



Growkits distribution to urban farmers

# Localising food supply chains during the COVID-19 pandemic: An example from the Philippines, Move Food Initiative

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This article is based on a series of interviews conducted with the AGREA team as part of the development of a SUN Movement 'Solutions Brief'. Interviews were conducted with Cherrie Atiliano; CEO, AGREA; Sef Carandang; Move Food Initiative Volunteer/ Gender Specialist, United Nations; Sonia Gonzales, Business Operations Manager, AGREA; Benjamin Jorge Cadag, Agribusiness Manager, AGREA; Caroline de Leon, Mindanao Logistics Officer, AGREA; Mary Ann Reyes, Administration and Finance Manager, AGREA and William Dar, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Philippines. The authors are grateful for the support of the SUN Movement Secretariat for identifying this story and for the support in developing and disseminating the broader 'Solutions Brief'.

## PHILIPPINES

**What we know:** The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent country lockdowns have had a large impact on food systems, particularly in relation to supply chains. This has necessitated the strengthening of local supply chains.

**What this article adds:** In the Philippines, a local non-governmental organisation, AGREA, developed the Move Food Initiative which aimed to move food from farms to consumers and to reduce food waste during the pandemic by using an online fresh food ordering platform and developing 'rescue kitchens' which repurposed fresh produce that would otherwise go to waste. While working closely with farmers, AGREA was able to see first-hand some of the problems farmers faced, particularly in the area of post-harvest losses, and have now begun empowering farmers to diversify crops and implement additional measures to reduce post-harvest losses. AGREA has also helped to foster a greater understanding for consumers of where their food comes from.

### Background

As a measure to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the Philippines, strict lockdowns, known as community quarantines were imposed in many parts of the country. The strictest of these began on the 16th March 2020 when an enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) effectively shut down most parts of the country, restricting movement except for when essential. In Metropolitan Manila, the quarantine led to challenges in obtaining fresh produce with supermarkets and wet market stalls<sup>1</sup> struggling to meet demand. In other parts of the country, farmers faced challenges in selling their produce, there were logistical problems in transporting produce from farms to cities and, with restaurants closed, Filipino farmers were left with few people to sell their harvest to, leaving fresh produce going to waste.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) mobilised to try to mitigate the effects of the ECQ on agricultural activities including developing a food resilience protocol. A number of mitigation measures were put in place such as developing food passes that enabled trucks carrying food and agricultural products to pass through quarantine checkpoints, increasing efforts to promote urban agriculture through the distribution of seeds and planting materials and developing 'price freeze' policies to manage unreasonable and excessive price increases of basic necessities during the ECQ. However, recognising that the DA was not able to act as quickly as it would have liked given the necessary bureaucratic

<sup>1</sup> A wet market is a marketplace selling fresh meat, fish, produce and other perishable goods as distinguished from dry markets that sell durable goods such as fabric and electronics.

processes within the government, the DA welcomed public-private partnerships to support agriculture activities during this time.

AGREA was one such partner, led by its CEO, Cherrie Atilano. AGREA aims to support the empowerment of local farmers by implementing sustainable agricultural practices and creating inclusive agribusiness livelihood programmes. This article explores how AGREA reacted to the challenges brought about by the ECQ and tells the story of AGREA's Move Food Initiative, an initiative to move food from farms to consumers and to reduce food waste during the pandemic. This article is based on interviews held with the AGREA team in the development of a [Solutions Brief](#) which was published jointly by Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN) and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement.

### Moving food from farms to the city

Three days after the ECQ was imposed, Atilano received a call from one of the farmers who AGREA works with who had 15,000 pineapples he had just harvested about 60 kilometres from the capital city. He was unable to transport the fruit to markets given the imposed quarantine. Through its wide network and support system, AGREA was able to source a truck owned by the local municipal government that was able to pass through the stringent checkpoints and transport the pineapples to Metropolitan Manila. By posting on Facebook and again using the networks that AGREA already had, they were able to sell 3,500 pineapples in just three days.

Seeing the success of this initial opportunity, AGREA began receiving more calls from farmers asking for help to move their produce so decided to launch the Move Food Initiative to support this effort.

As with the first call, AGREA relied on Facebook to communicate information about the initiative as this is a social media platform that is widely used in the Philippines. From the very beginning, word spread quickly through the social media platform and people started to respond with offers of help. AGREA's Facebook page already had a dedicated audience of farmers with whom they had worked for the last five years who were made aware of the initiative and who reached out when they had harvested their produce. This network also included those who were interested in supporting the agricultural sector and who were willing to volunteer when needed. For example, when a call was posted relating to the need for trucks to transport food, one furniture company offered the use of a delivery truck. This was repurposed for the pick-up and delivery of agricultural produce. Private trucks and cars were offered by friends and acquaintances across farming regions and restaurants that had temporarily closed due to the quarantine were made available to be used as storage depots.

An online fresh food ordering platform, using



Supporting women farmers

a simple Google form, was set up to distribute the produce when it arrived in Metropolitan Manila. This included a list of the available fresh produce as well as the amount available and the price. To determine the price, AGREA used the price freezing standards set by the DA to ensure that farmers and consumers were not taken advantage of. Customers were requested to indicate on the form what they would like to purchase and to share the details of where the food would be delivered to. Given the logistics of delivering to individual consumers, AGREA instead targeted the building of communes, homeowners associations and businesses where food would be delivered to a central point and one volunteer would be responsible for moving food to individual consumers and households. These volunteers, known as 'movers', would subsequently set up stalls or mini-markets in building communes (observing strict social distancing measures) to pass produce on to those who had ordered it. Movers were generally well known in their communities and by consumers and hence already had a level of trust for those buying the produce.

### Emerging issues

As the initiative progressed, a number of emerging issues were noted that required creative solutions from AGREA.

#### ECQ restrictions and harvesting challenges

In some areas, only two to three people were allowed to harvest produce at a time as a result of the ECQ. Although no quantitative data was collected, this reportedly led to huge delays in harvesting and subsequent post-harvest losses. To solve this, AGREA spent time advocating

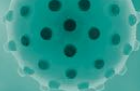
with mayors to enable more people to support the harvesting while still adhering to social distancing guidelines. In some areas, as a result of advocacy by AGREA and the DA, these restrictions reportedly reduced and more people were allowed to support in the harvesting of crops.

#### Financial payments

Paying farmers was another emerging challenge and required flexibility. Typically, AGREA paid farmers in person with cash but the limitations of the ECQ meant that AGREA had to shift from cash payments to bank transfers. Many farmers did not have access to bank accounts and were not able to open one due to not having an Identity Document (ID) so therefore creative ways of sending money had to be found. In some instances, rural banks or the bank accounts of relatives or friends were used or, in areas where there were no ATMs, at times AGREA paid local government officials in central locations and the officials would then distribute the money directly to the farmers. AGREA would subsequently follow up with the farmers to check that they had received the money and if they had distributed it amongst the farming cooperatives as per the agreements.

#### Working with different communities

As AGREA worked with ever-increasing numbers of farming communities across the country, they realised that ways of working were different in each community. The team had to contextualise the approach based on the farming community involved. For example, an indigenous farming community was identified as needing support to sell raw honey produced on ancestral land. Working with this community required a different



Watermelon delivery

way of working to build trust and to ensure that traditional practices were protected. AGREA relied on a volunteer who had an in-depth knowledge of this community and was able to facilitate AGREA offering support.

**Transportation of food**

One challenge of transporting the food using vehicles that were not municipal government vehicles was the negotiation required at quarantine checkpoints. The team had to secure food passes from an Inter-Agency Task Force (a special inter-government taskforce set up in light of COVID-19) which verified that their vehicles were carrying essential food commodities. These passes were often challenging to obtain and required support from local DA officials and government actors who were able to push the processes forward. AGREA had to spend a lot of time utilising local contacts and leveraging strong working relationships built prior to the pandemic to gain the support of government actors to secure the food passes. The DA was instrumental in supporting AGREA in this regard.

As the initiative grew, AGREA began receiving calls from farmers further afield who also needed to move their food. Considering that the Philippines is an archipelago of 7,107 islands, both sea and air transportation were needed along with land transportation. During the ECQ, such transportation also required special permission and came with its own challenges which is why the bulk of transportation was undertaken via land transportation. Sea transportation took time (up to five days) and was subject to weather challenges. Estimating the time that sea transportation would arrive in port was also difficult and meant that members of the AGREA team had to wait at the port for many hours. Air transportation was much quicker (typically only one to two hours). However, the new restrictions

within airports meant that once a plane had landed, it took many hours to complete the paperwork and secure the food. These delays were challenging given the need to move fresh produce as quickly as possible to prevent it spoiling. This challenge was also very noticeable when using land transportation as the trucks being used were not made for fresh food conveyance. They were poorly ventilated and lacked proper air conditioning. As such, food orders were prone to spoiling during the journey. Since there was not much that the AGREA team could do to address the challenges in transportation, it became vital that open communication was maintained with consumers so that they too understood the realities and challenges of transportation and were prepared for delays or for when stock was not of a high quality. This helped garner a sense of trust with consumers as they felt that nothing was being hidden from them in the process. Furthermore, when journeys were very long, the DA supported and provided cold storage to keep the food fresh while awaiting delivery in Metropolitan Manila.

**Tackling food waste**

The biggest emerging issue was that of food spoilage and food waste. In April, it became apparent that a surplus of tomatoes would go to waste if not used. There was also a growing supply of so-called 'ugly' foods which consumers were more reluctant to consume as well as a recognition that AGREA was having to throw away food that arrived in Metropolitan Manila already spoilt.

On the other hand, there was the challenge of restaurants being shut and chefs and restaurant workers being out of work. As a result, the Move Food Initiative decided to partner with chefs to develop products made from these oversupplied and misfit foods, naming the initiative the AGREA Rescue Kitchen (ARK). Ini-

tially, Pomodoro sauces and tomato jams were developed and this expanded to a broad range of produce including other types of jams, smoothies, soups, salad dressings and many other products depending on what surplus was available. Products were designed to be seasonal (based on what was grown at the time), artisanal (hand-made), intentional (designed out of foods that would otherwise be going to waste) and limited (in supply).

Like many countries, food loss is a major issue in the Philippines. Before the pandemic it was estimated that 30% of produce was lost post-harvest and during the pandemic this rose to almost 60%. This challenge became a priority for the Move Food Initiative. The products produced by the ARK were well received and demand has grown over time. The ARK also donated fresh produce and seasonal products to frontline and other essential workers.

Additional campaigns were developed to limit food going to waste. These included 'Hero Drives' where consumers were encouraged to buy fresh produce in bulk for a discount and the 'Being Crate-ful' Drive where crates filled with assorted available vegetables were sold to consumers. The 'Crate-ful' Drive, launched in August 2020, was the Move Food Initiative's way of extending gratitude to key workers. Consumers were told that for every crate of fresh and healthy fruit and vegetables purchased, AGREA would set aside a food parcel for selected beneficiaries, particularly jeepney (local bus) drivers and garbage collectors. In just five days, all the fruit crates had sold out, making it possible to deliver food parcels to 84 jeepney drivers and 12 garbage collectors. 'Donate a vegetable' campaigns were also developed in which AGREA promised that, for every 300 kg of produce ordered, 15 kg would be donated to kitchens that supplied frontline workers.

**Supporting farmers in the 'new normal'**

While working closely with farmers, AGREA was able to see first-hand some of the problems farmers faced particularly in the area of post-harvest losses. Farmers appeared to lack the skills and know-how to reduce these. AGREA built such factors into a brief capacity-building training that was conducted over the telephone and has worked hard to help farmers to better plan their harvests to avoid losses. Creative ideas and practices to prolong the life of food from farmers themselves were also tapped into and shared among other farming communities. One reason for post-harvest losses was the lack of diversity in crop planting – communities tended to produce the same crops that were harvested at the same time leading to a produce surplus. In light of this, AGREA and the DA have started working with farming communities to diversify the produce grown in provinces.

A further realisation that AGREA had was the fact that farmers lacked the skills for and



understanding of effective pricing models for their produce. Instead, in the past they have tended to rely on middlemen who take a cut of their profits. AGREA has slowly started working with farmers to help them to understand how to cost their produce and how to budget their income so that they are less reliant on taking out loans and working with middlemen in order to keep their farms operational.

### Supporting consumers in the 'new normal'

The biggest impact of the quarantine was the realisation by the public of the need to think about how they obtain their food. In an increasingly industrialised world, people have largely lost the connection to people growing their food and the pandemic has offered the opportunity for consumers to engage in a new way going forward. As a result, AGREA has also been promoting 'grow kits', urban gardening kits that include seedlings, potting mixes, seedling trays and a grow manual to encourage people to grow things at home, no matter how limited their space is. This is in line with the DA's 'Plant, Plant, Plant' programme that includes the distribution of seeds and planting materials as well as the establishment of community gardens. Home gardening was also promoted during the pandemic as a productive family activity that could be done during the ECQ.

Another lesson from the Move Food Initiative was the need to connect consumers to farmers. During the pandemic, there was a renewed focus on where food was coming from and AGREA was able to educate consumers on the process involved in getting food from farms to their homes. The Move Food Initiative Facebook page facilitated engagement with the wider consumer community and helped to connect farmers and consumers. By sharing farmers' stories on

the platform, consumers were able to get a sense of where their food was coming from, which farmer had produced the fruit and vegetables and what it took to bring produce to the market.

### Building off the successes of the initiative

The Move Food Initiative was subsequently adapted in light of a series of typhoons that affected the country in October 2020 (Typhoons Quinta, Rolly and Ulysses) to support farmers in the affected communities through a 'Rise Up and Recover' drive to support their recovery. One aspect of the drive was the 'Buto ng Pag-asa' or Seeds of Hope Initiative, where customers could sponsor a set of seeds that would cover 1,000 square metres of land.

The Move Food Initiative and the broader efforts by the DA have led to greater investments in agriculture by the Government of the Philippines. Amid the pandemic, efforts by the government and partner organisations have focused on localising food supply chains to prevent food waste and also to feed families.

The Move Food Initiative has also been shared widely as a success story in the midst of the pandemic, including through the SUN Movement, to promote the generation of ideas in other countries that are dealing with food waste and struggling to move food during lockdowns.

### Results

By 1 June 2020, the day the Philippines began lifting quarantine measures, the Move Food Initiative had shipped over 160,000 kg of fruit and vegetables from more than 7,400 farmers to nearly 52,000 families. By the end of November 2020, 191,447 kg of fruit and vegetables had been delivered, 28,122 farmers had been partnered with and fruit and vegetables had been served to 78,177 families and 4,690 frontline

workers. Farmers reported stories of how the initiative had impacted their lives such as the very first pineapple farmer who was able to pay back his loans and pay for his child's school fees. The initiative has been recognised within the DA and further afield with Atilano and AGREA winning numerous international and national awards.

### Lessons Learnt

Several lessons were learnt during the process of rolling out the Move Food Initiative and were, in part, key to its success. These included:

- 1. The need to be creative and agile:** The process of moving food around the country was entirely new to AGREA and the team had to learn as they went along, adapting and adjusting based on the emerging needs. Agility was needed to work differently with different farming communities and creativity was needed in order to overcome some of the challenges.
- 2. The importance of leveraging one's network:** From the beginning, the Move Food Initiative relied on AGREA's wide network of allies. Across Atilano's and AGREA's network, volunteers were engaged at both ends of the spectrum. Volunteers dedicated large amounts of personal time to support the initiative and helped to ensure food moved from farm to consumer. Facebook has played a critical role in this mobilisation. From the very beginning, word spread quickly through the social media platform and people started to respond with offers of help.
- 3. The need to complement government efforts:** AGREA has always aligned to government goals and objectives and maintains strong communication links with the DA who it kept continuously informed of its plans during the pandemic.
- 4. Contextualising the approach:** The Move Food Initiative looked different in each farming community and each consumer community. As such, there was not a logistical blueprint but instead the model was adapted as needed. The ways of working with farmers, the ways of transporting goods and the ways of paying farmers were all adapted based on the unique needs of each farming community. A similar process of contextualising approaches was also noted at the consumer end.

### Conclusion

While the pandemic has brought unprecedented suffering and challenges across the globe, it has also offered an opportunity to rethink practices and food consumption patterns. The Move Food Initiative is a small-scale example of a response to some of these large challenges. It is farmer-focused, community-based and sustainable. In addition, it provides a model that other countries can adopt, on a bigger scale, for a more sustainable future food system.

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A turmeric farm