RSBSA: How We Finally Put Our Farmers and Fisherfolk on the Map

By Jezelle Neth R. Amante[1]

A former Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary once said, "We must look at the farmers first. After all, more than the doctor, more than the lawyer, we need the farmer. Because we need a doctor or lawyer only a few times in our life, but we need a farmer three times a day."

Despite their crucial role in producing our daily food, farmers and fisherfolk are the most underrated members of our workforce. In an agricultural country like the Philippines, they remain among the poorest of the population and endure the consequences of our agricultural sector's sluggish growth. Moreover, the weak adoption of innovative farming practices and the lack of access to credit and insurance for farmers and fisherfolk have hampered their development. To address various challenges in the sector, the Aquino administration identified a critical starting point—to find out exactly who and how many farmers and fisherfolk there are, and where they live.

Hence in 2011, DBM led an inter-agency effort to create the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA): an electronic compilation of basic information on farmers, farm laborers, and fishermen. The RSBSA was piloted in 20 provinces, but by November 2012 it had covered an additional 55. Only staff of national government agencies could access the main database, upon the endorsement of the head of the agency or any authorized representative to protect the identity of the beneficiaries. As we implemented the registry, we asked a group of its direct users from the DA for feedback on its usefulness and impact. One user told us that "When the RSBSA was introduced, particularly when [it was] included in the special provisions under the budget of the implementing agencies, the rate of availing loans and insurance increased because identified target beneficiaries increased. It is effective in providing direct and immediate assistance to the poor. Moreover, it minimizes the possibility of leakages in the number of beneficiaries."

Like any program, RSBSA had its share of challenges, such as the accessibility of agency-owned databases that were not part of the Registry. Also, LGUs worried that beneficiaries would only include farmers who were allied with incumbent leaders. Hence, DBM updated the database to ensure the completeness and integrity of the Registry, known as RSBSA 1.1. Until today, government planners and policy makers use it as a guide to formulate new policies for agricultural development.

As a budget analyst handling the DA, which directly receives feedback on this reform, I am confident in the usefulness of RSBSA in preparing a more informed budget proposal. It fleshes out the "*kuwento sa likod ng kuwenta*" or the story behind the figures. RSBSA likewise strengthens the integrity of the data on the agencies' target beneficiaries. Since the registry identifies farmers and fisherfolk that the agriculture sector serves, it minimizes duplication and improves the suitability of programs to these beneficiaries. While it still may have a few loopholes, the positive comments received so far should motivate the next administration to retain and strengthen the registry. To improve RSBSA, the government should update it regularly and link it with existing databases such as those of the DA, rather than defer its use due to a lack of other information needed.

Through RSBSA, the government can now directly look after the hands that feed us. By leading the creation of the registry, DBM has concretely shown that investing in the right people and spending on the right priorities are at the core of its reform agenda. More importantly, by systematically identifying farmers and fisherfolk, we recognize their indispensable value to our agricultural sector.

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