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Headline: Aging farmers could add to food insecurity

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PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. recently announced plans to achieve rice self-sufficiency in two years. That seems consistent with the importance that the government has placed on reviving the agriculture sector. But if policymakers are to realize their dreams for agriculture, they must resolve the problem of aging farmers.

With the average age of Filipino farmers ranging from 55 years old to 59 years old, experts predict the Philippines will face a critical shortage of farmers in 10 to 12 years. This threatens not only the plans for achieving rice self-sufficiency but also food security.

Farmers generally find their life and occupation difficult. That is why they do not want their children to pursue farming. Instead, many of their children seek jobs in the cities or go abroad to become migrant workers.

That observation seems to be corroborated by the declining enrollment in agriculture programs and related courses across the country. The average rate of decline is 1.5 percent annually before the pandemic, according to a report citing the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture.

As to the part about their hard life, farmers account for a large share of poverty incidence, 31.6 percent, according to a report citing the Philippine Statistics Authority. Fisherfolk, who are considered part of agriculture, make up 26.2 percent of the poor. Clearly, helping those in agriculture will impact more than half of the poor.

However, that will be challenging given the perennial underperformance of the agriculture sector. In 2022, agriculture, along with forestry and fisheries, contributed only 8.9 percent to gross domestic product. That is worse than the sector's contribution in 2021, which was 9.6 percent.

That may explain why farmlands are being sold to housing and commercial developers — because they are unproductive. Those land conversions are happening rapidly, in a country that does not have vast arable lands to begin with.

Moreover, climate change threatens agriculture and in a larger context food security. According to a study commissioned by the World Food Program (WFP), the extreme weather events spawned by rising global temperatures will have a substantial impact on food supply chains, not to mention agricultural productivity. "This could in turn negatively affect the availability, affordability and accessibility to nutritious food for the Philippine population, particularly for the most vulnerable, poor and remote populations," the WFP reported.

Last but not least, the war in Ukraine has not spared farmers. Imported fertilizers have become more expensive, just like most goods that farmers and all consumers buy.

Meanwhile, the Philippine population continues to grow. And with that, demand for agricultural products naturally increases. But who will supply Filipinos with staples like rice and other food?

Fast enough

In fairness to the government, it seems to be on the right track. In pursuing rice sufficiency, President Marcos wants to invest heavily in irrigation systems and other infrastructure that can boost productivity.

Also, the newly released Philippine Development Plan, which was crafted by the economic managers, has a solid program to revive agriculture. The plan recognizes the need of farmers to earn a decent income and offers several strategies to modernize agriculture.

Some key interventions were also introduced during the previous administration, such as the establishment of the Rice Competitive Enhancement Fund (RCEF) that was part of the Rice Tariffication Law. RCEF intends to improve the productivity and competitiveness of local rice farmers and increase their income through the provision of farm machinery and equipment, rice seed development, propagation and promotion, expanded rice credit assistance, and rice extension services, the Department of Budget and Management explained.

To complement RCEF, there are efforts to boost rice production. The authorities are talking to irrigators associations and farmers to plant hybrid rice seeds, adopt alternate wetting and drying as a water-saving technology for irrigated lands, harvesting in September during the wet season, and ratooning after harvesting in the wet season.

These are wonderful programs. But they should be implemented faster, before more farmers give up on farming. Also, policymakers should check whether those programs actually attract younger Filipinos to agriculture.