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## The Perceived Impacts Of Alternative Food Source\* (“Pagpag”) On Selected Families Of An Urban Poor Community In The Philippines

### INTRODUCTION

Food discarded by different restaurants and fast food chains have become more socially acceptable as alternative food source by urban poor communities in Metro Manila. The extreme poverty evident in the Philippines has pushed these communities to cope up through alternative means. Food insecurity is still a major issue that stems from the extreme poverty present in the country. In order for these families to cope up with their harsh living conditions, they buy unsanitary scavenged chicken pieces that have been cooked again and wrapped in plastic bags. Locally, it is called “pagpag” (the act of dusting or shaking off left over food pieces), and it has been posing a threat to the urban-poor community’s overall health and nutritional status.

Based on the data provided by the World Bank, almost 25.2% of Filipinos fell under the poverty threshold in 2012. More than 48 million of the population is living on less than \$2 a day, to which food accounts for over 50 percent of the household expenditures (Pulse Asia, 2005). This kind of living condition explains why a survey conducted in 2005 claimed that 13.4 % of Filipinos are experiencing hunger, marking it to be “the highest ever hunger incidence in 20 years”

For the satisfaction of hunger, Filipinos have set aside the importance of nutrition adequacy and food safety that poses a detrimental threat to their overall health. In the 2008 National Nutrition Survey of the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI-DOST) of the Philippines, 26 in 100 children (ages 0-10) are underweight, and 12 in 100 adults (ages 20 above) are experiencing chronic energy deficiency (FNRI, 2008). The

role of the Philippine government has been questionable in terms of effectively implementing laws to measure threats and hazards to food safety. Republic Act No. 10611, or the Food Safety Act of 2013, aims to strengthen the regulatory system in the country through “higher standards of food safety, protection of human life and health in the production and consumption of food” through the help of local government units (LGUs), the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health.

Albeit this newly imposed law, the government has failed to implement this in urban-poor communities where health hazards from food are rampant.

To closely examine the culture of “pagpag”, the researchers chose an urban-poor community in Metro Manila, which dwells more than 47,000 families. Through direct observation, the researchers assessed the health and nutritional status of a selected family that has been consuming “pagpag” at least once a week. To fully understand the process, the procurement of “pagpag” was also observed.

The objective of this study was to discover the perceived impacts of consuming “pagpag” on the selected family and to find the effects of the underlying factors, such as the socio-economic profile of families, their environment, and the government. To further improve the living conditions of families living in this urban-poor community, this study also aims to raise awareness of the extreme poverty present in the country, which has forced the society to the culture of “pagpag”.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**DEMOGRAPHIC OF SELECTED URBAN POOR COMMUNITY**

*Demographics of the selected family*

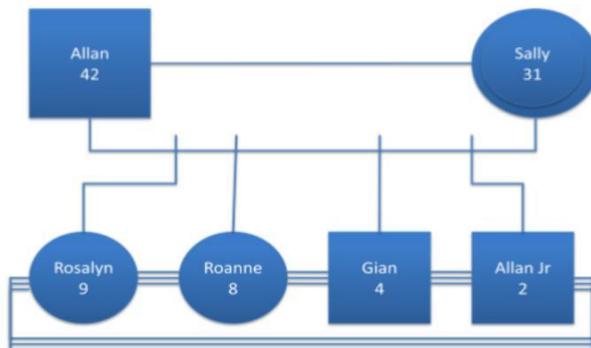


Figure 1.0 Family Genogram

The selected family settles in an urban-poor area in Metro Manila, Philippines. The family composes of a mother and a father with two daughters and two sons. The three older children are enrolled in a public school near their area. The mother remains at home, and is responsible for taking care of the children. On the other hand, the father works as a construction worker in the province with an income of \$69.00 (Php 3,000) in a month. Due to the location of the father's job, he has to be away from his family most of the time.

The mother admittedly reported that budgeting her husband's income has been difficult for the family. In order to adjust to their household expenses, they tighten their budget on the food that they consume. The parents have also relied on their luck in gambling. Because of this, there are times they can only eat one meal for a day whenever their parents use their money as bets.

The mother lacks ample nutrition education to provide better health for her family. The family normally consumes home-cooked meals, where they procure their ingredients in the local market. Eating at fast food restaurants is only a luxury they experience when money is available. According to the mother, the family remains nourished and healthy as long as they complete their 3 meals, consisting of rice and viand, in a day.

#### DEFINITION OF PAGPAG

"Pagpag" are leftover foods from fast-food chains and restaurants scavenged from garbage sites and dumps. In the Filipino language, the word literally means to "shake-off", and refers to the act of shaking the dirt off of the edible portion of leftovers. In the chosen urban-poor community, the locals have developed other terms for the word, such as "ter-ter". It is a colloquial term to a Filipino word "tira-tira", meaning leftover.

Leftover fried chicken pieces are most commonly re-used to be repacked as "pagpag". Other vendors also venture into selling leftover pizza slices or spaghetti, which are common food items on local fastfood chains.

"Pagpag" is considered to be a common survival food for urban-poor areas. Most locals, and even barangay officials, have admitted to try "pagpag", thus becoming a usual food source for their community.

#### DYNAMICS OF PROCURING PAGPAG

“Pagpag” is generally collected from near-by fast-food establishments. In the big-scale market selling, a mediator settles a deal with an insider or an employee of a fast-food chain to gather all available fried chicken discards and place it in a separate plastic bag. The mediator then delivers it to a repacking station, where the chicken pieces are washed in water and cooked again in oil as means of sanitation. After which, the chicken pieces are classified according to their edible portions and sorted into plastic bags. In a day, the repacking station can produce as much as 15-20 bags per class. Once weighed into plastic bags, the mediator brings the “pagpag” to the market to be sold by a seller from 3pm until the evening. The average income of the mediator is around \$18-23 (Php 800-1000) in a day, while the seller receives a commission of \$7-11 (Php 300-500) in day.

The small-scale market selling only involves a collector who gathers the food discards disposed by fastfood chains. The collection starts in the middle of the night, when most of the establishments start to close. According to one informant, the employees of the fast-food chain he collects from are aware of his business and even offer to help by separating the edible portions in a different plastic bag. In this setup, there is variety in the “pagpag” sold. Pizza slice, fried potatoes, and spaghetti are also sold as “pagpag”. The collector takes about 3-4 more hours in the garbage site, where he further separates the food discards. After which, the collector would classify and weigh the “pagpag”. On a regular day, the collector can yield up to 3-5 plastic bags of “pagpag”. The collector does no further means of sanitation. According to him, the method of sanitizing and cooking would rely on how his customers would consume it. He will then deliver them to his usual customers. The researcher’s informant reported that his business of selling “pagpag” is done as his means to add to his minimal daily income.

Other information is disclosed due to prohibition of the involved people.

#### CLASSIFICATIONS OF “PAGPAG”

The big-market selling categorizes the “pagpag” into Class A, B, C, and D. Class A consists of 4 pieces of white chicken breast meat (without skin and bones), which is sold for \$0.46 (Php 30). Class A is the least produced, which is why it is ordered on a reservation basis.

Class B is a combination of wing and leg parts with chicken meat and bones. A bag of Class B would cost \$0.35 (Php 15). Class C is similar to Class B, with fewer strips of chicken meat. It is sold in a cheaper price of \$0.23 (Php 10) per bag. Class D is purely strained chicken skin left after cooking and is sold for the cheapest price of

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In the big-scale market selling, Class A is sold at a higher price and is done by reservation basis because it is less frequently discarded in fast-food restaurants. The common classes of “pagpag” the locals buy are Class B and C due to its availability and affordability. According to an informant seller, the locals also prefer Class B and C because they can incorporate them in their favorite Filipino dishes. The consumers believe that the leftover chicken bones also adds flavor to their meals. Class D, on the other hand, is bought as rice-topping dish known as pastel.

A simpler categorization is done in the small-market selling. The collector only classifies the chicken’s edible portion as meat (“laman”) or bones (“buto”). Packs that consist mostly of meat parts can be sold for \$0.69 (Php 30), while the ones with more bones can be sold for \$0.23 (Php 10).

#### DEMOGRAPHICS OF LOCALS AVAILING “PAGPAG”

Most locals are aware of “pagpag” being sold in their market, and reported to have tried it

at least once. The researchers conducted an interview among the “pagpag” customers about their frequency of consumption and the possibility of contracting an illness. Based on the interview, at least 10 out of 15 informants consume “pagpag” 3 times in a week. They usually saute the pieces of chicken meat and bones with vegetables. For these informants, eating “pagpag” is the most affordable way to enjoy a flavorful dish that is comparable to fast-food standards. All of the 15 informants reported no incidence of health-related disease that can be attributed to eating “pagpag”. As long as their hunger is satisfied and no sicknesses are acquired, they will not stop consuming these food discards.

#### PERCEIVED HEALTH STATUS OF THE SELECTED FAMILY

According to the mother of the selected family, good health and nutrition equates to 3 meals within the day. Satisfying hunger is their main priority. Nutritional adequacy, variety of foods, and prevention of food-borne illnesses were less prioritized in choosing what to eat.

#### HEALTH STATUS OF THE FAMILY MEMBERS

The researchers decided to measure the height and weight of the four children. Gomez Classification and Weight-for-Age Classification were used for the nutritional status of the children.

#### ANTHROPOMETRIC ASSESSMENT

|  |   |  |   |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p><b>Daughter 1 (Rosalyn)</b><br/>                     Age: 9<br/>                     Height: 108 cm<br/>                     Weight: 15 kg<br/>                     Weight-for-Age Classification: <b>Below Normal</b><br/>                     Desirable Body Weight: 21.5 kg<br/>                     Gomez Classification:<br/>                     70% <b>Second degree; moderately underweight</b></p> | <p><b>Son 1 (Gian)</b><br/>                     Age: 4<br/>                     Height: 73 cm<br/>                     Weight: 6 kg<br/>                     Weight-for-Age Classification: <b>Below Normal</b><br/>                     Desirable Body Weight: 14 kg<br/>                     Gomez Classification:<br/>                     43% <b>with edema Third degree; severely underweight</b><br/>                     Protein-Energy Malnutrition: <b>MARASMUS</b> due to the presence of edema</p> | <p><b>Daughter 2 (Roanne)</b><br/>                     Age: 8<br/>                     Height: 101.5 cm<br/>                     Weight: 13 kg<br/>                     Weight-for-Age Classification: <b>Below Normal</b><br/>                     Desirable Body Weight: 20 kg<br/>                     Gomez Classification: 65% <b>Second degree; moderately underweight</b></p> | <p><b>Son 2 (Allan Jr.)</b><br/>                     Age: 2<br/>                     Height: 68 cm<br/>                     Weight: 8 kg<br/>                     Weight-for-Age Classification: <b>Below Normal</b><br/>                     Desirable Body Weight: 11 kg<br/>                     Gomez Classification: 73% <b>with edema Third degree; severely underweight</b><br/>                     Protein-Energy Malnutrition: <b>MARASMUS</b> due to the presence of edema</p> |
|--|---|--|---|

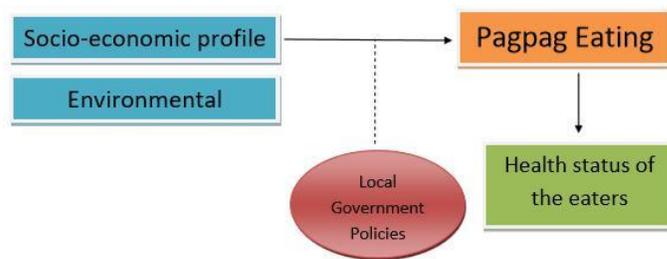
#### FORMULA FOR DESIRABLE BODY WEIGHT OF CHILDREN

$$\text{Age in years} / 2 * 3 + 8 = \text{DBW}$$

**CLINICAL ASSESSMENT**

There are signs of protein-energy malnutrition to two sons such as dyspigmentation of hair and skin, and muscle wasting. Marasmus may be attributed to the presence of EDEMA.

**ANALYSIS**



*Figure 2.0 Conceptual Framework of the Culture of Pagpag*

The urban poor communities in Metro Manila socially accept the culture of “pagpag” because of its affordability and availability. The crises created by hunger are workings of the poor economic and social system. It denies the poorest members of the society the right to choose healthy and sanitary meals (Ladicola, 2013). Their socio-economic profile highly affects their decision to procure “pagpag”. About 32% of slum population (or less than a million people) is poor based on national poverty lines (PDIS, 2008).The balance consists of the environmentally poor households living above the poverty line who can spend between \$2 and \$4 per day but reside in poor living environment. Extreme poverty has pushed them to live with what is cheap and available.

The culture in these urban poor areas has greatly influenced their choices as well. The interviewed consumers agreed that they have become accustomed to eating leftovers from fast-food restaurants because many people in their area have eaten and have not contracted any food-borne disease from “pagpag”.

Also, the government’s leniency on regulations regarding food safety and sanitation thrives the business of “pagpag”. The creation of the Food Safety Law of 2013 has not hindered “pagpag” from being sold, especially in depressed urban areas where they are most prominent. The lack of action and implementation makes the communities in the

urban poor area ignorant of what should be done. After all, living in extreme poverty makes food a means of survival, rather than means for nourishment.

Overall, the living conditions of these urban poor communities, along with a health-hazardous diet of “pagpag” eating puts an individual at risk to poor health. Their poor health status may not be directly traced to the consumption of “pagpag”, but it indirectly links to their socio-economic profile, the acceptability of poor health choices in their environment, and the government’s leniency on food laws and regulations.

### **CONCLUSION**

“Pagpag”, re-cooked discarded food from fast food chains and restaurants, has been a socially acceptable survival food by urban poor communities in Metro Manila. In the big-market selling, “pagpag” is collected, washed in water, cooked in oil, and classified based on their edible portion. It ranges from Class A to Class B and sold for \$0.12-0.46 (Php 5-30). Some venture into small-market selling of pagpag, where it is collected, sorted, and sold by one person alone. The small pagpag business does not limit itself to selling chicken pieces, but also sells pizza slices and spaghetti. Consumers of “pagpag” buy the products 3 times in a week. All informants interviewed reported no incidence of food-borne illnesses directly related to consuming “pagpag”. The choice of buying these food discards traces back to their poor nutritional education and ignorance for health. They would rather buy something that is cheap and available, but perceived to be hazardous, because it is their means to be nourished and to survive.

A selected family's that admits to consuming “pagpag” was assessed. All of the 4 children had protein energy malnutrition as evidenced by being extremely underweight, dyspigmentation of hair, and muscle wasting. According to the mother, the measure of good health and nutrition relies to the quantity of meals they have in a day. As long as they sustain at least 3 meals, she perceives her family to be healthy.

The consumption of “pagpag” can be linked to its underlying factors; such as, the community's socioeconomic profile, the acceptability of poor health choices in their environment, and the leniency of the government regarding foods safety laws and regulation. Because of these, the culture of “pagpag” continues to be acceptable to the urban poor communities in Metro Manila.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

#### **INFORMATION EDUCATION CAMPAIGN (IEC) ABOUT PROPER DIET AND NUTRITION**

Providing nutrition education is one way to promote a healthy food choices and a proper lifestyle for the improvement on the quality of life among the people.

The ultimate goal is to produce nutritionally literate decision makers who are motivated, knowledgeable, skilled, and willing to choose proper nutrition alternatives (Lewis, 1976).

To be effective, nutrition education must communicate clear messages with a specific behavior-change goal for target groups (Guthrie, 1978 in Valdecanas, 1985).

This information can be spread through the use of media, brochures, pamphlets, flyers, community programs, and school programs. It is also a way to assist urban poor community to plan nutritious and healthy food preferences within their budget.

#### **STRICT IMPLEMENTATION ON POLICIES OF SANITATION**

Food establishments are the main source of pagpag. Consumers are at risk of food-borne illnesses, which, later on, can lead to fatality.

There is no specific policy yet regarding the proper segregation and disposal of food waste in food establishments, which is why, in this case, it is the social responsibility of the food establishments to dispose food waste properly. The Code of Sanitation (Presidential Decree no. 856 section 103) Penal provisions state that: (b) Any person who shall interfere with or hinder, or oppose any officer, agent or member of the Department or of the bureaus and offices under it, in the performance of his duty as such under this Code, or shall tear down, mutilate, deface or alter any placard, or notice, affixed to the premises in the enforcement of the Code, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and punishable upon conviction by imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months or by a fine of not exceeding one thousand pesos or both depending upon the discretion of the Court.. However, the implementation of such has not been monitored rigorously, because “pagpag” is still being sold in the urban poor communities of Metro Manila.

#### **PROVISION OF ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC LIVELIHOOD PROGRAM FOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

The Philippines has the highest unemployment rate among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), according to a report of the International Labor

Organization (ILO) published in 2014. The Philippines registered an unemployment rate of 7.3 percent as of 2013, according to the Global Employment Trends. (Reference: <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/103286/ph-has-highest-aseanunemployment-rate-ilo-report>)

Because of this, lack of financial income or poverty is rampant in our country. This is the foremost reason for the consumption of pagpag since they are cheaper and yet can able to satisfy their hunger but providing trainings on different livelihood programs like weaving baskets, planting, craft making, and others to the people can help them overcome poverty and help aid to their financial needs.

#### NOTES

BENGOA MODIFICATION: All children with edema are classified as 3rd degree; severely underweight regardless of weight-for-age.

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