Stand Up to Poverty! Stand Up for Equality!

The “Is P36 Enough?” Campaign

Introduction

The Philippine government has defined the poor as *those who fall below the per capita poverty threshold of P36 per person per day* (NSCB, 2004). This was derived from the premise that the minimum amount a person needs to earn in a year in order to live beyond the poverty threshold is P13,113. Of this amount, P 8,734 will go to food needs, while the remaining P4,379 will go to other basic needs. Using this threshold, a family of five needs to earn P65,565 a year (or P5,463.75 per month). Further breaking down this amount shows that a family of five needs P182 per day (or P36 per person) to address food and non-food needs.

Regional data for Southeast Asia shows that the Philippines has one of the highest incidences of poverty, with 15.5 percent of its population living below $1 a day. This is lower than those of Laos (39 percent) and Cambodia (34 percent), but higher those of Vietnam (13.1 percent) and Indonesia (7.5 percent).

To pose the question directly: will P36 ensure the realization of many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the vast majority of Filipinos? Is P36 enough to cover the food and the non-food basic needs of every Filipino, as well as ensure good health for all? Can P36 ensure proper nutrition, access to potable water, sustained access to basic quality education, and life in a clean and safe environment?

Why are Filipinos going hungry?

Filipinos are going hungry due to the following major reasons:

- A 10 percent drop in household incomes between 2000 to 2003 (from P175,000 to P144,000). The shrinking incomes have, in turn, lowered household spending by 8 percent (FIES, 2003).
- The inability of wages to keep in step with the rapid and continuing increase in prices of goods and services.
- The skyrocketing of prices of goods and services because of inflation (from 2-3 percent in the late 90s, to 6-8 percent at present)
- The imposition of VAT has further accelerated the rise in prices.

The ADB Report has shown that economic growth that was registered from 2000 to 2003 has not been pro-poor.

- Despite the growth in GDP from 2000- 2003, preliminary 2003 FIES results show a 10 percent drop in real average family incomes.
The Report further revealed a 6 percent contraction in the real average income for the bottom 30 percent of the population for this period.

In real terms, the 2000 poverty line of P11,605 still falls below the 1988 poverty line of P4,777 per person per year (equivalent to P14,136 in 2000, based on the Consumer Price Index).\(^1\)

The so-called economic growth has actually been JOBLESS GROWTH. The slow growth rate of 5 percent for 2005 will not generate the momentum needed to eradicate the 7-8 percent level of poverty (ADB).

- The highest rate of joblessness in the past 20 years was posted in 2004. Mass unemployment was at 11 percent; underemployment at 21 percent. Translated, this meant that 4.1 M were unemployed, 6.8 million were underemployed, 4 million worked part-time, and 11 million were looking for work.
- The sharp contraction of the formal labor sector from 1999 to 2003 resulted in a job loss of almost one million (Employers Confederation of the Phils), led to the further “informalization” of the labor sector, and to declining job quality.
- Of the 750,000 jobs created in January 2006, 87 percent were part-time jobs, 52 percent were unpaid family workers, and 77 percent were in low productivity activities (e.g., 63 percent in agriculture, 14 percent in private households).

The reality for many Filipinos: Adopting strategies to address hunger

The grim reality is that Filipino families now get by with the barest of necessities, and the number of people living on the streets continues to grow. Various ways to stave off hunger and address the problem of food scarcity have been resorted to, such as

- Sleeping through meal times, cutting down the number of meals.
- Mothers eat smaller portions, or skip meals entirely, just to ensure that the rest of the family will get to eat.
- Those who really cannot afford to feed all the members of the household give their children to the care of relatives, and other sympathetic souls.

A study conducted in 2001 has shown that over a third of class E and over a tenth of class D had resorted to eating “surrogate ulam”, “new viands” consisting of salt, soy sauce, bagoong, pork lard, softdrinks or coffee because they cannot afford to buy vegetables, fish or meat. Instant noodles drowned in plenty of water now constitute a full meal for many poor families.

A bleak future because of low nutrition levels

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\(^1\) Ibid, p.38.

GCAP-Philippines is the biggest international alliance of organizations, networks and national campaign efforts committed to eradicating extreme poverty in the world.

Website: [www.endpovertynow.org.ph](http://www.endpovertynow.org.ph), [www.whiteband.org](http://www.whiteband.org)
Nutritious home-cooked meals have become an ideal for many, as more and more mothers have joined the workforce and have been constrained to keep long hours at work. Even stay-at-home mothers already saddled with housework and childcare do their share in bringing food to the table. Lacking enough resources, their only recourse is to buy canned goods or instant noodles that are short on nutrients.

Many Filipinos now subsist on carbohydrate- and calorie-heavy diets that keep hunger pangs at bay, but are direly short on nutrients. Such a regimen has yielded healthy-looking individuals who are basically weak and undernourished, and who run higher risks of acquiring illnesses related to high cholesterol levels, such as hypertension, and high sodium intake that can affect vital organs like the heart and kidneys.

No less than the United Nations Children’s Fund has raised the alarm on malnutrition in the Philippines, particularly the 30% child malnutrition rate that has persisted for over a decade. Consider these figures from UNICEF:

- About 10,000 babies a year are exposed to the risk of death immediately before and after birth;
- Folate deficiency caused 4,000 cases of birth defects a year. This deficiency also triggers infantile paralysis, heart disease and strokes, which lead to deaths;
- Around 500 young women die annually from severe anemia during pregnancy and childbirth.

Children constitute the biggest numbers of the poor, at 14,093,102; women comprise 12,227,315; the urban poor 6,784,016; and the youth (5,476,061). The sectors with the highest proportion of the poor are the fisherfolk and farmers, and senior citizens (NSCB 2006).²

Situating the Philippines in the regional Nutrition Map

- According to the World Bank, the rate of reduction of malnutrition (or the prevalence of underweight children under five years of age) in the Philippines stands at 0.6 percent annually. This is much slower those of its Asian neighbors: Cambodia (1.1 percent), Laos (0.9 percent) and Burma (0.8 percent).
- The level of hunger and malnutrition is now comparable to that of sub-Saharan Africa, not because we are poor, but because we have one of the highest levels of inequality in the region.

Looking Beyond Government Claims of Improved Nutrition

² In terms of magnitude, the smallest of the eight sectors are the fisherfolk, the senior citizens and the farmers who comprise 12, 60, and 68, respectively out of every 1000 Pinoys. The largest group are the urban population and women, who comprise closer to 500 each, followed by children at 433.

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Despite all the hard evidence, the FNRI maintains that there has been “general improvement” in the Filipinos’ nutrition and food intake in the last decade. Nutrition indicators (i.e. increased intake of the basic food groups, except fruits) have improved; there has been higher consumption of animal foods (in relation to total food and protein intake), and increased intake of nutrients (except iron and vitamin C).

A doctor in the FNRI, however, clarified that the focus of their survey was on mean food intake. He said studies should take a close look at the relationship between incomes and food intake. Surveys done in 1987 and 1993 have consistently shown that people with lower incomes ate less than those with higher incomes.

**Government’s Response**

Government (DOH) has offered food fortification as the most cost-effective and sustainable strategy to address micronutrient malnutrition. It uses a three pronged strategy of supplementation, nutrition education and food fortification to curb the incidence of micronutrient malnutrition, particularly deficiencies in vitamins A, iron and iodine. Another is the “Sangkap Pinoy Seal” program, wherein a seal of certification is given to processes-food manufacturers who fortify their products. There are other laws in support of nutrition, such as the mandatory fortification of all salt with iodine, and the fortification of NFA rice with iron, sugar and edible oil with vitamin A, and wheat flour with vitamin A and iron.

But the question remains: will P36 give the poor access to the proper nutrition inputs they badly need?

**Dagdag-Bawas in Poverty Statistics?**

Data on poverty, particularly those coming from government, need to be carefully studied for reliability and accuracy.

- First, the non-income dimensions of poverty such as vulnerability, powerlessness, social exclusion and deprivation need to be measured and factored in.
- Second, major changes in methodology that were applied to 1992 and 2003 data have affected official poverty estimates of the NSCB, from 1990 to 2003.
o The methodology change was again applied in 2003, with a retroactive application up to the 1997 figures. In effect, data generated after this period no longer became comparable with earlier data sets.

o The exclusion of families without “official and permanent residence” (the ambulant poor who live under the bridge, squatter areas, on the streets, etc) that was set in the poverty (FIES) data has led to the under-representation of the poor in the survey sample.

- The changes in methods of generating poverty data, done twice already, has resulted in two overlapping series of poverty measurement: the first one from 1985 to 2000, and the second one from 1997 to 2003. While the old methodology revealed a worsening magnitude of income poverty from 1985 to 2000, the new methodology resulted in lower poverty headcounts. This alleged decline in poverty incidence was, however, negated by a very high population growth rate. The actual number of poor people has even increased substantially by over four million from 1985 to 2000.

- Finally, the lack of updated and disaggregated data on nutrition, infant mortality, maternal health, water access and morbidity, and even population size, makes it difficult to assess real progress in terms of the MDGs. This lack of data is due to government’s unwillingness to spend on improving its statistical system, including the conduct of a long-overdue census, because of fiscal constraints.

To further illustrate how government intentionally “massages” data in order to present a sanitized version of reality is the well-publicized incident in June 2006, where the former DepEd OIC was publicly reprimanded saying there was a shortage of 6,832 classrooms in the country, and stating that this kind of a situation will persist beyond 2006. The President, in a raised tone, ordered the OIC to use a 100:1 pupil-classroom ratio, instead of the 45:1 ratio that was used in the report. The incident shows the extremes the President would go through in order to create a semblance of accomplishment, and perpetuate the myth of a much improved social and economic climate in the country.

Can NGOs, therefore, be blamed for their growing skepticism of the “improved” social indicators that are being claimed by government, and perceived these as more examples of the insidious government practice of “dagdag-bawas”?

**In the light of the above discussion, we therefore raise the resounding cry that NO, P36 is not enough to meet the MDGs. P36 will not lift the poor Filipinos out of their misery and help them live a life of dignity.**

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3 Tiongson, Rhodora. *Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger: Will we walk the line?* In May Pera Pa Ba? Moving Forward with the Millennium Development Goals, p.38.

4 Ibid., p.39.

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What can therefore be done to reverse this seemingly losing war that we are waging against poverty?

1. **Demand good governance; match pro-poor rhetoric with action.** The last few years have been marked by worsening poverty and inequality, where public investments in education, and health (just to name a few) have reached an all-time low. Resources that should have gone to financing the MDGs and social development, have gone to private pockets.
   - Thus we demand transparency, accountability from this government.
   - We demand that it squarely face the many corruption charges that have been lodged before it. This, we believe, is the single biggest challenge confronting the realization of the MDGs.

2. **Increase public investments in basic health, education, water and sanitation.**
   - Ensure the provision of basic social services, particularly the public provision of affordable and quality health care, including reproductive health, education, housing, potable water and sanitation for the poor who need them most.
   - In particular, we demand the reversing the declines in the budgets of health, housing, and education across the years.
   - We likewise demand that the budgetary shortfall of DOH (to the tune of P7 billion) and DepEd (amounting to about P14 billion) be covered in the 2007 budget.
   - Based on the need to focus on malnutrition among pregnant and lactating women, and children aged zero to two years old, we support the promotion of reproductive health care that provides the full range of safe and effective choices for women and men.
   - GCAP likewise supports the call for mothers to breastfeed their babies during the first two years of life, with the view to improving nutrition among babies.

3. **Focus on agricultural and rural development.** The Asian experience has taught us that poverty reduction is fastest when agricultural growth is rapid and sustained. We demand that government reexamine its priorities, and consider investing in rural infrastructure (e.g., farm-to-market roads, ports, irrigation systems), research and development (R&D), as well as asset reform (e.g., genuine agrarian reform). Such moves will result in creating viable livelihood and employment that have been proven to be the most enduring ways to combat poverty.

4. **Free up resources for the MDGs and social development by exploring alternative strategies, such as:**
• Push for debt relief (e.g., debt moratorium, debt cancellation of all odious and illegitimate debt which can determined after a debt audit); including calling for the repeal of the automatic appropriations law;
• Plug all leakages of government revenues (e.g., corruption, including smuggling, cutting down on administrative wastage);
• Fight against indiscriminate trade liberalization and push for the need install protective trade measures that protect our country’s domestic industries.

5. Develop Citizen-Leaders. Finally, we call on the ordinary Filipino, to exercise good citizenship and demonstrate love of country by taking steps, no matter how small, in trying to make a difference. In this age of widespread cynicism of politicians and charlatans, the task now lies on ordinary Filipinos to come forward and exercise leadership. Today, what we need are Citizen-Leaders.

Stand up to Poverty, Stand up for Equality.
Stand up and be counted.