Philippines Case Study: Government Policies on Nutrition Education

Mario V. Capanzana and Divorah V. Aguila

The global and national food and nutrition situation indicates that more than 900 million people are hungry worldwide, yet more than 1 billion are overweight adults. In a study carried out by DOST-FNRI and Save the Children in 2013, Php 328 Billion or 2.84% of the Gross Domestic Product are lost due to child undernutrition while around Php 1.23 billion are lost due to stunting-related grade level repetition.

With cognizance of the malnutrition problem, an integrated plan of action for nutrition was formulated by the national multi-sectoral nutrition community, consistent with the global call to eradicate malnutrition. Commonly known as the Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition (PPAN) 2017–2022, the plan is an integral part of the Philippine Development Plan 2017–2022. It is consistent with the Administration’s 10-point Economic Agenda, the Philippine Health Agenda, and the development pillars of malasakit (protective concern), pagbabago (change or transformation), and kaunlaran (development).

Major changes in our food system and eating environments over the past decades have been driven by technological advances, food and agricultural policies, and economic, social, and lifestyle changes. More processed and convenience foods are available in larger portion sizes and at relatively low prices. There are fewer family meals, and more meals are eaten away from home. Thus, policies and programs are extremely important to help make the healthful choices.

In the Philippines, Republic Act (R.A.) No. 11037 known as the Masustansyang Pagkain para sa Batang Pilipino, aims to combat hunger and undernutrition among Filipino children. Under this, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) implements a supplemental feeding program for daycare children while the Department of Education (DepEd) enforces the school-based feeding program. On the contrary, the rising obesity rates among Filipino children and adults have motivated policy makers to implement policies that can improve access to affordable, healthy foods, and increase opportunities for physical activity in
schools and communities across the country. One example is the DepEd Order 13, S. 2017 on Policy and Guidelines on Healthy Food and Beverage Choices in Schools and in DepEd Offices for the promotion and development of healthy eating habits among the youth and its employees. This DO from DepEd led to a subsequent issuance of a local ordinance in some cities (Pasig and Quezon City). Excise tax on sweetened beverages (SBs) is one of the new taxes imposed under Republic Act (RA) 10963 or Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Law which took effect last January 1, 2018.

The Industry sector has its respective shares in various nutrition education campaigns in the country. To name a few, the NutritionSchool.ph was launched in support of a common passion for wellness and nutrition education. To address the problem of child undernutrition, the United for Healthier Kids (U4HK) was launched in 2014. Other initiatives also include promotion of fortified milk drinking among school children through Laki sa Tibay School Nutrition Education and Pamilyang Laki sa Tibay Community Nutrition Education.

While it is apparent that eliminating hunger and malnutrition is technically feasible, the challenge lies in generating the requisite political will, developing realistic policies, and taking concerted actions nationally and internationally. Action and advocacy by many stakeholders are needed to overcome these barriers. Past successes that can point the way forward include effective public health approaches to complex problems such as tobacco use, motor vehicle crashes, and occupational safety. These successes provide a template for a healthier food system: address the consumer, the product (agricultural commodities, food), the environment (retailers, restaurants), and the culture (unhealthy eating, marketing). Strong government policy is crucial to achieve a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system that benefits all.