

Feature Article

Living Lightly and Abundantly in Cotabato

BERNARDITA AZURIN-QUIMPO

INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

According to a 2020 UN report, the number of people globally affected by hunger has been slowly rising since 2014. Current estimates indicate that nearly 699 million people or 8.9 percent of the world population are hungry—up by 10 million people in one year and by nearly 60 million in five years. The bigger challenge for the world is not in accessing food but in accessing healthy food. The nutritional status of the most vulnerable population groups is likely to deteriorate even further due to the health and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.

Low-income countries rely more on staple foods and less on fruits, vegetables, and animal source foods than high-income countries. We are lucky here in Asia that there are enough fruits and vegetables available for human consumption to be able to meet the FAO/WHO recommendation of consuming a daily minimum of 400 grams per person.

In the ASEAN region, the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF) issued a Joint Statement in April reaffirming its commitment to ensure food security, food safety, and nutrition in the region during this outbreak. The AMAF pledged, among others, “to minimise disruptions in regional food supply chains by working closely together to ensure that markets are kept open and transportation of agricultural and food products are facilitated. They also stressed the importance of reducing excessive price volatility particularly price spikes, ensuring adequate emergency food and reserves and providing timely and accurate market information.”

In Mindanao, provincial governors are now implementing the Self-Sustaining Food Security Strategy (SSFSS) recommended by the Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA) in late March by linking up with one another to ensure stable food supply for their constituents. Under the SSFSS, the LGU chief executives are tasked to design and implement a food security action plan, “conduct an inventory and quantify existing supplies of basic food commodities like rice, eggs, poultry, meat and fruits like banana, and identify individuals or groups which can undertake sustained food production.” MinDA is encouraging “families, especially those confined to their farms, to undertake simple food production activities like vegetable growing and backyard chicken raising, . . . thus creating a localized market” for the farmers’ produce, the distribution of which has been impaired by lockdowns.

MinDA head Emmanuel Piñol believes the system will “ensure available food supply for the families within the community while at the same time, mindful of the [COVID-19] quarantine protocols enforced.”

Although the provincial governors in Mindanao have all said they have enough food supplies for their constituents, there may be a problem of distribution due to COVID-19 lockdowns. It may not simply be a problem of food distribution, or food sustainability, or food security. The more important issue may be food sovereignty.

Food security, as defined by the UN Committee on World Food Security, “means that all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meet their food preferences to lead a healthy and active life.”

In contrast, the concept of food sovereignty is focused on small-scale agriculture (including livestock, forestry, and fisheries) of a non-industrial nature, preferably organic, mainly using the concept of agro-ecology. It places control in the hands of local food suppliers and localizes food systems by reducing the distance between suppliers and consumers.

Mindanao with its vast natural resources can be part of the solution to the global problem of hunger and malnutrition in a setting of food sovereignty. *I have been* on lockdown in a farm in North Cotabato since mid-March. It is the safest place I can be in this pandemic. Our nearest neighbor is 500 meters away; social distancing is no cause for worry.

North Cotabato is one of the twenty-two provinces in the island of Mindanao, a plantation country. There are huge tracts of land planted for bananas, coconuts, rubber, palm oil, coffee, and cacao. Owners of many of these plantations live elsewhere and rely on the local folks to manage their properties. These caretakers have their own plots that are planted with fruits, vegetables, and ornamental plants.

Our two-hectare farm, Marbel Forest Garden, is also planted with fruits, vegetables, herbs, and ornamental plants. Now that it is fruiting season here in Mindanao we have our fill of durian, rambutan, mangosteen, lanzones, and marang. We also have raised beds planted with a variety of vegetables: ampalaya, okra, eggplant, squash, string beans, pechay, radish, bell pepper, finger chilies. We have clipping beds of kangkong, saluyot, sweet potato, and alugbati from which we harvest daily.

Our farm is part of a small farming community with a population of over 1,500 in Kidapawan City where a lot of swapping goes on for farm produce, seeds, medicinal herbs, ornamental plants. We have traded our fruits for guyabano and bell pepper seeds. We get supplies from roving vendors who sell fish, dressed chicken, and midday snacks made from glutinous rice, bananas, and sweet potato.

Our farm team sources seeds and seedlings from New Leon where our farm resident manager Inday Ninfa, aged 43, comes from. New Leon is a sitio in Barangay Latagan, Matalam, a neighboring municipality. It is in an elevated area mainly used for agriculture but does not have big plantations.

Landholdings range from 0.5 to 6 hectares per family. It is populated by migrants from Leon, a municipality in Iloilo province in the Visayas. There are about forty households, a majority of whom are related to one another.

I have spent a lot of weekends in New Leon, my ideal of a tightly knit community. Inday Ninfa's immediate family has a total of over ten hectares used for rubber, coconut, hardwoods (narra, lauan, apitong, etc.) intercropped with a wide assortment of vegetables and fruit trees. They also raise free-range native chickens and goats.

On a typical weekend, we eat any of the fruits that can be harvested. Lunch is a vegetarian meal (saluyot, camote tops, eggplant, ampalaya) plus a special treat—bantam chicken tinola! We drink buko juice four times a day! Dessert is “sequential” fruit salad: papaya, buko meat, bananas, guavas, balimbing, Mandarin oranges.

Inday Ninfa's mother and aunt—Nanay Fely and Nanay Emang, both 79 and widowed—tend the farm, the source of healthy meals for any of their children and grandchildren who may decide to drop by. Their vegetable garden is a model of biodiversity. They have at least nine varieties of papaya and seven varieties of cayenne peppers. They can even sell their excess harvest of sesame seeds and turmeric roots.

Walking around Ninfa's village and visiting her cousin Darlene, aged 50, who has planted 500 square meters with 4 varieties of sweet potato, we end up bringing home an orchid plant, newly harvested eggplants and sweet potato, and a marcotted “tambis” (Java rose apple).

Farmers in the region must realize that monocropping or focusing on single commodities like coconuts, or bananas, or rubber, or palm oil is a recipe for disaster in these times. They cannot live off bananas or coconuts alone. The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging everyone to push for a diversification of food sources and agricultural products.

There can be food sovereignty in Mindanao if there is less focus on monoculture, if there can be more communities like New Leon, if we can find more farmers like Nanay Fely and Nanay Emang. Inday Ninfa and Darlene utilize every inch of their farms to grow a variety of fruits and vegetables for the local market and for their family's own consumption assuring their family's food sovereignty with or without this pandemic.

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