

Urban Farming and Urban Land Use Dilemmas in Metro Manila¹

KRISTIAN KARLO C. SAGUIN²

Introduction

Metro Manila's unprecedented growth has brought a host of challenges and complex land use dilemmas that urban governance seeks to address in a way that is sustainable, inclusive, and sensitive to the needs of urban residents. This policy brief takes the case of urban agriculture or urban farming, an activity rooted in land use decision making, to illustrate some of the intersecting issues in the context of Metro Manila. It recommends ways to incorporate urban farming into the urban development agenda in a sustainable and equitable manner that would promote its benefits rather than contribute to further urban exclusion.

Developing sustainable cities has long emerged as a framework for urban development in the Philippines, particularly with the emergence of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11. Under SDG 11, cities and human settlements are to be developed into inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable spaces. On paper, institutional support for strengthened equity in land use and urban development has been incorporated in various policies and urban agenda in the Philippines, giving emphasis on the concerns of the marginalized in the city. This is seen in examples such as the

Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 (Republic Act (RA) 7279), the National Urban Development and Housing Framework 2017–2022, and the Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board (HLURB) guidebooks. However, in practice, these strategies and principles of inclusive, participatory, and democratized urban land use planning have led to uneven results as many concerns of the urban poor rooted in land use are not addressed even with codified mechanisms. The challenge remains to bring focus to urban space as sites of social justice, where the least advantaged groups benefit from preferential treatment in the actual practice of decision making, especially when confronted with complex urban land dilemmas pertaining to basic needs such as food and shelter.

This policy brief illustrates how the case of urban farming and its associated land use and governance dilemmas present opportunities for incorporating social equity and the needs of the marginalized in urban land use decisions. Discussion for this policy brief is informed by interviews with government officials and urban farmers from 17 Metro Manila local government units (LGUs) from 2016 to 2018.³ It presents the context of urban farming in Metro Manila and its various challenges before posing several recommendations to incorporate urban

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² Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City • Email address: kcsaguin@up.edu.ph

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farming in the urban development agenda and improve its land use governance.

Challenges to urban farming in Metro Manila

Urban agriculture or urban farming refers to the growing of food through the cultivation of plants in cities, as well as their processing and distribution, including a variety of activities within different locations (e.g., vacant lots, rooftops, yards, greenhouses, parks) under various management regimes (e.g., residential, commercial, collective, institutional, non-profit) (McClintock 2014; Brown and Carter 2003, cited in WinklerPrins 2017). Urban farming has long existed in cities, often in marginal or interstitial urban spaces, but more recently, governments have recognized its importance by including it in various aspects of food systems planning and urban policy (Cabannes and Marocchino 2018). Multiple benefits of urban farming have been identified, including improving food security, nutrition and livelihood, especially of poorer urban households (Sonnino 2009); increasing diversity of diets, physical activity, and overall well-being for individuals and communities (De Zeeuw, van Veenhuizen, and Dubbeling 2011); and contributing to urban resilience, reduction of wastes, and ecosystem services (Hara et al. 2011; Sonnino 2009).

There is a diverse variety of people who farm, varying across class, gender, and age in Metro Manila. Based on fieldwork, many state-sponsored urban farming projects are located in government lands, including schools, parks, offices, open spaces, and demonstration farms, but urban farming also occur in private lands through community gardens or individual household farming. Pockets of more extensive agricultural lands that have been surrounded by built-up developments still remain in Metro Manila, including vegetable gardens, rice farms, and melon farms. The Local Government Code of 1991 devolved many functions and offices to city governments, such as environmental management and land use planning. This decentralization has enabled the emergence of local government urban farming projects that we see today, wherein all local government units host at least one project that often involves several departments and officials. National government

agencies and the private sector also provide active support and coordination with LGUs through the provision of inputs and technical assistance.

Despite its sustainability and equity potentials, urban farming in Metro Manila encounters a host of challenges tied to urban land use and development. Due to the sustained conversion of vacant or agricultural lands to other land uses in the last three decades, space for urban agriculture has been dramatically reduced, magnifying land use competition and restricting expansion of urban farming. Because of the scarcity of land, government urban farming projects have promoted specific types of urban farming that require limited space, such as vertical farming, rooftop, wall, window, and container gardening at the expense of more land-extensive farming. The planning philosophy of allocating “best use” of land for built developments and of the exclusion and invisibility of agricultural land uses in urban contexts contribute to the continued loss of vacant and open spaces.

Local governments have addressed the land problem in several ways. Many make the most use out of existing open spaces, including publicly-owned parks and vacant lots, or borrow lands temporarily from national agencies. Others strike an agreement or memorandum of understanding with private landowners. These create opportunities for urban farming but prevent further expansion or long-term planning given the uncertainty of land tenure.

Availability of inputs such as seeds, water, soil, and compost have not been a particular source of challenges in Metro Manila although suitability of land, pollution of waterways, and lack of sunlight pose minor problems. Access to technical know-how in farming however has served as a barrier for entry into urban agriculture, given that many urban residents have limited experience with crops or gardening. Interviews show that those who have prior experience tend to be migrants from rural areas who brought with them knowledge of farming that needed to be adjusted and adapted to the urban context. Many take up a farming project, only to be abandoned later due to a variety of reasons, such as lack of an interest or background in farming, of ample time and patience, and of a strong community spirit. Projects where participants had hands-on involvement in initiating and maintaining the

gardens and where they felt they had a stake in its success tended to be more successful and sustainable in the long run, according to interviews.

Issues of limited or lost access to existing open or vacant lands remain key concerns. Changing urban context and governance transformed the ability of residents to gain access to land for farming wherein what used to be communal or household lands have been taken away for other uses. While the urban poor are often the target beneficiaries of urban agriculture projects, the lack of land in densely-built informal settlements and access to other spaces often pose a problem and dampen people's interest.

No existing legislation or policy framework covers urban agriculture specifically in the Philippines. However, the Integrated Urban Agriculture Act is awaiting ratification in Congress, and at least one LGU in Metro Manila has passed an ordinance institutionalizing urban agriculture. In the absence of legislation and a coherent policy framework and urban agriculture's absence in many local government plans, there tends to be multiple and overlapping projects and offices responsible for urban farming. While coordination is often necessary to manage a multi-dimensional project like urban agriculture, differences among LGUs make integrating these urban agriculture initiatives difficult. Because LGUs have their own individual urban agriculture projects with different goals and strategies, expanding urban farming to a metropolitan scale remains a challenge, and many urban agriculture projects tend to be led on a project basis that may or may not be sustained by succeeding administrations with a different agenda.

Policy recommendations: Integrating urban farming into the urban development agenda

Given its benefits and challenges, how can urban farming be incorporated into the urban sustainability agenda of Metro Manila local governance? First, there is a need to emphasize its place in land use and development plans. Given persistent discursive associations of farming as a rural activity, promoting urban farming as a vital element of the urban landscape is necessary. It is important to see urban farming as a permanent fixture, rather than a temporary use of land that is expected to give way to other, more productive land uses. Valuing urban

farming spaces need to transcend the focus on the density of built-up areas as measure of urban development, and the notion that these farming spaces are not compatible with other land uses.

Second, the government should recognize the multiple types of urban farming in the city beyond vertical farming as the default model. While demo farms and training seminars extol the benefits of farming in constrained space, other types of farming should not be rendered invisible or excluded from support or recognition. Practices in remnant agricultural lands in the fringes and in household and communal lots continue to provide similar benefits and sustain livelihoods.

Third, idle and vacant lands in Metro Manila need to be identified, surveyed, and determined for possible use in urban farming activities. Urban farming can be practiced in interstitial spaces and even on lands considered as risky for structures. Because of this adaptability and versatility of urban farming, the potential lands for farming spaces could be significantly greater than currently imagined.

Fourth, there is a need to enhance access by the urban poor to these vacant lands, especially given the lack of space in densely-packed informal settlements. Arrangements brokered by the local governments may be made to ensure access to vacant lands, particularly with private landowners and homeowner associations, for particular periods of time. Incentives could also be created to encourage subdivisions with unused lots to dedicate these to urban farming. Existing parks and open spaces could also be utilized to host urban farming activities.

Fifth, urban agriculture requires a stronger institutional underpinning beyond piecemeal and often disjointed projects by local governments. Intra-LGU coordination and planning is necessary to ensure spatial continuity and encourage mutual learning among different cities. A national policy on urban farming, still in the works, needs to be passed to integrate the diverse components of urban farming and harmonize the overlapping and unclear responsibilities and mandates of various offices. Incorporating urban agriculture with parallel or related goals, such as in green infrastructure, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation, could strengthen its place in urban LGU planning. Similarly, urban farming should be

included within a broader approach to planning food systems, recognizing the multiple scales and spatial interrelations involved in food provisioning.

Sixth, the links between decentralization, governance structures, and land use need to be considered. Metro Manila's individualized planning in the absence of an overarching urban regional framework or governing body tends to lead to the fragmentation of decisions about metropolitan-scale concerns that extend beyond a city's border, such as land use and urban farming. Similarly, while land use and environmental and local development planning functions have been decentralized to local governments, they could extend further to the barangay level, the scale at which many of the urban farming projects are actually being implemented. This may help facilitate the integration of the concerns of the marginalized with the planning process. Furthermore, the creation of a formal body such as a food council, which is composed of local stakeholders (Cabannes and Marrochino 2018) at a regional or city level might help bring urban farming and other related issues more centrally.

Seventh, participatory and bottom-up approaches to designing and planning urban farming initiatives should complement top-down government projects. These can take the form of communities, associations, or civil society groups provided with the right and leeway to plan the use of land for farming in their vicinities. Integrating urban farming in land use planning would necessarily involve participation from multiple interests in the planning process at various stages and levels. It also requires building capacity of associations and communities to undertake the different components of such a task. While knowledge of urban farming techniques is relatively easy to share, capacity to construct and execute such a plan or to engage in the planning process remains limited. Activities such as participatory mapping are not only useful planning tools for identifying spaces for farming, they also help communities understand the spatial and interrelated nature of urban problems, which is an important entry point in involving people in the planning process.

Eighth, local governments could continue encouraging every barangay to dedicate a piece of

land for urban farming. This, however, should be sensitive to local differences and to the work and social relations that go into the maintenance of gardens. In practice, many of the demo farms and barangay farms are manned by officials, many of whom work in the gardens out of a strong interest and stake in the success of the project.

Ninth, a more systematic urban agriculture planning should include other related urban issues such as food security, poverty, health, waste, and climate change. This is due to the multi-dimensional character of urban farming and to its interaction with other urban land use issues that are both social and environmental in nature. Compost production and waste reduction, and food systems planning to address urban hunger are two examples of such linkages.

Finally, urban farming needs to be explicitly situated within broader discussions of sustainability, food sovereignty, right to the city, and urban land tenure. These issues extend beyond technical matters and must be addressed in their proper political venues. Urban land tenure in particular is at the heart of the land dilemma in urban farming. If access or right to urban space is not guaranteed for all, especially for the urban poor and marginalized, urban farming will remain a marginal activity that may benefit the better-off urban residents instead.

Conclusion

Urban governance toward sustainable and inclusive cities need to respond to shifting urban demands and configurations. This paper presented the case of urban farming in Metro Manila to illustrate the challenges of urban land use dilemmas while exploring potentials for improving its governance. The potential benefits of urban farming are manifold but without meaningful participation from grassroots actors or their access to land and other inputs, these will continue to remain unrealized. Evaluating existing governance mechanisms and structures for future improvement, therefore, has to consider that urban farming is not an isolated activity that is primarily technical but is embedded in broader urban political questions of equity and right to the city.

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Telephone: 981-8500 loc. 4266 to 68 / 435-9283 • **Telefax:** 426-0955

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**UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni
Magsaysay Avenue, University of the Philippines
Diliman, Quezon City 1101

Telephone: 981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268 / 435-9283 • Telefax: 426-0955
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