



Our lowly farm workers

No Free Lunch by Cielito F. Habito – February 02, 2018

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The Filipino farm worker earns less than half what the average Filipino worker does. Worse, a farm worker produces only one-sixth the value of output produced by a worker in industry. With lower wages and even much lower productivity, farm workers make up two of every three of our working poor. It should be no surprise that the younger generation of millennials has turned away from agriculture, favoring jobs and livelihoods away from the farms. The average age of the Filipino farmer was last reported to be 57 years old; it must be even higher now.

A recent policy note from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies by

Dr. Roehl Briones sheds light on the situation of our neglected farm workers. Among the other trends he documents is how our agricultural workers have been declining in the last six years. The number of agricultural workers traditionally exceeded that in services, but was overtaken by the latter in 1997. There are economic and climate-related reasons for the farm workers' falling numbers. A severe El Niño spell in 1997-1998 led to short-term dips in their numbers. But the decline has become more consistent since 2011, with an average of 250,000 workers leaving the farm sector every year. This could not have been due to El Niño, as it was only in late 2015 that a severe El Niño hit us. Briones surmises that economic factors are behind this decline, such as rapid growth and tightening labor markets in the rest of the economy, especially in manufacturing.

The exodus from agriculture has in fact been accelerating. The quarterly Labor Force Survey data show that from an average annual decline of 163,000 farm workers in 2012, the fall worsened to 575,000 in 2015, and further deepened to 803,000 last year. It worsened even within the past year alone; the latest data show that agriculture lost 1.42 million workers from October 2016 to October 2017. The share of agricultural workers in total employment has thus been dropping. In 1995, they made up 43 percent of all workers, but by 2012 their share had dropped to 28.5 percent, down further to 27 percent in 2015, and still lower to 25 percent last year.

The services sector appears to have taken up the drop (think pedicab and tricycle drivers and vendors). But a significant rise in the share of industry since 2012 (from 15.2 percent in 2012 to 18.1 percent last year) signals that more farm jobs are now also being given up in favor of manufacturing, which is a good sign that denotes improving job quality.

Briones also notes that agricultural workers are the least educated among our workers. About one-third of them did not even complete primary school, whereas this proportion is only 11 percent for industry and 7 percent for services. About 38 percent of farm workers reached high school only, compared to 29 percent for industry and 19 percent for services. Only a quarter of agricultural workers reached college or tertiary level education, as against about half of workers in industry and services, with the most educated workers going to services. The good news is that educational attainment of workers in agriculture has improved over the years, with a 4-percent shift to the higher education brackets.

Agricultural workers are also the most underemployed among our workers, making up the majority of those indicating need for more work. The bulk of unpaid family workers (as against wage/salary workers and self-employed workers) are in agriculture, and the drop in this worker category by more than a million last year broadly mirrors the decline in farm workers. Still, Briones notes that farm-worker productivity turned around from decades of decline in the mid-'90s and has increased since then, although worker productivity in industry and services has grown even faster after 2010.

Along with those observations and more, Briones notes that there remain significant gaps that need to be filled in what we know about farm workers, if policymakers are to be better guided on how to uplift their plight. After all, this, apart from ensuring wide accessibility and affordability of food to the Filipino masses, must be the primary aim of agricultural policy.

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