

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

---

## **Socioeconomic Aspects of Filipino Sugar Farm Workers: Three Views from the Cane Field**

Antonio J. Ledesma, S.J.

*Philippine Studies* vol. 27, no. 2 (1979) 231–246

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## **Socioeconomic Aspects of Filipino Sugar Farm Workers: Three Views from the Cane Fields**

**ANTONIO J. LEDESMA, S.J.**

Crop year 1974–75 was a year of grace for the Philippine sugar industry. In November 1974, the world price for raw sugar shot up to its highest level since the postwar era of \$.655 per pound. The yearly average for 1974 reached \$.295 per pound, a threefold increase from the previous year's price of \$.095 per pound.<sup>1</sup>

It was during this same period when most eyes were fixed on the price escalations of the world market that three separate studies were conducted to get the workers' views from the cane fields. Two of the studies were commissioned by the Philippine Sugar Institute (PHILSUGIN) and undertaken by various units of the University of the Philippines at Los Baños (UPLB) as part of a five-year series of socioeconomic studies on the sugar industry.<sup>2</sup> Both studies, though undertaken among different respondents, complement each other.<sup>3</sup> Jesus Montemayor's (JM) study provides a socioeconomic profile of the present day conditions of sugar farm workers, while the study of Depositario, Salacup, and Reinoso (DSR) focuses more on the perceptions and aspirations of farm workers. Both studies cover 600-800 respondents selected

This article is a background paper presented at a workshop on landless rural workers, sponsored by the Philippine Council for Agriculture and Resource Research (PCARR), Los Baños, Laguna, 8–9 December 1978.

1. Cenon Floracruz et al, eds., *Philippine Sugar Institute, Silver Jubilee Papers (1951–1976)* (Quezon City: Philsugin Press, 1976), p. 578.

2. Jesus M. Montemayor, *Socio-Economic Profile of Farm Workers in the Sugar Industry* (Laguna: Department of Land Tenure and Management, Agrarian Reform Institute, University of the Philippines at Los Baños, 1975), henceforth abbreviated as JM, and Pura T. Depositario et al., *Toward a Development Oriented Strategy for the Upliftment of Farmworkers in the Sugar Industry*, UPLB-Philsugin 2.22 (Laguna: Department of Agricultural Education, College of Sciences and Humanities; Agrarian Reform Institute; and the University of the Philippines at Los Baños, 1977) henceforth abbreviated as DSR.

3. As enumerated in its charter, one of Philsugin's objectives is "to improve the living and economic conditions of laborers engaged in the sugar industry by the gradual and effective corrections of the inequalities existing in the industry."

at random from fourteen mill districts, two-thirds from the Visayas and the other third from Luzon. Both studies began in November 1974, with the field interviews being conducted during the first four months of 1975.

The third study, sponsored by the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP), started earlier in July 1974 with actual fieldwork taking place from September to November of the same year.<sup>4</sup>

The scope of this survey was restricted to the principal sugar-producing province of Negros Occidental. Because of the opposition of some planters and the ensuing climate of fear among both interviewers and respondents, random sampling had to be modified. Nonetheless, interviewers were able to contact 319 respondents in eighty-three haciendas in eleven milling districts. The authors of the report explain the outcome:

If anything the final sample can be said to represent those haciendas in which the interviewers felt there would be less harassment and in which the climate of fear was not so pervasive . . . . From the study we cannot say how representative the sample actually was though those acquainted with the areas felt the haciendas covered are at least a good cross section of Negros Occidental.<sup>5</sup>

Taking into account these differences in survey techniques, scope, and emphasis among the three studies, we can compare some of their common findings with regard to demographic characteristics, economic aspects, social conditions, and organizations and patterns of interaction.

#### DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The mean age of Visayan respondents ranges from 33.6 years in the AMRSP study to 36.28 in the JM study to 38.8 years in the DSR study. Among all respondents, those who are married range from 80 percent (JM) to 97 percent (AMRSP). Household size for the majority averages four to six members (DSR; JM). On the other hand, the AMRSP study states that, on the average, its re-

4. Entitled "A Study of Sugar Workers in the Haciendas of Negros," the survey report constitutes part of a published volume, *The Sugar Workers of Negros*, a study commissioned by the AMRSP for its annual convention in Bacolod City in January 1975. Henceforth abbreviated AMRSP.

5. AMRSP, p. 65.

spondents have six children each. Thus, the AMRSP study of Negros workers has on the average the youngest respondents, with the highest percentage married, and with the most number of children. Luzon respondents moreover tend to be older in age, but have a lower percentage who are unmarried.<sup>6</sup>

Two possible explanations for the differences in survey findings may be put forward: (1) the AMRSP study has been skewed more toward younger respondents who were willing to take the risk of being interviewed in a climate of fear, and/or (2) the hacienda system prevalent in Negros and the Visayas in contrast to Luzon's share tenancy system is more conducive to earlier marriage and bigger families.

Tenure status thus provides an important variable in a discussion of the socioeconomic conditions of sugar farm workers. In Luzon, the largest group of respondents were share tenants (71% in DSR; 69% in JM) while regular agricultural laborers comprised the bulk in the Visayas (76% in DSR; 46% in JM).

In addition to these two tenure types, JM includes further classifications: seasonal migrant and nonmigrant workers, *encargado*, *cabo*, noncultivating laborers, and various combinations. The DSR study also enumerates the status of owner-cultivator and lessee. The complexity of tenures among sugar farm workers however, should not obscure the basic feature most of them have in common — non-ownership of the land.

#### ECONOMIC ASPECTS

If the actual classification of tenure presents a wide array of peasant subclasses, so also does any analysis of returns to labor or wage rates. For labor compensation is partly dependent on tenure, which in turn depends on the seasonal nature of sugarcane cultivation. Thus, among hacienda workers, employment is available on an average of 9.07 months per year, the remaining period constituting the idle months or the *tiempo muerto* for almost half of all workers. "Forty-seven percent of them work for less than nine months while 32% work a full 12 months."<sup>7</sup>

The length of work also varies on a daily basis. Although almost half of sugar workers (47% in DSR) work eight hours a day, others

6. Cf. JM, pp. 125–29; DSR, pp. 6–9; and AMRSP, pp. 65–66.

7. AMRSP, p. 67.

work for as long as twelve hours while still others work considerably less. "The average number of hours per day per person was 6.5," reports the DSR study, "excluding those 80 respondents whose schedules were indefinite."<sup>8</sup>

Based on time periods or on piece-work, the various methods of labor remuneration are summarized in the JM study:

The modes of payment vary from daily or weekly wages thru monthly salaries to *pakiao* or piece-work as ascertained by weight (tonnage) of sugarcane cut. In Luzon, daily wage covers 58.1% of respondents; piece-work, 21%; monthly salary, 13.3% and weekly wage, 5.7%. In the Visayas, daily wage covers 44.6%; monthly salary, 28.8%; weekly wage, 10.4%; and piece-work, 9.2%.<sup>9</sup>

How then does one determine the payment or nonpayment of the minimum wage?<sup>10</sup>

For Luzon, JM estimates the median daily wage at ₱7.00 with a range from ₱3.00+ to ₱2.00+. For the Visayas, the median wage is lower, approximately ₱6.50, with 78 percent receiving not more than ₱7.00 per day.<sup>11</sup> On a per hour basis, the DSR study estimates that almost one-half (48%) of all sugar farm workers receive ₱1.00 an hour; however, a third of all the respondents were paid by an amount other than the hourly wage basis.<sup>12</sup>

The AMRSP study confronts the question of a minimum wage directly. Among its respondents, 30 percent state that they receive the legal minimum wage, 11 percent receive more than the minimum, while 58 percent do not receive the minimum wage.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the study questions the *pakiao* system which sets a fixed rate for a given piece of work:

On the surface, it seems fair to assign rates for more difficult higher work. But rates assigned are deceptive as the more difficult work requires more laborers or a longer time in which to complete it. The result is that for more difficult work workers often do not earn more money and at times may even earn less. *Pakiao* is simply a way of undercutting the minimum wage law.<sup>14</sup>

8. DSR, p. 62.

9. JM, p. 190.

10. In 1972, minimum wages for sugar farm workers were fixed at ₱8.00 a day in Silay, Enrique Magalona, and Talisay in Negros Occidental province, ₱7.00 elsewhere in Negros island and in Canlubang, Laguna; and ₱6.00 in the rest of the country.

11. JM, pp. 191-92.

12. DSR, p. 22.

13. AMRSP, p. 67.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

Wages however may not tell the whole story. Thus, although Luzon sugar farm workers may be better paid than their Visayan counterparts, the DSR study observes that "the latter enjoyed more privileges/benefits such as: free housing, free medicine/hospitalization, insurance, annual bonus, vacation/sick leave and free electricity/water."<sup>15</sup> "Would this compensate for the low wages?," the authors ask.

JM lists the *expected* fringe benefits most respondents receive: bonuses/medicare services; social amelioration/living allowance; free schooling/educational benefits; free housing; and gifts and pensions.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Visayan workers receive a broader range of unexpected fringe benefits than Luzon workers. These include free clothing, training, and knowledge in sugarcane culture, and unexpected bonuses.<sup>17</sup>

What is free and what is owed to workers should however be delineated. By law, the AMRSP study claims, social security, medicare, and workmen's compensations are deducted from the workers' salaries with corresponding contributions to those funds made by the employers. Yet, the study continues, 54 percent of its Negros respondents claimed they had no social security coverage, 65 percent had no medicare, and 90 percent had no workmen's compensation.<sup>18</sup> Of those whose salaries had deductions for social security and/or medicare, roughly one-fourth to more than one-third experienced difficulties in obtaining the benefits for various reasons.<sup>19</sup>

Increased workers' participation in the profits of the sugar industry has also been legislated. Foremost in this area is the Social Amelioration Fund, which sets aside ₱2.00 per picul from the increase of the controlled price of domestic sugar, to be redistributed to the workers in cash bonuses. Sometimes called the Marcos Bonus, this fund was estimated at ₱45 million in crop year

15. DSR, p. 62.

16. JM, pp. 171-72.

17. JM, p. 174.

18. AMRSP, pp. 68-69.

19. "Of those who actually received benefits 33% had difficulty either because their cards have never been issued, their papers have not been processed, they were prevented from applying, they were told that their forms were in Bacolod, they do not qualify, the employer did not file, they were new members, the encargado does not accompany them, there was no place to apply." AMRSP, p. 68.

1973–74, or about ₱112.00 per year for each of the 400,000 sugar workers. Yet, the AMRSP study claims 76 percent of its worker-respondents did not receive any part of the fund.<sup>20</sup>

Another less well-known provision for workers' sharing was the Sugar Act of 1952 which stipulated that sugar plantation laborers would be entitled to "60% of the difference in participation provided in the measure and in the original milling contract which had expired." Eight-nine percent of the workers in the AMRSP study have not received any benefits under this provision.<sup>21</sup>

Aside from wages and benefits (whether on the fringes or as legislated), another economic indicator for the workers' living conditions is the measurement of annual household income. In the JM study, the median income per year is: ₱2,851 for Luzon households, and ₱2,714 for the Visayas.<sup>22</sup> Comprising the biggest number of those with incomes above the median are sugar share tenants in Luzon and regular cultivating laborers in the Visayas.<sup>23</sup> "Cumulatively 53.0 percent of respondents in Luzon and 60.1 percent in the Visayas have each an annual total household income of not more than ₱3,000."<sup>24</sup> This is corroborated by the DSR study which reports that 49 percent of all its respondents had an annual income of ₱3,000 and below, further adding that "the Luzon farm workers had higher annual incomes and expenditures than their Visayan counterparts." The authors continue that "eighty percent of the total populace were dissatisfied with their income."<sup>25</sup>

Various ways of supplementing incomes from wages or crop sharing have been noted. Almost a third of Luzon respondents are also engaged in the market sale of farm produce, in contrast to an insignificant percentage in the Visayas.<sup>26</sup> Inquiring about possible alternatives, the DSR study notes:

The Visayans thought of supplementing their low income by: getting another job, engaging in business, letting their children work and engaging in piggery or poultry production, in that order. Among the Luzonians, the

20. AMRSP, p. 69.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

22. JM, p. 203.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

25. DSR, p. 59.

26. JM, p. 206.

choices given were: getting another job, engaging in piggery or poultry production and engaging in business. *Letting their children work was their least mentioned choice.*<sup>27</sup>

Although extensive data are not available, child and women labor in Negros haciendas constitutes another form of supplementing family incomes. The AMRSP study estimates that "women often work 8 or 10 hours a day for ₱2.00 while children 8 and 9 years old may work the same length of time for from ₱0.75 to ₱1.00 a day."<sup>28</sup>

### SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Economic indicators generally try to quantify the extent of a person's income and earning capacity. Social indicators, on the other hand, reveal a person's expenditure patterns as evident in his standard of living and ability to meet the basic needs of human life.

Though constituting the largest percentage in the family budget, the food intake of sugar farm households is generally low. Rice, fish, and vegetables are the normal fare for roughly half of all farm families. One out of five families have only rice and fish, while 3 percent eat only rootcrops for their meals. Less than a fifth of all families included meat or eggs in their daily meals.<sup>29</sup>

In the AMRSP study, only two questions on diet were asked: "What did you eat for your last three meals?" and "When did you last eat something different?" Rice or corn or a mixture of both was eaten by 48 percent for breakfast, 64 percent for lunch, and 62 percent for dinner. About a third of all families had fish for any of the last three meals. Twenty-nine percent included some vegetable or root crop, mostly for lunch and dinner. Seven percent mentioned fruit, mostly bananas, at any meal, while only 30 percent had meat or poultry for a single meal. Another 8 percent mentioned coffee or cocoa for breakfast only.

In answer to the second question, a third of Negros sugar workers responded that they last ate something different on some special occasion such as a fiesta, wedding, death anniversary,

27. DSR, p. 59. Italics supplied.

28. AMRSP, p. 73.

29. Cf. DSR, pp. 66-67; and JM, pp. 159-64.

baptism, or birthday. Another third answered they occasionally had something different if money was available; 5 percent said they had something different on Sundays, and 7 percent said they had meat on Saturdays. "Seventy percent of the respondents, therefore, rarely eat anything different than rice and/or corn, fish, and a vegetable, if they eat these regularly."<sup>30</sup>

Although more workers' families from the Visayas than from Luzon had heard about the need for "balanced diets" (DSR: 66), the Negros study indicates that "workers have diets which are seriously deficient in protein." (p. 76) "It is useless to tell people what should go into an adequate diet," concludes the AMRSP report, "when they can hardly get enough food to stay alive."<sup>31</sup>

Because of low nutrition levels, it is not surprising that health problems continue to plague sugar farm workers. Among the common illnesses mentioned by respondents in the DSR study are: fever or flu, colds, and dysentery, and/or gastroenteritis. More than one-fourth of all responses indicated that these illnesses occurred often or always. Likewise, a fourth of all respondents have been hospitalized.<sup>32</sup> In the JM study, on the other hand, more than half (55%) of all workers claim that they seldom or occasionally fall ill.<sup>33</sup>

Child mortality comprises an unusually high proportion of deaths among sugar workers in both Luzon and the Visayas. Of the 236 deaths recorded by respondents over the past twenty years, one-half died before reaching the age of ten years.<sup>34</sup> The AMRSP study presents a narrower range for Negros workers: on the average each family has lost at least one child, and 78 percent of these died in the first three years of life. Only 40 percent of the families were able to consult a doctor before the child died.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding housing needs, the JM's study reveals that half of those reporting in Luzon own the homelots they occupy, in

30. AMRSP, pp. 75-76.

31. In the same vein, DSR observes: "In actual practice, however, rice, fish and vegetables are resorted to. Could it be that these are the available foodstuffs in their communities and these are the ones that they can afford to purchase considering their meager income?" DSR, p. 67.

32. DSR, p. 44.

33. JM, p. 158.

34. DSR, p. 43.

35. AMRSP, p. 74.

contrast to only 14 percent in the Visayas.<sup>36</sup> In the AMRSP study, 65 percent of Negros workers own their own houses, while 31 percent live in hacienda-owned houses.

Both UPLB-Philusugin studies find that Luzon respondents and their children have a higher educational attainment than their Visayan counterparts. While the mode for Luzon workers is Grades 5–6(7) completed, that of the Visayas is Grades 1–4. Furthermore, 13 percent of Visayan farm workers compared to only 1 percent in Luzon have had no formal schooling.<sup>37</sup> Among workers' children, more than one half (52%) from Luzon had formal education compared to 42 percent from the Visayas. Totalling both regions, 34 percent reached the elementary grades, 9 percent high school education, and 3 percent college education.<sup>38</sup>

Out-of-school children also comprise a sizeable proportion of all school-age children: 39 percent in the Visayas and 32 percent in Luzon.<sup>39</sup> In the AMRSP study, a lower percentage, 18 percent of respondents' children do not attend school regularly.<sup>40</sup> The primary reason cited by parents for their children being out of school was poor financial condition.<sup>41</sup>

Summing up the most pressing barrio problems as perceived by sugar farm workers, the DSR study lists according to priorities: infrastructure (35%), economic problems (17%), health and sanitation (15%), education (13%), and peace and order (4%).<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, when asked what improvements they expected in their barrios one, five, and ten years from now, respondents had a slightly different ordering of priorities: first, more schools and good public buildings, then better roads and means of transportation, good electricity, better health and sanitation facilities, and better housing.<sup>43</sup>

36. JM, p. 215.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 132–34.

38. DSR, p. 51.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

40. The discrepancy may be attributable to the different time periods when the various field surveys were undertaken. The AMRSP study surmises: "The large percentage of respondents who claim their children attend school regularly may reflect the fact that this study was undertaken at the very beginning of the milling season when children might not yet be required to work in the field." AMRSP, p. 66.

41. DSR, p. 52.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

43. DSR, pp. 41–42.

## ORGANIZATIONS AND PATTERNS OF INTERACTION

Problems perceived individually may have to be solved by group efforts. It is in this light that organizations and social interactions of sugar farm workers with each other and with others attain significance.

Comparing the two sugar regions, the JM study finds that half (49%) of those reporting in Luzon belong to an organization or association, while only 15 percent are members in the Visayas. Of all those in turn who are members, half belong to economic organizations such as cooperatives. Furthermore, while 21 percent of member-respondents in Luzon belong to political organizations, only 7 percent join similar political groupings in the Visayas. Contrariwise, 30 percent of member-respondents in the Visayas belong to religious organizations while no one reports himself to be such in Luzon.<sup>44</sup>

Actually, as the DSR study reveals, more respondents from both regions are affiliated with informal groups than with formal organizations. Among those informal groups are: neighborhood groups, co-workers' groups, and age groups.<sup>45</sup> The authors note that Luzon farm workers seem to be more prepared for the more formal organizations than their Visayan counterparts.

A special kind of organization not specifically mentioned by either the JM or DSR studies is the labor union. In the AMRSP survey of Negros farm workers, 118 respondents stated that there was a union in the hacienda where they worked, 128 said there was none, while the remaining 77 did not give an answer. Of those who mentioned the presence of a union, 82 percent listed the NFSW, 9 percent NASWU-PAFLU, 5 percent CAILO, and 3 percent the CIO-ALU.<sup>46</sup> Ninety-six percent of the union members felt their union was good, although, as the AMRSP report comments, one has to distinguish between the designs of a company union and those of a free union.<sup>47</sup>

In the JM survey, government development programs are

44. JM, pp. 227-29.

45. DSR, p. 63.

46. The AMRSP recognizes the National Federation of Sugarcane Workers (NFSW) as a free union. The high percentage of respondents who know about the NFSW reveals a bias perhaps in the sampling of the AMRSP survey. AMRSP, p. 77.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

participated in by 55 percent of Luzon respondents and 73 percent in the Visayas. Of those participating, the most popular programs among sugar workers in Luzon are the Green Revolution (48%) and Masagana 99 (30%). In the Visayas, on the other hand, the programs most often participated in are the Green Revolution (61%) and Family Planning (11%).<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the DSR study notes that two-thirds of the respondents from both regions attend barrio meetings. Others contribute money, labor and material, and participate in the deliberations of the barangay council.<sup>49</sup>

More Visayan than Luzon workers report having disputes in the past (83% vs. 5%) or at the time of the survey (18% vs. 15%).<sup>50</sup> Although almost two-thirds of the disputes in the Visayas relate to personal affairs, the other third pertains to management of the farm and another 5 percent to land disputes.<sup>51</sup> This finding is echoed in the DSR study which notes that although the personal relationships between workers and planters were generally favorable, "many of the Visayan farm workers felt that working relationships were unfavorable." Among the major concerns of farm workers, the report continues, are adequate compensation for their labor, economic security, and readier access to farm equipment.<sup>52</sup>

The AMRSP study examines in greater detail the dynamics of grievance articulation and the obstacles involved, particularly with regard to members of the labor unions. In two-thirds of the cases when the administrator knows of the existence of an independent union in his hacienda, various forms of harassment were utilized: threats, lockouts, bringing in the Philippine Constabulary (PC), and cutting off rice rations. Thus it is no surprise that Negros farm workers voice their grievances more freely at union meetings and among equals than to other parties. "While 33% said they could voice grievances to the *cabo*, only 5% said they could voice these to the P.C., and only 2% to either the administrator or the barrio captain."<sup>53</sup>

48. JM, pp. 229-30.

49. DSR, p. 38.

50. JM, p. 242.

51. Ibid., p. 243.

52. DSR, pp. 62-63.

53. AMRSP, pp. 78-79.

A common and most effective way of stifling union activity has been the lockout or denial of work to union members. Among AMRSP respondents, three-fourths knew of someone who was not allowed to work because of union activity.<sup>54</sup>

Conflict settlement, in the JM study, takes place most often through an intermediary (90%), through compromise (5%), or through court action (5%).<sup>55</sup> In the AMRSP study, 66 percent of the Negros respondents knew of union cases which had been brought to court. Two-thirds felt it was a good idea to bring a case to court. However, the other third was skeptical about any positive results.<sup>56</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

Based on separate survey findings, the three studies agree on a major theme – the widespread poverty of sugar farm workers.

By and large, farm workers in the sugar industry are poor and are dissatisfied with the income they have. It seems that the benefits of increased production and profit do not accrue to them.<sup>57</sup>

JM study's conclusion raises more pointedly the paradox of increased production and productivity on the one hand and the continuing poverty of farm workers on the other:

By and large, farm workers in the sugar industry are poor. While government's concern over increased production and productivity is laudable, such concern should consciously aim at the development of the farm workers, especially the poor. It is conceivable – and it actually often happens – that the benefits of increased production and productivity accrue not to the many producers or farm workers but only to a few privileged persons. Moreover, overproduction often results in decreased income when prices fall.<sup>58</sup>

JM's last statement is borne out today in the light of the depressed price of sugar in the world market. Yet, aside from marketing difficulties due to overproduction, the question of technological change in the sugar industry is once more raised – this time as it affects the socioeconomic conditions of farm workers.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

55. JM, p. 244.

56. AMRSP, p. 80.

57. DSR, p. 70.

58. JM, p. 248.

Do technological improvements in the industry bring about an increase not only in productivity but also in the welfare of farm workers? What are the effects of technological change on employment; on income distribution; on the wage scale of farm workers; on lessening the hours of work; on benefits and services received; on educational and literacy levels; and on workers' attitude and aspirations?

These and a host of related questions could well be raised in a more thorough study of the social impact of technological change on farm workers who constitute by far the majority of the population directly involved in the sugar industry.<sup>59</sup>

Although the three studies under discussion do not confront the issue of technological change directly, they provide a socio-economic profile of sugar farm workers under varying conditions. A notable difference is the contrast between Luzon and Visayan sugar farm workers, as repeatedly pointed out in the DSR and JM studies.

Although both groups are generally poor, Luzon sugar farm workers enjoy a relatively higher standard of living than their Visayan counterparts; earn higher incomes from more diversified sources; attain higher educational levels; are more literate; have less deaths in the family; are more politically conscious and ready for formal organizations; and are more market-oriented in terms of getting production loans and producing directly for the market. On the other hand, Visayan workers enjoy more benefits and social services in terms of free housing, hospitalization, insurance, free electricity, and water etc.; are more inclined toward religious organizations; and have heard more about the need for "balanced diets."

A key variable that has been pointed out for the marked differences between the two sugar regions is the land tenure system. Whereas sugar farm workers in Luzon, are predominantly share tenants, in the Visayas they are mostly agricultural laborers working in haciendas. The socioeconomic implications and basic difference in the style of community life are described by the JM study:

59. In 1976, there was an estimated number of 431,000 farm workers in the sugar industry, while there were 30,714 planters. This constitutes a ratio of 14 farm workers for every planter.

In Luzon, rural life is based on the *barrio* and the *purok* (sub-barrio cluster of houses). In the Visayas, the *hacienda* or plantation is the matrix of community life in the rural sector. The direct or indirect presence and influence of the landowner or planter on farm workers are more greatly felt in the Visayas than in Luzon, especially in terms of dependency ties.<sup>60</sup>

Another variable indirectly associated with the tenure system is technological change (which ordinarily increases productivity). By and large, sugar areas in the Visayas are said to be more productive than those in Luzon not only because of soil and weather conditions, but also because of technological adaptations — adequate and more timely use of fertilizers, improved cane varieties, pesticides, etc.; wider use of tractors and other heavy equipment; and the specialization and mobilization of labor made possible by a plantation economy.

On the other hand, sugar share tenants may find it more difficult to apply the required amounts of fertilizer or adopt any new technology; have less access to production loans than planters; and may have less incentive to increase production because of the sharecropping system. It comes as no surprise therefore that the record shows Visayan sugar areas surpassing the Luzon region in terms of cane tonnage per hectare — in 1974–75, Luzon produced 38.73 metric tons of cane per hectare, Panay reached 47.64, while Negros attained 58.04.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the higher yield in Visayan sugar lands, why then are sugar farm workers in the south less well-off than their Luzon counterparts? Is technological change (with higher yields) positively correlated with the plantation system, but *inversely* associated with farm workers' welfare?<sup>62</sup>

#### ONGOING SOLUTIONS AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

In one of its concluding remarks, the AMRSP study adds a note of urgency to the social problem in sugarland. "Interpretations of

60. JM, p. 245.

61. Philippine Sugar Institute, *Silver Jubilee Papers*, pp. 579–80.

62. Other explanatory variables that could be considered are: farm size; proximity to urban areas and presence of alternate planters, millers, and workers; and the history itself of the development of sugar areas in each region.

some of the facts may vary but the facts remain.”<sup>63</sup> Yet, as the same study cautioned earlier: “Data, no matter how shocking, is [sic] not people. It may describe the situation of people but unless one has experienced for one’s self the situation described, one cannot translate the data into human terms.”<sup>64</sup>

It is in this light that recommendations stemming from the three studies should be viewed as efforts to concretize in human terms possible solutions to the plight of sugar farm workers. One way of classifying suggestions for improvements is according to the social group entrusted with the changes – the planters/millers; the government; the churches; and/or the workers themselves.

Both the DSR and JM studies include suggestions that are addressed partly to planters/millers and partly to government agencies: more educational opportunities for in-school and out-of-school children; the “direct approach” of extension work among Luzon sugar workers, and the “indirect approach” through planters/overseers in the Visayas; mobile health services; manpower training; cottage industries; intercropping programs; etc.<sup>65</sup>

All three studies also stress a particular role of government – the review and enforcement of the minimum wage law for sugar workers. Before the war and up to the early sixties, the AMRSP members note in an open letter to the president, the legal minimum wage was the equivalent of four gantas of rice; now the minimum wage of ₱7.00 can buy only two gantas.<sup>66</sup>

A major area for structural reform is outlined in the related thrusts of cooperative education and land reform in sugarland. In addition to the possibility of land reform for farm workers’ residential homelots, JM study suggests “cooperative ventures in production processing, marketing and even in landownership.”<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the AMRSP letter proposes a different kind of land reform for sugarlands where ownership is diffused, but management is centralized through cooperative farming.<sup>68</sup>

Though limited, the role of the churches is not negligible in the social life of sugar workers. Traditional, other-wordly views of

63. AMRSP, p. 83.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

65. Cf. DSR, pp. 70–74; JM, pp. 245–48.

66. AMRSP, p. 160.

67. JM, p. 248.

68. AMRSP, p. 159.

religion and the role of church representatives – whether clerical, religious, or lay – persist among a sizeable number of sugar workers.<sup>69</sup> “There is some evidence from the study, however,” the AMRSP report notes, “that the church is becoming more actively involved in the daily lives of the workers, that she is beginning to meet them where they are rather than expect them to meet her where she is.”<sup>70</sup>

Meeting workers where they are means recognizing workers not only as objects but as subjects to change. It is in this light that the farm workers’ struggle to form their own unions constitutes a focal point for any lasting improvement in their socioeconomic situation. “The principal way for labor to acquire a position worthy of respect in the industry is to prove its strength by means of free unions.”<sup>71</sup>

Finally, but not least of all, the three studies under discussion represent perhaps the most immediate expressions of concern among UPLB-Philsugin and church personnel – to try to get the workers’ views from the cane fields; to accept the facts as they are, no matter how unpalatable; and to begin to search for effective and lasting solutions, not only on the technological, but more so on the human level.<sup>72</sup>

69. DSR, pp. 56–58.

70. AMRSP, p. 83.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 162. Explaining how partisanship for the workers’ cause is not incompatible with the objectivity of its study, the AMRSP report states: “The professionalization of social sciences tends to take the institutions and prevailing patterns of society as given. But it is the scientific task to take them as problematic. This study is concerned with serious moral issues. In dealing with them, it has tried not to substitute purely technical standards for the kind of morality on which objectivity might rest. The human issues this study deals with are basic. The study is not rigidly scientific. It is not over cautious. Given the circumstances, it could not, even if it wished, be the former. Given the seriousness of the problem and the commitments of those who worked on it, it could not be the latter.” AMRSP, p. 177.

72. Conducting field interviews in sugar areas may pose special methodological problems due in no small part to the “culture of science” characteristic of many farm workers, particularly in the haciendas. There are other UPLB-Philsugin socio-economic studies on the sugar industry. Among those already completed at the Agrarian Reform Institute are the studies of Jesus M. Montemayor, with the assistance of Angela Tolentino, Clarita Nacionales, and Manuel Garcia, Jr. on: (1) the socio-economic profile of mill workers; (2) the roles of hacienda *katiwalas* and administrators; and (3) the tri-sectoral (Church-Government-Planters) approach to cooperation in the sugar industry. An earlier study on “The pragmatics of extension communication in the sugar industry” was completed in 1975 by E. C. Legaspi, W. C. Depositario, and M. E. Eusebio.