

Scientists optimistic in tackling climate change despite concerns

By Johnny F. Goloyugo

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In Photo: Dr.

Julian Gonsalves of the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (second from right) discusses points on Climate Smart Village approach in responding to climate change. Seated, from left, are Philippine Agricultural Journalists (PAJ) Director Dr. Rex Navarro, PAJ President Roman Floresca, Dr. Rex Victor Cruz of the University of the Philippines Los Baños, Dr. Reiner Wassmann of the International Rice Research Institute and PAJ PRO for Broadcast and Social Media Gani Oro. Ma.

Three scientists remain optimistic in confronting the challenges of climate change affecting the Philippines despite lingering issues, such as institutional and government policy weaknesses, agricultural zoning and the need to support mitigation and adaptation initiatives at the local level, among others.

Climate-change specialist Dr. Reiner Wassmann of the Los Baños-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), speaking at the monthly Usapang Sakahan forum on “Climate Change: Handa na Ba Kayo [Are You Ready]?” said, “Climate change is a big risk, but it is also a chance for bringing things together because of the comments and interactions of people from different fields and those coming from the policy side.”

Dr. Rex Victor Cruz, a professor at the Institute of Renewable Natural Resources at the College of Forestry and Natural Resources and former chancellor of the University of the Philippines Los Baños, noted the P1 billion poured in by the government from the people’s survival fund “to help local government units implement different adaptive projects in agriculture and in other sectors, as well as investments in research.”

Cruz said, “This is something that should give us confidence to improve our resiliency. The [Philippines’s] Climate Change Commission must do trafficking and serve as a clearing house to coordinate and synergize these different initiatives, because we never had these much resources before to address climate change.”

Scale up

Meanwhile, senior consultant Dr. Julian F. Gonsalves of the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction based in Silang, Cavite, noted the implementation of the Adaptation and Mitigation Initiative in Agriculture by the Department of Agriculture (DA) in 10 regions, and soon in 17 other regions, in assessing the country’s climate-change vulnerability.

“There is a momentum,” Gonsalves said, but those who work on the ground must scale up. It’s time to demonstrate doing things based on skills to achieve incremental adaptation due to climate change, thereby narrowing the complexity

gap. Move the action down to the local government and build on the huge social capital that exists in the country,” he said.

Policy weaknesses, location-specific solutions

Notwithstanding such optimism, Cruz, at the forum initiated by the Philippine Agricultural Journalists Inc. (PAJ), traced the root of agricultural inefficiencies to “institutional and policy weaknesses, uncoordinated government policies and inefficiencies in implementing development plans.

“It is not only an issue of technology preparedness, but also of being institutionally and operationally prepared to face the challenges of climate change,” Cruz said.

Gonsalves pointed out the need for location-specific solutions, as “the nature of climate change at any particular time might be different”. He cautioned against “any glamorous ideas that have not been tested adequately, as the Philippines’s science community has a lot to offer.”

Rice production and nature differences

Rice production, likewise, took center stage during the forum.

“We cannot simply say that rice productivity in the Philippines is much lower than in other countries because of nature differences,” Wassmann said, citing Vietnam’s Mekong Delta as “perfect for planting rice”.

He also pointed out the presence of short-duration rice varieties available to farmers for planting.

“Thailand’s success is not so much of the quantity of rice-produced, but very much of the quality of rice. For farmers, quantity may not be of such a value,” he said.

In fact, Cruz added, the Philippines has a higher rice-productivity-per-unit area, notwithstanding the slow provision of services and development of its irrigation systems.

“In the Philippines we are trying more and more to adapt the framework that includes disaster-risk reduction and climate-change adaptation. We cannot have an approach that is solely isolationist agriculture,” Gonsalves said.

“Input cost is higher in the Philippines than in other Asian countries. We need to decentralize the availability of seeds and inputs,” he said.

“We have enough moisture to grow three crops a year. We are not like Ethiopia and Somalia that are struggling now. This challenge of extreme drought is not here in the Philippines,” Gonsalves said.

Zoning

Unlike in Vietnam, the zoning of agricultural land is not strictly followed in the Philippines, notwithstanding the passage of the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act (Afma), or Republic Act 8435.

Afma defined “Zoning Ordinance” under Section 4 as “a local legislation approving the development/land-use plan and providing for the regulations and other conditions on the uses of land, including the limitation on the infrastructure that may be placed within the territorial jurisdiction of a city or municipality.”

“The problem is with the local government units,” Cruz said, “for invoking their authority in converting 15 percent of lands within their jurisdiction based on the local government code.... We cannot have unified laws when it comes to land-use allocation because of our policies.”

The DA must take the initiative in pushing forward an interagency collaboration in promoting a common land-use zoning framework, he suggested.

On the other hand, “landscapes with different elements in it are definitely better in terms of adaptation. Just think about diversity. Zoning, if done in the right way, would be a much better approach than having everything unified,” Wassmann said.

Climate-smart agriculture and villages

Wassmann and Gonsalves are jointly working on the so-called Climate Smart Villages (CSVs), a project under the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS).

CSV, an element of the Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) approach, is participatory and relevant to the local context to make sure that climate-smart farming practices are carried on in the long term.

The CGIAR CCAFS defines CSA as an integrative approach in addressing the interlinked challenges of food security and climate change.

It aimed at sustainably increasing agricultural productivity to support equitable increases in farm incomes, food security and development; adapting and building resilience of agricultural and food-security systems to climate change

at multiple levels; and reducing greenhouse-gas emissions from agriculture (including crops, livestock and fisheries).

Cruz considered “science-based decision-making as the core of being smart in practicing agriculture. This means operating on well-tested technologies and proven with information borne out of research and experiences of scientists, practitioners and farmers...and where the government is able to provide enough support services.”

“We do not want to overwhelm farmers with all kinds of new things and new technologies that they may not be able to handle in a proper way. We should really see what is possible in a given context, and then make it something which is generally accepted,” said Wassmann, who has been working on climate-change issues since 1987.

Dr. Rex L. Navarro, PAJ director and author of the book *Towards People Empowerment: GO-NGO Collaboration in Agricultural Development*, summed up CSA as informed decision or knowledge-smart based on science; variety smart or right seed to plant, right water management through employing alternate wetting and drying techniques to help reduce greenhouse-gas emissions; nutrient smart/pest smart; energy smart (use of solar energy); market smart with the government providing more efficiencies in mechanization, right information where to sell rice and right postharvest facilities; and being more competitive in the face of the emerging Asean common market.

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