

Relocalizing Food Systems in the Age of Pandemic

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“*Anong kakainin ninyo?*” (What will you eat?) Solena Toctocan, a farmer-leader from Bauko, Mountain Province, asked Charlene Tan when the Philippine government announced a Luzon-wide lockdown in mid-March 2020. Toctocan is a member of a cooperative that supplies organically grown fruits and vegetables to Good Food Community, a social enterprise that Tan set up in 2011 to connect rural farmers and urban consumers in a model called community-shared agriculture (CSA).

The prevailing industrial food system, with its sprawling worldwide supply chains, has eroded at the vital connection between farmers and eaters, contributing to the multiple crises we now face such as malnutrition and obesity, massive food waste, climate emergency, and environmental degradation.

Knowing and understanding little about how food is grown, we identify merely as consumers at the end of a long food chain with little say on how food is made and distributed—a common symptom of food supply chains’ globalization that is plagued with sustainability challenges and contradictions.

Why is it that our food producers are among the poorest and suffer regular periods of severe hunger? Are the food we are eating safe and nutritious or riddled with toxic chemicals and ultra-processed with high amounts of salt, fat, and sugar? Is it made in a manner that protects the farmer and the earth’s resources or does it contribute to soil erosion as well as air and water pollution? And how come a third of global food production ends up in landfills and our oceans? Relegated to the consumption end of things, the contemporary consumer either feels little can be done in the face of the food system’s failures or that the solution lies solely in buying the right products.

When the pandemic struck, the food system’s weaknesses were further exposed. With the sudden and sweeping lockdowns to contain the coronavirus, urban centers in the country encountered challenges in accessing fresh beneficial produce amidst the panicked demand of an alarmed public. Meanwhile the small farmers and fisher folk that make up a majority of the country’s food producers were unable to sell their harvest as businesses shuttered and movement was restricted. Monocultures meant for large businesses and exports had nowhere to go; vegetable dumping became the

painful, inevitable resort. Local government units, non-government organizations, private entities, and concerned citizens scrambled to mount efforts to shorten the supply chain and address the food security issues arising in their respective communities nationwide. Experts began to warn that the coronavirus pandemic was part of a series of more frequent disease outbreaks soon to come.

Indeed, what will we eat? The farmer's question strikes at the heart of Good Food's nearly decade-long work and its belief that CSA can help change the food system into one that not only secures safe and nutritious food for the community but also supports the labor that grows and produces the food we eat, rebalances access to the planet's resources including our genetic resources, and protects the planet and society's most vulnerable members. It is a bold proposition, albeit one that has shown much promise in different parts of the world under lockdown. The direct relationship between food producers and consumers transforms the latter into co-producers with a significant stake in food production and with an active role in ensuring food supply in a manner that is ethical and ecological. "Now is the time to sign up for local community-supported agriculture," announced a *Guardian* article in April 2020. Spikes in CSA membership were seen worldwide, including in Good Food, as local producers and consumers adopted the model as an effective strategy toward food security, fair trade, and access by localizing food production or shortening supply chains as the times grew precarious.

In the Philippines, Good Food is among its pioneers and the longest running practitioner of CSA. One of the most well documented CSA models that shaped Good Food's practice is Japan's *teikei* system that started in the 1960s. A group of Japanese women came together to source safe fresh food for their families directly from producers. Distrust in conventional agriculture, with its reliance on chemicals, was growing along with the awareness of its negative impacts on the environment. According to *teikei*, the commercial food industry obstructed the necessary partnership between farmers and consumers. *Teikei* connects eaters with producers in a relationship built on mutual assistance, trust, and recognition of their interdependence to create a better way of life for the entire community and not just a select few, usually those who are better resourced.

Good Food adapted the *teikei* CSA model to Philippine conditions as it seeks to foster these direct relationships, this time between the rural small food producer and the urban consumer. Adjustments were needed to be made given the realities that Filipino smallholders face, which make the direct relationship a little challenging to set up, such as the remoteness of farms, the landlessness of 7 out of 10 Filipino smallholders that exert pressure on their farming practices as reported by *Manila Today*, and the education and lifestyle support of urban consumers for CSA to thrive.

Good Food started in 2010 to bridge consumers with several rice farmers from Capas, Tarlac. Despite being a rice-eating nation, the Philippines is not rice self-sufficient and is actually the biggest importer of rice. All too often, farmers who devote their land to conventionally grown rice find themselves constantly exposed to toxic pesticides and chemical fertilizers on top of always being at the mercy of market swings, abrupt and extreme weather changes, and more recently the rice liberalization law. Good Food engaged these rice farmers who were then trained to plant organic vegetables to diversify their crops, providing them year-round access to food that they can feed their families, and help them move away from poverty.

Working with smallholders with very limited resources, Good Food and its growing community of co-producers agreed to a partnership with the farmers: purchasing their harvest to incentivize ecological practices, making organic farming viable and sustainable for smallholders and sustainably grown food more accessible to the Filipino consumer. Good Food calls its CSA practice “*pamayanihan*,” a portmanteau of the key concepts of *pamayanan* or community, *anihan* or harvest, *bayanihan* or cooperation and solidarity, and *pamana* or the legacy of a strong relationship and commitment between farmers and eaters for a better food system. All these serve as guiding principles of Good Food’s practice.

Pamayanan

The role of the community is paramount in localizing food systems and ensuring they are resilient, ecological, and meet the needs of stakeholders. There is no hierarchy or subordination; neither the food producers nor the consumers are nameless, faceless entities but are equal parties of a mutual commitment to share the rewards, risks, and responsibilities of food production.

While third-party organic certification is the global norm for quality assurance, it can be very prohibitive for small farmers in the Philippines. One of the primary tasks of Good Food is to work with the farmers in making sure that the requirements of the Philippine National Standard for Organic Agriculture are observed as minimum standards of practice such as crop rotations and soil management practices to support increased diversity of species and nutrient cycling in soil, permitted fertilization practices, prohibition of the use of genetically modified organisms, and preventive methods of pest management, among others. No chemicals are used, no new forests are cleared for the production, and all items are traceable to the farms that grow them.

With the guidance of PGS Pilipinas, Good Food has also started the installation process of the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) in the farmers' organizations it works with. PGS serves as an alternative tool to third-party certification. As a quality assurance system, PGS certifies food producers based on the active participation of the various stakeholders of the local food system, which makes

PGS one of the most promising and successful tools for developing organic agriculture that is within the reach of small organic producers. PGS prioritizes an approach of solidarity. Its processes are built on the foundations of mutual trust and transparency, the sharing of knowledge, resources, decision-making, and sensitivity to local contexts and the development of local economies—all of which are principles that *pamayanihan* upholds. Both PGS and *pamayanihan* believe that sustainable agriculture and access to safe and healthy food are possible when the community shares these goals.

Anihan

Despite being an agricultural country with year-round growing capacity and rich tropical soils, the Philippines counts its farmers as among the poorest and those who suffer from seasonal periods of hunger. Central to *pamayanihan* is the concept of the local, which prioritizes the local community's ability to access safe, nutritious, and affordable food, over making it in international markets. In *pamayanihan*, the concept of “local” emphasizes the importance of biodiversity.

While Good Food understands the need for a consistent supply of certain crops, it also believes in the benefits of seasonal biodiverse produce. Under *pamayanihan*, crops that have year-round demand, such as cherry tomatoes, carrots, and spinach, are planned and programmed to grow throughout the year but within a larger system of companion

plants and sequential soil-building techniques, given that the soil is one of the farmer's most important resources. The partner farmers of Good Food follow a modular agricultural system that helps them plan their crops as sources of both sustenance and livelihood. This diversified production makes the farmers more resilient to price fluctuations, inflation, and environmental hazards. It recognizes and respects the cultural significance of certain food crops and protects the genetic diversity of a locale through seed exchange and seed conservation among farmers.

Like the teikei system, Good Food's practice was shaped by the involvement of women farmers who also happened to be mothers and the primary caregivers of their families. According to Tan, CSA resonated with the women farmers so "we invited [them] to plant for us and grow a sideline of organic crops with a steady demand, and it became lucrative for them, especially for those who were just based at home and could easily head to their small food gardens." The women were able to earn an income each week, which their families welcomed, especially when compared to the vulnerabilities encountered in conventional agriculture. As mothers, they are also assured of poison-free food that they can feed their families without fear or worry about the impacts of pesticides on their health.

However, while CSA has been in the Philippines for almost a decade, letting biodiversity shape the final contents of their weekly produce supply remains a novel idea for a majority of Filipino households, which explains the constant

education and advocacy activities of Good Food. Biodiversity remains a key principle of *pamayanihan* that cannot be compromised—it not only offers better variety in one's diet but also promotes an ecological approach to food production versus monoculture. The latter may promise yield in the beginning, but the practice compromises soil quality needed to support healthy plant growth. Over time the yield decreases, pushing farmers to use more and more chemical fertilizers. Pests and diseases also tend to spread like wildfire in monocultures and therefore the need to be heavily sprayed with pesticides. The overabundance of a single crop also means that when supply exceeds demand or when supply chains break down, as we have seen in the pandemic, it can lead to massive vegetable dumping.

According to Good Food subscriber Ria Salabit, “It’s like having a surprise package every week. Instead of thinking of the same old veggies I cook with, I’m challenged to think of ways to incorporate the veggies I already have. GFC [Good Food Community] is also kind enough to answer questions on how to use the produce. The experience has enlarged my knowledge of veggies and how to cook them.”

Bayanihan

Among the biggest challenges that small farmers face in the Philippines are the lack of access to credit and support in logistics and infrastructure. *Pamayanihan* helps address these through a solidarity-based economic model.

Good Food works with the farmers to create a supply plan and to agree on fixed prices and minimum volumes to purchase throughout the year. The purchase guarantee and stable demand, enabled by the prepaid subscription of consumers in Metro Manila, secure the livelihood of the small organic farmers, strengthening their commitment to organic farming and allowing them to save money and enjoy a living wage. According to the organizer of one of the farmers' groups, their partnership with Good Food was also the first time they were ever asked what they considered was a fair price for their produce. Small farmers usually have little to no say when it comes to pricing in conventional agriculture and traditional trade, but with *pamayanihan*, they are no longer passive price takers. Good Food also builds the capacity of the farmers' groups for collective marketing so that they can expand to markets outside their local communities with their surplus fruits and vegetables.

Apart from the purchase guarantee, the solidarity-based approach of *pamayanihan* is embodied by the farmshare subscription model, an element common to all CSA practices worldwide. These farm shares are paid in advance by consumers interested in the arrangement. Farmers are guaranteed an income for an entire season allowing them to focus on growing safe food, while subscribers commit to receiving a weekly share of the organic harvest, including uncommon ones that are hardly found in the city because of little demand. Good Food also has a Solidarity Share that allows subscribers with the means and social safety nets to

avail of subsidized farmshares to help urban poor families in Payatas, Quezon City.

Pamana

With the ongoing pandemic, the time is ripe for conversations and greater scrutiny on the limitations of the current food system and how these can be mitigated and corrected with a local solidarity-based approach to creating food systems. Pamayanihan advocates for improving the capacity of our farmers, better investment in agriculture, and more direct relationships between food stakeholders to address food security challenges, rather than penetrating global markets or promoting imported agricultural products to meet domestic demand. For instance, when Vietnam needed to suspend rice export to our country to review if it had enough supply for its domestic needs during the pandemic, we saw how reliance on other countries can severely undermine the food security goals of our country.

Ultimately, Good Food seeks to create an enduring practical model of CSA that is adapted to Philippine conditions through pamayanihan and looks forward to seeing it replicated in different communities nationwide as a strategy for food security as we enter this age of pandemic. Good Food is currently developing online modules to make this social technology available to more farmers organizations, collaborating with PGS Pilipinas to include pamayanihan both as an alternative economic or marketing model for community-based food systems and as a way to

foster mutually beneficial relationships between food producers and consumers for a resilient and food-secure path to recovery.

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