

## Reaching the Poorest of the Poor at the Community Level: The Experience of the Philippines

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The Republic of the Philippines has entered a new and hopeful phase in the struggle to lift its poor out of poverty. The *Philippines Midterm Progress Report on the Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) shows that the Filipino people are on track and that national economic gains have trickled down to the grassroots. The number of Filipinos living in poverty fell by 15.3 percent between 1990 and 2003. The number of Filipinos living below the subsistence threshold declined by 10.8 percent over the same period. And the number of underweight children younger than 5 years old dropped by 9.9 percent between 1990 and 2005. Equally encouraging is the report's favorable assessment of the country's efforts to promote gender equality, combat deadly diseases, and ensure safe water and sanitation facilities for the entire citizenry.

These advances have not occurred by chance. For decades the country was unable to sustain growth long enough to reduce poverty to levels attained by other East Asian nations. There was widespread inequity and chronic instability in the economic cycle as the nation underwent alternate periods of boom and bust. The Philippines' current effort to fight hunger and reach the poorest of the poor is the result of years of refinement and reform. In the years leading up to the turn of the past century, there was already widespread understanding that faster, more efficient economic growth is needed to significantly reduce poverty among Filipinos. Today a difficult period of recovery and reform is behind the Philippines, and the country is finally on a high road to progress. Inflation and interest rates are down. Investments are pouring in. Tourism is on the rise. And in the second quarter of

2007, economic growth was measured at a historic 20-year high of 7.5 percent. The country's concerted efforts to ensure that local plans reflect national anti-poverty goals and to develop regular community-based monitoring of economic and social indicators may offer lessons for other countries fighting poverty and hunger.

### Linking National Goals to Local Action

In keeping with the equitable spirit of the progress made so far, the Philippines has embarked on a deliberate program to improve the personal security and opportunity of the great mass of Filipinos. The Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan was devised in 2001 with four main policy objectives:

1. *macroeconomic stability and equitable growth based on free enterprise*—to stress the importance of economic progress in the bid to reduce poverty levels,
2. *agricultural and fisheries modernization*—to ensure the needed focus on food security and the growth of the rural sector and to address the problems of regional poverty and underemployment,
3. *comprehensive human development and the protection of the vulnerable*—to fill the need for greater social protection and accurate and effective delivery of basic services to the poor, and
4. *good and effective governance*—to underscore the fundamental role of government (both national and local) in all poverty reduction efforts.

Within this framework of growth and stability, the Philippines proceeded to outline the five principles of its national anti-poverty strategy:

1. *accelerated asset reform*—to address the problem of economic inequity and widen the citizens' share of resources, whether natural or manufactured;
2. *improved access to human development services*—to increase the number of people receiving adequate education, health care, sanitation, electricity, potable water, and housing;
3. *the provision of better employment and livelihood opportunities;*
4. *security from violence and social protection for vulnerable sectors*—to eliminate all forms of discrimination; and

5. *the institutionalized participation of the poor in matters of governance*—to address the issue of political equity.

The Philippine development process begins at the national level, where policies are formulated, budget appropriations are decided, and the country's overall economic policy is determined. These national policies are then transmitted to the regional level through various regional offices. From there the bulk of the next—and most difficult—phase of the process is passed on to the implementing agents: the country's local government units.

At the local level, the Philippine government's anti-poverty strategy revolves around a policy of convergence and consultation. That policy translates national priorities into actual work at the provincial, municipal, and village levels. To ensure that the objectives of the national government are amply reflected in both regional and local plans, the strategy identifies a clear set of desired outcomes for programs at the local level, including

- a local development plan incorporating targets and the corresponding increase in budget allocation for MDG-responsive programs and projects,
- local policies that facilitate the achievement of the MDGs,
- a local monitoring system to track progress toward the attainment of the MDGs,
- improved delivery of basic services through the replication of good practices, and
- the inclusion of the accomplishment of MDG targets among the performance commitments of local government units.

### Monitoring Poverty to Help Refine and Reform Programs

The Philippine archipelago is made up of more than 7,000 islands, all characterized by mountainous terrain and separated by large bodies of water. Policy executives at all levels therefore confront the persistent problem of determining exactly where and who the poor are and what services they require.

For several years, varying estimates of the extent of poverty in the Philippines have been made. As valuable as some of these estimates may have been, they have not provided local governments with sufficient up-to-date factual data on which to base effective interventions. The Philippine government's current poverty-monitoring system relies heavily on a few large surveys of household income, expenditures, and

health. These surveys are by their nature too costly to be undertaken frequently. Moreover, they are conducted over different time periods, making it impossible to obtain a comprehensive profile of the poverty and health situation at a specific point in time. For these reasons the government has embarked on an endeavor to ensure the nationwide use of the Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS). CBMS is an organized process of data collection and processing at the local level. The system facilitates the integration of data for local planning, program implementation, and evaluation. It promotes evidence-based policymaking and encourages communities to participate in the data-gathering process.

The 14 core indicators used in CBMS questionnaires are premised on basic needs. These needs consist of health, nutrition, housing, water and sanitation, basic education, income, employment, and the local peace and order situation. Because CBMS gives local government planners a means to gather precise information on a wide variety of subjects, it can provide a strong basis for the formulation of truly effective programs at the local level. If the poor and unemployed wholeheartedly give the information sought in the questionnaires, local leaders will know, for instance, the work qualifications of the affected households and the conditions that prevail in each community; what industries the unemployed are suited to; where hunger, malnutrition, and disease are most rampant; and which gender, sector, and age groups are most affected by poverty, unemployment, and disease. This information will allow local leaders to determine what future measures and social services are most likely to improve conditions in depressed communities. With this information they can carry out precise, fact-based local planning and action to address the specific needs of each community or sector.

For policy executives at the national level, tracking the progress made in each community and sector—and determining what national programs require further refinement at the local level—poses considerable logistical challenges. By using modern information technology, CBMS can establish a highly reliable communications network through which local data can be instantly transmitted from local governments to a national repository. This network makes the system useful both for ensuring the precision of national government interventions and for monitoring the progress made by local governments toward each MDG.

Notwithstanding the need for further refinement, the strategy of national and local government partnership has already allowed the country to react to emergencies with remarkable speed and efficiency. In November 2006, an independent survey firm reported that some 800,000 Filipino families had endured severe hunger in the third quarter of that year. The Philippine government responded to the emergency with the Accelerated Hunger Mitigation Program, an effort that continues to involve the entire country's logistics apparatus and bureaucracy. On the national level, this program has five basic objectives:

1. increase food production,
2. build up the logistics for food delivery throughout the country,
3. put more money in the pockets of the poor and the hungry,
4. promote good nutrition, and
5. manage population growth rates.

Within a few days of the Philippine government's discharge of this emergency program, an entire policy structure was created to pursue six main goals at the community level:

1. the backyard propagation of vegetables and fish;
2. the establishment of public food stalls to sell low-cost but safe and nutritious food to the poor;
3. the improvement of ports, roads, and other transport facilities;
4. the implementation of free school feeding programs;
5. more aggressive microfinance and employment programs and free skills training services; and
6. the widespread promotion of responsible parenthood and family planning.

The government's central political leadership assigned responsibilities to local governments and to each agency in the Philippine government's bureaucracy, with clear targets and responsibility centers.

The initial phase of the program proved a resounding success. In June 2007 the same survey firm that had reported high numbers of hungry Filipino families in 2006 announced that the number of households suffering from severe hunger had decreased from 800,000 to 390,000 by the second quarter of 2007.

### Lessons from the Philippine Experience

In general, the Philippine experience suggests seven basic imperatives for developing nations:

1. sound macroeconomic policies to promote the creation of jobs and suitable employment opportunities for the poor;
2. a strong partnership between national governments and local government units to maintain the relevant and timely delivery of services, assistance, and additional resources to the poorest of the poor;
3. equitable asset distribution to prevent and eliminate social inequity, poverty, and hunger;
4. infrastructure development to expand and enhance each country's competitive advantages;
5. rural and agricultural development to ensure food security, economic competitiveness, regional growth, and national self-reliance;
6. good governance and carefully controlled public investments to guarantee both the integrity of government and the efficiency of public spending; and
7. political stability to encourage people's trust in the political leadership and its system of governance.

But perhaps the most important lesson learned so far is that poverty and hunger must be confronted not merely as problems experienced by households, communities, and nations but as a challenge to humanity as a whole. More than 1 billion people throughout the world survive on less than a dollar a day. Their food is inadequate, and their children fall to disease. Their economic life is stagnant, and they are unable to cope with the pace of modern progress. The plight of the world's poor and hungry is a handicap and a menace not only to them but also to more prosperous communities and nations. The global community must embark on stronger and more effective international programs to make the benefits of progress available for the improvement and growth of impoverished communities. This task is not only a logical necessity but a moral responsibility that puts to the test the very foundations of modern human progress and society.