

A MAGNA CARTA OF YOUNG FARMERS

Promoting the Contributions of Young Women and Men Farmers to Family Farming

SUMMARY

Legislation is proposed for a *Magna Carta of Young Farmers* that will recognize the aspirations of young women and men farmers and promote their roles and contributions to family farming. The proposed bill shall protect the rights of young farmers aged 15-40 years; establish programs for young farmers, e.g., agriculture-sensitive educational curriculum and broader scholarships for all agri-related courses; promote “farm take-over” schemes; and institutionalize young farmers’ representation in all agricultural policy-making bodies and other agencies with reserved seats for youth.

CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The average age of the Filipino farmer is 57 and assuming an average life span of 70, the Philippines may reach a critical shortage of farmers in just 15 years. Farmers and fishers are getting too old for what is back-breaking work and their children not keen on replacing them in the field or family farm for lack of interest or incentive or both. In 2011, then Senator and now Presidential Assistant for Food Security and Agricultural Modernization (PAFSAM) Francis Pangilinan described this trend as an “unseen crisis” and a major threat to the country's food security.

Nationwide, the younger generation is leaving rural areas, depleting the pool of potential family farmers and farmworkers. Most rural families want their children to pursue more gainful jobs in the cities or overseas as farming is largely associated with poverty. Enrollment of agriculture and related courses offered primarily in state universities and colleges has declined due to perceived low employment opportunities by students and their parents.

In the family farm, young men and women are “all-around” farmers oftentimes assigned the more laborious tasks in their parents’ or other people’s farms. Young farmers work alongside their parents and when they have families of their own, they still help in their parents’ farm. Young farmers also augment the family’s income by working in off-farm odd jobs, e.g. as tricycle drivers. They are “merchandisers” entrusted with marketing and finding buyers for their family’s produce.

Young women and men farmers are also farm managers, supervisors or caretakers, while others are small entrepreneurs who put in capital or form joint ventures to increase the productivity of their family farms. They also take on the role of extension workers within the family and community, sharing agricultural knowledge or technology they learn in school or elsewhere. Many young farmers especially those trained in sustainable agriculture are staunch advocates of environmental protection and chemical-free organic farming.

However, the youth seems no longer attracted to agriculture for various reasons. There is widespread perception that there is no money in farming – their parents were poor farmers, they will remain poor farmers. Farming is perceived as a lowly job fit only for school drop-outs or those with no options. This low regard for farming leads to a sense of discrimination, low self-

esteem and confidence among young farmers, and hence the need to put pride and dignity back into farming.

Young farmers also face several challenges. One is access to land as many young farmers do not own land that they cultivate. In case of owner-cultivator parents, young farmers have to wait for their parents' demise before they can inherit and manage their parents' land. Young people can apply as agrarian reform beneficiaries only if they are considered as an independent household unit and not dependents of their parents.

Young farmers also lack access to capital and credit as they are not the heads of their families nor do they have the collateral needed by banks and financial institutions. They also worry that inappropriate agricultural machines will result in loss of their jobs in the farm, as when huge tractors displace the labor that they provide.

The lack of socio-cultural activities or youth organizations in rural areas is also a key factor. There are no solidarity groups or venue for exchange of information, ideas and supporting each other's endeavors. Young farmers are also excluded in agricultural policy formation and decision-making processes, thus their issues and concerns are not usually taken into consideration nor prioritized.

In 2012, however, an award-winning research by the Philippine Rice Research Institute found that contrary to widely-held perceptions, young farmers are still interested in farming. Young people expressed the desire to stay connected to agriculture if only more options were available, i.e., that agriculture be able to provide decent livelihoods that support their family. Young farmers should hence be seen as future investors who can give support for capital investments in family farms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ **Enact a Magna Carta of Young Farmers** to promote and protect the rights of young farmers aged 15-40 years, establish programs for young farmers and institutionalize young farmers' representation in all agricultural policy-making bodies and other bodies with reserved seats for youth.
- ❑ **Strengthen existing and innovative new programs that provide greater incentives to young farmers** including such programs as: *Young Farmers Program* to encourage young agriculture and fisheries graduates to become entrepreneurs; *Schools for Practical Agriculture* to empower young marginalized farmers to produce more than their subsistence level; *Adopt a Farm Youth Program* to provide farm internship to youth; and *Farm Take-Over Program* to incentivize young farmers by providing capital to buy their parents' lands.
- ❑ **Ensure young farmers' representation in decision-making bodies** including national and local agrarian reform councils, National Organic Agricultural Board (NOAB), National Youth Commission (NYC) and National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC).