

2013 RTAF Watch

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Collective Action Strategy towards the Development of a National Food Framework Law in the Philippines

By Aurea Miclat-Teves¹

The purpose of this article is to elaborate on last year's Watch piece, "The Legal Framework Governing the Right to Adequate Food in the Philippines," while demonstrating how there is still a pressing need to push the government to draft and approve a national framework law on the right to food, and show how civil society in the Philippines intends to support this ongoing process.

Civil society currently resorts to complaint and recourse mechanisms which remain insufficient in practice. The National Human Rights Commission has a limited mandate that focuses on civil and political rights. Moreover, while mechanisms to enforce fulfillment of state obligations are non-existent, the Philippines' national budget remains stretched, a continuous reflection of the government's history of weak policy implementation.

To date, the Philippine Constitution has not yet explicitly recognized the right to adequate food (RTAF), nor is there any appropriate legal framework governing the right to adequate food.

The National Food Coalition

In order to overcome these obstacles, the National Food Coalition (NFC) was formed to tackle the issues surrounding the current governance of rural development, environmentally sustainable growth as well as redistributive justice.

The NFC is composed of over 50 organizations and federations with more than 10,000 members representing the urban poor, peasants, indigenous peoples, fisherfolk and the middle class. The NFC has highlighted the main drivers of hunger in the country as being: poverty, inequality, and the resulting failure of the poor to access available resources.

In February 2013, the NFC hosted a conference on "The Right to Adequate Food: A Collective Action for Policy Reform" in which a declaration was issued demanding the government of the Philippines to draft and approve a national law on the right to food.²

¹ Aurea Miclat-Teves is the President of FIAN Philippines. She is an expert on rural development work and has written extensively on the rights-based approach to governance, specifically asset reform. She was former Vice President of FIAN International and now serves in the Election Committee. FIAN Philippines is a member of the steering committee of the National Food Coalition.

² "Declaration of the First National Conference on the Right to Adequate Food in Philippines." *FIAN International*. <http://www.fian.org/news/article/detail/declaration-of-the-first-national-conference-on-the-right-to-adequate-food/>

More than 100 human rights activists, rural development advocates, environmentalist groups, indigenous peoples and various representatives from both nongovernmental organizations and national governmental agencies participated in the conference.³

The Declaration of the First National Conference on the Right to Adequate Food affirmed the Philippines' state obligation to secure the RTAF, which is said to be "closely intertwined with the right to land, water, work, education, health, and housing – the right to adequate standard of living," for its people.⁴ The declaration urged the government to ratify the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which would lead to the drafting and approval of a National Framework Law on the Right to Food in the Philippines.⁵

The conference participants agreed that the main contents of the framework law on the RTAF should have: a) a clear declaration of policy; b) specific targets or goals; c) strategies or methods to achieve its targets or goals; d) institutional responsibility mechanisms; e) avenues for recourse for violations; and g) a national monitoring mechanism.

The mandate of the coalition proclaims their "commitment to the basic and universal human right to food", and express their "determination to claim this right for every citizen and child in our country, the Philippines, as well as in the whole world."⁶ Its goal is to challenge the government to integrate the various Philippine policies on the RTAF into a national framework and to develop strategies which address economic growth and rural development.

NFC launch

Before the conference, the NFC launch was attended by more than 300 people representing various sectors – indigenous peoples, peasants, urban poor, members of the academia, individual advocates. They were mobilized by an awareness campaign on October 15th, 2012, the eve of the World Food Day, to address the issue of growing hunger and impoverishment in the country.⁷

The launch was initiated by a march-demonstration calling for adequate food for all and the signing of an Open Letter to the Philippine President. The letter contained the main demands of the NFC: 1) to give central importance and support to farmers and their concerns; 2) to promote organic rice production; 3) to face and take action against damages caused by climate change; and 4) to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of farmers and indigenous peoples.

Raising Public Awareness

Public awareness of the RTAF remains crucial in pressuring the Philippine government to craft and implement an appropriate legal framework. In order to achieve continued mobilization of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷For more information, visit FIAN Philippines website: <http://fianphilippines.org/national-conference-right-adequate-food>

civil society backing the RTAF, the NFC members have employed various collective-action strategies, including awareness-building and information dissemination on the RTAF.

In order to join the NFC, individuals and groups received human rights training on how to realize the RTAF. Furthermore, key documents as well as educational materials (e.g. Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Adequate Food) were translated into Filipino.

The NFC has also hosted local level consultations around the country and conducted problem-focused group discussions on core issues of the right to adequate food, while spearheading unified efforts to facilitate a progressive realization of the right to adequate food.⁸

Public Participation

Aside from publications, the NFC has hosted numerous workshops for the promotion of the right to adequate food. These workshops included participation from indigenous peoples, farmers and urban poor for the purpose of not only informing vulnerable members of society, but also validating the steps to be taken by the NFC in its fight against hunger. These awareness raising workshops discussed possible solutions to issues and aspirations of the participants with regard to food.

The participants pointed out that there is inadequate food due to a lack of access to land and productive resources, unemployment, lack of unity among community or family members, and problems arising from the non-consultative process implemented by local government in addressing the peoples' livelihood needs or in the development and management of government projects. Additional issues causing of the lack of access to adequate food include: violence and conflicts at community level, food theft and poor targeting of government programs.

The participants manifested that secure employment, access to land and resources, alternative livelihood options, education and transparency in the implementation of government projects will all help them achieve their aspirations of a happy healthy family and community with food always on their tables.

Conclusion

The NFC stands firm on the need for the Philippine government to draft an enabling law that will rectify existing incoherent, non-complementary and conflicting legal mechanisms to contribute to the realization of the RTAF in the Philippines.

The State authorities are urged to declare RTAF as a national policy priority in order to leave a legacy that is beneficial to both the present and future generations of the Philippines.

⁸The results of these efforts can be seen in the publications of the NFC like the books on "The Summary Review of the Philippine Legal Framework Governing the RTAF" and "Asserting the Human Right to Food: Local Initiatives to Access Land and Natural Resources for Sustainable Food Security in the Philippines."