

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

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### **Poverty and distributive justice**

The latest Social Weather Stations survey figures on hunger are truly alarming. More than 20 percent of Filipino families (or more than 4 million families) have reported experiencing involuntary hunger in the first quarter of 2011. Though the number is slightly lower compared to a year ago, the March figures nonetheless show a steady quarterly rise from the 15.9 percent of September last year. The problem, says SWS president and Inquirer columnist Mahar Mangahas, appears to be concentrated in Luzon, where hunger has risen to a new record level of 25 percent. This is quite puzzling -- and it is worth figuring it out -- for there has been no major natural disaster in Luzon during the first quarter that might explain it.

The standard explanation would ascribe the rise in hunger to an increase in food prices. If that is what the SWS figures are telling us, then we should expect an even steeper increase in hunger by the next quarter, when the inflation induced by recent global events will be more severely felt. Still, there could be other factors behind the hunger figures.

March is always, for many poor families, an especially difficult month to hurdle. Whatever was left over from cash gifts received during the holiday season would be totally gone by then. In March, preparations for graduation are in full swing. This is the time of the year when families are besieged by all kinds of school collections which they cannot ignore or refuse to pay. The costs associated with graduation -- whether from pre-school, grade school or high school -- are often incredibly out of proportion to the earning capacities of ordinary families.

But I have a strong suspicion that what is causing a spike in hunger rates in Luzon, ironically, is the ongoing enlistment for the Conditional Cash

Transfers Program of the P-Noy administration. From what I gather, the interviews to assess eligibility for benefits under the expanded program began late last year and continue to the present. The indigent Filipino mother who is angling for CCT benefits would not be able to tell the difference between an interview conducted by the Department of Social Welfare and Development and an SWS survey. She would not know that there is no connection between the two. Hence, she would be inclined to picture her family's circumstances in the direst possible way to any interviewer.

News about the CCT and the coming of the DSWD social workers into a community spreads like wild fire. It triggers a sense of anticipation that is instantly woven into the political and social dynamics of a local community. A situation like this is hardly the right setting in which to get an objective assessment of poverty and self-reported hunger. This is not to cast doubt on the validity of the SWS findings, but merely to offer an alternative account that might explain the unusually high incidence of reported hunger in Luzon.

In any event, it is difficult to deny the worsening poverty situation in the whole country. What makes the situation unacceptable is that more and more people are going hungry even while the economy is growing and incomes at the top are rising. Wealth is certainly not trickling down, and there is no sustained and systematic effort to help the many break away from the vicious cycle of poverty.

Like all doles, conditional cash assistance may help tide a family over for a couple of days or a week, and it may even reduce hunger in the short term. But without a steady livelihood or source of income, an indigent family has no chance of breaking the barriers to a better life. The CCT program is definitely better than the desultory feel-good medical missions in which we all participate at one time or other. But it is still a dole. It is not a long term solution to poverty.

The long-term solution has to focus on communities, not individuals. It

must focus on enhancing the productive capacities of people, on helping them help themselves rather than merely attending to their short-term needs. It has to be articulated in clear unequivocal policies rather than merely expressed in high-visibility charitable projects.

In general, all of us probably subscribe to such views. Yet how many times have we found ourselves repeatedly contributing to immediate and narrowly targeted initiatives? Instead of re-distributing wealth we distribute necessities to some people. The latter is vastly personal and immediate in its impact, whereas economic justice is anonymously structural, and it usually takes a long time for its outcomes to be felt. The result is a public complacency about the social order that is at the root of all the inequalities and exclusions in our midst.

Scandalized by the pervasive poverty they see outside their gated neighborhoods, many rich people try to justify the sharp differentials in wealth and opportunity they see in our society. The shallow among them never tire of blaming the poor for their laziness and irresponsibility. In a sense, this is their way of morally rationalizing their good fortune. They do not see the fortuitous elements behind their own personal successes.

The more conscientious of them, who use their minds as well as their hearts, see the many accidents that have shaped their lives for which they cannot claim any credit – their birth in a fortunate family, the happy circumstances of an early life, the accident of being born with qualities that are highly prized by society at a given time. And so they regard their personal success in the world as constituting a duty to help improve the lives of the less fortunate. This is what distributive justice is about.

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