

## QC project taps open spaces as food source

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Before the pandemic, hunger was already a very real and palpable problem. UN agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Program (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) released the first comprehensive report on food insecurity and nutrition since the start of the pandemic, which showed that the rates of hunger and malnutrition in the world increased from 8.4 percent in 2019 to 10 percent in 2020. COVID-19 had a significant share in this increase.



The largest city in the Philippines, Quezon City was hit particularly hard. During a high-level discussion on policies and strategies for COVID-19 recovery organized by the United Nations Philippines, Mayor Joy Belmonte shared the difficulties the city government had faced, most of which came without warning.

For example, upon declaration of the hard lockdowns, local government units (LGUs) had to provide relief through food and cash to residents which immediately had an effect on the city's resources and stockpile. Quezon City, through Mayor Belmonte aimed to become more selfreliant, by establishing urban gardens and farms with Grow QC. "We now have 166 sites in different areas across the city that serve as a source of nutrition and comfort and mental relief for many of our underprivileged," Belmonte enthused.

The UN panel discussion on the impacts of the pandemic with respect to food systems revealed to Belmonte as well as to the other leaders present, that one of the most basic needs of humans was not always given the attention it deserved. "Food security is central, but I don't think any city has a grassroots food security action plan laid out – which is why I am grateful

to the Grow QC – Food Security Task Force (GROWQC- FSTF) for doing their part and making sure that we were able to extend relief across the city to those who need it,” Belmonte said. The Grow QC Food Security Initiative looks at two primary pillars to establish to ensure food security. According to Emmanuel Hugh Velasco, head of the Sustainable Development Authority and co-chair of Grow QC with Mayor Belmonte, food security is pivotal to a fulfilled life. “Our mental states are relieved through urban agriculture – because the very nature of it is grounding and reassuring. Many of us project ourselves onto the plants and vegetables we cultivate, seeing that yes, we too can triumph over adversity and become healthy and whole,” Velasco explained.

“That’s the mental/emotional benefit of these programs by Grow QC. Physically and biologically speaking, urban agriculture provides a direct source of food. It may start off as a tomato or a cucumber or two, but soon urban agriculture helps us become self-reliant. The ultimate goal for these cityscape farms however would be to make the surrounding neighborhood disaster-proof, in that they empower the community to thrive in the midst of adversity because they do not need to worry about what they are going to eat.”

Urban agriculture and rooftop farms don’t just happen overnight, though. Grow QC promotes and strengthens urban farming in the city through Joy of Urban Farming Project, where seed starter kits and food packs are distributed, and community farms established via multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Grow QC furthermore has a mandate to improve food systems or food flow, which enables laws like Executive Order 16-2021, A Law Establishing the Quezon City Healthy Food Procurement Policy. Established to promote the general welfare, health, and safety of Quezon City residents, employees and beneficiaries, the Healthy Food Procurement Policy ensures that all food, including meals, snacks and beverages procured, prepared, and/or served by the Quezon City government must comply with the city’s nutrition standards.

“One of the best ways we have found to make certain projects self-sustaining is to connect them to a social ecosystem,” Velasco said. “So, under our mandate, Grow QC links urban farm harvests to the city’s community feeding in lockdown areas, as well as help form urban agriculture associations and cooperatives.”

Ofelia ‘Ate Ofel’ Bagotlo, president of the Amlac Village Urban Gardeners in Payatas said, “Ngayon pong ECQ ulit nabawasan po ang amin pangamba na baka magutom po ang aming mga kasamahan. Kasi nga po ay may mga masustanya napo kaming gulay, at kahit paano po ay may kinikita naman po kame sa GrowQC-Oplan Isda (partnership between QC & DA BFAR). Masasabi po namin na nakatulong po ito ng malaki sa aming grupo.”

Kati Tanninen of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization also recognized Quezon City’s effort and lauded them for their progress thus far. According to Tanninen, the pandemic has resulted in input supply and labor mobility difficulties, cash flow constraints, logistical bottlenecks, and food loss among other things. This, she emphasized, underscored the need for current food systems to transform in order to thrive. “Recognizing the impor-

tance of smallholder farmers as producers and supporting them during emergencies will allow their recovery in food production.”

“But I think what we do need from the United Nations and other actors, especially from international communities, is to help us with the capacity building,” Belmonte weighed in. “It would be quite the experience should the UN help us do a local food security action plan,” the mayor said, adding that it is not only in preparation for further impacts of COVID-19 but also for other eventualities such as the “predicted dreaded earthquake,” typhoons, and other natural disasters.

“One of the most important takeaways we at Grow QC have gleaned from the pandemic is that we must always be prepared for any eventuality. We have the foresight. We have the determination. We have the political will. And we know what good a little garden can do.”