Policy Insight

How Marcos Undermined Philippine Agriculture and Marginalized Further the Peasantry

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Introduction

In the beginning of the 80s, the Philippine economy under martial law underwent a crisis of unprecedented proportions (De Dios 1988; Hutchcroft 1998; Wurfel 1988; Ibon Databank 1984). A negative growth rate of 1.8% was reported in late 1984, and international reserves by June 1984 dropped to USD 470 million compared to USD 1.69 billion the previous year. The consumer price index averaged 250.3 by April 1984, with 1978 as the base year. Successive devaluations of the peso in 1983 and 1984 saw the local currency decline by 63% vis-à-vis the dollar, resulting in a 59% inflation rate by July 1984 and the doubling of prices of essential commodities.

From 1980 to 1983, the foreign trade deficit was 61% higher than the preceding five-year period. A foreign debt crisis resulted in four moratoriums on debt repayments, forced negotiations for a USD 646 million standby credit with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and negotiations with 483 international banks for the rescheduling of the due principal payments of the USD 26 billion foreign debt (Business Day 1984i).

Local and foreign media observers point to the 1983 assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr. as the event that precipitated the crisis, and withdrawal of confidence by the international financial community from the Marcos government. Signs of the economic debacle, however, have been evident for many years with mounting trade deficits, ballooning balance of payments shortfalls, declining exports, falling real wage rates, deterioration of the peso, corporate failures, and increasing taxes (Alburo et al. 1986; De Dios 1988; Ibon Databank 1984; Business Day 1984h).

The already fragile economy was further undermined by the rise of a group of businessmen closely tied to Marcos, the "crony capitalists." The takeover of this group on major economic sectors, the preferential treatment accorded to them in terms of government loans and bail-outs, and the eventual collapse of some of the crony empires built with the aid of public funds, particularly undermined the fragile economy (Encarnacion Tadem 2014).

BAIDS: A Failure Repeated

The economic development strategy pursued since the 70s, followed the export-oriented model, premised on tight linkages with the international capitalist system and the subsuming of domestic needs in favor of external gains (Bello 2004). It also consisted of following the dictates of the global system's primary guardians—the World Bank and the IMF (De Dios 1988).

The failure of the export-oriented industrialization strategy, as borne out by the crisis, resulted in a new policy thrust outlined in June 1983, specifically in a position paper by the Ministry of Agriculture addressed to the World Bank (Republic of the Philippines 1983). Titled "The Agenda for Action in Agriculture: 1983 to 1987," the paper named the new thrust the Balanced Agro-Industrial Development Strategy (BAIDS). Basic features include:

1. Import substitution and export expansion;
2. Diversification of agricultural products;
3. Increased private sector participation;
4. Diminished government control; and
5. Increased foreign investments.

The Role of the World Bank

The World Bank played a major role in this policy shift. In 1983, the Bank proposed a series of agricultural reforms to the Philippine government consisting of: a) the elimination of credit subsidies to small rice and corn farmers; b) dismantling of government monopolies in sugar, coconut, and grains exportation; c) merging and streamlining of government agencies in agriculture; d) removal of price controls on commodities such as rice and corn; and e) preparation of a five-year plan for agricultural development (Business Day 1984i).

The Philippine government complied with most of the World Bank prescriptions. Credit subsidies to small farmers in the form of lower-than-prevailing market rates were effectively dismantled with the interest rates to be determined by the market. By April 1984, the interest rates for the Masagana 99 and Maisagana 77 small farmer loans ranged from 16% to 38% from the old rate of 12% (Tadem 1986b). Private entrepreneurs were allowed to export sugar, rice, and yellow corn; government agencies involved in agriculture and food production were merged; the price ceilings on rice and corn were raised three times; tariffs on imports of crop inputs were reduced; and a five-year plan for agriculture was drawn up in June 1983 (De Dios 1988; David 2003).

Through its affiliate, the International Development Association (IDA), the World Bank invested in a wide range of activities in Philippine agriculture including food processing, palm oil production and processing, and copra and coconut oil production. From 1972 to 1982, total World Bank/IDA loans to Philippine agriculture and the rural areas amounted to USD 1.5 billion or 44% of all World Bank/IDA loans to the Philippines (De Dios 1988; see appendix).

On September 26, 1984, a USD 150 million agricultural loan agreement was signed by the Philippine government and the World Bank (Business Day 1984b). The loan was viewed as World Bank support for the Philippine government's action agenda for agriculture and the BAIDS strategy. It was also seen as a "hopeful event" that would trigger a revival of confidence in the Philippine government's ability to weather the current crisis.

A close look at the USD 150 million loan, however, showed that 99% of the components was earmarked for the importation of various agricultural inputs, whereas the remaining one percent would go to paying for foreign technical experts (see table 1).

Table 1. World Bank agricultural loan to the Philippines, 1984

Item	Amount (USD)
1. Fertilizers	Fertilizers
2. Pesticides	15 million
3. Feedgrains	50 million
4. Veterinary products	14 million
5. Animal breeding stock	5 million
6. Agricultural machinery and spare parts	20 million
7. Technical assistance	1 million

The loan's priorities were in line with the strategy associated with the already discredited Green Revolution (GR) program. Since its introduction in the late 60s, GR and its components have been responsible for the entrapment of the small farmer in a continuous cycle of indebtedness and increasing marginalization (Feder 1983; Tadem 1986b). The import-dependent and capital-intensive nature of the GR's farm technology had only increased costs of production, and resulted in lower shares of net incomes for farmers despite increased production.

Table 2 shows that the paid-out costs of rice production in Central Luzon rose by 89% between 1966 (pre-GR) and 1979 (GR year), whereas harvests only increased by 55%. Returns to the farmers also lagged behind with only a 20% hike. The highest increase in costs were for the imported capital and technological inputs, which grew by 262%, comparing the same two years.

Table 2. Costs and returns for rice farming, Central Luzon.

	1966	**% Share**	**1979**	**% Share**	**Change**	**% Change**
Harvest	2185	100.0	3382	100.0	1197	54.75
Paid-out cost	1094	50.07	2071	61.24	977	89.31
Land rent	595	27.23	449	13.28	(146)	(25.24)
Hired labor	263	12.04	765	22.62	502	190.87
Hired capital	95	4.35	238	7.04	143	150.53
Material inputs	141	6.45	619	18.30	478	339.01
Left with farmers	1091	49.43	1311	38.76	220	20.16
(PHP per hectare)	437.7	---	1419	------	995	205.95

Source: IRRI annual report as reproduced in Ibon Facts and Figures (1985, 4)

The ultimate beneficiaries of the World Bank loan are the transnational agribusiness corporations, which manufacture and export these agricultural inputs, their local affiliate firms, and dealers of these inputs (Tiglao 1988; Feder 1983). Apart from serving to perpetuate the structures of control in the rural areas and do little to alleviate the plight of small farmers, the USD 150 million will simply flow right back to the economics of the advanced capitalist states. This was one "rescue operation" that worked in reverse.

A Reign for Big Business and Crony Capitalism

As export crops were the priority, the new agricultural thrust was geared more toward aiding private businessmen and landowners rather than small farmers and owner-cultivators. The latter has already accumulated large unpayable debts under credit programs such as Masagana 99 and lost its eligibility for any further crop loans (Tadem 1986). Any participation of the small producers in the BAIDS program would, therefore, be only under the auspices of the big agribusiness corporations.

The urgent attention being paid to BAIDS, the need to produce results in the shortest possible time, the high capital requirements, and the critical want for foreign exchange export earnings meant that the new policy thrust could only be spearheaded by big corporations.

A "government productivity fund" amounting to PHP 500 million for developing short-gestation crops was channeled to the corporate takers of the government invitation for investors in agricultural production (Business Day 1984e; Business Day 1984c). Total loans to agribusiness firms by 1984 totaled to PHP 60.32 million on 10,700 hectares of agricultural lands. American and Japanese firms entered into partnerships with Filipino companies to set up seed farms in Mindanao. Foreign export fruit plantations expanded in Mindanao, in the process forcing destitute farmers to enter into "operating contracts" (Business Day 1984f). Private banks also jumped in by increasing their agricultural loan portfolio for agribusiness expansion. Deleterious land conversions from food crops to export crops became the order of the day, dispossessing small farmers and ejecting them from their holdings.

Marcos cronies monopolized or assumed vital agricultural sectors led by Roberto Benedicto for sugar, Eduardo Cojuangco for coconuts, and Antonio Floirendo for export bananas (Encarnacion Tadem 2014). These industries suffered severe downturns and had to be bailed out in billions of public funds by the Marcos government. The World Bank's BAIDS strategy for rescuing Philippine agriculture had reached an impasse from which it could not be salvaged.

An Expansion Toward More Problems

The further expansion of agribusiness could only result in the following consequences (Hawes 1984; Feder 1983; Bello et al. 1982; Thiers 2019):

1. The production of food crops suffered as export promotion was intensified. The Philippines remained a food-deficit country with increasing imports in rice, corn, other cereals, and live

animals while receiving food aid from other countries and international agencies.

2. Agribusiness expansion also resulted in the social and physical dislocation of farmer-tillers and whole rural communities. The ejection of tenants and small owner-cultivators from their lands, by aggressive corporations, has been documented in the export fruits industry, palm oil ventures, corporate rice farms, and coconut plantations.
3. Being capital-intensive, export-oriented farms are also labor-displacing. Palm oil expansion in Agusan del Sur displaced some 5,000 settler farmer-families (30,000 people), whereas the workforce requirement for 8,000 hectares of farm area was only 2,800 workers (Tadem 1980).
4. Low wages of agricultural workers continued, as the law grants no more than the minimum wage for agricultural plantation workers of PHP 35.75 a day and PHP 6.75 for nonplantation workers. Plantation workers earn PHP 10,725 a year, whereas nonplantation workers take home PHP 8,025 a year. As of the end of 1983, Business Day computed the poverty line for families outside the Metro Manila region at PHP 13,834.
5. The monocrop culture and the extensive use of harmful chemicals by agribusiness plantations result in soil degradation, pollution and other ecological issues, and health problems for the workers and surrounding communities.

The new economic development policy officially abandoned equity-oriented goals to make way for an exclusively productivity-centered approach to rural development. Under the "government productivity fund," Marcos instructed the Ministry of Trade and Industry in July 1984 to offer the incentive of exemption from the agrarian reform program to corporations who would undertake the large-scale planting of export crops of short gestation. Billed as an "emergency measure," the offered incentives "shall not be subject to constraints and proclamations, whether in land reform or any other such programs."

Agrarian reform, already suffering from a half-hearted snail-paced implementation for 12 years, from the time it was declared the "cornerstone" of Marcos' "New Society," was finally dealt a death blow. Covering only 28% of the officially estimated number of tenants in all croplands and only 33% of all tenanted agricultural lands, the program was able to transfer lands through so-called "emancipation patents" (EPs) to only 3.3% of the targeted beneficiaries by December 1984 (see table 3). The Marcos regime's BAIDS concept of rural development effectively dispelled any remaining illusions about where the Filipino peasantry stood in the overall government policy.

Table 3. Philippine agrarian reform accomplishment as of December 31, 1984

	Scope	**Accomplishment**	**% Accomplished**
Amortization stage			
Farmer beneficiaries	396,082*	130,205	32.80
Hectarage	716,520	251,121	35.04
Landowners	56,574	11,758	20.78
EP stage**			
EP holders	427,623	13,027	3.29
Hectarage	716,520	17,586 (est)	2.45
Operation leasehold			
Tenants	609,042***	517,679	98.1
Hectarage	562,030	547,595	97.43
Landowners	423,027	-----	-----

Source: Data from Ministry of Agrarian Reform (MAR) (1984)

*The December 31, 1984 MAR Accomplishment Report changed this figure to 427,623 tenant-beneficiaries. Most studies, however, still used the above number.

**The accomplishment figure here refers to EPs actually distributed to farmers. MAR does not give the official figures for hectarage and landowners.

***MAR reduced this number to 527,667 as of 1984.

The Fall of Sugar

Since its rapid growth under American colonial rule, the sugar sector has been dependent on the United States (U.S.) sugar quota and its preferential rates. The expiration of the quota in 1974 forced Philippine sugar to compete in the international sugar market, thus, the industry was exposed in all its naked frailties. The U.S. quota was renewed in 1982, but under less favorable conditions. Sugar imports to the US continued to drop to record levels. The price of sugar dropped to a low USD 0.04 a pound in 1985 compared to USD 0.65 a pound in 1975, whereas the cost of domestic sugar production was USD 0.11 a pound (Cana 2021).

To cut down on losses, production was drastically reduced, as well as the area planted to the crop. Sugar mills closed down, and 100,000 sugar workers were displaced (Business Day 1984d). Those retained in the workforce suffered pay cuts (Business Day 1984g). Internationally, a famine alert was issued for one million Filipino sugar workers and their families (Cana 2021). Negros island, the country's main sugar producer, became the new global basket case for hunger, rivaling Africa.

On the whole, agricultural workers in almost all croplands were hardest hit by the spate of layoffs and retrenchments in industries that could no longer maintain their production levels. Real wages of agricultural workers in all croplands fell to levels that were below the consumer price index.

As Table 4 shows, daily farm wages fell from a consumer price-indexed value of PHP 5.03 in 1968 to only PHP 2.82 in 1984—a 44% drop. National Census and Statistics Office (NCSO) reported that 1.072 million rural workers lost their means of livelihood during the first quarter of 1984 alone (Business Day 1984d; 1984g).

Table 4. Changes in real farm wages

Year	Farm wage (PHP/day)	Farm wage/ Consumer price Index (1972 = 100)
1968	3.42	5.03
1969	3.13	4.52
1970	3.20	4.05
1971	3.64	4.00
1972	3.78	3.78
1973	4.40	3.78
1974	6.41	4.21
1975	7.46	4.53
1976	8.97	5.13
1977	9.89	5.24
1978	10.05	4.95
1979	10.44	4.33
1980	11.72	4.13
1981	12.51	3.77
1982	13.94	3.90
1983	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Reproduced from Lantican and Unnevehr (1985, 17)
*Based on Central Luzon wage for transplanting

Other Fragile Agricultural Sectors

The banana export industry, once a bright spot in Philippine export agriculture, suffered a decrease in export revenues. In 1983, losses in the industry were estimated at USD 30 million, as exports fell from 70 million cartons in 1982 to 50 million cartons in 1983 (Business Day 1984a). In the coconut industry, a government-mandated "check price," which was higher than prevailing world prices, saw oil exports ground to a halt (Tadem 1986a). Furthermore, 81% of the PHP 5.7 billion in coconut levy funds, imposed on farmers, were found to "have gone to the controlling group of the various coconut agencies and corporations in the form of subsidies for coco-based firms, Philippine Coconut Authority operations, the development of the hybrid seed farm (owned by Cojuangco), the coconut industry investment fund, and operating costs," whereas coconut farmers failed to receive dividends from their "investments" (Hawes 1984).

The much-publicized rice self-sufficiency, attained during the seventies, was undermined by the importation of 150,000 metric tons in 1984 and 390,000 tons in 1985 from Thailand and China (Bulletin Today 1985). The rice shortfall was caused by a sharp 5% decline in production from 8.12 million metric tons in 1982 to 7.23 million metric tons in 1983. Palay harvests were rotting due to continuous rains; the high cost of inputs, and unavailability of cheap credit. Rice farmers were simply applying less fertilizers to minimize costs.

From 1980–1984, only 60,000 small farmers availed of the government-supervised credit compared to 500,000 in the 1974–1975 period (Tadem 1986b). This refers especially to the Masagana 99 small farmer rice credit program. Business Day estimated that by the end of 1983, the incomes of 73% of rural households had fallen below the poverty line, as compared to 33% in 1971.

In response to the threats posed against the continued viability of small-scale rice production, farmers' groups threatened to limit production to their consumption needs alone, unless the prices of fertilizers and pesticides were rolled back to their levels from the previous year (Malaya 1984). Fertilizer prices almost doubled from PHP 133 per bag in 1983 to PHP 255 per bag in 1984.

Rural Poverty, Income Distribution, and Landlessness

It is not surprising, therefore, that the increase in rural poverty incidence exceeded that of urban poverty levels (see Table 5). Based on an inter-agency study by National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), Food and Nutrition and Research Institute (FNRI), and NCSO in 1986, the proportion of Filipinos living below the poverty line in 1985 was 59%, an increase over the 1971 share of 49%. Rural poverty incidence, on the other hand, grew from 56% in 1971 to 64% in 1985. The number of rural poor families also increased from 2.5 million in 1975 to 3.8 million by 1985.

In 1985, 45% of rural families (2.7 million) only had a 21% share of the income, whereas 19% (1.1 million) cornered 43% of the income (see Table 6). At the middle rung was 36% (2.1 million families) who had 35% of the income.

Table 5. The extent of poverty in the Philippines, urban and rural, 1971 and 1985

	1975		**1985**	
Area	Magnitude* (1,000 families)	Incidence** (%)	Magnitude (1,000 families)	Incidence (%)
Urban	533	38.4	1,352	56.1
Rural	2,465	55.6	3,800	63.7

*Refers to the total number of families below the poverty line. The poverty lines are as follows: PHP 2,382 for the Philippines; PHP 2,912 and PHP 2,066 for urban and rural areas, respectively.

**Refers to the proportion of families that fall below the poverty line out of a total number of families

Source: Data from NCSO, NEDA, and NFRI and reproduced from Tiglao (1988)

Table 6. Philippine rural income distribution, 1985

Income brackets	Number of families (1,000)	% of total families	Total income (PHP 1,000)	% of total income
Below PHP 2,000 to PHP 9,999	1,318.7	22.05	9,501,653	7.14
PHP 10,000 to P14,999	1,391.3	23.32	17,324,512	13.57
PHP 15,000 to PHP 19,999	1,055.5	17.70	18,299,567	14.33
PHP 20,000 to PHP 29,999	1,115.1	18.70	27,103,066	21.22
PHP 30,000 to PHP 500,000 above	1,083.2	18.16	55,449,901	43.22
Total	5,963.9	100.00	127,678,702	100.00

Source: Data from NCSO (1985)

Other consequences of the 1980s' agricultural crisis include the increasing landlessness and the growth of landless workers. The latter situation stems from the inability of tenant shareholders to repay their debts to village creditors, including landowners and merchant dealers. In many cases, agrarian reform beneficiaries had to mortgage their land transfer certificates and eventually surrender them to rural banks, the state cooperative, or farm machinery dealers. This phenomenon was amply documented by Ledesma (1982) and Kikuchi (1983), in which the increase in landless worker households rose by as much as 93% in 1980. As a share of the entire Philippine farm population, landlessness reached as much as 61% by 1980, compared to 31% in 1966.

Conclusion

The agricultural scene in the 80s went from bad to worse for small farmers and rural workers. Diversification of export crops only offered stop-gap and short-term relief. Hence, the costs entailed in the long run were higher than any foreign trade returns. Net proceeds were, of course, much less than export receipts, since capital and technology (including machinery and inputs) were imported and huge foreign loans were secured. It would also appear that the hundreds of millions in foreign assistance and government allocations for export agriculture and agribusiness have come to naught.

The tragedy is that government planners in the post–Martial Law period have been blind to the lessons of the 1980s. The same Marcosian agricultural strategies have remained in place, continuing to inflict pain and hardship on the Filipino peasantry and rural workers.

Invoking the mantra of trade liberalization, the government plunged headlong into membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 and eliminated all quotas on agricultural goods. The agricultural trade deficit rose from USD 149 million in 1995 to USD 7.867 billion in 2019 (a 95% increase), whereas the country became a dumping ground for cheap and subsidized agricultural surpluses from other countries, thus, bankrupting local producers (Bello 2021).

The 2019 Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) liberalized rice importation and allowed private traders to import rice in unlimited quantities. The result was an epic disaster for rice farmers (Montemayor 2020). As palay prices plunged to their lowest levels in years, rice farm households lost PHP 80 billion or a per capita minimum of PHP 17,347 and a maximum of PHP 41,000 in the first year of RTL implementation. On the other hand, rice importers, dealers, and retailers earned PHP 52 billion, or an average of PHP 234 million to PHP 570 million each.

There appears to be no end in sight to the agony and suffering of the local agricultural sector and its direct producers, the peasantry, rural workers, and their families.

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Note

1. Presented at the Webinar of the "University of the Philippines Days of Remembrance of Martial Law and Marcos Regime Myths and Misinformation," September 20–24, 2021. This is a revised, updated, and shorter version of Eduardo C. Tadem, "The Crisis of Philippine Agriculture," *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 1(2). Originally based on a paper presented at the Preparatory Meeting for the "World Food Assembly, 1984," Penang, Malaysia, October 6–7, 1984.

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Appendix

World Bank/International Development Association (IDA) Loans to Philippine Agriculture, 1972–1982

Fiscal Year	Project Title	Agency	Amount (in USD million)
1972	Rice processing and storage	NFA	290.5
1974	Peñaranda irrigation	NIA	68.0
1975	Tarlac irrigation	NIA	30.0
1975	Rural Development	Mindoro IAD	17.0
1976	Magat Irrigation	NIA	30.0
1976	Livestock II	DA	25.0
1976	Chico Irrigation Project	NIA	20.5
1976	2nd grain processing	NFA	10.0
1977	2nd Fisheries	BFAR	22.0
1977	Jalaur Irrigation	NIA	95.0
1977	4th Rural credit	DA	25.0
1977	National Irrigation Improvement	NIA	86.5
1977	2nd Rural Dev	Samar IRD	15.0
1978	Small holder tree farming	MNR	8.0

Source: NEDA, as cited in De Dios (1988)