



Pagpupunyagi

Perseverance



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For many rural and urban poor households, the struggle to make ends meet is a daily challenge. Yet, despite persistent job shortages, falling incomes, inadequate services, poor governance, and other socioeconomic issues, these families continue to persevere and support one another. As these challenges persist, the need for communities to unite and pursue both immediate and lasting solutions becomes ever more urgent.

In response to a deepening economic crisis, communities have taken to collectively plant crops, vegetables, fruits, and medicinal herbs in backyards and unused patches of land. Worsening issues, such as increased job insecurity, poverty, and environmental degradation caused by government neglect of agriculture and industry, compounded by a continued bias towards big businesses, have compelled communities to turn to urban farming. This practice not only supplements their food supply but also provides income and shared resources.

The practices inspired by *Bungkalan* (collective land cultivation) and *Bagsakan* (direct selling of farmers' produce to consumers), as experienced in 2021 and 2022 and documented in the previous book ***Pagpupunla (Sowing)***, were sustained and replicated in six other communities in the National Capital Region (NCR) and nearby cities in 2023, which are featured in this 2023 new compendium titled ***Pagpupunyagi (Perseverance)***.

This book includes stories from farmers in San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan; an overview of efforts to revive collective land cultivation in Malolos, Bulacan; highlights of urban gardening in three areas of Commonwealth, Quezon City, namely Barangay (Brgy.) Payatas, a plot nurtured by the *Laban Kabataan Pasulong* (Fight Forward Youth) and Brgy. Commonwealth; and a look at a rice and vegetable farm in Area 17, Brgy. UP Campus.

Pagpupunyagi revisits the areas in the previous endeavor, ***Pagpupunla***, and draws lessons from both exposures to sustain and promote Bungkalan and Bagsakan beyond and despite challenges.

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Revisiting Pagpupunla

Pagpupunla (Sowing) presented collective and urban farming stories from 11 clusters of IBON's partner communities in 2021 and 2022. At that time, these communities were grappling with the pandemic while already facing the consequences of the government's unsustainable policy priorities. They were either preparing for or building on sustainable city farming practices.

The documentation narrated the initial efforts to plant leafy vegetables and crops in backyards and unused patches of land. It placed the stories in the backdrop and landscape of the regions where the communities are located – Central Luzon (Region III), Bicol (Region V), and Metro Manila (or the NCR). It related the specific challenges faced by these communities, illustrating how the pandemic and other issues exacerbated their hardships. The book concluded with an overview of various rural and urban gardening practices, highlighting hope forged through collective land cultivation, interspersed with prose, poetry, and photographs.

Pagpupunla set the stage for *Pagpupunyagi*. The pandemic significantly impacted economic growth, employment, and poverty rates. But the economy was already slowing before the pandemic, with millions unemployed, underemployed and living in poverty. It was weak to begin with – agriculture has been shrinking for decades, manufacturing has stagnated, and the economy has only served as market of foreign corporations and big local businesses. The economy relies heavily on imports, including staple foods and industrial products.¹

This context reflects a widespread lack of progress that requires serious and strategic attention. But consistent with the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023-2028 and previous plans, official regional reports on the three focus regions highlight their rich cultures and economic potentials without addressing long-standing issues. There is a token acknowledgment of the need to strengthen agricultural production and create more and better-quality jobs to alleviate poverty and improve the lives of Filipinos. Unfortunately, government's proposed solutions and plans remain old, recycled and skewed towards big corporations – primarily focusing on tourism and infrastructure to attract foreign investments. Over the decades, this approach has not delivered meaningful employment or development.



Farmers and urban poor residents shared their ongoing struggles. Urban poor in Metro Manila and adjacent provinces originated from rural areas in Northern Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao. Many come from peasant backgrounds and were driven away by militarization, extreme poverty, and outright eviction. They sought better opportunities in Metro Manila but found life in the capital challenging. Those living in the outskirts managed to farm, while others within Metro Manila faced low-paying jobs or none at all. Many resorted to self-created informal work with irregular incomes. Some became domestic helpers, subcontracted workers, vendors of food and merchandise, pedicab or tricycle drivers, or service personnel in laundry, cleaning, repairs, and retail. Others found work in factories, or as non-regular laborers in construction and other tasks.

Residents from the 11 cluster areas reported that their incomes were insufficient to cover their basic needs like food, water, electricity, fuel, and rent. They also struggled to afford additional housing or medical emergencies. Rising costs of these essentials are exacerbated by the privatization of public services and utilities, which are increasingly driven by profit, while income opportunities remain limited.





Communities that have cultivated their farmlands for decades are facing eviction or have already been demolished. In asserting their land rights, they have been harassed, attacked, and even killed by the armed goons working for big private companies in collusion with the state forces.

Bungkalan, urban farming, and urban gardening have become vital pathways for these communities. They serve as a primary means of livelihood for farmers and a consistent source of food for urban poor residents. Collective farming fosters cooperation and unity among neighbors as they combat hunger, insufficient incomes, limited access to services, and unreliable government support.

Despite challenges such as militarization, natural disasters, lack of organizational experience, inadequate farming practices, and mental or physical disabilities, farmers and urban poor residents have persevered in their collective cultivation efforts.

Pagpupunla concludes with calls to action, emphasizing that for community-level and collective land cultivation to thrive, substantial government support is essential. It also underscores the importance of implementing this support within the framework of a comprehensive people-centered economic plan.





Persevering

In 2023, community members – mothers, fathers, grandparents, and youth – persisted in their collective farming efforts in rural and urban areas. The food produced through their cooperation significantly supported them, though to varying degrees. While some faced challenges that nearly led them to abandon team planting, they fought to uphold the practice and often resolved to revive it when possible.

Bird's eye view

The six community farming areas in focus for 2023 are located in Central Luzon, specifically in San Jose Del Monte (SJDM) and Malolos City, Bulacan, as well as in the NCR, which includes Brgy. Commonwealth, Brgy. Payatas (including a *Laban Kabataan Pasulong* project area), and Area 17 in the University of the Philippines (UP) Campus.

The NCR and Central Luzon are the largest and third-largest economies in the country, respectively. Both regions experienced positive gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2023, marking nearly three years of economic reopening since the pandemic.

Central Luzon, known as the country's rice granary, grew by 6.1% in 2023, surpassing the national rate of 5.5 percent. Unemployment reportedly decreased from 5.1% in 2022 to 4.2% in 2023. The Marcos Jr administration highlighted these as a positive outcome of government interventions outlined in the PDP and the Central Luzon Regional Development Plan for 2023-2028. The accommodation and food service activities sector recorded one of the highest growth rates. This was interpreted as a success for the tourism industry and a signal to enhance tourism infrastructure, including the development of farm tourism areas aimed at benefiting agriculture.²

However, Central Luzon's growth fell short of the official target of 6.2% and was slower than the previous year's 8.1 percent. The agriculture, forestry, and fishing (AFF) sector registered the second lowest growth rate at just 2.6 percent. Contributing factors included the harmful effects of climate change, land and fishing ground conversions, animal diseases, market fluctuations, and environmental degradation.³

The government's reliance on tourism and infrastructure for this to address perceived weaknesses in the agriculture sector is problematic. Proposed solutions like innovative technologies to mitigate problems like water scarcity or pests, and infrastructure development, may be beneficial to some extent. But a closer examination of approved infrastructure projects in the region reveals a focus on roads, airports, railways, bridges, and flood control measures, with only one reservoir irrigation project included.⁴ These initiatives mainly serve the tourism

industry but are scant in addressing agricultural needs and other essential services, such as planting, harvesting, post-harvest facilities, public schools, hospitals, and healthcare facilities, based on accounts from farmers and urban poor residents in the region.

The NCR's GDP growth for 2023 was 4.9%, falling below the national average. This decline can be attributed to price hikes in certain commodities, which likely affected the output of large industries and contributed to the region's slower performance. Although the AFF sector experienced positive growth, it contributed the least to the region's economy in 2023. Additionally, the manufacturing industry registered the slowest growth, while the top contributing service sector also saw a significant slowdown.

Despite these challenges, official reports indicate a decrease in poverty incidence in the NCR, from 3.5% (approximately 482,480 individuals) in 2021 to 1.8% (about 262,240 individuals) living below the regional annual per capita poverty threshold of Php37,711. This figure is even lower than the 2.2% regional poverty incidence recorded in pre-pandemic 2018. Inflation has eased, and employment increased in 2023, with tourism also flourishing during this period.⁵

As in Central Luzon, noting positive developments is important but structural reforms might need to be considered given the almost unchanged non-inclusive economic landscape that will be seen through the subsequent testimonies. Slowing growth in the country's major economic hub should be a point of concern. Also, the government-set annual per capita poverty threshold is much way below IBON's estimated NCR family living wage as of December 2023 which is Php25,793 per month or Php309,516 per year, highlighting complacency in actually solving chronic poverty.

The challenges, prospects, and strategies outlined for the region emphasize crucial people-related aspects, particularly ensuring food sufficiency, accessibility, and availability through the promotion and development of urban and community agriculture. Additionally, addressing transportation challenges and improving mobility are vital.⁶ However, framing the jobs situation solely around employability and skills issues, coupled with a focus on tourism for greater economic gains, overlooks the need to ensure decent living standards for the populace that could be achieved through stronger domestic industries.



San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan

Collectively overcoming adversities

Farmers in SJDM have long battled landgrabbing by influential oligarch families, such as the Aranetas, Ayalas, Villars, and Lopezes, who seek to further expand their residential and commercial projects into the lush greenery and rolling hills of the city.

Araneta Properties, one of the country's biggest real estate developers, is expanding its residential lots in San Jose Del Monte.⁷ It is in a Php20-billion joint venture deal with the Ayala Land Inc. to expand Altaraza, a residential and commercial estate, by an additional 600 hectares.⁸ The Villars, who have established Palmera Homes, Camella Homes, and Bria Homes in SJDM, are also growing their residential projects in the mountainous eastern part of the city.⁹ Lopez Holdings' Rockwell Land Inc. is building a 100-hectare hillside escape and wellness retreat called The Samanean at Paradise Farms.¹⁰ These developments align with the government's investment and tourism priorities for the region but threaten the rights and disrupt the livelihoods of SJDM farmers.

The stories of Nanay (Mother) Wilma, Dodong, Norma, Rafael, Leonor, and Nanay Lenlen exemplify the perseverance of peasant families determined to defend their livelihoods in the face of looming threats. Despite these and other adversities, they assert their right to cultivate the land they have nurtured for many years and strive to organize themselves to harness the benefits of cooperative farming.

Nanay Wilma Garcia, a 63-year-old matriarch from Leyte, is one of the longest-residing farmers in Baryo Bisaya. Married with seven children – none of whom completed their education – she also cares for two school-aged grandchildren. She built her home and cultivated the land, but life has been challenging due to the interference of the Aranetas and Lopezes.

“They’ve made it nearly impossible for us to live and farm here,” she laments, recalling how Araneta goons prevented construction materials from entering the vicinity, uprooted her crops, and occasionally threatened her with eviction.

Farming is Nanay Wilma’s primary source of income. She grows *saluyot* (jute leaves), bananas, cassava, and tobacco. However, even with contributions from family members working in construction, their earnings are insufficient to cover monthly expenses, including high utility costs of Php3,500 for electricity and a similar amount for water, which they must buy in drums due to the lack of a water supply system. Expensive farm inputs and traders who undervalue their produce further strain their meager income. Although Nanay Wilma used to make and sell *suman* (rice cake), she can no longer do so due to her deteriorating health.

Dodong and Norma Cuaton, both 57, originally hail from Bohol and Misamis Occidental, respectively. They met 34 years ago while working in a factory in Binondo, where they eventually married and raised a family of eight – five daughters and three sons. Among their children is a college student pursuing a degree in hotel management and another child in Grade 8.

Their decision to move to Bulacan around 25 years ago was driven by Dodong’s severe lung condition, as they sought to escape the high cost of living and unhealthy environment of Metro Manila. Despite their long-standing presence in SJDM, the Cuatons do not own their home; they reside on land claimed by prominent developers, the Araneta and Villar families. They received assistance in securing their current abode from the *Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas* (KMP).

The Cuatons primarily sustain their family through farming and selling their produce as ambulant vendors in Novaliches. Their children contribute financially, especially one of their daughters, who works as an overseas Filipino worker in Taiwan and has helped renovate their home. However, their income often falls short of covering household expenses, which can reach up to Php10,000 per month, including electricity, student allowances, and care for their eldest son who suffers from epilepsy. Periodic droughts and typhoons further devastate their crops and livelihoods, forcing them to rely on loans from ASA Philippines Foundation, a microfinance organization, whenever their income is insufficient.





On their little over a hectare of land, Dodong and Norma cultivate various crops, including *saba* (a type of cooking banana), *saluyot*, and *kamote* (sweet potatoes), along with fruits like jackfruit and *marang* (a tropical fruit). They previously participated in a communal farm but it faltered due to a lack of commitment from other members. Their situation is further complicated by the high cost of fertilizer (Php40 per kilo, totaling up to Php2,000 per hectare) and other chemicals for production, rising prices of goods and services, a lack of emergency assistance from the government, allegedly because they are not listed in the Registry, and constant threats from bad weather and theft.

"Despite all the challenges, we continue to dream and strive for our family and our neighbors here," says Dodong.

Rafael and Leonor Matandag, 58 and 47, respectively, have called SJDM home for over 20 years, after migrating from faraway Masbate. However, the looming threat of the Araneta family claiming the land they farm weighs heavily on them.

Despite this uncertainty, they remain committed to farming, their primary livelihood. They cultivate a variety of crops, including eggplants, *ampalaya* (bitter melon), *sitaw* (string beans), *saluyot*, *alugbati* (Malabar spinach), bananas, and rice. Farming is truly a family affair, with support from their eldest son, Marlon, who works in Japan; Michael, who has stopped attending school to help his parents; and Mary Grace, who shares in the labor. A son-in-law working in construction also pitches in.

Like many families in SJDM, the Matandags struggle to make ends meet through farming alone. Agricultural inputs are costly, and bad weather can devastate their crops, complicating their situation further. Managing irrigation with a motor pump and two carabaos adds to their burdens. While Rafael occasionally takes on construction work in the community, farming remains their primary source of livelihood.

"With life's hardships, farming is our hope, even though it is filled with challenges and sacrifices," says the Matandag couple.

Nanay Elena Caagas, a native of Dumaguete, has lived in SJDM for 29 years. Like the Cuatons and Matandags, she faces insecurity over tenure on land coveted by the Araneta family.

"Every day, I worry that we might lose the land we have worked so hard for," says Nanay Lenlen, as she is affectionately called.

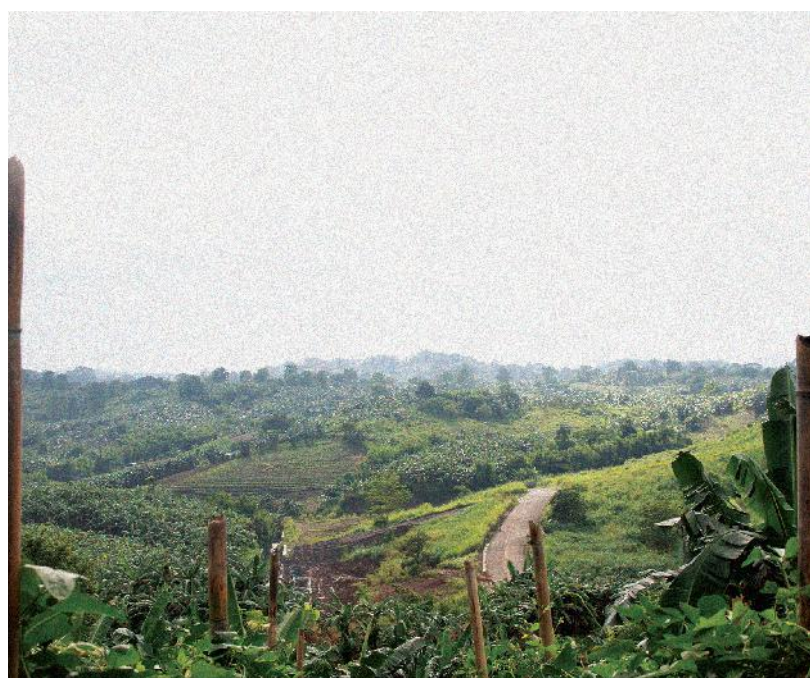
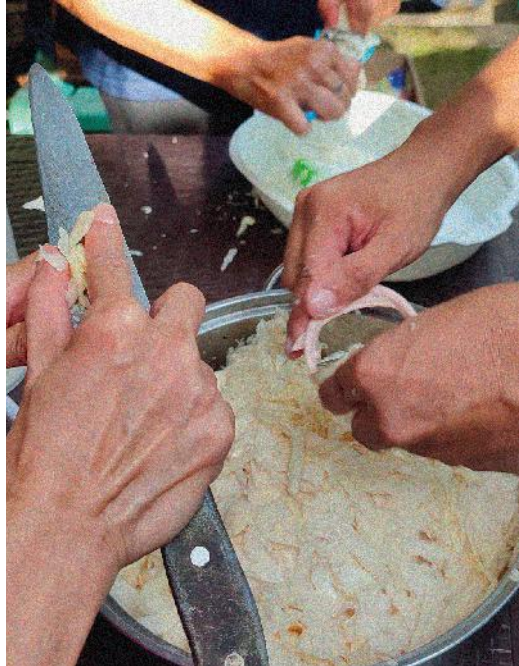
Life is tough – she needs around Php1,200 monthly for electricity and Php200 weekly for water, in addition to providing for her children's tuition and allowances. As a vendor, she faces restrictions imposed by local authorities, being allowed to sell only from 9 pm to 3 am and often being driven away during the day. Customers seeking bargains further diminish her earnings.

Nanay Lenlen grows an array of crops, including okra, sitaw, *talbos ng kamote* (sweet potato leaves), bananas, and *tanglad* (lemongrass). She also raises two pigs for the family's consumption. While she operates her own garden, she participates in community farming initiatives as well. Farming is costly – Nanay Lenlen attests that seeds cost Php1,500, pesticides another Php1,500, and raising pigs amounts to Php4,500, including their medicine and food. She dreads natural disasters – they wreck crops yet the national and local governments do not give any assistance. Despite these challenges, Nanay Lenlen remains actively involved in her community, advocating for her family's and other farmers' rights to land.

"As a mother and advocate, I will not let our rights to the land be taken away," Nanay Lenlen asserts.

Despite constant threats to their security and livelihood, the experiences of the Cuatons, Matandags, Nanay Lenlen, and Nanay Wilma highlight the plight and struggle of marginalized communities asserting their right to till the land, produce food, nurture their families without worry, and strive for a brighter future. With the *Samahan at Sandigan ng mga Magsasaka sa Sitio San Isidro* (SASAMAG), they thrive, cope, and work hard – including standing up to the powers that be – to realize their goals collectively.







Barangay Sumapang Bata, Malolos City

The tenacity of farmers like Narsing

Brgy. Sumapang Bata, Malolos City is surrounded by expansive planting fields. It is home to 593 families, with a population of 2,281 across 581 households. Six out of 10 jobs in Sumapang Bata are in farming, while the remaining residents work as professionals, laborers, drivers, and garbage pickers.

The rice fields speak volumes about the farmers' diligence and struggle. For farmers like Narsing, Ka Narding, Pising, Clarita, and Lina, their lives are deeply intertwined with the land they cultivate. After more than 20 years of farming, they now face significant challenges.

At 62 years old, **Graciano "Narsing" Manalad Jr.** reflects on a life spent in the fields, having begun farming at the tender age of 10. Today, he manages 1.4 hectares of land, an inheritance from his father and a symbol of his family's legacy. However, the land he once tilled with pride is now under threat, overshadowing the dreams he cultivated with hardship.

Narsing is married and a proud father of four, three of whom have jobs, while the youngest is navigating college life. Once, his farm bustled with fellow farmers working alongside him but as financial pressures mounted, those days faded. With a hint of sorrow in his voice he admits he can no longer afford to hire anyone.

The struggle for land has intensified. A landlord by the surname of Crisostomo has entered a joint venture with a developer, Maunlad Homes Incorporated, leaving the future of Narsing's farm hanging in the balance. Without a title to his land, he lives in constant fear of losing it. The title has been manipulated to avoid transferring ownership to the farmers. "Pulumbarit, the administrator of Maunlad Homes, mortgaged the mother title for Php215 million," Narsing explains with frustration. Many farmers in the area have sold their land, trading their heritage for survival.

Despite the challenges, Narsing continues to farm, growing sitaw alongside his *palay* (unhusked rice) to diversify his income. But the obstacles are relentless. Seed assistance from the government falls woefully short; he receives only one sack when he needs three. *Palay* seeds cost around Php2,600 per sack, he says, knowing that every peso counts. Fertilizer is another burden, costing Php1,700, which jumps to Php1,900 if borrowed – a harsh reminder of the debts that trap farmers like him.

Interest rates on loans add another layer of difficulty, ranging from 3 to 5 percent. “We’re made to feel indebted for just getting help,” says Narsing as he recalls when a loan shark deceived him, revealing the high price of the *palay* he borrowed only after he had loaded all the sacks onto a truck. Stories like these keep him awake at night, worrying about the choices he must make to survive.

The income from selling rice has plummeted, dropping from Php25 per cavan to as low as Php14, dictated by traders who wield the power in this desperate economy. When farmers run out of rice, they have no choice but to borrow from loan sharks, says Narsing, resigned to the reality of their situation.

Before, farmers like Narsing relied on carabaos for plowing, a more traditional and cost-effective method, which he preferred. Now, machines do the work faster but come with steep costs that many cannot afford.

Farmers’ organizations have been dissolved due to the oppressive climate of fear and violence under the previous regime. “Palparan’s acquittal was disheartening,” Narsing says, recalling the days when developers used the military and goons to intimidate and attack those who dared to resist. Jovito Palparan, a notorious general known as “*Berdugo*” (The Butcher), led one of the State’s bloodiest counterinsurgency campaigns in the early 2000s in Central Luzon, Mindoro, and Samar.

As subdivisions sprouted around them, the land that once yielded plentiful harvests has been lost, sold for as little as Php20 to Php50 per square meter. With every sale, another farmer’s dream slips away. Narsing feels the weight of these losses, lamenting that their livelihoods have fallen apart since Duterte’s administration, pointing to the Rice Tariffication Law as a significant factor in their decline.

Yet, amid these struggles, there is a glimmer of hope. Narsing’s youngest child aspires to become a lawyer, motivated by the desire to fight for the rights of farmers like their father.





Like Narsing, **Reynaldo Choco “Ka Narding” Marcos** remains dedicated to the land they love. He tills a one-hectare rice farm based on a Certificate of Land Transfer (CLT) awarded in 1983. Ka Narding harvests around 90 to 100 cavans per hectare, though this can drop to 80 when conditions are poor. He plants twice a year, following a rigorous schedule: preparing the land in July, planting in August, and harvesting in October.

Farming is not without its hardships for 74-year-old Ka Narding. Typhoons and flooding threaten their crops, and pests like snails invade the fields. He also receives one sack of seeds from the Department of Agriculture before each harvest but needs three for proper planting. These sacks from the government contain only 40 kilos instead of the promised 50, complicating his efforts. Fertilizer prices soar between Php2,800 and Php3,000 per hectare, and he often requires six to eight sacks to nourish his crops.

The financial strain is unrelenting. The previous harvest barely covered his expenses, leaving him with little to show for his hard work. Even organic fertilizers provided to them ended up being left on the roadside because they were deemed unusable.

Despite these challenges, Ka Narding remains resourceful. He has his own *kuliglig* (a small motorized tiller) but prefers not to rent it out; instead, he allows fellow farmers to use it as long as they provide the fuel. “We help each other out in any way we can,” he says, emphasizing the spirit of cooperation that binds their community.

At 86 years old, **Priscila “Pising” Marcos** still trudges through her one-hectare rice field, often leasing additional land to support her family. Despite the physical demands, she remains committed to her work. She borrows funds from the local cooperative at a manageable 3% interest to sustain her farming, hoping for a gross income of Php50,000 to Php60,000. However, she often only nets around Php15,000 after expenses. “I’m left with just a sack,” she says with a weary smile, yet her resolve remains unyielding.

Clarita Lamboy, 67, also finds herself in a cycle of borrowing just to plant her crops on her small piece of land. The returns are often insufficient, merely covering her debts. She holds on to farming for her livelihood and survival. To supplement her income, she works as a farm laborer, earning between Php500 and Php550 a day, depending on whether snacks are provided. Clarita also sells fresh vegetables and mangoes, managing to make ends meet despite the hardships. After her husband, a former member of the Alyansa ng Magbubukid ng Bulacan, passed away, Clarita took on the membership herself.

Unlike Pising and Clarita, **Lina Villanueva**, 77, does not own any land. Once a dedicated farmer, she now relies on her children in Nueva Ecija. With six children to care for, Lina struggles with the rising cost of living. Her retirement from farming has not diminished her hopes; she wishes for lower prices on basic goods to ease her family's burden.

The farmers face overwhelming obstacles, yet they demonstrate remarkable solidarity. They help each other by lending their kuliglig and water pumps without asking for anything in return and maintain a system of seed exchange. This cooperation is essential, especially when managing fallow land, as they recognize that neglected areas can become overgrown and attract pests.

The farming spirit of Narsing, Ka Narding, Pising, Clarita, and Lina remains unbroken, fueled by the hope that one day, justice and prosperity will find their way back to the fields of Brgy. Sumapang Bata.







Barangay Payatas, Quezon City

Aspirations for sustainable gardening

Payatas, derived from the phrase “*payat sa taas*”, meaning “thin soil at the top”, refers to the area near the upper part of the Tullahan River, historically unsuitable for rice cultivation.

Brgy. Payatas is a densely populated area in Quezon City, known for its challenging environment and as location of the infamous dumpsite. In recent years, the barangay continues to grapple with squalor, with many residents living below the poverty line. The community is characterized by a diverse population, primarily composed of various ethnic groups from the North, alongside migrants from Southern Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao.

The landscape of Payatas has evolved, with a mix of semi-concrete homes and informal settlements. Many residents near the dumpsite have constructed their houses using scavenged materials, reflecting their resourcefulness. While some parts of the barangay have been developed into residential subdivisions, significant areas remain underdeveloped due to limited access to infrastructure and services. The Payatas dumpsite, once the largest open dumpsite in the Philippines, has undergone improvements since the tragic landslide in 2000.

For the children of Lower Molave and Golden Shower, three schools, both private and public, serve as educational hubs, catering to students from elementary through high school. But the absence of universities nearby limits opportunities for those wishing to pursue higher education.

Healthcare is a vital concern for the community. In Lower Molave, the Payatas Health Center provides essential services like primary care, dentistry, and ophthalmology, ensuring residents can regularly access health services. In contrast, Golden Shower faces a significant challenge – it does not have its own health center and the nearest facility is 1.3 kilometers away, leaving residents reliant on occasional medical missions in their area.

Housing in the community reflects various living situations. Some residents own their homes through housing rights or benefit from Gawad Kalinga initiatives, while others rent from homeowner associations. Despite these arrangements, the land is primarily owned by civil service or private corporations. As the population grows, overcrowding becomes a pressing issue, straining resources and living conditions.

Many families’ livelihoods hinge on the salaries of the husbands. However, the soaring prices of basic goods have rendered these incomes insufficient for a decent living. The COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated the situation, stripping away many job opportunities. In response, mothers in the community took initiative in 2019, transforming their backyards into urban gardens to improve their families’ dire circumstances.

Box 1. Barangay Payatas Farming Calendar

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN
Due to the cold weather in January, the participants agreed that planting <i>pechay</i> (a white-stemmed green leafy vegetable) is unsuitable for this season. Instead, they decide to plant eggplants and okra.	The participants want to plant ampalaya and tomatoes because they are easy to grow. They also plan to plant <i>upo</i> (bottle gourd) and squash, which they identified as suitable for the cold weather in February.	It's the drought season this month. The participants plan to grow bell peppers which will require both land and seedlings.	It is still summer in April, and a lot of plants are drying up. The participants agreed that they can start planting sitaw during this month.	Participants note that the rainy season will begin in May. During this time, they want to cultivate <i>sili</i> (chili pepper), talbos ng kamote, <i>pechay</i> , sitaw. They suggest using recycled water bottles as containers.	It is still rainy season in June, and the participants plan to cultivate okra, eggplant, ampalaya, tomatoes, and onions. This will need land and fertilizer.

Efleda “Leda” Nebres, 46, hails from Nueva Ecija. She moved to Manila in the 1990s to join her mother, who had been invited by a relative running a grocery store. This transition marked the beginning of her journey in the city.

Nay (short for Nanay) Leda is a widow and a devoted mother of five. Her children represent her hopes and dreams for a better future: Ninyo, 24, working in information technology (IT); Abel, 22, employed at a call center; Heart, 20, a second-year social work student; and her two younger children, Zalde, 15, and Faith, 13, who are in Grades 10 and 8, respectively.

Their house, constructed through the Gawad Kalinga initiative, was made affordable with a monthly payment plan of Php750. While Nay Leda appreciates the security of her home, she worries about her elderly mother, who has yet to receive a house of her own despite paying her dues and contributing to the community's development. They have reliable access to water and electricity, although the costs are burdensome.

Nay Leda supports her family through her work as a vendor and seamstress. On a good week, she can earn from Php1,200 to Php1,400 from her sewing but payment can take up to two weeks. This gap means she often needs to replenish her stock weekly, keeping her in a cycle of labor and anxiety.

JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
The wet season continues. Participants want to try cultivating sitaw, sili, okra, eggplant, and <i>malunggay</i> (moringa) trees. This will require land, container, and tools for digging the soil.	Participants want to plant tomatoes, <i>kangkong</i> (water spinach), and talbos ng kamote. They will need land and a hoe.	Participants are interested in planting pechay particularly this month. The main challenge they identified is that animals are destroying their herbs, which are also disintegrating during the rainy season.	Residents want to plant tomatoes. This will require tools for digging the soil and containers. Rain is still expected this month, which causes the disintegration of herbs, and the leaves are turning red due to environmental stress or lack of nutrients.	Residents want to plant ampalaya, pechay, sili, upo, squash and okra, which they find suitable for the cooler weather during this month. They will need seedlings to start.	Planting sitaw, eggplant and okra is suitable for the cooler weather. This will necessitate land, containers, a hoe and fertilizer.

Her daughter Heart contributes to the family's income with a scholarship of Php2,400 a year from St. Joseph's Church. But the family's monthly expenses often reach Php10,000, primarily for the medication of Nay Leda's father, a stroke patient, and her brother, who has a chronic disease, along with food, debts, school supplies, and utilities. Nay Leda finds that their earnings are consistently insufficient to meet their needs, unfortunately forcing her to borrow money to fill the gaps.

In a recent gathering, Nay Leda and her neighbors engaged in a farming calendar activity, mapping out their gardening plans for the year. They identified crops they want to cultivate, the materials required, and the challenges they anticipate in different seasons. This collaborative effort not only strategized their gardening but also strengthened their bond as they strive to improve their lives through urban farming.

In light of the significant challenges they face, such as the lack of land to cultivate and vulnerability to climate change, the residents of Lower Molave and Golden Shower have expressed a keen interest in hydroponic gardening. This innovative approach offers a viable solution for growing food in urban settings where traditional gardening methods are limited.

The urban farm practitioners of Brgy. Payatas are dedicated to container gardening, focusing on cultivating vegetables for their families' individual consumption. This initiative not only addresses immediate food needs but also serves as a practical response to the pressing economic hardships they endure. By nurturing their gardens with help from funds gathered from various advocates by the *Pinagkaisang Lakas ng Mamamayan* (PLM), an urban poor organization, these community members are taking proactive steps to improve their living conditions, fostering a sense of collective empowerment and hope for a more sustainable future.



Laban Kabataan Pasulong

Hope in the young

Once known as *Likas Kayang Pagsasaka* and later *Laban Kabataan Padayon*, the organization now called *Laban Kabataan Pasulong* (LKP) was founded in 2021 as an extension youth group of the PLM. This vibrant collective aims to support gardening and cooking efforts in their community kitchen, uniting youth and students from elementary through college.

The youth reside in row houses in Lower Molave, many of which their families have acquired. Within their community, small stores offer quick access to meals, snacks, and basic necessities. A nearby Catholic church serves as a community space for learning and recreation, even for youth who do not identify as Catholic.

"Public schools are within walking distance but overcrowded classrooms and inadequate facilities make learning challenging. We want to join sports clubs but we are required to bring our own equipment, which we couldn't easily do due to lack of resources", says Zalde, Nay Leda's son.

While barangay health centers are close by, clinic facilities are limited, forcing some residents to travel 15-20 minutes to reach hospitals for treatment.

During a recent focus group discussion, the youth engaged in activities designed to foster teamwork and reflection. One such activity, “Uprooting the Carrot,” involved members working together to “uproot” their peers, symbolizing their collective struggles and achievements. They learned that despite initial challenges, unity could lead to success.

They also played a “Memory” game, matching crops to gardening tools, reinforcing their knowledge of what they grow and when. However, they noted that their harvests are insufficient to meet their food needs. Although they receive seeds from local government units (LGUs) and non-government organizations (NGOs), the most pressing requirement is soil, which is both scarce and costly. Their gardening tools also need upgrading, as many have fallen into disrepair, prompting them to improvise with items like used containers and sticks.

Recently, they engaged in a dialogue with LGUs, receiving promises of support for urban farming. Yet, the specifics of this assistance, particularly regarding soil or land, remain unclear.

LKP members have been given seeds and materials to cultivate their own vegetables. Much like their parents, they’ve taken to growing crops at home or in the backyards of neighbors and relatives. With their busy school schedules, they choose vegetables carefully, focusing on crops that can thrive within their limited time and resources. Their harvests include sili, kangkong, alugbati, blue ternate, malunggay, eggplant, oregano, squash, bell pepper, and sitaw. These vegetables both contribute to their families’ meals or are used in the community kitchen.

Despite their efforts, challenges such as the lack of sunlight and unsuitable planting locations often hinder crop growth. The youth are learning to identify which vegetables require more sunlight and which are easier to manage – all while grappling with the realities of urban gardening. Container gardening is their primary method of cultivation due to the lack of available land. Urban living necessitates purchasing soil, which has become increasingly expensive.

LKP is determined to uphold their parents’ legacy in urban farming and continue their community kitchen efforts. However, they face significant hurdles without access to soil and land. Although their LGUs have expressed support, the lack of concrete plans for land provision remains a pressing concern.





Barangay Commonwealth, Quezon City

A community of strong women

Brgy. Commonwealth is one of the largest and most populous barangays in Quezon City. Located in the northeastern part of the city, it serves as a vital residential and commercial hub. Commonwealth is known for its significant landmarks, including Commonwealth Avenue, one of the major thoroughfares in Metro Manila, which facilitates access to various parts of the city. The area features a mix of residential neighborhoods, commercial establishments, and educational institutions, making it a vibrant locale for both living and business.

In recent years, Brgy. Commonwealth has experienced rapid urbanization, leading to the development of new housing projects and infrastructure improvements. However, like many urban areas, it faces challenges such as traffic congestion, waste management, and the need for enhanced public services.

In the bustling streets of Brgy. Commonwealth, six women navigate the complexities of life, balancing family responsibilities and financial strains.

Eliza Demerin, 57, left her home province of Capiz in search of better opportunities in Manila. As a single mother of three, she juggles her family's needs from their rented home in Villa dela Rosa Subdivision. With a monthly rent of Php3,500, her concerns about housing insecurity trouble her, especially as she relies on her children's earnings, particularly from her son who works at Red Ribbon, a commercial bakeshop. Despite her daughter finishing Grade 12, the family struggles to cover tuition, utilities, and daily expenses. Eliza often finds herself borrowing money to make ends meet. Their situation is truly precarious.

Meanwhile, **Arlene Hufancia**, 40, originally from Camarines Sur, has built her life in the same barangay with her husband and four children. For the past 10 years, they have rented their home for Php3,500 a month. The fear of eviction looms over them, compounded by the utility expenses paid through their landlord. Arlene supplements the family income by selling chicken and barbeque, alongside offering massage services. Despite her hard work, the family's finances are tight, forcing her to borrow money or cut back wherever possible.

At 38, **Merjie Catherine Elip** has lived in Brgy. Commonwealth for over two decades. Married with a Grade 7 daughter, her family shares a house with her siblings, navigating the complexities of joint living. Her husband, a truck driver, provides a monthly income of over Php15,000, while Catherine's small sari-sari store adds a little extra. Yet, with rising costs, they occasionally rely on loans from family or local moneylenders, showing the delicate balance of their financial stability.

Evangeline Galupo, 58, comes from Cebu and fears the uncertainty of their housing situation. Living with her two daughters in a house they purchased for Php55,000, they don't own the land it stands on nor do they know who the landowner is. With her husband working in construction, their combined income is not enough to cover daily expenses, leading them to borrow from local moneylenders when necessary. Evangeline's anxiety about their living situation reflects the ongoing struggle many in the community face.



Rizaline Regner, 43, is a lifelong resident of Quezon City. Living with her husband and four children, they too rent their home for Php3,500 a month. Her husband, a security guard, earns Php13,000 monthly but their expenses exceed this amount, pushing them to seek loans when funds run short. The fear of eviction and instability lingers, mirroring the experiences of her neighbors.

Lastly, **Rosevilla Duerme**, 49, has built a life in Brgy. Commonwealth with her two daughters. Despite owning their house, the uncertainty of not knowing the landowner adds to her worries. Her husband, a barangay officer, earns a minimum wage but like the others, they often turn to local moneylenders to bridge the financial gaps. Rosevilla's concerns for her family resonate deeply within the community, especially when health crises arise.

These women share common challenges: the rising cost of living, the burden of rent, and the fear of losing their homes. During the pandemic, they faced further hardships, witnessing inequalities in aid distribution and the struggle for basic necessities. Local services, such as health centers and schools, provide some relief but they still grapple with the pressures of daily life. The looming presence of urban development adds to their anxieties, as new construction projects threaten the stability of their homes.

As they navigate these complexities, these women remain determined to support their families and each other. Container gardening has allowed them to grow vegetables and herbs at home, providing a source of fresh produce. This initiative helps reduce their grocery expenses and ensures access to nutritious food for their families, which is especially important when cash is tight.

Engaging in container gardening also empowers these women by giving them the opportunity to learn new skills and gain confidence in their ability to cultivate food. It fosters a sense of independence, as they could produce their own food rather than relying solely on the market.

Most importantly, container gardening encourages interactions among neighbors, fostering a sense of community. The women have shared tips, seeds and even harvests, creating bonds and support networks that have been crucial in times of need. This camaraderie provides emotional support as they face common struggles.

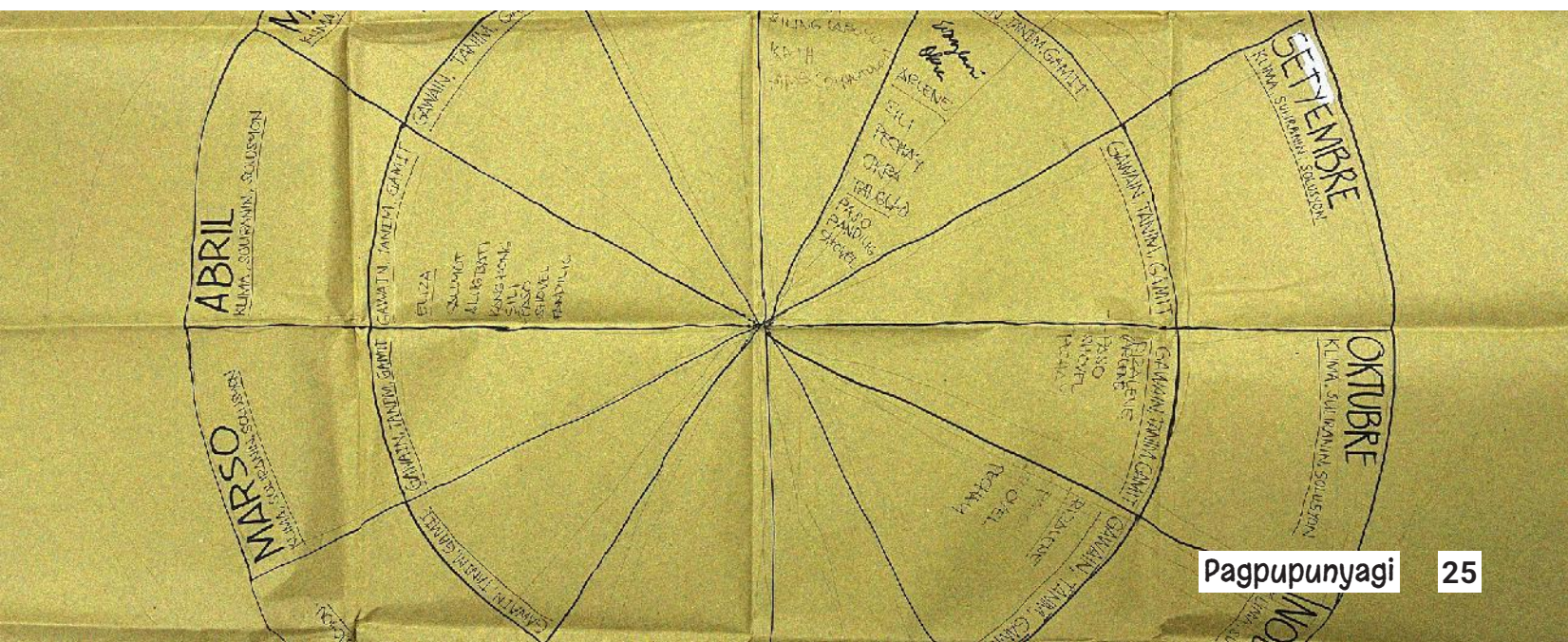
Box 2. Barangay Commonwealth Farming Calendar

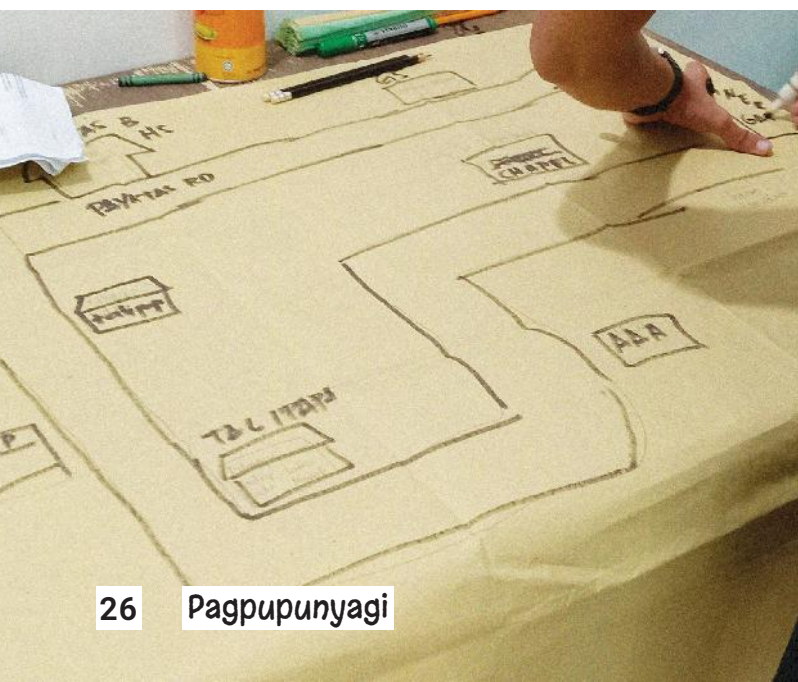
The members of PLM from Brgy. Commonwealth have been actively engaged in container gardening since last year, using seeds provided by the organization. Their experiences have varied, resulting in different levels of success. During a recent gathering, each member shared their planting schedules and methods:

- **Nay Eliza** typically plants saluyot, alugbati, kangkong, and sili in May. Her gardening tools include homemade containers, store-bought soil, a small shovel, and a watering can.
- **Nay Rosevilla** grows *mustasa* (mustard greens), saluyot, and *siling labuyo* (wild chili) in July, using the same types of homemade containers and tools as Nay Eliza.
- **Nay Catherine** attempted to plant corn in July but it did not thrive. She also relies on homemade containers and store-bought soil.
- **Nay Evangeline** plants okra in August, using the same gardening implements as her fellow members.
- **Nay Arlene** grows sili, pechay, okra, and tanglad in August, employing homemade containers and the usual tools.
- **Nay Rizalene** plants pechay, sitaw, and ampalaya in October and November, also using similar tools and containers.

The group discussed the challenges they face with their container gardening efforts. A major concern is the lack of affordable soil, as store-bought soil costs Php60-70 per bag. They also contend with pests like aphids and worms, and sometimes their vegetables are eaten by mice or cats.

To improve their gardening, they noted that their biggest needs are more soil and seeds. While they manage with homemade containers and tools, they have also tried to acquire a vacant lot for a communal farm. Unfortunately, the owner refused their request without providing a reason.







Area 17, Barangay UP Campus

The fight for a home

For families like Rodelyn, Jun, Toto, Butch, Ana, Tash and Aga, who have made Area 17 of the Brgy. UP Campus their home for over two decades, the journey has been one of resilience and hardship. They left the Visayas, driven by the promise of opportunities in Metro Manila. Some even abandoned their studies in the provinces to seek work at a young age, hoping to realize their dreams. But the reality has been far different.

The university administration is aware of their existence and has categorized residents based on when they started settling on the land. Those who settled after 2011 were excluded from the census, and UP has prohibited them from making house repairs.

With irregular and part-time jobs rendering uncertain returns, residents often turn to microlending and loan sharks to augment their measly incomes.

Services in the area are insufficient. Children commute to distant schools, while older students often find themselves in expensive private institutions. Basic services like water and electricity are privatized, leaving many reliant on costly submeters. Although there used to be a community well, residents now have to dig their own and pray for rain. There are also no public hospitals nearby; the East Avenue Medical Center, the closest facility, requires a 20-45 minute commute from Area 17. Residents are thus forced to seek medical attention when needed from private facilities, which are the only options available.

Local government support rarely reaches the community. During the pandemic and other emergencies, residents are often surprised to see neighboring barangays and communities receiving aid from the LGU, as they are usually not informed and do not get anything.

They are grateful for youth advocates from the *Kariton ng Maralita*, who are helping them assert and promote their rights within the community.

The residents also value a small piece of land where they plant vegetables for personal consumption and for sale when there is surplus. They share crops with one another when harvests fall short. But this makes them insecure as UP lays claim to the land and threatens them with eviction. For now, they choose to continue cultivating the land by planting vegetables and fruits.

As the threat of demolition looms, the community has rallied to form the Defend Area 17 Network. They refuse to be evicted, and demand recognition and support. With offers of relocation or a measly cash payout on the table, they know their fight is about more than just land – it's about their right to live and thrive where they've planted their roots.

Their story highlights the urgent need for economic policies that protect vulnerable communities, ensuring access to education, healthcare, and essential services. In the heart of a sprawling city, they remind us that every community deserves a chance to grow.

Box 3. Area 17, Barangay UP Campus urban farming needs

SEEDS

- Pechay
- Kangkong
- Eggplant
- *Siling panigang* (green chili pepper)
- Bell pepper
- Okra
- Upo
- *Patola* (ridge gourd)
- Ampalaya
- Malunggay
- Chinese kangkong
- Spinach

MATERIALS

- Hoe
- Rake
- Water drum and hose
- Rubber boots
- Garden net
- Watering can
- Materials for mushroom cultivation
- Sickle
- Urea

OTHER NEEDS

- Organic farming training







And Beyond

In the face of economic hardship and land insecurity, the communities in focus provide a glimpse of how Filipinos' perseverance paves their path of survival, solidarity, and hope. From the farmers of San Jose Del Monte and Malolos, Bulacan, to urban gardeners in Brgy. Payatas and Brgy. Commonwealth, as well as the families in Area 17 of Brgy. UP Campus, these narratives illuminate the struggles and triumphs of those striving to secure their rights and livelihoods. Each account reflects a shared commitment to nurturing their families, cultivating their land, and advocating for their rights, revealing a profound interconnectedness among diverse communities. As they confront systemic challenges, their stories serve as powerful reminders of the strength found in unity and the potential for transformation through collective action.

Stories of perseverance

The stories from San Jose Del Monte and Malolos illustrate the determination of farmers in marginalized communities striving to secure their livelihoods and assert their humanity. Farmers like Kuya Dodong and Ate Norma, alongside the Matandag family, Nanay Lenlen and Nanay Wilma, confront not only the daily struggles of farming amidst landgrabbing and economic instability but also the emotional toll of job and housing insecurity and the threat of eviction. Their unwavering commitment to tilling and making the land productive reflects a deep connection to their roots, emphasizing the essential role of agriculture in their lives.

In Brgys. Payatas and Commonwealth, mothers and families echo similar struggles, transforming their backyards into urban gardens as a means of survival. These initiatives foster not only food security but also community bonds, allowing residents to share resources and support one another in times of need. The youth from *Laban Kabataan Pasulong* embody the hope and innovation necessary for future sustainability, engaging in urban farming efforts despite facing significant obstacles such as inadequate resources and support from the local and national governments.

Meanwhile, in Area 17 of Brgy. UP Campus, families assert their right to exist and thrive, banding together against the looming threat of displacement. Their collective action showcases the power of community solidarity in the face of adversity, emphasizing the need for policies that recognize and uplift vulnerable populations.

Together, these narratives highlight the urgent necessity for inclusive social and economic measures that protect the rights of those who work the land and contribute to society. They remind us that every effort to cultivate hope – whether through sustainable farming practices or community organizing – contributes to a richer,

more equitable future. As these communities continue to advocate for their rights and strive for a better life, they inspire us all to support grassroots movements that empower individuals and foster resilience against the challenges of urbanization and economic disparity.

Bagsakan and more

Farmers' groups, land rights advocates, and champions of healthy food and agriculture are joining the fight for genuine agrarian reform and sustainable food and agriculture systems. Sustainable agricultural practices that have nourished communities for generations are being promoted, with efforts to secure support for them. Promoting agroecologically sound methods also means combating landgrabbing and the conversion of agricultural land for commercial use, which jeopardizes food security and environmental integrity.

Organizations dedicated to agrarian reform such as SASAMAG, KMP, PLM, and LKP, inspire collective action, encouraging other communities to embrace lifestyles that value local agriculture, stand with farmers, and advocate for their rights. Farmers, among the most marginalized in Philippine society, face challenges such as land dispossession and human rights violations. By recognizing and amplifying their struggles, advocates can create a powerful movement for food sovereignty.

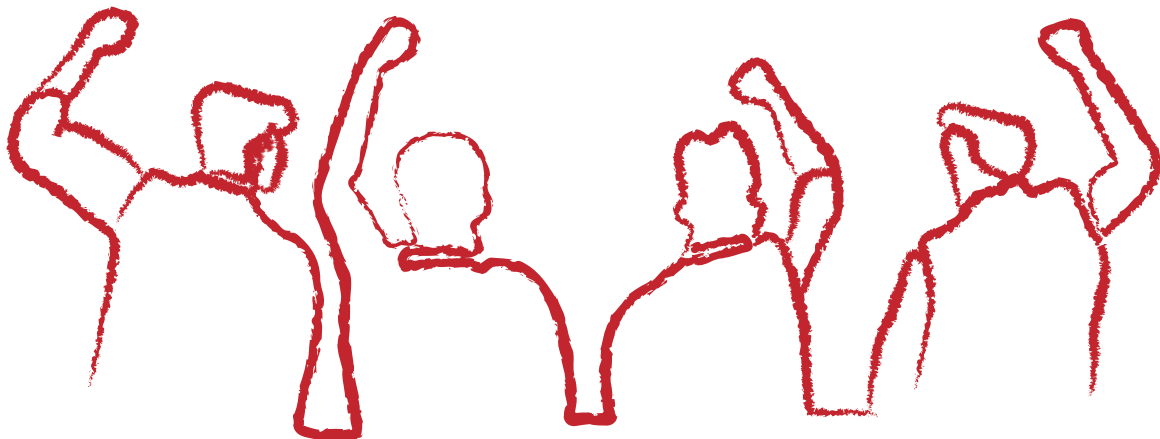
Various groups are putting up platforms for farmer advocacy, connecting agricultural initiatives with local communities. By supporting projects like community farming and local produce markets such as the *Bagsakan*, they help eliminate middlemen, ensuring fair prices for farmers and fostering direct relationships between consumers and producers. These initiatives are crucial in promoting solidarity and encouraging consumers to actively engage in supporting sustainable agricultural practices. By urging local governments to sponsor agroecology fairs and other events, they help cultivate a culture of appreciation for local produce while amplifying the voices of farmers advocating for their rights.

Ultimately, achieving genuine agrarian reform and a robust agricultural sector requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders. By working together to advocate for substantial government support for farmers in land distribution, access to resources, and reasonable financing, while challenging policies that favor corporate and chemical farming, they can pave the way for a more just and sustainable food system that benefits all Filipinos. Through perseverance, they can ensure that Philippine agriculture thrives and is built on the principles of equity and sustainability.



Endnotes

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