# Economy’s weakest link

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The Philippine economy grew at a slower-than-expected 5.2 percent in the third quarter, according to preliminary data released last week by the Philippine Statistics Authority. This was a sharp slowdown from the 6.4 percent expansion recorded in the previous quarter and the 5.9 percent in the same typhoon season period in 2023.

The main reason for the slowdown was that bad weather slashed agricultural output. The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector, which accounts for about a tenth of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP), shrank by 2.8 percent in the July-September period, a reversal of the already dismal 0.9-percent growth in the same quarter a year ago. This reflected “the impacts of the El Niño phenomenon during the planting season and the effects of seven typhoons, in addition to the Habagat (monsoon), during the harvest season,” according to Secretary Arsenio Balisacan of the National Economic and Development Authority.

It is true that these are events beyond the government’s control. However, it cannot forever blame these natural calamities that come with precise regularity because there are literally hundreds of ways to at least mitigate their impact on agricultural production that the government and the private sector can do. In short, the country is not helpless against these causes of farm destruction.

## Flood control management

The problems of the sector are well-known. Agricultural land is being lost to manufacturing, shopping malls and housing. Aging farmers who have remained poor despite toiling all their lives have been encouraging their children to find more lucrative work. Progress is too slow despite promises by past administrations to modernize it, as shown by the limited number of irrigation facilities, outdated planting and harvesting methods, and inadequate milling and storing facilities. And there is corruption in the sector, in almost every crop from rice and sugar to onions and vegetables.

The biggest issue since the 1970s has been irrigation, or more specifically the lack of it. Adequate irrigation facilities are extremely necessary to address the country’s need for water in times of drought, or the seasonal El Niño dry spell. Integrated with flood control systems and catch basins, these structures can also address the excessive rain brought by La Niña that brings higher-than-normal rainfall. The government should go big in installing irrigation and water control systems that will preserve water for use during the summer months and trap water in the uplands during the typhoon season for later use.

President Marcos has already taken a step toward this, directing the Department of Public Works and Highways to integrate its flood control management programs with other sectors, the National Irrigation Authority in particular, for effective water management and conservation.

## Resilient practices

Another major action plan that the government needs to pursue with more zeal is on disaster preparedness and climate adaptation. While it has established systems to alert farmers about impending disasters or extreme weather conditions, it needs to provide more support on what they should do. For instance, the government needs to make farmers adopt resilient practices such as crop rotation and intercropping. It can also make use of current artificial intelligence and robotics to increase production by assessing the periods when crops produce more, or determining the best time to plant so that the harvest will not be affected by bad weather.

There should also be massive investment in technology and innovation for farming and fisheries. Put money in agricultural research to develop high-yield and climate-resilient crop varieties, offer training programs on modern farming techniques and sustainable practices, encourage the youth to participate in agriculture through an information campaign to increase awareness on the benefits of farming, and showing them modern farming methods in other countries that have better yields and therefore more income for farmers.

## Bad reputation

These activities will need capital, which the government lacks. The solution is to entice private and even foreign investments. One way is through the Public-Private Partnership route that can encourage collaboration between government agencies and private sector players to boost investment in agriculture. The Makati Business Club, for instance, has emphasized the importance of using farming methods that can withstand climate disruption and help ensure a stable food supply.

By addressing these areas, the agricultural sector can improve its productivity, enhance the livelihoods of farmers, and contribute positively to overall economic growth to finally shed its bad reputation as the weakest link in the economy.

Stop blaming the weather each time the agriculture sector posts a dismal production. There are available solutions, the only problem is that the government is not focusing on them with enough vigor and funding.