

COPING WITH CRISIS: LANDLESS AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN CENTRAL LUZON

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This paper reviews the current situation of landless agricultural workers in three provinces of Central Luzon. Data gathering techniques include survey interviews with 593 landless workers, projective techniques, and field observation. Standards of living experienced by the landless workers are generally quite low, as shown by various indicators. The paper concludes with a description of the major strategies which have been devised by the landless to cope with this problem.

There is a general agreement among social and economic historians that landless agricultural workers belong to a marginal class in an agricultural, feudal society. They are akin to peasants, as this term is used by social anthropologists, in the sense that they perform no strict and permanent functions in the production processes. It is with the advent of plantation agriculture, as in the case of export crops, and the monetization of the countryside, as in the case of traditional farming, that this class has typically emerged.

This paper is intended to portray the situation of landless agricultural workers during the present crisis and to account for some of their coping and survival strategies. Both objective and subjective aspects of this problem will be investigated insofar as:

the notion of crisis probably started in medicine to describe that phase of a disease in which the question is posed as to whether the organism has the healing powers sufficient for recovery. A contagious disease, for example, seems to be something objective, in that the infection affects the organism from the outside. The deviation of the organism from his normal state can be measured by certain indicators or symptoms with which the patient's consciousness seems to play no part. But the crisis cannot be separated from the patient's inner view. He experiences an impotence toward the objectivity of his illness, because he is unable to gain full possession of his strength (Habermas 1973).

A holistic view of crisis therefore has both internal and external dimensions. As with a critically-listed patient who hangs on to his remaining strength and the medical trappings he can avail of, the landless worker struggles

for survival amidst the many crisis (oil, inflation, devaluation, price increase) that are beyond his personal control.

The Filipino peasant lives under conditions dictated by external forces. Somehow he manages to survive, no matter if it is in the poor and simple way that was the lot of his forefathers. His inner view of his present existence typically is one that accepts poverty as a given of his day-to-day existence. As such, there is no crisis, for there is always hope that a new day will provide for his food and sustenance.

But when abrupt changes due to inflation and rising prices are superimposed by the system on this already impoverished existence, then the poor man's life is further burdened. His very survival is now put to question. Indeed, he is like a critically listed patient who gets only a 50-50, or even less, chance of survival. When a landless worker then reacts to such a crisis with the sense of hopelessness, his survival chances further decline, since it means that he has accepted his condition with passivity and dejection. Coping with crisis is thus a stage in which such passivity may be temporarily arrested. He handles his survival problems with infinite creativity and succeeds, at least for the moment, in using to the utmost his only capital (i.e. his labor and that of his family), to forestall physical annihilation.

Methodology

This study was conducted in eleven purposively-chosen barrios of Central Luzon. These were barrios Pilar, Simon and Callitang in Sta.

Maria, Pangasinan; Motrico, Apolovesino, and Pando in Concepcion, Tarlac, and Pinambaran, King Kabayo, Bariton, Cambio, and Salacot in San Miguel, Bulacan. The study utilized surveys, questionnaires, modified projective tests, and field observation methods.

For the survey results, the total sample size consisted of 593 landless agricultural workers. These represented 200 rice workers in Bulacan, 192 laborers in the sugar fields of Tarlac and 200 tobacco workers in Pangasinan. In most cases, the respondent was the household head. As such, most persons interviewed were family breadwinners (57 percent of the rice workers, 61 percent of those in sugar, and 87 percent of the tobacco workers).

Following Ledesma (1978), a landless agricultural worker may be defined as one who (a) lives in the countryside and is dependent mostly on rural forms of employment, particularly farm work; (b) neither owns any land nor has any tenancy rights to such; and (c) hires out his labor, together with the labor of his family, to others, as his principal source of income. The operational definition of a landless agricultural worker used in the present study also specified that the worker must be at least 15 years old and engaged in the production of either rice, sugar, or tobacco.

The sampling of landless agricultural laborers was in many cases facilitated by the cooperation of *kabesilyas* (local foremen) who maintained a list of such workers for the payment of wages. In cases where such a list was not available, the interactive sampling technique was used. In this procedure, those respondents who are found initially to fall within the study population are asked to identify others holding alike status. These, in turn, were asked for help in locating other landless agricultural workers until the desired sample size (200 respondents per crop) was reached.

Findings

The task in this section of the paper is to point out some critical indicators that portray the landless agricultural workers' concrete experience during the early 1980's. What devia-

tions from the normal or desired state can be said of them as a peasant class, and which are symptomatic of the crisis they are presently in?

Total Farm Income from the Last Cropping Season

The respondents' reported total farm incomes are based on the most recent cropping season in which they participated during the period 1981-82. Though some have non-farm incomes, all consider their agricultural work as their primary source of income.

The rice crop has two seasons. Sugar workers, on the other hand, participate at any point in the work cycle for a period of 45 days only. Tobacco workers have separate tobacco and rice seasons, with the workers being able to participate in both seasons. Altogether, then, the three types of crop respondents have different wage systems. As a result, the agricultural workers vary in their income.

The study reveals that the highest frequency of highest earners is in the sugar workers group. As shown in Table 1, 37 percent of the sugar workers have an income in the ₱1,500 to ₱2,000 category. At the other end, when it comes to those who receive the lowest income of P1,000 and below, the rice workers have the highest frequency. Tobacco workers are more evenly distributed among the various income categories; but as it has been said, they have a second crop season to look forward to. Rice workers too, are enabled to earn during the second cropping season, but the same cannot be said for the sugar laborers. Also noteworthy is the fact that sugar workers are considerably less likely to report a secondary income source than are either of the other two groups. Fully two out of every three landless sugar workers reported that they had no supplementary income source, as compared to only 34 percent of those working in the rice industry and a mere 16 percent of the tobacco workers. Hence, the sugar workers appear most disadvantaged since their earnings reflect nearly their total income.

Altogether, most respondents have total farm incomes that are far below the food

threshold level of ₱13,834 outside the National Capital Region. Most are also near, if not actually below, the poverty line of ₱3,458.70

(Ibon Facts and Figures, 1984). This generalization is partly explained by their comparative wages, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Total Farm Income for the Last Cropping Season^a

Farm Income	Rice	Tobacco	Sugar	Total
None	0.5	3.5	0.5	1.5
₱ 1 – 500	34.5	18.0	3.1	18.7
501 – 1000	29.5	18.0	18.1	21.9
1001 – 1500	15.5	20.5	14.0	16.7
1501 – 2000	11.0	12.0	37.3	19.9
2001 – 3000	8.0	11.0	11.9	10.3
3001 – 4000	0.0	6.5	5.7	4.0
4001 – 5000	0.5	6.0	5.7	4.0
above ₱5000	0.5	4.5	3.6	2.9
Total	100.0 (N = 200)	100.0 (N = 200)	99.9 (N = 193)	99.9 (N = 593)

^aFigures may not add to 100 percent, due to rounding.

Table 2. Worker's Wage System by Crop

Mode of payment and task	Rice	Tobacco	Sugar
Cash:			
<i>Planting</i>	₱1.25/hour per cabecilla member		₱23.70/day (basic pay + allowance)
<i>Harvesting</i>	₱2.00/day per cargador (<i>tagahakot</i>)	₱10.00/day post harvest; ₱2.50 for 25 sticks of tobacco leaves	—
In kind:			
<i>Planting</i>	<i>meryenda</i> or lunch as arranged; not automatic	<i>meryenda</i> or lunch	—
<i>Harvesting</i>	a) 1 out of 10 cavans/work group b) 1 out of six units of measurement system per work group	<i>meryenda</i> or lunch + reject leaves (post harvest)	—

Job Options and Security

Feder (1971) asserts that geographic mobility of the peasantry is the most telling consequence of rural unemployment. Farm people do not move from place to place in search of better jobs, but just for jobs. They are seldom organized, as would empower them to bargain for higher wages so that they typically accept whatever is offered to them by their employers without prolonged hesitation.

In the study, sugar workers are assured of work for only 45 days; they then must give way to the next batch of workers who need the job just as badly. Obviously this helps to keep their wages low. At the time of the study, sugar workers received ₱23.70 per day, including basic pay and allowance.

For the rice workers, only a minority of *katulong* (the tenant's farm helper) are assured of a predictable share from production, e.g. 10 cavans per hectare. But for the majority of *manananim* and *manggagapas* (planters and harvesters), they must compete against time and other workers to contract their labors. This is shown by the following notes from a field observer's logbook:

"Mahirap pang makigapas ngayon, dahil kaunti pa lamang ang nagpapagapas. Halos nag-aagawan ang mga manggagapas sa gapasan. Madilim pa lamang ay kailangang bumangon ka na at pumunta sa lugar ng gapasan dahil kung tatanghaliin ka, ay wala ka nang aabutan. Kasi madilim pa lang ay nag-uumpisa nang gumapasa ang mga tao; kaya bago pa lamang tumataas ang araw ay natatapos na ang gapasin." . . . (Harvest opportunities now are still scarce. Only a few tenants are ready. Workers have to compete against each other for place. Long before dawn, they go out into the fields and start working. Thus, just as the sun rises, the job is done and people have no more work opportunities.)

Among rice workers, there is a time called *kawitan ng palakol*, a time when there is nothing to plant or harvest during which one figuratively hangs by the axe. The lean months coincide with the period in between planting and harvesting (August-September and March-

April). During these periods children "forego" breakfast for a ₱.50 *baon* or school allowance. There are smaller meals and children are asked to withdraw from school activities that require expense. Seeking medical services can only be at the threat of death.

Across the three crop areas, the work in the fields is unstable and seasonal. But the workers have to endure the hardships because they have no other alternatives with which they could support their families. From the stories gathered through the modified projective tests, they say:

"Wala man akong saka, pag dumating ang anihan, kami ay makakatawid na rin sa kawalan." ("I may not have a land to till. But harvest time helps me and my family to tide over." Statement of a rice worker.)

"Mahirap ang trabaho rito. Hindi sigurado kung may trabaho bukas." ("Jobs are so few here. No one knows for sure what job, if any, there is tomorrow." Statement of a sugar worker.)

Aspirations and Fears

Despite their uncertain economic position, two out of three respondents would not leave for another job paying the same wages. Those who would not leave their current jobs justify this for sentimental reasons, family attachments, perceived greater difficulties in factory/construction work, or the fact that their limited skills mean that they would have great difficulty in securing another job. Those who would venture to try another job point out the difficulty of farm work and the need for a job that offers more benefits and a better life.

As is the case with most Filipinos, the foremost aspiration of the farm laborers is that their children could earn a professional degree. But the best that most can realistically hope for is that their children would reach high school. Of the three groups studied, it is the tobacco workers who are most likely to hold this aspiration.

The sugar workers, in particular, are most threatened by mechanization. To them,

mechanization spells their doom; they frequently ask if they will be replaced by machines.

To some, land remains a desirable possession. As a rice worker remarks, "Ang nais ko'y magkaroon ng lupa. Sapagkat ang lupa di nawawala, hindi kinakalawang tulad ng bakal." (What I want is land because it cannot be lost; unlike iron gutted by rust.) So he would purchase a piece of land if he can get a job in "Saudi."

For the moment, though, the typical laborer will be satisfied just to meet the basic needs of his family.

Access to Services and Community Involvement

Rarely do programs and services directly benefit or affect the landless workers, although they are aware of, for instance, family planning, KKK, Sariling Sikap and calamity rations. At most they act as mere observers to the benefits that happen to come to the barrio. Nor do these workers hold leadership positions in the farm or in the community. Their sole contribution, if one would be objective about it, is to provide labor.

The presence of a barrio/elementary school is crucial in giving the children of landless agricultural workers an educational starting point. From then on, every additional step up the educational ladder must be thought about painfully. Eventually, many must decide against further schooling for their children. As one worker said, "mahirap magpaaral sa high school. Biro mo sa pasahe lang, 6-10 kaban ang bayad isang taon." . . . (High schooling is high financing. For school jeep fare alone, you pay 6 to 10 cavans per school year).

Children are encouraged to absent themselves from classes whenever there are opportunities for them to earn, and to contribute to family income. For example, they may gather the fallen grains at the sides, or join the work group as soon as they learn to handle a scythe. After a few weeks or a month of working and earning, though, the child will typically resist going back to school, either because he has to

catch up with past lessons or simply because he has lost interest in school.

Coping Mechanisms and Survival Strategies

So what do peasant workers do to survive and meet the day-to-day demands of living? One survival strategy which is commonly employed is for these laborers to join various forms of work groups. The rice workers join the *kabesilyahan*, which is a constellation of family members, extended kin, neighbors, and friends. The sugar workers join the management union, for only in this way can they be hired. And the tobacco workers affiliate with work-exchange groups for hire.

One function of the work group is to tone down conflict and competition among individual workers. It provides a structure for uniting their efforts to maximize output and promotes the concept of sharing. At the same time, the worker sees wider options and sources of work opportunities which by himself alone he may not be able to even get to know. Thus, the *kabesilyahan* or head of the work group surveys and negotiates for him, near or far. Moreover, tenants and farm managers prefer to deal with a person like the *kabesilya* or *kontratista*, who is responsible for finding and supervising the required number of persons to do the job. Among the rice workers, the farm helper (*katulong*) has the slight edge, because he and members of his family can also join work groups provided there are no conflicts with his own farm schedule.

A second option is geographic mobility. The search for jobs is not only within the barrio, but also takes place across barrios, towns, and neighboring provinces or (in the case of the sugar *sacadas*) across islands. Thus, our case study of the family of a rice worker reports on a day when the family head sighted a group of migrant workers:

Tailing the machine (a thresher) was a passenger jeepney cum trailer packed with mostly young men and women. The trailer was caged by metal bars, as it was used to transport swine. They were a noisy group

of around fifty. They wore long sleeves, hats and/or towels/clothes over their heads; they carried sickles. Their hired transport; was paid in cavans for a whole day trip. A woman talked with Tata Tomas. She explained that they were from Jaen, Nueva Ecija and that if he would permit, they would like to participate under the *hunasan* system.

A majority of the respondents, though, live permanently in the areas where they were interviewed. This is true for 68 percent of the rice workers, 57 percent of those in tobacco and 56 percent of the sugar laborers.

For those who stayed in the study sites temporarily, most of the rice respondents cited another province as their permanent place of residence. Those in the tobacco and sugar producing areas, however, tended to mention another municipality in the same province. Very few of these are permanent residents of the same municipality. However, when these were asked whether they have any plans of permanently staying in the study areas, a majority (90 percent) said "yes."

During peak work periods, family members combine their labor and thus maximize their share of income. This may be seen as a third coping strategy, particularly, in the rice and tobacco areas, where every man, woman, and child counts for his/her participation in the production process. Work is available only while it lasts, and that leaves practically only the smaller children and infirm away from work. The options are twofold: either to join conventional work groups, or secondly, to work on the side, where family members, for instance, pick up and collect grains or stalks that have spilled. This is called *pulot* or *pamumulot* of rice. Children can bring home one pail of these droppings and can subsequently get more when the rice hay is repounded (*pagpag*) after threshing. If they are lucky they can derive 10-15 kilos of rice a day through this procedure.

Family members of the tobacco workers are most productive during the post harvest stage when they can stick the choice leaves

together. As a privilege for this job they are given the reject leaves for their own marketing.

Sugar workers' families are restricted to participate as wage earners. Each family is allowed only one wage-member at a time for a maximum of 45 days.

Another common coping strategy is to find some means of earning additional income. This was reported by about 60 percent of the respondents in our sample. The most common secondary sources of income among rice farm workers are fishing, carpentry, water-fetching, firewood chopping/selling, vending, and hiring themselves out as construction workers in the city or poblacion. It is interesting to note that though they may go out of the barrio during the off season, they usually come home during the planting and harvesting periods (*kapag panahon ng trabaho, taniman at gapasan*).

Tobacco workers combine livestock raising, gardening and gold panning (during opportune times). Also, let it not be forgotten that rice still remains to be the primary crop and source of income for the tobacco workers.

For the sugar workers, 68 percent have no other income source. Livestock raising and vegetable gardening in their small homelots provide some products for home consumption. A few residents of the hacienda find rice-farm-work in adjacent barrios. Other family members may find work as construction workers or drivers of the hacienda.

During both the on- and off-work seasons, loans (*talinduwa* or *5/6, takipan, prenda*), cash advances (*anticipos, bale*) and rations that are later deducted from their work wages represent a fifth strategy for coping with economic crisis. Workers frequently resort to borrowing. Debts are usually incurred to meet basic household needs. Other reasons include emergency medical care, school fees, and payment of other debts.

The most common sources of loans are relatives, private individuals and, for the sugar workers, the company union. In addition, rice workers may approach the *cabecilla* or the tenant. They rarely use formal lending institutions, such as banks, since they have no

property that can be used as collateral. For most of them, the debt trap occurs in a recurring and vicious cycle.

Workers of the countryside have only so little, but the little they have is shared when asked for, as a loan or for keeps. This represents another important coping mechanism. They borrow rice from neighbors and kin, and sometimes it is given with a small amount of viand included. Kinship ties are pulled up or down depending on who needs what and who has what. Children who may already have their own families do not begrudge their parents or siblings should the latter appeal for assistance. Children could also go to their grandparents, to their uncles or to their parents, that is to whomever has food at the moment.

Neighbors would still lend their hard-earned money to foot emergency expenses like those for medicines, school needs or transportation. Herbolarios do not mind treating ailments for free. Sari-sari storeowners can be persuaded to lengthen their credit list just a bit more until the next wage comes. These are, of course, rare situations for there is just that much to pass around. When they run out of resources they just stop their activities until an opportunity comes around. Many barrio folk, though, are willing to help in some manner, even if this only represents a form of "shared poverty." When even this option is no longer available, there is always the final resort of prayer.

The final, and most desperate, form of coping strategy is to sell or mortgage the family farm. This option, of course, is no longer available to the landless agricultural laborers and often represents, in fact, the means by which their present economic condition was first reached. Of the 593 respondents, more than half (55 percent) report the occurrence of either land or tenancy dispossession during the past three generations. Mortgaging and subsequent sale of the land typically bespeak a need to meet some family crisis like a serious illness. Others gave up their rights and/or ownership because of high production costs which meant that they could not amortize their loan in order to regain the farm.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has attempted to describe some of the crisis situations faced by landless agricultural workers in three provinces of Central Luzon. These are situations that indicate survival problems when farm income is below the poverty line and the food threshold level, when job options and security are narrow, when there are more fears than aspirations, and when there is general inaccessibility to services and programs.

The paper further underscores the workers' will to preserve their own and their family lives, relying on their only capital (labor) and their years of experience in farmwork. They look forward to survive another year through work-group membership, job mobility and migration, family participation in the production process, other sources of income and credit possibilities, and a sense of shared poverty with relatives, neighbors and friends.

Compared to other sectors of society, the national crisis may not have so much of a crippling effect upon the landless agricultural worker and his family as that experienced by the urban poor and industrial workers, due to the persistence of a cycle of seasons which assures him of an available job at some time. The seasons of rain and sunshine raise hopes for planting and harvesting work opportunities. Thus, unlike a city worker, an agricultural worker can mortgage his labor. His other coping mechanisms, mainly those involving kinship, work group membership, and reciprocity, are also there to contain social unrest and to provide a release from the pressures brought about by the national crisis. Thus, he can even laugh over the so-called *krisis*.

Finally, I would like to raise a few hypotheses that have policy implications for the landless workers' coping strategies:

1. To date, nebulous and grandiose programs for the countryside have not appreciated (or specified) what the farm workers deserve as contributing members of the productive force.

2. The increasing number of landless agricultural workers is inversely related to the number of options and opportunities available to them for the satisfaction of their needs.
3. The level of satisfaction of these needs will have a significant bearing on the nation's quality of life in the rural sector.
4. The organization of landless agricultural workers and their consciousness as a class would increase their survival. Such an outcome however, is as yet unlikely, due to their sporadic and short-term work with its resulting job instability and job mobility.
5. The landless agricultural workers will eventually adapt themselves to a machine-based economy, given diversified work opportunities, just as they do with agro-based economic programs.

Notes

This study was funded by the Philippine Council for Agriculture and Resources Research and Development (PCARRD) and was undertaken by the Institute of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines - Diliman between 1981 and 1983. The author served as the overall coordinator for the research group, while the study leaders were Dr. Sylvia H. Guerrero, Professor Ma. Theresa V. Tungpalan, and Mrs. Josefina F. Carandang.

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