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Headline: In Nueva Ecija, farmers keep their chill even as El Niño scorches

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Rice farming in Nueva Ecija remains in business despite a report from the state weather bureau that the province and 48 others are suffering from a dry spell as the El Niño phenomenon continues to bite.

Going around the province, one might think the place was spared from the havoc of climate change. While the weather was dry and humid, there were neither dry taps nor parched lands. Newly harvested palay were displayed along side roads, ready to be put in sacks and stored.

What separates the province from most agricultural areas in the Philippines, aside from its rich lands, is no secret—the availability of efficient irrigation systems and technology.

“It’s not because there is no El Niño here, it is that we have the best irrigation system in the country,” said Roger Barroga, Future Rice Program head of the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice). “We are used to the arrival of dry season, even when it is hot as this, we’ve always been prepared.”

The province owns the first and biggest solar-powered irrigation system in the country. It also benefits from other irrigation projects, including the Upper Pampanga River Integrated Irrigation System.

The city of Muñoz in Nueva Ecija, where PhilRice’s main office is located, is not called “the science city” for no reason. Here, farmers are introduced to affordable innovations. It’s common to see farmers manning tractors and combine harvesters instead of carabaos. Others tend and monitor their farms through apps. They use high-yield hybrid seeds that can withstand drought or flooding.

Nueva Ecija remains the largest producer of the staple in the country without having to cough up unnecessary expenses. But the province is an exception rather than the rule.

Only 30 percent of the country’s farm lands benefit from communal irrigation while the rest still rely on rainwater, according to the National Irrigation Administration. A majority of rice-producing provinces are still dependent on traditional farming, which is more laborious, expensive, and above all, less productive.

Traversing outside the province, the importance of government support in sustaining agriculture is magnified. A three-hour drive from Muñoz to Pangasinan—where irrigation systems and government support in agriculture are subpar—reveals an entirely different scenario where lands have become arid and crops cry for water.

In Bulacan, Dagupan and certain parts of Cotabato, farmers cannot just shift to planting drought-resistant crops to survive the dry spell even if they want to, as this would require a constant water resource.

Farmer leader Jhun Pascua of the National Movement for Food Sovereignty said some farmers in Mindanao were already forced to sell their livestock animals with no grass for them to feed on.

William Dar, a former DA chief and former director of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, said the wrath of El Niño and other natural disasters could be avoided if there were enough infrastructure in place, and if machinery were utilized to fit specific needs.

According to the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, what's bogging down the adoption of modern technology may be partly due to the government's lack of spending for infrastructure and science and technology geared toward agriculture. Economic managers have admitted the sector remained the "weakest link" in the country's growth story.

It would be difficult to replicate Nueva Ecija, but former International Rice Research Institute director and current Monetary Board member Bruce Tolentino said it was only a matter of priorities.

"The government is not providing adequate support for the agriculture sector as a whole—not only for rice, but especially for other crops. And whatever support has been provided has been going to expenditures that do not result in the most important aspect of agriculture—the improvement of sector productivity and the lowering of production costs," he said.

If the economic managers prove to be right, the Rice Import Liberalization Law may just be the sector's saving grace.

In an interview, Socioeconomic Planning Undersecretary Rosemarie Edillon said "the assistance that would be given to farmers [under the law] was designed to lower the cost of producing rice," noting that "one of the biggest cost differences is the labor cost because of the lack of mechanization."

The measure would provide a P10-billion annual subsidy for the distribution of seeds and machinery and the provision of credit for the country's local rice producers.

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It may take two to three years before Filipino rice farmers reap the benefits of the rice fund, economic managers said. For now, producers of the staple in rural and far-flung areas do not have any choice but to wait for the next rainfall.