

Urban farms in Quezon City in Philippines harvest some good from 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 vegetation 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 where shanties line the unpaved streets.

But when her husband lost his job as a construction worker due to the lockdown, Ms 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 Ms Lilio's home into the New Greenland Farm.

A year later, Ms Lilio is among the over 4,000 urban farmers working across 337 gardens and 10 farms in Quezon City. She earns about 1,000 pesos (S\$24) a month selling vegetables. She says it is not much, but being able to grow food for her family makes a difference.

The farmers were trained to till the land and they harvest vegetables free of charge. The city government linked them with markets to sell their produce, a portion of which they could 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 Ms 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 Ms Belmonte when she was vice-mayor in 2010. Seed starter kits were initially given to residents. Ms Belmonte 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. Idle plots of land in the city were converted into farms. In villages where land was scant, residents were taught to repurpose discarded plastic bottles for container gardening and turn old tyres into tower gardens. Waste from public markets was turned into compost.

"Communities started to see the relevance of having a garden or farm," said Ms Belmonte, who governs over 2.9 million people.

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 like feeding and milkletting projects. Moringa, jute leaves, spinach and sweet potato tops from Ms Lilio's harvest in end-August were given as incentives to lactating mothers at the nearby Sauyo village who volunteered to donate their milk to Quezon City's milk banks.

Beyond ensuring food security, Ms Belmonte said GrowQC also allows the **city government** to better protect residents against climate risks like heat, cyclones, floods and drought. Excessive rainfall and strong typhoons are likely to damage crops from neighbouring provinces that supply food to Metro Manila. But the urban farms now allow the city to be food self-sufficient while also reducing transportation costs and carbon emissions.

GrowQC's climate resilience model has not gone unnoticed.

In October 2021, it won the prestigious Galing Pook Award, which recognises innovative practices by local government units in the Philippines.

In 2022, the Department of Health gave the project the Healthy Pilipinas Award (Healthy Philippines Award) for spearheading efforts to promote nutrition and physical activity, one of the department's priority areas.

Quezon City is also the only Philippine city under the C40 Cities Bloomberg Philanthropies Awards for innovative climate solutions. Winners will be announced on Oct 19.

Ms Belmonte said such recognition is a sign that Quezon City is "on track" to achieve climate resilience and food security. She hopes other cities can follow its example.

"What we have learnt from GrowQC is that people, food and the environment are connected," said Ms Belmonte. "No matter how huge the task at hand, if we learn to collaborate and work together towards common goals, sustainable goals, anything is possible."

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QUEZON CITY MAYOR JOY BELMONTE, on Quezon City being "on track" to attain climate resilience and food security.