

## Urban farms in Quezon reap gains after pandemic

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HIDDEN behind the tall skyscrapers and busy highways in the Philippines' most populous city of Quezon is a sprawling 38ha of lush vegetables that helped urban farmers like Miles Lilio survive the Covid-19 pandemic.

The 46-year-old mother of four was a housewife when the pandemic struck in 2020. She used to grow some vegetables in her small garden in Bagong Silangan, a village in the city outskirts.

But when her husband lost his job due to the lockdown, Lilio knew she had to do more. She signed up for the city's Growqc food security programme in January 2021.

Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte teamed up with the Department of Agrarian Reform to convert an empty lot located near Lilio's home into the New Greenland Farm.

A year later, Lilio is among the over 4,000 urban farmers working across 337 gardens and 10 farms in Quezon City.

She earns 1,000 pesos a month (RM80) selling vegetables. She admits it is not much, but said being able to grow food for her family makes a difference.

They were trained to till the land and harvest vegetables free of charge. The city government linked them with markets to sell their produce, a portion of which the farmers would take home.

"This is such a big help for us because instead of having to spend for what we eat, we can just get them from our farms," said Lilio.

Growqc is a food security initiative designed to address three of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals within Quezon City: hunger, loss of jobs, and physical and mental health concerns.

The programme was the brainchild of Belmonte when she was vice-mayor in 2010. She expanded the project when she became mayor in 2019 and had to face the Covid-19 crisis a year later.

Establishing urban gardens producing nutritious food was the city's response to supply chains that were disrupted by the lockdown.

"Communities started to see the relevance of having a garden or farm," said Belmonte.

What the farmers do not take home or sell in markets are sold to the city government, which uses the harvest for other social welfare programmes.

Beyond ensuring food security, Belmonte said Growqc also helps the city government better protect residents against climate risks like heat, cyclones, floods and drought.

Excessive rainfall and strong typhoons are likely to damage crops from provinces that supply food to Metro Manila. But the urban farms now allow the city to be food self-sufficient and reduce transportation costs and carbon emissions.