Land Watch Asia

LAND USE

Philippine Agricultural Lands:
Are They Worth Protecting?

Digested by

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from the proceedings of the conference on "Are Private Agricultural Lands Worth Protecting?" June 4,2015, Pasig City, Philippines

ANGOC and the LWA campaign have been working to advance the land rights of the rural poor through protecting and promoting the gains of progressive legislations and initiatives on agrarian reform and access to land. As such, the campaign shall pursue the lobbying of the passage of national land use and facilitate sharing of tools and approaches in land use planning among CSOs.

In the Philippines, a national land use law is yet to be legislated. While a number of legislations addressing land use issues have already been passed, these policies, however are sectoral and fragmented in approach and do not address priorities for land use that cut across sectors and put premium on long-term sustainability, local productive capacity and over-all social equity. Clearly, the absence of a land use framework result in increasing cases of conflicting claims on land use, which threatens the livelihood and security of the poor.

Thus, ANGOC and CLUP Now! have been engaging in constructive dialogues with the Philippine Congress as well as government agencies regarding the importance of enacting a national land use act as it is seen as a critical piece of legislation that will provide a rational, holistic, and just allocation, management, utilization, and development of the country's land resources. The Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE), Deutsche Gesellschaft Für (GIZ), and Misereor have been supporting this initiative.

On a similar vein, members of the International Land Coalition (ILC) in the country have been implementing a national engagement strategy (NES) with the objective of creating conditions for inclusive and people-centered land-related policy change. Part of NES is addressing inter-sectoral concerns on land and future legal frameworks affecting land rights, which includes the passage of the pending National Land Use Act (NLUA).

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ANGOC

CONTEXT

As the Philippine population surpassed 100 million in 2013, pressures on how the country should use its land resources increased. Our demands on land range from food self-sufficiency, safe and affordable housing, real estate development, industrial use, conservation of forests and watersheds, to climate change adaptation.

Of the country's 30 million hectares (ha) total land area, around 9 million ha are used for agriculture.[1] In 2011, the Benigno S. Aquino administration launched its Food Staples Sufficiency Program (FSSP) towards ensuring food security by 2016. Food staples include rice, white corn, root crops, and plantain. Around 95% of global rice supply is commonly consumed where it is produced and only 5 to 7% is exported. It is only natural for the Philippines to secure its agricultural land to guarantee a constant supply of rice for a growing population.

But given the growing demands of market forces for land, the debate rages on whether it is necessary to protect agricultural lands to ensure the country's food self-sufficiency or allocate lands based on optimal economic use.

For over 20 years, civil society organizations have been campaigning for the passage of a National Land Use Act (NLUA) to achieve a more rational, equitable and sustainable framework for planning the use and management of our land and natural resources.

The NLUA aims to define a planning framework from the national to the local level that delineates lands for Protection, Production, Settlements and Infrastructure. The current version of the proposed bill includes prime agricultural lands as among the areas for protection, together with forests, key biodiversity areas, and cultural heritage sites among others.

In June 2014, House Bill 4382 or "An Act Instituting a National Land Use and Management Policy" was approved on third and final reading with the approval of 194 Representatives. But in the Senate, the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources has yet to release the committee report of the proposed NLUA.

In the last Senate public hearing for the NLUA bill, the real estate development sector challenged the provision on the protection of prime agricultural lands. They pushed for a more flexible definition of prime agricultural lands, arguing that prohibiting conversion of agricultural lands would not be forward looking and may hinder the country's progress.

Hence, a policy discussion entitled "Philippine Agricultural Lands: Are They Worth Protecting?" was organized by NLUA campaigners last 4 June 2015 with notable experts from government and the academe to give their views on whether Philippine agricultural lands are worth protecting. This discussion is a joint initiative of the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) and the Campaign for Land Use Policy network (CLUP Now!), a network of 23 NGOs and people's organizations pushing for the NLUA's passage, with assistance from the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) and the Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE).

Food Self-sufficiency or Food Security?

"What do we really want to use our lands for? The answer should be obvious for Filipinos. Somebody who can last for a week without eating rice is not Filipino," said renowned social scientist Dr. Gelia Castillo.

At the conference, Dr. Castillo presented data from her forthcoming book, "Rice Security in the Provincial Level." She cited from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) that food self-sufficiency in the Philippines was achieved only once in 1980. All the other years from 1961 to 2013 were below the 100% self-sufficiency line.

The Philippines has become the world's biggest importer of rice since 2009.[2] The Philippines imported 2.4 M tons in 2008, when the price of the commodity reached an all-time high of $1,080 a ton. In 2009, the country brought in 1.7 M tons of rice. Similar imports were made in April 2015 as headlined in the Philippine Daily Inquirer.[3]

Table 1. Trends in National Paddy Production, Harvested Area, and Yield in the Philippines 2000-2013

Year	Production (mt)	Harvested Area (mt)	Yield (mt/ha)
2000	12,389,412	4,038,085	3.07
2001	12,954,870	4,065,441	3.19
2002	13,270,653	4,046,318	3.28
2003	13,499,884	4,006,421	3.37
2004	14,496,784	4,126,645	3.51
2005	14,603,005	4,070,421	3.59
2006	15,326,706	4,159,930	3.68
2007	16,240,194	4,272,889	3.80
2008	16,815,548	4,459,977	3.77
2009	16,266,417	4,532,310	3.59
2010	15,772,319	4,354,161	3.62
2011	16,684,062	4,536,642	3.68
2012	18,032,422	4,689,960	3.84
2013	18,439,406	4,746,082	3.89

Source: Bureau of Agricultural Statistics–Philippines Statistics Authority

Meanwhile, total rice production grew from 12.4 metric tons to 18.4 metric tons within two years (2009 and 2010) reporting lower production than previous years. Harvested area grew from 4.04 M ha in 2000 to 4.7M ha in 2013 with four years lower hectarage than previous years. Dr. Castillo notes that there has been no upward climb in both production and hectarage.

Yield per hectare has been a steady growth from 3.07 mt/ha in 2000 to 3.89 mt/ha. in 2013 with dips in years 2008 and 2009. However, population has steadily grown and has now reached 100 million. Poverty is widespread in 56 provinces.

The mean contribution of provinces to the total harvested area is 4,293,229 ha. Fifty percent came from 13 provinces and those with small contributions from 54 provinces. There is rice self-sufficiency in 39 provinces which make up 37% of the population and 46% of total provinces. Of the 39 provinces which are rice self-sufficient, 25 provinces have poverty incidence higher than the national poverty incidence and 14 provinces which are rice self-sufficient and with poverty incidence lower than national poverty incidence.

A self-sufficiency index was computed for each province taking population and production into account. Rice self-sufficiency index nationally is at 0.96%, 0.4% short of 100% self-sufficiency. Per capita rice availability kg/person is 122; per capita rice consumption is 114 kg/person and estimated per capita use kg/person is 127. The self-sufficiency index is meant to be an indicative measure rather than a definitive measure of self-sufficiency.

Every year, the current political administration promised rice self-sufficiency but never achieved it.

There is rice insufficiency in 43 provinces and NCR which comprises 63% of our total population. Of these areas, 30 have poverty incidence levels higher than the national average. They make up 26.7% of the total population, do not produce enough rice and have less capability to purchase it because of poverty.

According to Agriculture Undersecretary Segfredo Serrano for Policy and Planning, events relating to climate change make it urgent to protect our agricultural lands.

USec. Serrano thinks the dichotomy of the debate is whether the goal is food self-sufficiency or food security.

If the Philippines has enough money to purchase the necessary staples from other countries for food security, the pressing issue may not be about the land, but the ability to purchase outputs. Therefore, there is a need to improve the income-generating capacity of the people to secure or purchase food requirements.

However, while this may be true, the countries where the Philippines imports rice from are also susceptible to extreme climate events. Also, we have no control of their ability to sell surplus food to the market, as well as our ability to pay for those food resources.

USec. Serrano believes, therefore, that it would be easier for the country to achieve a more comfortable level of sufficiency coming from our own production areas.

The issue of food relates to the way our population is increasing over time. Aside from adverse extreme conditions, the demand for food is continually increasing as population increases. There is also the matter of finite land resources. Population increases, extreme conditions continue to happen, but land size is still the same so the demand for and supply of food becomes more critical. The growing population and demand for more land may increase conflicts in terms of access to resources and availability of food.

Consequently, there is a need to enhance productivity. The question is how much more can we improve the productivity of our lands given the growing demands of the population?

The problem of converting agricultural lands that are suitable for staples is that the conversion cannot be reversed. Some of our forest lands have been converted to agricultural lands and grasslands, and it is very difficult to convert them back to forest lands. The increase in demand for food per capita will also further prohibit the conversion of lands.

If the main objective is to increase availability of food for the people, will technology improve land productivity?

While we are pursuing technology, our production system is mostly dependent on land resources. So all land use must be efficient. Technology provides more flexibility to improve the utilization of land in terms of settlements. In the case of agriculture, the availability of land is the most crucial element.

For the Department of Agriculture (DA), land is very critical for its long term and intergenerational food security goal. Moreover, because climate change has made international food prices unstable, protecting our prime agricultural lands becomes a key measure to cope with climate change.

Protection of Prime Agricultural Lands in the NLUA Bill

If the Philippines truly prioritizes food self-sufficiency, how many hectares of agricultural land must be protected to achieve this target? What kind of agricultural lands should be considered as prime? Are local government units consciously incorporating food self-sufficiency in drafting their respective comprehensive land use plans adhering to the FSSP?

The National Land Use Act bill provides a clearer definition of prime agricultural lands to be protected in the interest of ensuring the domestic supply of food staples for the next 30 years or the next generation of Filipinos. Prime agricultural lands are among the areas under Protection Land Use in the proposed act.

The proposed NLUA seeks to institutionalize land use and physical planning to determine and evaluate appropriate land use and allocation patterns. It will craft a National Physical Framework Plan (NPFP) with Physical Land Use planning as the basis for development planning following the "ridge-to-reef" physical planning framework. The plan will be valid for 30 years with regular review and updating every 10 years. A 30-year planning period is appropriate due to the doubling rate of the country's population which would need these resources for survival.

It employs four Land Use Categories in indicating broad spatial directions and policy guidelines for land use, namely, (1) Protection Land Use, (2) Production Land Use, (3) Settlements Development, and (4) Infrastructure Development.

"Protection Land Use" refers to areas of the public and private domain that shall be protected, conserved, and rehabilitated to maintain their intended use for the perpetual promotion of ecological and life support systems. These include permanent forestlands, critical watersheds, key biodiversity areas, environmentally"critical and ecologically"fragile areas and prime agricultural lands. These are to be protected from any other land use, conversion, disposition, intrusion, utilization and development, and will be devoted to their determined use and limits.

In the current Senate version, planning for protection land use intends to achieve food self-sufficiency in rice and corn, water and energy security, environmental stability and ecological integrity; ensure a balance between resource

use and the preservation of some areas with environmental, aesthetic, educational, cultural, heritage and historical significance; and protect people and human-made structures from the ill-effects of natural hazards.

The main issue with the bill now is the inclusion of prime agricultural lands under protection land use and their exclusion from conversion. But some stakeholders say that prime agricultural lands do not need protection.

Definition of Prime Agricultural Lands and Their Inclusion in Protection Land Use Category

There is no generally accepted definition for prime agricultural lands. The use of the qualifier "prime" is itself a source of much debate. This Experts Roundtable Discussion was organized to gather inputs from experts so that the definition can be defended in Senate Hearings on the NLUA Bill. Several approaches have been proposed on how to define prime agricultural lands.

Ms. KimberlyAlvarez of the Campaign for Land Use Policy Now Network (CLUP Now!) summarized the different definitions of prime agricultural lands under various proposed laws:

1. **House Bill No. 4382** *(Approved version by House of Representatives, adopted from the Network of Protected Area definition.)*

Prime Agricultural Lands refer to all contiguous irrigated areas and irrigable lands already covered by irrigation projects; all alluvial plain lands highly suitable for agriculture whether irrigated or not that have been identified to satisfy the country's needs for food self-sufficiency and security; agro-industrial croplands or lands presently planted and suitable to industrial and high value crops; highlands, or areas located at elevation of 500 meters or above and have the potential for growing semi-temperature and high value crops outside of declared permanent forestlands and protection forests and not located in ecologically-fragile and environmentally-critical areas.

2. **Senate Bill No. 7** *(Filed by Sen. Loren Legarda, also adopted from NPA definition except for the inclusion of "all rain-fed area planted to rice and other crops." This is the current definition in the pending Draft Committee Report.)*

"Prime agricultural land" shall refer to all irrigated areas, all irrigable lands; all rain-fed areas planted to rice and other cops; all alluvial plain lands highly suitable for agriculture whether irrigated or not; agro-industrial croplands or lands presently planted to industrial crops that support the viability of existing agricultural infrastructure and agro-based enterprises, highlands, or areas located at elevation of 500 meters or above and have the potential for growing semi-temperature and high value crops; all agricultural lands that are ecologically fragile, the conversion of which will result in serious environmental degradation; and mangrove areas and fish sanctuaries.

3. **Senate Bill No. 63** *(Filed by Sen. Gregorio Honasan III which includes the BSWM classification of Class A, B and C lands.)*

Prime agricultural lands shall refer to all irrigated areas; all irrigable lands; all rain-fed areas planted to rice and corn; all lands classified by the Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM) under its land capability classification system as Class A, Class B, and Class C lands; all agricultural lands that are ecologically fragile, the conversion of which will result in serious environmental degradation, and mangrove areas and fish sanctuaries.

According to USec. Serrano, there are three contexts in which prime agricultural land should be defined: (1) agricultural science, (2) agricultural economics, and (3) technology and development.

Under agricultural science, not all lands are suitable for agriculture. In defining prime agricultural lands, the alluvial plains are the first consideration because their fertility and irrigability will provide better production. They also demand less technology output. The other consideration is irrigable lands based on their biophysical characteristics. These are the areas suitable for planting which are predetermined by agricultural agencies.

In the context of agricultural economics, spatial or locational characteristics are the primary consideration. While a particular piece of land may be suitable for agriculture, a number of factors can make it difficult to transport products to the market. Meanwhile, technology has improved rice varieties, thus increasing land productivity.

An additional consideration is carrying capacity. Lands should be utilized for their "best use" or "best economic value." Thus, there must be a determination of how much land is needed to feed the population for a long period of time, and the level of productivity that must be attained to produce the amount of food the population demands.

The surrounding areas that provide viability to agricultural lands must also be considered. For example, a watershed may not be an agricultural land, but the viability of the water coming from the watershed contributes to the productivity of agricultural land and should also be protected.

Dr. Bruce Tolentino of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) suggests to first identify where the crops are located. This, he says, will lead to a comprehensive and participatory land use plan. Through an orderly participatory process, the valuation process and methodology for defining prime agricultural land may be evaluated.

Environmental planner Dr. Elmer Mercado proposes that the definition should be based on how or why we use the land, that is, the value placed on the use should be considered. Thus, the definition must consider which priorities are to be served, for example, rice production or food sufficiency.

Dr. Gelia Castillo stressed that the definition must consider what will benefit the country, while Mr. Don Marquez of ANGOC suggested that before coming up with a definition, there must be data of how much available land should be protected.

Mr. Elmer Borre of BSWM remarked that the classification system used in Sen. Honasan's definition is based on the US Department of Agriculture classification used in the 1970s and which has since gone out of use. The BSWM has been using the classification system in the Land Evaluation Manual which classifies land as S1 (highly suitable), S2 (moderately suitable) or S3 (marginally suitable) classification for Strategic Agricultural and Fisheries Development Zones (SAFDZs).

It was also raised that under the Local Government Code, local government units (LGUs) have the power to reclassify lands. Thus, a concern arose as to the prohibition to convert prime agricultural lands. The deliberation on this point led to the question of whether the definition should prioritize food security or food self-sufficiency.

Dr. Tolentino remarked that protecting and assisting farmers would help them achieve a better life and alleviate poverty.

In this regard, Agrarian Reform Undersecretary Rosalina Bistoyong mentioned that incentives to farmers should be in place to achieve the goal of increasing the area where rice can be planted. Farmers have reportedly remarked that subsidies are very important but they are not in place. She added that fertilizer subsidies are not enough, and the same has in fact encouraged farmers to shift to other crops.

Dr. Mercado, meanwhile, noted that if statistics are correct that the country is 98% self-sufficient, then the focus should be on improving the production of the smaller to smallest provinces. On the other hand, it was noted that protection should extend not only to lands dedicated to production but also lands where infrastructures and amenities are to be built. It was suggested coordinating with the International Rice Research Institute so that the latter can help delineate areas that should be protected.

The role of LGUs was also considered in reclassifying lands within SAFDZs. Mr. Borre observed that LGUs must have strong political will in certifying lands for agriculture.

Based on the discussions, a range of definitions of prime agricultural land may be summarized as follows:

- **Proposal 1** *(Minimum definition)*

"Prime Agricultural lands shall refer to lands that can be used for various or specific agricultural activities and can provide optimum and sustainable yield with minimum inputs and development costs as determined by the Department of Agriculture."

- **Proposal 2**

"Prime Agricultural Lands are those lands highly suitable to agriculture as determined by the National Land Use Committee (NLUC) with inputs from other agencies."

- **Proposal 3** *(Maximum definition)*

'Prime agricultural land' must thus be defined as those areas, generally alluvial lands, suitable for agricultural production (field and horticultural crops, livestock and aquaculture); inclusive of those with existing infrastructure and amenities that enhance productivity and viability and those that still be brought to productive agricultural activity through the provision of such infrastructure and technological development; areas with locational characteristics that make them productive and economically viable such as those proximal to markets and additionally provide non-market benefits and amenities to society; as well as those within and around these areas, inclusive of fragile ecosystems, degradation of which through other types of development and use will adversely impact on the productivity and viability of 'prime agricultural lands.'

Upon further discussion, the participants agreed to submit to Congress the following definition:
Prime agricultural land—must thus be defined as those areas, generally alluvial lands, suitable for agricultural production (field and horticultural crops, livestock and aquaculture); inclusive of those with existing infrastructure and amenities that enhance productivity and viability and those that still be brought to productive agricultural activity through the provision of such infrastructure and technological development; areas with locational characteristics that make them productive and economically viable such as those proximal to markets and additionally provide non-market benefits and amenities to society; as well as those within and around these areas, inclusive of fragile and vulnerable to climate change ecosystems, degradation of which through other types of development and use will adversely impact on the productivity and viability of 'prime agricultural lands.'

It was agreed that protection should encompass different crops, not just rice. Additionally, the conversion of prime agricultural lands should not be allowed.

Ultimately, as Dr. Tolentino noted, the farmers know which lands should be protected for food self-sufficiency. Thus farmers should be consulted and assisted in identifying prime agricultural lands.

Leave Space for Rice

In the final analysis, Dr. Castillo asserts that agriculture and fisheries are the only means by which we produce food. Technology only aids in improving food production but it cannot produce food. Land is needed to produce food, particularly rice.

Dr. Castillo noted that production, productivity, harvested area and consumption may dip but population always goes up. Therefore, there is a need to allocate land and to be prepared for population growth.

"There is a need to leave SPACE for RICE; to allocate as 'sacred' these hectarage at the provincial level where actual monitoring can be done more easily," insists Dr. Castillo. She said this is necessary if we want to keep rice land untouched for anything else but rice and other additional crops but always with rice as the major occupier of the land. ■

Endnotes

[1] PhilRICE, 2010

[2] Olchondra, R. T. (2010, June 10). RP rice imports to hit 2.5M tons. *Philippine Daily Inquirer.*

[3] Domingo, R. W. (2015, April 6). PH seen as world's 3rd largest rice. *Philippine Daily Inquirer.* Retrieved from http://business.inquirer.net/189735/ph-seen-as-worlds-3rd-largest-rice-buyer.

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Founded in 1979, ANGOC is a regional association of 15 national and regional networks of non-government organizations (NGOs) in Asia actively engaged in food security, agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture, participatory governance and rural development. ANGOC member networks and partners work in 14 Asian countries with an effective reach of some 3,000 NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). ANGOC actively engages in joint field programs and policy debates with national governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and international financial institutions (IFIs).

ANGOC is a founding member of the International Land Coalition (ILC), regional convenor of the Land Watch Asia (LWA) campaign and the Asian Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition (AAAHM–Asia). ANGOC is also a member of the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN) and the Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Territories and Area (ICCA).

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Land Watch Asia (LWA) is a regional campaign to ensure that access to land, agrarian reform and sustainable development for the rural poor are addressed in national and regional development agenda. The campaign involves civil society organizations in seven (7) countries—Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines. LWA aims to take stock of significant changes in the policy and legal environments; undertake strategic national and regional advocacy activities on access to land; jointly develop approaches and tools; and encourage the sharing of experiences on coalition-building and actions on land rights issues.

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale (GIZ) GmbH is an international development organization of the Federal Government of Germany working in more than 130 countries worldwide. The organization is guided by the concept of sustainable development with areas of expertise in economic development and employment promotion; governance and democracy; security, reconstruction, peacebuilding and civil conflict transformation; food security, health and basic education; and environmental protection, resource conservation and climate change mitigation. Know more about GIZ at www.giz.de.

FPE is the first and largest grant-making organization for civil society environmental initiatives in the Philippines. Its support goes primarily to protecting local conservation sites and strengthening community and grassroots-led environmental efforts in more than 65 critical sites through more than 1,400 projects. The establishment of FPE on January 15, 1992 was meant to abate the destruction of the country's natural resources. As many as 334 NGOs and grassroots organizations, along with 24 academic institutions , helped set its course through a process of nationwide consultations. Subsequently, Philippine and United States government agencies and NGOs raised the foundation's initial $21.8-million endowment through an innovative "debt-for-nature" swap. Today, FPE remains committed to fulfilling its roles a s a catalyst for cooperation, grantmaker, and fund facilitator for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. Know more about FPE at www.fpe.ph.

ILC is a global alliance of intergovernmental, governmental and civil society organizations working together with the rural poor to increase their secure access to natural resources, especially land. Know more about ILC at www.landcoalition.org.

As the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Germany, MISEREOR works in partnership with all people of goodwill to promote development, fight worldwide poverty, liberate people from injustice, exercise solidarity within the poor and persecuted, and help create "One World". MISEREOR supports projects and promotes local initiatives in Africa, Asia and Latin America, irrespective of nationality, religions or gender. Know more about MISEREOR at www.misereor.org.