

DevPulse

NEDA Development Advocacy Factsheet

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Vol. XII, No. 16, August 31, 2008

NUTRITION IN THE PHILIPPINES: A CONTINUING CHALLENGE

Nutrition is recognized as a basic human right, vital to the survival, growth and development of children according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Despite this pronouncement, however, malnutrition continues to claim millions of lives, with more than 5.5 million children under-five years of age dying annually.

In the Philippines, gains have been achieved insofar as quality and quantity of absolute food intake and the prevalence of underweight preschool children are concerned. But such gains have not come fast enough according to the latest National Nutrition Survey conducted by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI).

The Survey found the proportion of households with per capita dietary intake lower than 100 percent dietary energy requirement decreasing from 69.4 percent in 1993 to 56.9 percent in 2003, or an annual rate of reduction of 1.25 percent. On the other hand, the prevalence of underweight preschool children also declined from 30.6 percent in 2001 to 26.9 percent in 2003. This further declined to 24.6 percent in 2005.

However, data reveals that wide disparities exist across regions ranging from a low of 16.2 percent for the National Capital Region (NCR) and a high of 38 percent for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

The Malnutrition Factor

According to FNRI, malnutrition is caused by various factors that include among others, poverty; hunger, the most crucial manifestation of poverty; and food insecurity, a major determinant of a country's nutritional status.

In terms of families, poverty incidence increased to 26.9 percent in 2006 compared to 24.4 percent in 2003 according to the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB). However, the 2006 figure is lower than the 27.5 percent poverty incidence in 2000. In terms of population, out of 100 Filipinos, 33 were poor in 2006, compared to 30 in 2003.

Meanwhile, the extent of poverty can also be described in terms of hunger situation in the country. A Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey revealed that as of the second quarter of 2008, about 2.9 million families have experienced hunger. From this figure, about 760,000 families experienced severe hunger. The spike in global oil and food prices are among the reasons why many Filipinos are hungry says SWS.

Prevalence of Underweight 0-to 5-Year Old Children

Region	1989	1990	1992	1993	1996	1998	2001	2003	2005
Philippines	34.5	34	29.9	30.8	32	30.6	26.9	24.6	
NCR	28.6	27.8	29.8	23	26.5	20.3	17.8	16.2	
CAR	24.8	17.8	17.5	27.9	26.7	23.4	16.3	17.5	
I. Ilocos	35.2	33.1	32.5	26	36.2	31.5	28.9	28.5	
II. Cagayan Valley	30.2	34.8	23.5	34.5	32.3	31.2	34.1	17.9	
III. Central Luzon	28	23.3	19.6	25.3	26.7	25.9	21.7	19.7	
IV. Southern Tagalog	30.6	30.3	32.5	26.2		27.8			
IV-A CALABARZON								22.4	20.5
IV-B MIMAROPA								34.2	35.8
V. Bicol	41.3	39.2	31.5	37.6	36.5	37.8	32.8	26.4	
VI. Western Visayas	46	44.9	34.4	36.3	39.6	35.2	32.6	28.3	
VII. Central Visayas	40.7	42.2	25.5	32.2	33.8	28.3	29.4	27	
VIII. Eastern Visayas	38.1	37.4	34.4	40.1	37.8	32	29.9	32.1	
Western Mindanao	33.8	33.2	36.3	35.3					
IX. Zamboanga Peninsula					34.4	31.8	31.5	33.9	
X. Northern Mindanao	31	35	30.1	31	29.8	34.1	24.3	25.4	
Southern Mindanao	37.1	37.1	34.6	37.1					
Central Mindanao	33.2	35.7	32.8	36.8					
XI. Davao					32.9	32.3	22.6	23.1	
XII. SOCCSKSARGEN					32.4	30.2	30.3	27.8	
CARAGA				34.4	34.1	33.5	30.2	24.3	
ARMM	31.3	33.1	28	29.7	29.1	27.9	34	38	

Source: National Nutrition Survey

As a government's response to the anticipated food shortage due to spike in global food prices, it has assured Filipinos of stable food particularly rice supplies from both foreign and local sources. The Department of Education, on the other hand, is expanding its feeding program in schools.

Moreover, through the Medium-Term Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition (MTPPAN), the government hopes to improve the Filipino's quality of life through better nutrition, improved health and productivity. The government has also committed to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that include, among others, the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. This means that government's goal is to reduce by half or equivalent to 34.7 percent, the proportion of the population below the minimum level of dietary energy consumption; and by 17.25 percent, the prevalence of underweight 0-5 year old children by 2015.

Fighting Malnutrition

Through the MTPPAN, various health and nutrition programs continue to be implemented to address malnutrition in the country. These include among others, the *Garantisadong Pambata*, the Salt Iodization Nationwide Act, Food Fortification, Nutrition Education, National Supplemental Feeding, and Food-for-School. Latest data revealed that under the Supplemental Feeding program, about 255,526 children were served hot meals and milk while 2.6 million school children benefited from the Food for School program.

Other activities being undertaken to hasten the decline in levels of child malnutrition include: (a) infant and young child feeding (IYCF) which promotes breastfeeding in the community, hospitals as well as the workplace; (b) the revision of the implementing rules and regulations (IRR) of the Milk Code; and (c) Mother-Baby Friendly Hospital initiative, among others.

To fight hunger as well as address food security, the Accelerated Hunger Mitigation Program (AHMP) was launched to address issues related to food production and distribution, access to available food supply as well as nutrition-oriented food demand, and population growth management.

This program shall be aggressively pursued by intervening in both the supply side or the production of food to eat; and the demand side, or the means by which people obtain sufficient food. Top priority will be given to the ten worst food-poor provinces or provinces with the highest subsistence incidence. Second priority will be given to the 20 poorest provinces (excluding the ten food-poor areas) while third priority to the other 24 provinces (food insecure but with existing hunger mitigation initiatives of various government agencies).

On the supply side, measures include increasing food production and productivity as well as enhancing efficiency of logistics and food delivery. The expansion in production capacity shall be pursued by: (a) increasing productivity in livestock, crops as well as marine regeneration (mangrove and coastal fishery development); (b) food production through the *Gulayan ng Masa* or backyard gardening and other related initiatives to provide alternative food sources; and (c) improving irrigation.

Efficiency in logistics and food delivery shall be pursued by: (a) expanding Barangay Food Terminal and *Tindahan Natin* as sources of low cost basic commodities; (b) ensuring efficient use of ports or the roll-on-roll-off (RORO) as well as the maximum use of private ports and shipping; (c) improving farm to market roads (FMRs); (d) ensuring efficient local transport; (e) implementation of Food for School Program

including day care centers as channels of distribution; and (f) creating nongovernment organization (NGO) network to support feeding programs, among others.

On the demand side, government will help put more money in poor people's pockets, promote good nutrition as well as manage population. This will be done by pursuing micro-financing aggressively; creating more employment opportunities through government infrastructure projects as well as skills training for better employment opportunities; conducting nutrition education in schools; promoting breastfeeding, appropriate complementary feeding as well as increased consumption of vegetables; and managing population through responsible parenthood.

Strategies and Goals

Malnutrition is a continuing challenge in the Philippine. This requires an effective and continuing education on nutrition aside from supplying supplementary food aid for poor mothers, according to FNRI.

The MTPPAN strategies include: (a) prioritizing nutrition and related services for infants and young children as well as pregnant women, especially those living in depressed areas; (b) intensifying delivery of nutrition interventions that include micronutrient supplementation such as vitamin A and zinc, food fortification, breastfeeding promotion, food assistance as well as food production in homes, schools, and community; (c) improving service delivery to address nutrition deficiency; (d) stronger nutrition perspective in disaster management; (e) effective coordination among those directly involved in nutrition interventions, among others.

Simultaneously, Responsible Parenthood and Natural Family Planning Program (RP-NFP) shall vigorously be pursued, based on the following policies: (a) responsible parenthood; (b) birth spacing; (c) respect for life; and (d) informed choice. In this connection, Responsible Parenting Movement (RPM) was launched, to create couple's awareness regarding their basic responsibilities as parents and towards attaining a better future for their children.

The Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP), for its part seeks to assure access to quality and affordable health goods and services. It will thus seek to: (a) enforce compliance with national health legislation and standards such as the Generics, Salt Iodization and Food Fortification laws; and (b) legislation of health-related laws at the local level. For better health service, the program includes: (a) child health nutrition, in the context of integrated early childhood care and development; (b) maternal and women's health and nutrition; and (c) healthy lifestyle and management of health risks will be aggressively implemented.

To create awareness on proper nutrition, the Department of Health (DOH), has embarked on an information and advocacy program including the development, printing and dissemination of nutrition-related communication materials. With the help of the LGUs, it has also been promoting responsible parenthood to encourage family planning and avoid frequent pregnancy and child birth.

Sources: *Medium-Term Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition (MTPPAN)*, updated *Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP)*, data from the *Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI)*, *United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)*, *National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB)* and the *Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES)*.