

Relocalizing Food Sovereignty and Peace-making: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

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Di ako natatakot sa COVID-19 na yan, kasi kaya mong gamutin ang sarili mo. Ang nakakatakot diyan ay mamatay kang dilat sa gutom. (I am not afraid of that COVID-19, because you can cure yourself. What's frightening is dying with your eyes open because of hunger.)

— Inday Bagasbas, 64²

¹ “Relocalization’ is a strategy to build societies based on the local production of food, energy and goods, and the local development of currency, governance and culture. The main goals of relocalization are to increase community energy security, to strengthen local economies, and to improve environmental conditions and social equity.” Cited from www.postcarbon.org/relocalize/, accessed July 2, 2020.

² Rambo Talabong and Jodesz Gavilan, “Walang Wala Na: Poor Filipinos Fear Death from Hunger more than Corona Virus,” *Rappler*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/poor-filipinos-fear-death-from-hunger-more-than-coronavirus> cited by Jaqueline J. Tolentino, “Relational Egalitarianism and the COVID-19 Pandemic” *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 24, No.1 (2020): 157–58.

When community quarantine measures were implemented in the Philippines last March, 2020, senior citizens, like Inday Bagasbas, were prohibited from leaving their homes. Bagasbas, however, had to feed her children who could not go back to work. Her grandchildren were also depending on her for their sustenance. Her difficult circumstances and the sheer force of biological necessity compelled her to join her neighbors in publicly demanding for assistance from the government. Residents of depressed communities, like Bagasbas, were then caught in a trilemma: to stay at home and starve, to clandestinely go out of their homes to find food, or to be caught by the police for violating the quarantine measures imposed by the government.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) quickly mobilized themselves to help ease the additional burdens borne by the vulnerable sectors of society. Not unlike the heroic deeds of *Darna*, the fictitious superwoman of Philippine movies and comic books,³ these CSOs had to come to terms with the enormous logistical requirements of doing relief operations. They gathered food from farmer organizations in the provinces and transported them to the urban communities

³ Angel Locsin, one of the actresses who portrayed Darna's character in the movies, actually initiated her own relief operations for those who were adversely affected by the pandemic and the typhoons that devastated poor communities. Ryan Arcadio, "LOOK: Angel Locsin, actors' group call for donations for Typhoon Ulysses victims," *Inquirer.net*, November 13, 2020, <https://entertainment.inquirer.net/396340/angel-locsin-actors-group-call-for-donations-for-typhoon-ulysses-victims>.

they served. They subsequently organized and maintained soup kitchens for their beneficiaries.⁴

The task of mediating the food produced by farmers and the feeding needs of urban poor dwellers, however, was not easy. The police and the military were reported to have blocked, and even imprisoned, some of the distributors for violating the containment measures imposed by the government.⁵ To overcome these obstacles, households, especially mothers, with the assistance of CSOs, started composting organic materials in empty plastic bottles and burlap sacks that were repurposed to hold garden soil. These containers served as plots to grow vegetables in their own backyards and other vacant lots.⁶

Gardening in urban centers was not only practiced within poor communities. The privileged classes soon converted their roof-decks, verandas, and lawns into verdant spaces. “Plantitos” and “plantitas,” the new terms of endearment for exotic plant collectors, joined the band-wagon of plant-lovers. Cultivating the soil served as a coping mechanism to handle their anxiety and boredom.

⁴ Nina Unlay, “Can we Rely on Bayanihan Spirit Alone to Keep Donations Going?,” *Esquire*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.esquiremag.ph/politics/news/compassion-covid-19-a1889-20200512-lfrm>.

⁵ Inday Espina Varona, “Marikina mayor orders police to free arrested relief workers,” *LiCAS News*, May 1, 2020, <https://philippines.licas.news/2020/05/01/marikina-mayor-orders-police-to-free-arrested-relief-workers/>.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/pamayanihansapayatas/>.

The articles in this issue discuss some of the modes of survival that were deployed as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts include the tasks of peace-making, ensuring food security, and aspiring for food sovereignty.

Following the United Nations' distinctions, one of our authors pointed out that food security must be differentiated from food sovereignty. The former is about access to nutritious food and dietary preferences; while the latter refers to the control of food supply by reducing their distance from consumers. Food sovereignty is a long-term global policy that seeks to address the anomalous preponderance of hunger and lack of nutrition amidst the chronic problems of obesity and food waste.

Our first article, Abhik Gupta's "Berries in Baskets versus Apples in Crates," exposes the wide gap between the feeding patterns of affluent urban dwellers who depend on the long food supply chains of the global economy, on the one hand, and the abject poverty of the rural folk who dwell within local ecological niches that produce the raw materials that supply processed food for the global citizenry, on the other hand. The pandemic had compelled the former to return to their provinces where they have better access to food and nutrition.

Reflecting on this pattern of reversed migration during the pandemic, Gupta proposed alternative social arrangements that can respond to this phenomenon. He identified post-conventional models of social life such as

Mahatma Gandhi's "village swaraj," non-violent economic systems that abide by the rhythms the natural world, and other means of measuring social progress such as Nepal's Gross National Happiness Index.

In "Fitting Food to Circumstances," Felice Sta. Maria offers a historical account of the adoption of local convenience food as a means of survival during times of war, earthquakes, and other calamities. Native Philippine delicacies such as *suman*, *binalot*, and other rice toppings were proposed as immediate provisions that can supply the nutritional requirements of vulnerable communities during emergency situations. She concludes her essay with a gentle reminder from an Ilocano proverb: "If we are wise, we will prepare for the worst."

William Holden and Kathleen Nadeau's article on "Catholic Responses to Peace-building, Climate Change, and Extractive Industries" addresses the problem of social conflicts engendered by resource allocation. They refer to the Catholic principle of subsidiarity as a guide to allow local organizations, such as Basic Ecclesial Communities, to take the lead in addressing issues that affect their localities. They also proposed the notion of "stewardship" as a norm for the management of resources in distributive and life-affirming ways. These paradigms serve as alternative sustainable models of human development instead of the prevailing extractive social systems that expropriate natural and human resources to serve centralized power structures

fueled by economic mechanisms measured by the monolithic grids of money.

Miwako Hosoda's Research Note, "COVID-19 and the Metaphors of War," argues against the very use of war metaphors in handling this pandemic. She reinterprets the measures of confinement, such as physical distancing and mask-wearing, as gestures that invoke feelings of solidarity and expressions of consideration for the lives and well-being of others. She claims that these health protocols are meant to protect others from ourselves instead of merely protecting ourselves from others. Such deliberate reversal of meanings from the language of war to expressions of mutual solidarity are intended to communicate "morally thoughtful acts" that ignite feelings of sympathy and fellowship.

Mabi David's feature article, entitled "Relocalizing Food-systems in the Age of the Pandemic," tells the story of the Good Food Community's (GFC) adoption of a community-shared approach to agriculture from Japan's *teikei* system of partnership between food consumers and farmers. Their successful cooperation was built on the conviction that they can support and promote a more healthy life-style among themselves in contrast to the chemically-induced commercial systems of food production.

GFC initially tried to shorten the supply chain by mediating between the farmers' organic products, on the one hand, and their pre-paid urban subscribers, on the other hand. This mediation was meant to assure the former of a stable market condition while providing a healthy food-

supply for the latter. Through the pandemic, however, they further short-circuited the market forces by producing food “on the ground,” within the communities themselves. By practicing organic farming and biodiversity where the consumers are located, the needs of both producers and consumers are met accordingly and immediately.

Our second feature article, Bernardita Azurin-Quimpo’s “Living Lightly and Abundantly in Cotabato,” recounts her rustic life under the pandemic’s lockdown in Kidapawan, North Cotabato. She learned to live in abundance by participating in their community’s efforts to optimize and diversify food production processes within a shared land area of two hectares. By practicing barter and agro-ecology, her community of farmers was able to maintain, have control over, and be assured of their food supply. She admonishes those who practice mono-cropping with a paraphrase from the Bible: “One cannot live on coconuts and bananas alone.”

Michael Charleston “Xiao” Chua’s extended book review of Felice Sta. Maria’s *The Foods of Rizal* situates food consumption within a larger social milieu. He shows how Jose Rizal’s novel, *Noli Me Tangere*, and his annotations to Morga’s *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* mirror the structure of social relations among friars, husbands, and children in the manner by which food was served and distributed. He concludes his review by wondering how future historians will write about the practices of Filipinos in relation to food during the current COVID-19 pandemic. He cites Sta.

Maria's observation that "The fight against hunger is fundamental to individual and social security."

The articles in this issue show that food production, distribution, and consumption mirror the quality of our social relationships. Abhik Gupta's article initially set the stage to present the underlying conflict between the distant and ostentatious global food supply chains, on the one hand, and the alienation and deprivation of local populations from food-sovereignty, on the other hand.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity to expose this social contradiction and to propose solutions that can bridge the gap between food producers and their consumers. This was initially achieved through the mediation of CSOs. By lodging the responsibility for food production in the hands of the consumers themselves, however, food sovereignty can be achieved by learning from the lessons of agro-ecology and by applying them to food production techniques. The principles of biodiversity, organic farming, and urban gardening are some of the features that will characterize the future of food security beyond the maws of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our lives will be saved, indeed, by the proper cultivation of the soil; but more significantly, such activities might even redeem our soul.