



Scaling Up
Nutrition



Irish Aid
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Moving food and reducing waste

TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES DURING COVID-19 IN THE PHILIPPINES



THE PROBLEM

We need to treat hunger as a real threat, like we are treating the COVID-19 pandemic. Food availability is as critical as PPE [personal protective equipment].

— Secretary William Dar, Department of Agriculture

! The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented changes to global food and agriculture sectors. Many governments have closed formal and informal retail outlets for food, and severely restricted the movement of citizens, with the production, processing, transportation, trade, and retail of food being profoundly affected. This has led to multiple shocks throughout the food system. Sadly, such impacts on the food system have major impacts on people's nutritional wellbeing. The World Food Programme estimates that the number of women, men, and their families facing acute food insecurity doubled to 270 million by the end of 2020,¹ with increasing rates of stunting, wasting, maternal anaemia, and low birthweight, especially in lower, middle-income countries predicted.²

On 16 March 2020, the Philippine Government imposed an enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) which 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 struggling to meet demand. In other parts of the country, farmers have faced challenges in selling their produce; there were logistical problems in transporting produce from farm to cities, and, with restaurants and all institutional markets closed, Filipino farmers were left with few people to sell their harvest to, leaving fresh produce going to waste.

¹ WFP, 2020. Needs analysis informing WFP's Global Response Plan to COVID-19. <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000117454/download/>

² Standing Together for Nutrition Consortium, 2020. The potential impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on maternal and child undernutrition in low and middle income countries. <https://assets.researchsquare.com/files/rs-123716/v1/4aadae3e-ac75-4bfa-9dde-356ae0a5f8b1.pdf>



The silver lining of this pandemic is we can absolutely shorten the gap between the producers and consumers. When the lock down happened, all traders couldn't operate, farmers were left out with rotting produce in their fields. Despite challenges, we tried our best to bring their produce to the new market. Always making sure that no one is left behind in the process.

— **Cherrie D. Atilano**



How does a movement start? When the heart feels a need and the mind sees a solution and the will says, 'can do'!

— **Ivy Almario, AGREA board member**

THE SOLUTION



AGREA, a group that aims to support the empowerment of local farmers by implementing sustainable agricultural practices and creating inclusive agribusiness livelihood programmes, began getting calls from farmers unable to move their produce. The group, led by Cherrie Atilano, a member of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Lead Group, quickly set up the Move Food Initiative, an online, Google Formbased, fresh produce ordering platform, which facilitated food to move, at both producers' and consumers' end. The initiative has helped reduce food waste and post-harvest loss on the side of the farmers and on the consumers end, provided people who needed food but were not able to leave their homes because of the quarantine, access to fresh produce.

By 1 June, the day the Philippines began lifting quarantine measures, the initiative had shipped over **160,000 kilograms 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 fruits and vegetables** had been delivered, **28,122 farmers** had been partnered with, and fruits and vegetables had been served to **78,177 families and 4,690 frontline workers**.

The story of the Move Food Initiative offers some insights for other countries who are struggling to ensure that produce moves from farm to consumers, and for whom practical solutions to food waste and postharvest losses are limited. Some key aspects of its success are outlined below.



1. AGILITY: KEY TO RESPONDING TO NEEDS CREATIVELY

The Move Food Initiative began on day three of the quarantine. In order to meet the new reality, AGREA rapidly innovated, with staff having to quickly shift roles and responsibilities while operating within the limitations of quarantine themselves. The spirit of flexibility and a 'can-do' attitude emanated throughout the organisation as they had to learn the logistics of moving food from farm to consumer.

A sense of creativity was reflected within the organisation: creativity in getting food from the farms in an archipelago where transporting food is challenging even at the best of times, creativity in engaging with 'movers' – volunteers who facilitated the sale of produce to consumers in Metropolitan Manila – and creativity in dealing with food surplus and avoiding food waste in order to maintain AGREA's value of sustainability. In an environment that was rapidly changing as a result of the pandemic, AGREA was able to adapt and meet needs as they arose.



2. LEVERAGING ONE'S NETWORK

From the beginning, the Move Food Initiative relied on AGREA's wide network of allies. In order to overcome transport challenges, Atilano reached out to a furniture company who offered the use of a delivery truck. This was repurposed for the pickup and delivery of agriculture produce. Private trucks and cars were offered by friends and acquaintances across farming regions and restaurants that temporarily closed due to the quarantine were made available to be used as storage depots. Across Atilano's and AGREA's network, volunteers were engaged at both ends of the spectrum – those working with farmers to facilitate the transportation of food and those working in metro Manila, as movers, who were able to advertise the platform among consumers and facilitate the distribution and sale of produce when it arrived. Volunteers dedicated large amounts of personal time to support the initiative and helped to ensure food moved from farm to consumer.

Special permits to enable successful negotiation through the quarantine checkpoints was a critical challenge in transporting food during quarantine. Due to a strong working partnership with the Department of Agriculture prior to the pandemic, the team was able to secure food passes which verified that their vehicles were carrying essential food commodities and allowed passage through quarantine checkpoints. These passes, particularly at regional level, were challenging to obtain and required support from local Department officials and Government actors who were able to push the processes forward. Without these networks and strong working relationships it would have been more difficult to develop the Move Food Initiative during this time of crisis.



3. THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook is widely used in the Philippines, and, thus, the platform offered a way to provide regular communication on the Move Food Initiative easily and cheaply. From the very beginning, word spread fast through the social media platform (particularly through AGREA's Facebook page) and people started responding with offers of help. It was through Facebook that volunteers were mobilised, and farmers were engaged. AGREA's Facebook page already had a dedicated audience of farmers with whom they had been working with for the last five years, who were made aware of the initiative and reached out when they had harvests. This network also included those who were interested in supporting the agriculture sector and who were willing to volunteer when needed. A Move Food Initiative Facebook page was developed which helped to raise awareness of the online ordering system which could be used by consumers. This page facilitated engagement with the wider consumer community and also 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 fruits and vegetables and what it took to bring produce to the market.

The Move Food Initiative provided consumers with a better sense of where food comes from and highlighted the stories of farmers. It became not just about getting food but about being part of a solution.

— Sef Carandang, mover advocate/volunteer



The Move Food Initiative was born out of necessity – at the time AGREA was doing completely different activities but there was a need and we had to respond. It was a baptism of fire and we learnt as we went along.

**— Mary Ann Reyes,
AGREA head of
admin and finance**



4. COMPLEMENTING GOVERNMENT EFFORTS

The Department of Agriculture has a goal of developing ‘a food-secure and resilient Philippines with prosperous farmers and fisherfolk’. As such, AGREA has always aligned to government goals and objectives. This also rang true for the Move Food Initiative as it sought to support the Government in its efforts. The Department has always been responsive to public-private partnerships and see such initiatives as key to their work. During the initial implementation of the enhanced community quarantine, the Department of Agriculture recognised that it was challenging to rapidly respond to needs, given the bureaucratic processes within government. As such it supported initiatives like the Move Food Initiative to quickly act, assisting with some of the identified needs, such as the facilitation of food passes, transportation, and cold storage warehousing. In 2019, the Department of Agriculture launched the ‘Kadiwa ni Ani at Kita’ programme, an initiative which sells major agricultural goods at low prices to help impoverished households. The Move Food Initiative incorporated aspects of this Governmental programme into its work, and used prices determined through the price freeze initiative by the Department when selling its produce.

5. PRE-EMPTING AND COMMUNICATING LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

Overcoming logistical challenges has been one of the hardest tasks for the Move Food Initiative, considering that the Philippines is an archipelago of 7,107 islands. Transportation of produce is typically via a combination of air, sea, or land in the Philippines. During the ECQ, air transport and sea transport became increasingly limited and the bulk of transportation having to be made via land which increased the time for produce to get from farm to consumer. The trucks used were poorly ventilated without proper air conditioning. As such, food orders were subject to delays and prone to spoiling during the journey. A further logistical challenge was that, in some areas, only two to three people were allowed to harvest produce at a time. This led to further delays and post-harvest losses. To solve this, AGREA advocated with mayors to enable more people to support the harvesting, while still sticking to social distancing guidelines. As there wasn’t much that the AGREA team could do to improve 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 when stock was not up to a high quality. This helped garner sense of trust with consumers as they felt that nothing was being hidden from them in the process. Movers were generally well known in their communities and by consumers, which further helped build trust and maintain good communication.





Talking about it now it seems like it was easy, but it was not a simple process that we have done or are doing, there were so many different aspects involved, so many different things to consider.

**— Sonia Gonzales,
AGREA business
operations
manager**

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT USING A BLUEPRINT

As AGREA worked with ever-increasing numbers of farming communities across the country, they realised that the process of moving food was different in each community, and that a logistics blueprint could not be created. Moving food sometimes requires trucks, ferries or airplanes and the team had to shift modalities based on what produce was being moved.

Paying farmers also required flexibility as the limitations of the ECQ and the fact that those transporting the food were reluctant to carry cash with them meant that AGREA had to shift from cash payments to bank transfers. Many farmers did not have access to bank accounts and weren't able to open one due to not having an identity document (ID) so creative ways of sending money had to be found. In some instances, rural banks or relatives' or friends' bank accounts 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 then 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 agreements. Paying farmers in such creative ways was logistically challenging for AGREA and required a degree of trust from the side of the farmers.

During the process, an indigenous farming community was identified as needing support to sell raw honey produced on ancestral land (previously they would sell it every summer in neighbouring areas but the ECQ meant that they were left with gallons of unsold honey). Working with this community required a different way working to build trust and ensure that traditional practices are protected. They too had no bank accounts and a trusted person who had an existing relationship with the indigenous community had to be found to whom AGREA could pay and who would subsequently provide cash to the community.

A similar process of contextualising approaches was noted at the consumer end, as well. Some communities appreciated viewing the produce before purchasing and, as such, some movers set up regular market stalls, as opposed to the pre-ordering system. Using homeowner associations' club houses and common outdoor areas in communities – and strictly sticking to social distancing guidelines – these markets provided the opportunity for consumers to shop in a safe and small-scale manner.



7. THINKING SUSTAINABLY TO AVOID 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’ (misfit) foods, which consumers were more reluctant to consume. 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 chefs³ to develop products made of these oversupplied and misfit foods, naming the initiative the AGREA Rescue Kitchen. Initially, pomodoro sauces and tomato jams were developed, and this expanded to a broad range of produce, including pineapple jam, smoothies, soup, peanut butter, salad dressings, pesto, humous 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 (handmade), 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 percent of produce was lost post-harvest, during the pandemic this rose to almost 60 percent.⁴ This challenge became a priority to the Move Food Initiative. The products produced by the Rescue Kitchen was well received and demand for them has grown over time; a useful example of how products that are unwanted can be transformed, with a little effort and imagination, into something desirable. A separate Facebook page was developed to highlight what products were being developed so that consumers could easily purchase them. The kitchen was also vital in providing meals to frontline workers with a total of 4,594 workers provided with meals over the quarantine period through the AGREA Rescue Kitchen.



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 example 5 kg of tomatoes) for a discount, and the ‘Being Crateful’ campaign where a crate filled with assorted available vegetables were sold to consumers. With additional funds from this campaign, the initiative was able to provide food for jeepney drivers and garbage collectors.

³ One of AGREA’s board members owned a restaurant chain and provided a vital link to chefs who were able to develop products for the AGREA Rescue Kitchen. He also offered his restaurant facility to support the development of such products for home delivery.

⁴ WFP, 2020. Food Waste campaign. <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/stop-the-waste/>

COVID was a catalyst, an eyeopener for everyone to see what is needed, the problems that need to be solved.

— Benjamin Jorge Cadag, AGREA agribusiness manager



8. LEARNING TO BUILD BACK BETTER

The crisis has provided AGREA with new insights into the agriculture sector. It highlighted the isolation of farmers who often don't have phones or access to banking and who have limited knowledge of what happens to crops after being brought by traders. It emphasised that farmers may have little understanding of how to price their produce and the need for supporting women and men farmers to plan harvests and cash flow accordingly. AGREA is now working on a training programme for farmers. Furthermore, because farmers have been brought in as partners throughout the process, they themselves, are becoming more empowered to consider these aspects.

The issue of post-harvest loss has been a critical feature throughout the process. One reason was the lack of diversity in crop planting – communities tend to produce the same crops which are harvested at the same time, leading to a produce surplus. Proper planning is needed to ensure that there is a diverse array of produce grown in different provinces. Farmers also need to be equipped on how to limit post-harvest losses and their creative ideas and practices to prolong the life of food need to be further tapped into. This now has become a key concern for the Department of Agriculture.

The biggest impact from the quarantine was the realisation by the public of the need to think about how they obtain their food. In our 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, encouraging a degree of self-sustainability. AGREA is now promoting urban gardening kits, emphasising that almost everybody, no matter how small-scale, has the capacity to produce some of their own food. This is in line with the Department of Agriculture's 'Plant, Plant, Plant' programme (#plantdemic), which builds on the current momentum to rebuild under the 'new normal'.

While the pandemic has brought unprecedented suffering and challenges across the globe, it has also offered an opportunity to re-think practices and consumption patterns. The Move Food Initiative is a smallscale example of a response to some of these large challenges. It is farmer- focused, community-based, consumer- purposed and sustainable. And, perhaps can even provide a model that other countries can adopt, on a bigger scale, for a more sustainable future food system.

The pandemic has made people realise food is so important. Agriculture has been a focus during COVID-19, a year ago agriculture was not that sexy. But now it is becoming a hit.

— Christine Jodloman, AGREA Foundation associate director



@ ENN and Scaling up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, 2021.

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www.scalingupnutrition.org

