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Headline: Reinventing the Department of Agriculture

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The Department of Agriculture (DA) must be reinvented during these fast changing times in an uncertain climate change environment.

For the last eight years, industry growth has averaged 6.8 percent compared to agriculture's 1.5 percent. Part of the reason is the inability of the DA to address our new global reality.

The DA subsector road maps are not very useful because they lack private sector involvement. Organizational effectiveness has been hampered by the lack of globally recognized management systems (e.g., all units of the Department of Trade and Industry have the ISO system, compared to only one-fifth at the DA). Our farmers receive inadequate help from 17,000 LGU extension workers because the DA lacks the structure to guide them.

Fortunately, Agriculture Secretary William Dar is now aggressively addressing these bottlenecks.

We saw the need for the reinvention of the DA in the recent conduct of the rice tariffication study. It was discontinued, presumably because of its inflation impact. However, no quantitative inflation estimates were given, and requests for partial study findings were denied.

This critical study directly impacts 11 million rice household members. In many areas, their net income has dropped from P15,000 to only P4,000 a hectare.

On Nov. 5, Dar ordered the continuation and completion of this study. He has started reinvention in this area by ensuring transparency and significant involvement of the private sector (farmers, nongovernment organizations, and business).

Agriculture stakeholders had asked: "Why did the DTI get safeguards for cement manufacturers, while the DA does not even complete a safeguard study to help poor farmers?"

Since I was involved in both initiatives, my answer is because the DA management practices are very different from the DTI's. DA personnel are both caring and competent but their potential is constrained by old DA practices that need reinvention.

During deliberations after stakeholder submissions, the DTI actively sought private sector involvement. On the other hand, not once did the DA call the two national farmer groups that submitted their input. These were the Federation of Free Farmers and the Alyansa Agrikultura (representing the coalition Agri Fisheries Alliance composed of farmers and fisherfolk, agribusiness, science and academe, rural women and various other sectors).

Also introduced to the DA was the volunteer international trade expert who had helped it succeed with the cement safeguard measures. Not once did the DA call him. Dar's announced private sector involvement was not implemented in this situation.

For the rice issue, there are two schools of thought. One states that rice farmers must be competitive, or perish. The other argues that farmers must be protected to ensure food security. The DA must now find a solution that uses and unifies the valid points from each school of thought.

This is to provide a reasonable starting tariff, when farmers can finally get the required government support services to compete. A detailed plan with timetables and budgets should then be given to decrease the tariff to 35 percent as soon as possible. The DA should support those who can be competitive, and help the others with limited potential move to other crops.

This detailed plan has to be formulated immediately. On Oct. 24, Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez said: "The DA is looking at the data. So we will certainly listen to them if and when they bring the proposal back."

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On Nov. 5, Dar promised to do just that. But this time, he will ensure transparency and the best private sector involvement. Without this reinvented DA, our agriculture and our nation will be in serious trouble.