

The Hunger Picture: It's Not a Game

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Statement at the Opening of the Photo Exhibit at the Senate

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Senator Koko Pimentel, Chair of the Committee on Justice and Human Rights, Chief of Staff Gwen Pimentel Gana, Chief Legislative Officer Catherine Manahan, colleagues and friends,

First of all, we would like to thank the honorable members of the Senate, especially Senator Koko Pimentel and Senator Miriam Santiago for the sponsorship of the bill and for opening the doors of Senate to this photo exhibit. We would like members of the Senate to stop here to view these photographs and then try to imagine themselves as among the people captured in the snapshots, feel and smell the surroundings, and hopefully be moved enough to change the dire situations portrayed.

Many of us are aware of the hunger problem that has plagued our countrymen over the decades. Everyone knows that this is due to widespread poverty across the land.

In February 2011, the government “refined” the methodology for rating poverty and thus lowered the poverty line to 7,017 pesos monthly for a family of five, down from the previous 7,953 pesos. This reclassification has been questioned by some members of Congress and, among others, Mahar Mangahas, whose Social Weather Stations has done numerous surveys on hunger.

The change in the poverty line meant a drop from 52 pesos to 46 pesos per person per day for food and non-food expenses. 46 pesos is less than the price of a liter of gasoline, which can take us in our cars less than 10 kilometers from here, not far enough to reach Makati or Malacañang.

Mahar Mangahas said that by lowering the poverty threshold, the government reclassified 5.4 percent of all families from “poor to non-poor.” Suddenly 1 million families were removed from the list of poor people without any substantial changes in their living conditions.

According to the government, the poverty threshold in 2012 was 18,935. Going by this measure, it said that 25.2 percent of Filipinos were considered poor. It also said about 10.4 percent of Filipinos are barely able to earn 13,232 pesos a year, the minimum amount needed to feed an average Filipino family in 2012.

The Food and Nutrition Research Institute reported in 2012 that in the previous year, 69.3 percent of all Filipino households were food insecure, i.e., they could not afford to buy food sufficient to meet their dietary requirements, or they had limited capabilities to access safe and adequate food. In the same report, the FNRI said involuntary hunger arises from food insecurity and that more than one-third (36.0%) of all Filipino mothers and more than a fifth (22.9%) of all Filipino children were food insecure.

Veteran photographers Pat Roque, who has worked for The Associated Press, and Angie de Silva, a commercial and documentary photographer and photo contributor for ABS-CBN news online, have given us images of what these boring statistics mean and look like in the real life of Filipinos few of us see in the course of the day.

We have probably read stories about scavengers collecting left-over food like bread and pieces of meat from the trash heap of fast food stores. We have images of that and the pictures assault not only our sensibility but also our humanity. As they say, a picture paints a thousand words, but a thousand words are not enough to describe what many of our hungry countrymen go through in their normal day.

Not all is bleak, however, because we also have pictures of what could be -- such as organic farms that not only feed entire communities but also create income for farmers. More than that, the photographs show the indomitable spirit of the Filipino, the against-all-odds attitude as they struggle for a better life.

We, in the National Food Coalition, along with our friends and supporters within and outside the Senate have come to a determination that this hunger situation cannot continue. Even for a developing country like the Philippines, hunger of this scale is not a game and it is unacceptable.

We applaud efforts by the Senate members to alleviate the life of ordinary Filipinos who do not have the means to uplift their condition on their own. Now we challenge them to pass the House version of the zero hunger bill. A similar version is with the House of Representatives and the bill is on third reading already.

This proposed legislation provides a legal framework within which zero-hunger may be achieved progressively. The bill also provides an explicit guarantee to the right to adequate food. It encompasses food adequacy, availability, accessibility, freedom from adverse substances, and cultural or consumer acceptability. More importantly, the proposed law will rationalize all existing policies, laws, decrees, executive and administrative orders, memorandum orders and circulars, as well as ordinances with regard to food in accordance with the right to adequate food.

The bill also enumerates the human rights principles upon which the proposed law is based, namely, participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment, and rule of law.

We hope that the images in this exhibit will be seared in our minds, grip our hearts *and* move us to help erase these parts of Philippine reality today so that tomorrow they will just be relegated inside picture frames to be viewed only in museums, or in exhibits of what once was, and to never be captured in photographs again. We can only wish that these pictures will be the last of their kind.

The National Food Coalition, its members and supporters are ready to help the Senate craft this proposed zero-hunger law so that a new picture of adequate food for all may emerge. We should all be open to contributions, especially from sectors of our society that know hunger the most, who live hunger day-to-day, like the urban poor, the landless farmers, those belonging to indigenous communities and the fisherfolks. As the popular shoe company would say, just do it! If I may add, now na!

Maraming salamat po.