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Every time a destructive typhoon wreaks havoc in the country, our policymakers and media practitioners are quick to issue a litany of observations, pointing out the destruction of our forest covers and watersheds, siltation of our rivers and other water bodies due to severe soil erosion, and illegal settlers' occupation of hazardous areas as the main culprits behind the enormous damage, both in terms of lives and properties that we suffer. That was the case in the aftermath of the flashflood and landslide that occurred in Ormoc, Leyte, killing thousands of victims in 1991, when Typhoon "Ondoy" hit Metro Manila in 2009, when "Pablo" struck Mindanao in 2012, "Yolanda" destroyed Western Visayas in 2013, and now "Ulysses" in 2020.

After a few months, this blame game will surely be forgotten and as a nation, we will move forward by reverting to our "business as usual" ways. At least this time, our level of analytical sophistication has risen a little bit because besides those cliché observations regarding the causes of flooding and landslides, we added the concern of "climate change" as another reason for our woes. We have at least become global in our perspective since climate change is now a fashionable concern in global development thinking.

It is obvious that we know what the problems are and the exorbitant costs they exact in terms of lives and properties lost. Where we always fall short is in the implementation of the measures that will solve the problems we observe and analyze. For instance, it was noted that if we add all the budget allocated for reforestation and greening projects undertaken by successive governments, we could have planted even the spaces between the open seas that separate the various islands in the country. If we account for all the money spent for farm-to-market roads, we could have paved all the roads in the country and connected them. If we sum up all the money devoted to irrigation, we could have irrigated all of the potentially irrigable lands in the Philippines. And if we put together the sums allocated for farm mechanization, we would have easily robotized farm production.

What happened then? The obvious answer is that we are not spending our budget properly.

There is really no honest-to-goodness master plan that will respond to our problems and serve as the basis on how budgets are spent and not what our legislators dictate to our executing agencies. There are no robust monitoring and evaluation systems installed that will truly track progress and whether the goals set in the master plan are really achieved. It is symptomatic of this malaise that when one listens to government reports of accomplishments, they consist mostly of figures on the amount of assistance given and presumed number of beneficiaries without informing the taxpayers whether those interventions really made a difference on the lives or welfare of the recipients.

In the private sector, the ultimate measure of success of a manager is the amount of profit that he or she can bring in to the company regardless of his/her personality or management style. In the public sector, it should be the ability to deliver services in the most efficient and effective manner. Generating savings is a secondary concern given that public funds unused is tantamount to depriving the public of the services it needs. It is the manner by which those funds are used that determines whether government spending is productive or wasteful, and not the amount of savings the agency makes.

Undeniably, the only way that one can determine whether those funds were utilized efficiently and effectively is through the installation and implementation of a robust monitoring and evaluation system. Unfortunately, most government operations, outside of counting numbers of facilities or goods provided, do not tell us whether those interventions really uplifted the welfare of their poor beneficiaries.

Banning coops from the rice importation business

The Cooperatives Development Authority (CDA), egged on by a number of farmers' cooperatives (co-ops) engaged in rice importation, objected to the issuance of the Department of Agriculture's Administrative Order (AO) 34 banning farmers' coops from importing rice. It argued the AO is discriminatory because not all of the co-ops engaged in the rice importation business do not have the financial capability to import and hence, are only used by unscrupulous traders as fronts. It stresses that it is the government's policy to promote the development of cooperatives and, in fact, gives preferential treatment to co-ops in supplying the food requirements of government agencies and institutions as a way of fostering the growth of cooperatives.

However, CDA fails to mention whether those food and agricultural supplies intended for the government agencies and consumers at-large should be imported by the co-ops. Although the law was silent on this, I believe its assumption is that these supplies must come from the local produce of co-ops, thereby providing their members greater incentive to produce more, and in the process, raising their productivity and incomes with the guaranteed market for their products. In turn, this hews closely to the primary goal of establishing and developing co-ops, which is to strengthen local production so that it can benefit local producers, particularly members of farmers' co-ops.

It is simply beyond comprehension how importing the commodities that the co-op members cultivate themselves will encourage them to produce more given that rice imports directly compete with the crops that they harvest. A clear manifestation of this contradiction is that co-ops are among the first and noisiest groups to object when palay (unmilled rice) prices fall due to the entry of rice imports. Thus, we have a situation here wherein CDA wants co-ops "to keep their cake and eat it too"!

Finally, CDA does not present any evidence that without co-ops importing and selling rice, rice traders will monopolize the activity and jack up prices. Current experience shows that despite co-ops able to import rice, the difference between import/wholesale prices and retail prices are high. Meaning that despite participation in retail trade by coops importing rice, this has not brought down rice retail prices.

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