratic projects that foster greater participation at the grassroots level provides promise and proof of feasibility. Heller (2012), in particular, examines three participatory projects that originated in three different countries. He first cited the case of South Africa, during the time when the national government implemented the Integrated Development Plans, a nationwide effort to decentralize and mandate citizen participation in formulating local plans and budgets. Next, he cited the people's campaign of decentralized planning in the Indian state of Kerala, which was an outcome of the passage of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments that authorized public participation through the creation of village assemblies. Finally, he gave reference to the participatory budgeting scheme that was first introduced in Porto Alegre,

Brazil in 1983 but eventually was embraced by over 400 cities in the country. These projects were born out of legal frameworks that underwent thorough consultation and deliberation with the citizens.

The Politics of Knowledge and Access to Information

The farmers' knowledge about the proposed economic integration can be gleaned as limited. Most of the people living in ASEAN countries are uninterested or not well-informed about the plan of economic integration within the regional bloc. A report prepared by the ASEAN Secretariat (as cited in Domingo, 2013) reveals that 76 percent of the people from the ASEAN region lack basic understanding of what ASEAN is and its mandate. The study is participated by 2,200 respondents coming from the general public and 261 business leaders in 11 sectors. During the 6th ASEAN Social Forestry Network Conference, Dr. Ramon Razal (as cited in Finlayson, 2015) reported that the knowledge about the AEC is low and the usual knowledge acquired by both citizens and officials regarding ASEAN economic integration comes only from what they heard from the media.

In the realm of political economy, information and knowledge can be considered a resource. From a Foucauldian perspective, knowledge and the access thereof can be constrained by a certain individual, group of people, or entity. Knowledge and power are always intertwined. One cannot separate knowledge from power since all fields of knowledge are constituted within power relations, and all power relations are constituted within a field of knowledge. Moreover, power relations are present in all social encounters, even in private domains. That knowledge is power underscores the notion that those who are in power are also those who are in control of knowledge and, therefore, are able to make use of this valuable resource either for gaining personal benefit or advancing the general good. Private or corporate interests could be furthered through the possession of knowledge and information.

When pieces of information find availability only in a restricted group of people or those who belong in the high echelons of society, knowledge will fail to trickle down the base of the social ladder. Such failure, caused by the control of information flow, makes the *should-be* recipients of

information vulnerable and powerless. This information asymmetry could have adverse effects to society in the long run and be subject to manipulation of those who are in power, if not captured by a select few. This is evident in how policies, both in national and international platforms, are formulated.

In determining policy directions and crafting policy alternatives, the direct involvement of the people is an important but often-ignored feature of the process. Engaging the people in policy matters enables them to know the rudiments of political processes and take remedial actions to avoid risks and difficulties, if necessary. In essence, public policies are framed within the ambit of human development and improvement of people's lives. As Amartya Sen (1999) argues, development should be construed as the absence of *unfreedoms* (such as poverty) in society. Development should be the ultimate goal of public policy and should aim to promote political freedom and the end of oppression.

Conclusion

It is the Philippine government's constitutional mandate to promote the development of agriculture and workers in the agricultural sector. Article 13, Section 5 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution stipulates that "[t]he State shall recognize the right of farmers, farmworkers, and landowners, as well as cooperatives, and other independent farmers' organizations to participate in the planning, organization, and management of the program, and shall provide support to agriculture through appropriate technology and research, and adequate financial, production, marketing, and other support services." It is noteworthy that the Magna Carta of Farmers was passed into law almost 30 years ago, but gleaning from the literature on the assessment of diverse Philippine agricultural policies shows a recurrent theme: policies that are supposedly beneficial to farmers are implemented poorly.

Is there a way out of this quagmire, especially when the government remains less effective in addressing this panoply of issues emanating from the agricultural sector? The answer could be this: people and ideas from the bottom up should repurpose the elite's use of the state as well as the present hegemony. The initial ways forward can be concretized and sustained through the following:

- (1) Coalition of labor candidates in national-level elections such as the senatorial and congressional races.** The meaningful intent of the party-list system to broaden representation of sectoral organizations and coalitions in the Philippine legislature is usually defeated by the practice of some party-list representatives purporting to come from or represent the interests of the marginalized sectors. In the 2019 Philippine senatorial elections, however, the Labor Win coalition sought to break through the oligarchic defenses of the Senate race equipped with their platforms that advance the causes of laborers and workers in the Philippines. Supporting coalitions in national-level electoral races that advocate for genuine agrarian reform, creation of more decent jobs, and higher minimum wage, among other labor advocacies, can be a gamechanger on how our democratic institutions approach policy formulation for the benefit of the greater good.
- (2) Strengthening the system of people's initiative and referendum.** Currently, the law that governs people's initiative and referendum is RA 6735, otherwise known as the Initiative and Referendum Act of 1989. While a bill was introduced in the 17th Congress to amend the law and address its inadequacies as elaborated by the Supreme Court of the Philippines in *Defensor-Santiago v. Commission on Elections* (G.R. No. 127325, 19 March 1997), RA 6735 still empowers citizens to directly initiate national laws as well as local ordinances (specifically those that address some lacunae in present agricultural laws and policies) and be approved through a referendum, provided that the required number of signatures for the draft law is met.
- (3) Mandatory representation of agriculture non-government organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and/or people's organizations (POs) in all levels of policy making processes, most especially at the national level.** The present practice in congressional committee meetings,

for instance, is to invite organizations as resource speakers during inquiries in aid of legislation. Since lawmaking and policy formulation are imbued with public interest, the representation of NGOs, CSOs, and POs that genuinely cater to the interests of agricultural workers must be institutionalized both in the local and national levels of policymaking.

- (4) Institutionalization of pre-tertiary level courses that aim to enhance political efficacy and consciousness.** The overarching recommendation in all these is to hone a proactive citizenry that possesses a high level of political efficacy and consciousness, which could be done by engaging the Filipino youth on matters of politics and society during their primary or secondary education. As Schulz (2005) finds, “[i]n the process of political socialization during childhood and adolescence, acquisition of political efficacy is often seen as crucial for future participation as an active citizen in a democracy” (p.2). How our educational system teaches socio-civic education at the primary level can be substantially improved by including lessons on political accountability, the non-negotiable values of democracy and respect for human rights, responsible and people-centered leadership, and the importance of electoral participation, among others.

In a democratic setting, repurposing hegemonic circuits of power can be initiated through enhanced political participation, more avenues for participatory governance, and reclaiming the power of knowledge claims from the technocrats, and/or community organizing and collective action. Within the context of the ASEAN integration, this commentary echoes the argument of San Juan (2018) on the need to “explore the possibilities of steering the ASEAN project toward a solidarity-based, people-centered, grassroots-driven, and non-neoliberal model, aligned with progressive goals” (p. 2). By and large, the country needs to make significant strides on including the farmers and other vulnerable sectors in the process of policymaking and governance.

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