

## **[PRESS RELEASE] Forum on the Impact of Drought, Rice Tariffication and other Urgent Agrarian Issues - March 29, 2019, Kidapawan City**

**Amas, Kidapawan City, March 29, 2019** – The Integrated Rural Development Foundation and the North Cotabato Movement for Food Sovereignty organized a forum today, 08:30 am to 03:00 pm, at the Office of the Provincial Agriculturist Office Conference Hall in Capitol Compound, Amas, Kidapawan City. The forum, titled Forum on the Impact of Drought, Rice Tariffication and other Urgent Agrarian Issues: "Kagutom Batukan, Panaghiusa Kinahangalan", highlighted the impacts of the El Nino phenomenon on the agricultural sector in North Cotabato. Members of farmers and peasant sectors were invited to participate and share their struggles amid the drought. Officials from different government offices also invited to speak on the forum. Speakers from the Provincial Disaster Risk Management Office (PDRRMO), Office of the Provincial Agriculturist, and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA)-Cotabato Irrigation Management Office shared the government's responses to the concerns of the farmers affected by the drought.

In March 12, North Cotabato was declared to be in a state of emergency– affecting around 72,000 families. Fourteen of the province's municipalities are under the state of calamity. As of March 14, it has been reported by the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council that there had been P628 million worth of damages on agricultural crops in North Cotabato due to the dry spell. Mercedita C. Foronda, Provincial Officer from PDRRMO, said that their office conducted pre-disaster risk assessment with NIA, local government units (LGUs), and other stakeholders after the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAG-ASA) released its advisory on El Niño last November. According to Foronda, they analyzed the scope of the areas that are at risk to be affected by the drought and organized information campaigns. However, despite their efforts, most of the province were still unprepared from the impacts of the drought. Foronda said that their agency could have done more if they have enough budget to have more intensive preparations before the onset of El Niño. *"Kailangan talaga ng maagap na paghahanda, pero tingin ko kailangan din ng partnership between the government, non-government sectors, at mga mamamayan"*, Foronda stated.

Eduardo Mora, head convenor of the National Movement for Food Sovereignty also expressed his concern regarding the passage of the Rice Tariffication Act as another setback to the rice farmers who are already being affected by the drought. He stressed that the government should be taking drastic measures to mitigate the impacts of El Niño. Instead, they prioritized the passing of neo-liberal policies that are anti-poor and anti-farmer. Last month, the President signed the Republic Act No 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Act, which is the final blow to our already dying rice industry. This law replaces the quantitative restriction (QR) on rice with tariffs and allows any trader to import rice into our country without restriction on volume. The liberalization of imports, coupled with the presently occurring drought, will pose a difficult challenge to our rice farmers. The current drought has already pushed most small farmers deeper into poverty as damage to crops resulted into less income from agricultural production while alternative rural livelihoods could not suffice the basic needs of the rural sectors.

The concerned groups in the forum concluded that there is a dire need for well-organized preparation measures from the government and LGUs. Agencies should also intensify the information campaigns to ensure that information is successfully relayed to the marginalized sectors. This way, farmers could opt to skip cropping to save cost and minimize losses. Hence, LGUs should assist farmers by giving them alternative sources of livelihood during the time of no cropping. Moreover, sufficient financial assistance should also be readily accessible to the farmers. It was just announced that the government will be granting P420 million worth of crop insurance to farmers whose farms have been damaged. However, small farmers still find it difficult to access such aids from the government agencies and local government units (LGUs). In the following months, our farmers will be more at risk of being affected by the manifestation of the El Niño phenomenon, hence, the forum calls for actions to mitigate the impacts are needed right now. They are challenging policy makers, politicians, local executives, government line agencies to step up and provide the necessary assistance to those affected by natural disasters and calamities.