Policy insights on evidence-based transformation of food systems in Quezon City, the Philippines

Emmanuel Hugh "Nonong" F. Velasco II and Francis Ian L. Agatep, in conversation with Gordon Prain

Quezon City is located just northeast of the capital, Manila, and is an important entry point for food supply to the greater Metro Manila area. As such, it plays a pivotal role in ensuring that citizens in the capital region have access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food. However, this crucial function is facing several challenges related to climate change that disrupt not only the production, but also the supply of food into the urban area.

Quezon City is on a remarkable journey to strengthen its food systems and build resilience against these challenges. Stakeholders, including local government officials, farmers, vendors, researchers, and urban planners, are joining forces to strengthen Quezon City's food systems. On October 16, 2023, the Local Government of Quezon City (QC-LGU) and CGIAR Resilient Cities initiative joined forces by signing a historic Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). The agreement, signed by Dr Simon Heck, Director General of the International Potato Center (CIP) and the Lead of the CGIAR Resilient Cities initiative, and Quezon City Mayor Hon. Maria Josefina G. Belmonte, promises to help make agrifood systems in Quezon City resilient and sustainable, contributing to improved food security in the city and greater climate resilience. Dr. Heck was represented at the ceremony by Dr Gordon Prain, Senior Advisor to the initiative. Other Resilient Cities initiative witnesses to the event included Dr Pepijn Schreinemachers, Senior Scientist at the World Vegetable Center, and Ms. Arma Bertuso, Focal Person (Philippines), CGIAR Resilient Cities initiative as well as Quezon City's executive and legislative leaders.

Following the signing ceremony, Gordon Prain held a conversation with Mr. Emmanuel Hugh "Nonong" F. Velasco II, Sustainable Development Projects Officer and Co-chairperson and Action Officer of the Food Security Task Force (FSTF), and Mr. Francis Ian L. Agatep Consultant, Sustainable Development Affairs, Quezon City Food Security Task Force, Quezon City Government, Philippines. The participants explored in more depth the food systems challenges faced by Quezon City Government and the timely role of evidence-driven solutions in mitigating and

CGIAR Resilient Cities senior advisor Dr. Gordon Prain and Quezon City Mayor Hon. Maria Josefina G. Belmonte sign Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) at the Quezon City Hall in commemoration of World Food Day . © Bertuso Arma, International Potato Center, CIP

adapting to these challenges. The discussion revolved around several thematic areas that shed light on the critical issues faced by the city's food system and the potential contributions of research and innovation. It included insights and suggestions regarding the impacts of climate change on urban food systems, incentives for food businesses and consumers, and the significance of collaboration with CGIAR Resilient Cities initiative in supporting evidence-based solutions.

Gordon Prain (GP): What are the major threats of climate change affecting the food system in Quezon City/Metro Manila and how can research help with mitigation/adaptation responses?

Mr. Emmanuel Hugh "Nonong" F. Velasco II (EHV): Climate change, particularly strong rains, more frequent typhoons, and flooding not only affect food production but also lead to a spike in food prices. The ability of typical buyers to reach their regular food sources is hampered, due to decreased availability and supply delays. Without proper production and post-harvest facilities, vegetables perish faster in wet conditions, leading to food waste. Additionally, the timing of the rainy season in the Philippines normally occurs at the end of the third or at the beginning of the fourth quarter, which then coincides with increased food demand due to the Christmas season, exacerbating food supply & demand challenges. These climate change events have significant implications for the city's food system, causing disruptions and food losses.

GP: What kind of information or data can help support better decision-making on food systems planning and management. Can CGIAR Resilient Cities initiative play a role in this?

Mr. Francis Ian L. Agatep (FIA): Research can play a crucial role in understanding consumption behaviours and patterns, the kind of food that is easily affected by climate change, and how food sources can be better managed. By regularly gathering data on the nutritional needs and food preferences of different population segments, research on consumption preferences can guide policymakers in creating targeted and efficient food policies. This information is critical for better governance and improving the flow of food at both local and regional level.

EHV: Quezon City aspires not only to create policies, but also to invest in impactful programmes that can serve as models for others to follow. However, relying solely on local government revenue resources may not be sufficient to address the complex and multifaceted issues within the food system. The availability of up-to-date data will present a clear picture of the city needs. Research and data can be used as support for the development of proposals by the government to attract external funding and projects. Key investments in cold chains, and the development of urban peri-urban partnerships, can significantly transform and improve our food systems.

GP: What incentives to food businesses and consumers can local governments use to make the local food system fairer or more equitable, safer and healthier? With reduced levels of waste? Can research contribute to designing effective incentives?

EHV: With Quezon City's commitment to provide better services to its people, there is now pressure to generate more taxes to support this. But we are still exploring how to provide tax and non-tax incentives. An example of a non-tax incentive is the city's creation of contests and awards, such as the Barangay Kontra Gutom 2.0 (Barangay Against Hunger 2.0) Awards through the Barangay and Community Relations Department. This recognition programme encourages local units to establish Barangay-led community urban farms. The city's Climate Change Environmental Sustainability Department also recently launched the Green Awards to promote better care of the environment. Some of the winning entries were related to food waste reduction and urban agriculture food production. These awards aim to motivate and document best practices that contribute to a more resilient food system. I truly hope other Barangays and citizens will be inspired to follow these award winners.

FIA: Food safety is paramount in all steps of the food system. It may be on the production side, or the consumption side, which is the city's major role, because we are essentially the end user. But we need to communicate this better because encouraging healthy diets and nutrition means safe and nutritious foods, and the Quezon City Mayor advocates for this. Our City Mayor has set multiple policies such as the healthy food public procurement policy, as well as trying to enact a calorie labelling policy, because she understands that these will enable an environment that can eventually incentivise healthier living in healthier diets and welfare of the people. Research should play a part because it shows that good social services must be reflected by better health in nutrition. And that should be backed up by data and evidence-based research that can push for policies and say,. 'if you do eat better, if you have a healthier diet, you will have more productive cities and more productive urban areas'.

Dr Simon Heck, Director General of the International Potato Center (CIP), and the Lead of the CGIAR Resilient Cities initiative involvement in the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) signing ceremony highlights the strong commitment of both CIP and the CGIAR Resilient Cities initiative to the collaborative efforts.
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GP: How can the recently signed MOA between Quezon City and Resilient Cities help to strengthen the city's food system, which depends on flows of food from local production, from different Philippine regions and internationally, and which is marketed through multiple local markets?

EHV: Research is instrumental in providing the clear evidence needed not only to draft policies but also to translate them into tangible programmes that directly benefit the citizens. The Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between Quezon City and Resilient Cities emphasises evidence-based policy creation and programme development as the cornerstone of good governance. The work packages outlined in the MOA will serve as valuable contributions to the ongoing efforts to construct a comprehensive food security plan. As the city continues to refine and develop this plan, the insights gained from the research outputs from various sources, including collaborative research initiatives, are expected to play a pivotal role in creating a holistic and effective food security strategy for the city. This collaborative effort aims to bring together all relevant research findings to help craft a comprehensive and sustainable food security plan for the city.

FIA: Investing time and attention to data and research is a reflection of the city's commitment to good governance. It's about adaptive leadership, where in the case of food systems, it is the city and the City Mayor herself taking a step forward, showing how highly urbanised cities must play a role in food systems. Food is a public policy that must also be overseen by local government. If the Resilient Cities initiative will be able to show and allow Mayor Joy and the city to have that platform of showing the example of how food systems must move forward, then I think we're moving in the right direction.

GP: Any final thoughts on how your city government can be more innovative to ensure just access to healthy food by all citizens under conditions of climate change for future generations?

EHV: Meeting Sustainable Development Goals and the assurance of access to healthy foods through improved food systems, given climate challenges, requires a

Participants during CGIAR Resilient Cities initiative and the Local Government of Quezon City (QC-LGU) historic Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) at Quenzon City Hall.
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← Back to index

Stakeholders pose for a photo after signing of the MOA held on October 16, 2023. © Philippine STAR

long-term commitment. However, Local Government Units (LGUs) are constrained with short government tenure, and this must deliver results within a short-term period. We hope that when we conduct research, the approach will strike a balance between the larger and long-term vision and the achievement of short-term wins. The approach to research should be regular and frequent rather than a one-time exercise.

We can learn from other groups, seek assistance and guidance from partners, and work collectively towards common goals. As our local food security initiatives transition from a focus on urban farming to addressing a reliable food supply in the face of disruptions – be they related to climate, health, or other disruptors, we are now investing more effort in medium to long-term solutions rooted in improving our food systems. The improvement of food systems, however, demands greater information gathering, more collaboration from stakeholders, additional resources, and a stronger political will to be realised. These are just some of the steps we are taking. By attaining small victories that address larger challenges, we aim to ensure continuity of access to healthy foods. We hope that we will be able to institutionalise the efforts of our food security task force so that even if we have a change in leadership, our food security initiatives will continue.

FIA: Indeed, you brought up the critical aspect of food safety, a concern that permeates every stage of the food system, from production to consumption. As a city, we hold a pivotal role, primarily as end-consumers. However, it's essential that we enhance our communication on this matter, as promoting healthy diets and nutrition hinges on the availability of safe and nutritious foods. Our City Mayor is a strong advocate for this cause.

It is the citizens who bear the brunt of the effects of climate change that affects each one of us. Therefore, there is a need to invest in programmes that enable the city to involve a broader spectrum of food stakeholders, extending beyond manufacturers or producers to encompass the most food-vulnerable individuals, including urban farmers and market vendors. This innovation has to be seen. The country has good laws. There are good policies in place. But we have to look not just outwards, but also inwards, in understanding how these policies can really make a difference in people's lives. If evidence-focused efforts can provide the data for that kind of innovation, then I think the city is going in the right direction to improve and become a more resilient city.

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