

Who Can Cultivate Urban Land

A Post-development Review of the
Proposed Urban Agriculture Bills

Sheila Mae B. Pagurayan 



Program on Alternative Development

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Email: cidspublications@up.edu.ph

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Krus Na Ligas farmers planting rice during the 2023 cropping season.

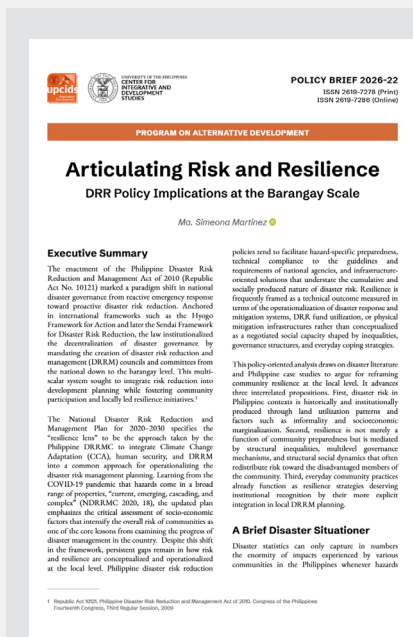
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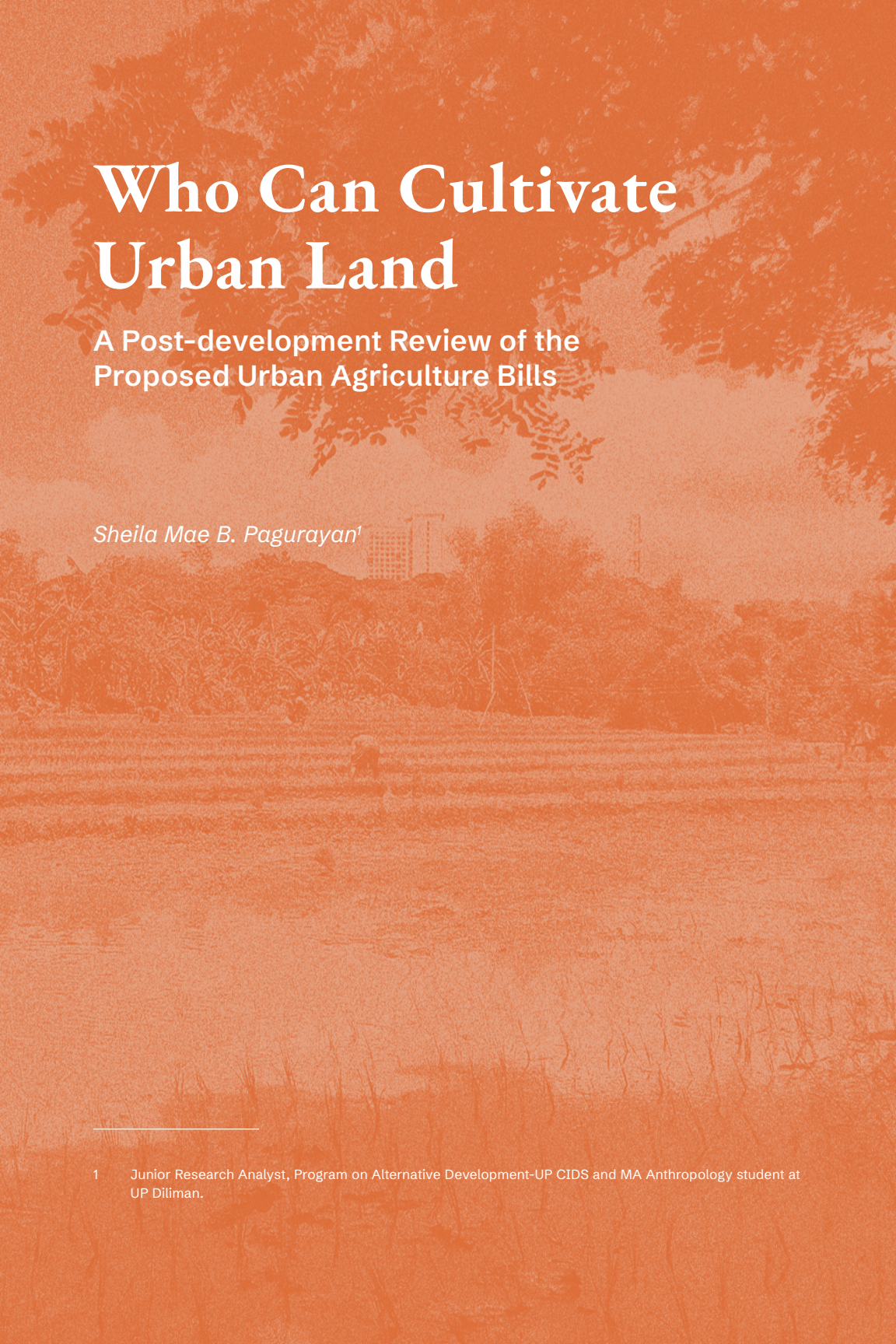
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Proposed Urban Agriculture Bills

Sheila Mae B. Pagurayan¹

¹ Junior Research Analyst, Program on Alternative Development-UP CIDS and MA Anthropology student at UP Diliman.

Key Highlights

- Urban Agriculture (UA) has been treated primarily as an undertaking practiced by urban poor communities on land with insecure tenure. 16 UA bills are currently pending in the Philippine Congress to institutionalize Urban Agriculture (UA) as a statutory program to address this concern on sustainability.
- Using a post-development framework to analyze these UA bills alongside the experiences of two urban poor UA practitioners in Quezon City, this study argues that securing agriculture's place in urban areas requires more than resolving land tenure insecurity. It requires overcoming the growth-centric development paradigm entrenched in state policies, which renders agriculture incompatible with the city and less valuable than conventional urban land use.
- This study further argues that UA, as practiced by urban poor communities, is more than a survival strategy. It is a disruption of this development paradigm, as it values land not through the "Highest and Best Use" principle, but through the ethos that "land is life."
- This paper concludes that awareness of these ideological underpinnings is foundational to developing UA legislation that is truly transformative and capable of achieving its envisioned socio-ecological goals.

Introduction

Urban Agriculture (UA), in its broadest sense, is the practice of growing crops and raising livestock in cities and surrounding peri-urban areas. While UA has been gaining popularity, especially after the pandemic, its sustainability has become a major concern, as it is practiced mainly on land with insecure tenure. The expansion of urban agriculture has been mainly attributed to a “laissez-faire” policy stance (Drescher et al. 2006), in which activities are permitted but remain largely unregulated and unsupported.

To address this concern about sustainability, some suggest integrating UA into urban planning and climate change action plans (FAO 2011; World Bank 2013). In the Philippines, the Department of Agriculture (DA) created the National Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture Program (NUPAP) in 2022, adopting UA as a banner program. Several local government units (LGUs), most notably Quezon City, have their own UA programs, many of which predated the national government's adoption of the initiative. Programs, however, are subject to shifting priorities of each administration. If the new leadership fails to prioritize UA, the program can be easily canceled or starved of funding. Thus, legislative proposals were filed in the Philippine Congress to institutionalize NUPAP into a statutory national program. One of the key provisions of these bills is the mandate for every city and municipality to designate specific UA Zones to secure the use of urban land for agriculture.

Guided by a post-development framework, I argue, however, that insecure land tenure, the absence of an agricultural zone in urban areas, or the lack of a statutory national program are merely surface-level symptoms of a deeper structural hurdle. The fundamental barrier to fully integrating agriculture into the urban fabric is the state's prevailing growth-centric development framework. In fact, it can be argued that this ideological commitment is precisely why making UA a mandated program has become so difficult to materialize. Cities play a crucial role in pursuing development, as they are considered engines of economic growth. Under this paradigm, urban land, which is predominantly held as private property, is treated as a commodity and valued primarily through the lens of Highest and Best Use (HBU), thus privileging capital-intensive developments, such as high-rise commercial and residential buildings, over agricultural uses.

I further argue that UA, as practiced by urban poor communities, disrupts this imagination of the city and, therefore, our idea of development. Driven by the development ethos that holds land as life, urban poor UA practitioners have utilized urban land not to generate maximum monetary value but to sustain life—supplementing households’ food supply, providing tenured housing, and offering relaxation, among others. Urban poor UA practitioners, therefore, are advancing an alternative ideal of urban development.

Who can cultivate urban land then? This paper sees UA as a contested terrain, fraught with tensions between state-led growth logic and the latent development ethos of urban-poor UA practitioners. I used discourse analysis, with a particular focus on their respective views of urban land, to foreground this tension. Two sets of texts were used — the 16 UA bills filed in the 20th Congress and the narratives of urban-poor UA practitioners from two UA groups, in Bagong Silangan and Pook Aguinaldo, Barangay UP Village. Both were under the Joy of Urban Farming (JOUF) of Quezon City. I chose Quezon City as a case study for this research, given its status as a pioneer of the UA program in the Philippines. The two UA groups were selected because they represent distinct forms of land contestations and spatiality within the city.

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on UA governance. While numerous studies have examined UA in the Philippines and offered policy recommendations to make this endeavor sustainable (see Saguin and Cagampang 2023), this study is among the first to critically analyze the proposed national legislation. More importantly, by foregrounding the development logic that governs UA policy, this study shifts the discourse away from purely technical concerns on property regimes toward an interrogation of the ideological underpinnings of urban land governance, which are often treated as givens and excluded from policy deliberations. In doing so, it enjoins policymakers to approach the UA question using an alternative lens—the development ethos of marginalized communities.

Development as a Discourse

We regard development as something natural, a “common sense” truth that everybody, from individuals to states, must aspire to. It is rarely questioned as a concept. Rather, we argue about the best pathways to realize it and the factors that hinder its realization. In his seminal work *Encountering Development*, Escobar (1995) put forward a post-development framework to challenge this naturalization. By framing it as a discourse, Escobar argues for treating

development as a social construct—a system of representation which “sets the world as a picture, so that the whole can be grasped in some orderly fashion as forming a structure or a system.” This worldview is operationalized and managed by development authorities and experts who deploy policies and plans to ensure the system’s legitimacy and sustainability. Discourse, therefore, is not just an expression of thought. Rather, it is a “practice, with conditions, rules, and historical transformations” (Escobar 1995, 216).

Development emerged at a specific historical conjuncture. It was introduced by the United States after World War II to secure its hegemonic position in the world capitalist system. In this new world order, as Escobar noted, the world was organized around a binary logic—the developed West and the underdeveloped rest of the world. Development discourse sets the West, particularly the US, as a model of what societies ought to become—a modern society. It also positioned the developed nations as having the messianic role of saving the rest of the world from underdevelopment through the provision of financial and technical assistance.

This modernization project requires dismantling “archaic superstitions” and pre-capitalist social relations. Following the path of the West, industrialization and urbanization were prescribed as necessary. Private property and free market ethos as well as structures were institutionalized. Science and technology were mobilized to intensify production. To measure a nation’s economic performance, gross domestic product (GDP) was established as the primary metric, translating development into growth goals (Kallis 2018). GDP also became the basis for providing aid to underdeveloped countries. By using a metric designed to represent a market economy as a yardstick, two-thirds of the world’s population, whose lives were organized around subsistence production and non-market social relations, was proclaimed poor (Escobar in Kallis 2018). As development was naturalized, economic growth also became the metric for progress. The duo achieved such hegemony that they captured the imaginations of not only proponents of capitalism, but also those who aspired to establish socialist societies (Kallis 2018; Gorz 1980).

Development profoundly impacted our relationship with the land. What was once regarded as a communal landscape valued for its role in sustaining life and to which identities are attached, as in the cases of the peasantry and indigenous peoples (Akram-Lodhi 2021; Tadem 2009), has been transformed into a private asset, a commodity, priced according to the vagaries of the market. The land market was institutionalized, and the HBU principle became the primary

determinant of land value. From the landowner's perspective, HBU refers to the specific use that yields the maximum financial return (see Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board 2013). For the government, HBU can be seen as the land use best able to fulfill national and local development targets.

As urbanization is seen as a primary engine of growth, the commodification of land is most intense in the cities. This further intensified with the Western economies' pursuit of deindustrialization (Heron et al. 2025), or the shift towards a service and finance economy, as a strategy for growth. With deindustrialization, urban development and housing became a new frontier for capital accumulation. The construction of buildings is no longer driven by the need to house productive labor but by the need to create financial assets. With this shift, "luxury" apartments packaged to offer the highest asset price appreciation proliferated in cities. Because land hosts these financialized buildings, its market value is pulled upward exponentially. Under the HBU framework, the most rational choice is to utilize the land for high-density vertical real estate development. Consequently, agriculture, which is bound to a horizontal field, can be dismissed to be inefficient or an underutilization of space.

However, capitalism, with its perpetual search for new frontiers for capital accumulation, has driven us into the Anthropocene, an era in which the entire surface of the Earth is covered by human activity, irrevocably altering its natural order and threatening the very existence of human civilization (Crutzen, in Saito 2024). Escobar (1995) observes that, amidst the capitalism-induced ecological crisis, sustainable development (SD) was promoted to reconcile development goals with environmental protection. These goals, however, are inherently contradictory, and SD was eventually revealed to be more concerned with ensuring the sustainability of growth than with addressing the environmental degradation it causes. This attempt at greening development gave rise to a new form of management referred to by Escobar as environmental managerialism, which aims to manage the new frontier for capital accumulation. Nature becomes a source of value in itself, prompting green grabbing (Fairhead et al. 2012), land rushes (Borras and Franco 2025a), and other forms of land and resource appropriation.

From this deconstruction of development, Escobar advanced a post-development discourse that departs radically from the existing hegemonic discursive practice, as well as from grand alternatives articulated in exclusive intellectual and academic circles and sought to be applied to all places and situations. For Escobar (1995), alternatives must be "gleaned from the specific manifestations

of such alternatives in concrete local settings” (223). The enduring practices and struggles of indigenous peoples, food sovereignty networks calling for a shift toward localized food production systems and peasant-based agriculture, and the enshrinement of the concept of *Buen Vivir* (Living Well) in the Bolivian Constitution are examples of new systems of representations and ways of imagining life. He advanced the idea of pluriverse—“a world where many worlds fit,” one that is “constructed on the basis of different ontological commitments, epistemic configurations, and practices of being, knowing, and doing” (Escobar 1995, xxviii).

Methods

This study adopts Escobar’s post-development framework to analyze the proposed UA bills, using their framing of land as my point of departure. Through this lens, I examine the bills’ underlying logic of development and counterpose it to the latent development ethos of urban-poor UA practitioners. The analysis of the latent development ethos draws upon Escobar’s conceptualization of alternatives being gleaned from the narratives, struggles, and practices of marginalized communities. In this study, the latent development ethos is shown by how urban poor UA practitioners articulate their own visions of well-being and living with dignity—of how life ought to be.

The texts used in this study are the 16 UA bills filed in the Philippines’ 20th Congress,² and the data gathered through the participatory research I conducted with two urban poor UA practitioners in Quezon City. The 16 bills were analyzed as a single body of text, reflecting the legislative process of the Philippine Congress in which related measures are consolidated into a Substitute Bill.³ To supplement the legislative analysis, I conducted Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with representatives from Quezon City’s Joy of Urban Farming (JOUF) program and the City Planning and Development Department (CPDD). These interviews provided critical institutional perspectives on urban land use and the implementation of UA programs.

2 Please see Annex for the list of congressional UA bills filed in the 20th Philippine Congress

3 Once the consolidated version of the bill is approved at the Committee Level, it supersedes previous versions and moves to the Second and Third Readings for plenary deliberation. Currently, all UA bills remain pending at the committee level.

I used Quezon City as a case study for this research, given its status as a pioneer in UA in the Philippines. In 2010, the city introduced the JOUF program to address poverty by mitigating hunger. As of April 2025, the Quezon City LGU reported a total of 1,439 urban farms established across the city (Quezon City Government n.d.). Among the existing UA initiatives in Quezon City, I focused on two groups: the Sunshine Urban Farmers of Bagong Silangan and the Krus Na Ligas farmers based in Pook Aguinaldo, Barangay UP Village. These groups were selected because they represent distinct forms of land contestation and spatiality within the city. Both operate on highly contested terrain. The first group operates on land characterized by legal ambiguity, where the absence of a clear owner has invited multiple claimants asserting their respective versions of legitimacy to use the land. It is situated in the peri-urban zone. This group's UA efforts recently ceased after their farm was destroyed, allegedly by local officials. The second group is located in the city center and asserts ownership based on historical accounts of being the community's first settlers. They continue to farm despite threats of displacement.

I have been in touch with the Krus Na Ligas farmers since 2022. Such engagement provided me a firm grounding in UA practice, particularly on matters relating to land politics which as Borras and Franco (2025b, 2) defined as a “relatively stable pattern of who gets to have access to land, why, how, what kind of land and how much, where and for how long, for what purposes, and with what implications for who wins and who loses.” My engagement with the Sunshine Urban Farmers was facilitated by the research initiatives of the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of the University of the Philippines-Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), an organization I have been part of since February 2026.

Land in the proposed UA Legislation

There are currently 16 UA-related bills pending at the committee level in the 20th Philippine Congress. Collectively, the bills frame UA as a strategy for sustainable development. Through the optimized use of urban land and spaces for food production, the proposed legislation aims to achieve food security, promote public health, generate employment, alleviate poverty, and foster ecological balance within urban areas. While these objectives present a transformative agenda, a closer look at the bills reveals their commitment to the existing growth-centric agenda, which produced the very socio-ecological

crises they hope to address. This ideological commitment is revealed through a close reading of how the legislation frames urban land, specifically who has authority to designate land for agricultural use, which land types are eligible, and the duration of such use.

Who holds the authority to decide which lands are suitable for urban agriculture? House Bills No. 1337 and No. 6823 mandate that all LGUs designate specific “Urban Agriculture Zones” (UAZs) within their Comprehensive Land Use Plans (CLUPs) and Zoning Ordinances. The remaining bills are less prescriptive regarding how UA is integrated into existing local government plans. Rather than mandating the creation of formal UAZs, these measures only task the LGUs to pass legislation to institutionalize UA or to harmonize UA policies and strategies with their existing CLUP and zoning ordinances. Several bills also mandate the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development (DHSUD) to ensure that residential developments, including subdivisions, condominiums, and public housing projects, allocate adequate space for UA. In doing so, the bills provide that property owners and managers may qualify for incentives provided under Republic Act No. 10771, or the “Philippine Green Jobs Act of 2016.” The Department of Education (DepEd) is also tasked with ensuring that school grounds are maximized for UA purposes.

These provisions appear to give the state, specifically the LGU, the power to define, map, and sanction urban land for agricultural use. A closer examination, however, reveals that this managerial power is fundamentally constrained by the sanctity of private property. All the bills share a common caveat—the identification and utilization of land for UA must be conducted without prejudice to the rights of private landowners. The legislation explicitly ensures that it cannot be used to limit or extinguish ownership rights without the owner’s consent or the provision of just compensation in cases of expropriation.

This is not a novelty. In practice, even under the current zoning rules, where urban agricultural land use is not formally recognized, property owners can circumvent existing zoning restrictions. In Quezon City, they may do so by filing a request for a variance or exception with the City Council (see Quezon City SP-2502, S-2016). This legal caveat is so decisive that it could effectively subordinate public institutional plans to the interests of the private landowner. Moreover, the choice to provide incentives rather than sanctions to private landowners reinforces the understanding that the implementation of UA is highly contingent on voluntary private participation. It underscores the commitment to the sanctity of private property.

What type of land is qualified for UA? The proposed legislation targets “idle,” “abandoned,” “open,” and “available” lands owned by both public and private entities as the primary sites for UA.⁴ Several versions also explicitly restricted prime lots from UA use. In line with these provisions and the premium regard for private property rights, the CPDD noted during our discussion that the most feasible site that can be designated as UAZ is an 11-hectare site in Barangay Bagong Silangan. This feasibility is based on the land’s inherent risks. The LGU designated the area as a “no-build zone” as it is part of the Marikina River’s riparian corridor and lies on the path of the Marikina West Valley Fault. Currently, a portion of the area is home to New Greenland Farm, one of the most prominent UA farms in the JOUF program. Agriculture, therefore, can be allowed in urban areas only if it utilizes the spaces rendered “unfit” for conventional urban use. One bill, Senate Bill No. 1243, also provides that private landowners can enter into an agreement with the city LGU to allow the latter to use the land for UA, provided that the plot size is not less than 100 square meters and not more than one hectare.

This restriction on the land where UA can be practiced reinforces the existing hierarchy of land use, which prioritizes commercial, industrial, and residential development over agricultural uses, a framework well noted by the policy brief issued by the Philippine Senate with regard to the National Land Use Policy (Senate Economic Planning Office 2014). This undervaluing of agriculture is most pronounced in the urban areas. Agriculture has been excluded from urban land-use plans due to the commitment to the planning framework set by the Athens Charter, which limited the city to four functions: dwelling, recreation, work, and transportation (Tornaghi and Halder 2021).

Given the view that there is limited land for agricultural activities in urban areas, it is logical for the proposed legislation to forward land-optimizing modalities, such as vertical farming. Across all bills, UA is consistently used alongside vertical farming, suggesting that the latter is treated not merely as a subcategory but as almost synonymous with, or the primary manifestation of, UA itself. Vertical gardening can take the form of growing crops in shipping

4 The Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 (RA No. 7279) defined idle land as “non-agricultural lands in urban and urbanizable areas on which no improvements...have been made by the owner, as certified by the city, municipal or provincial assessor.” “Improvements” is defined by the same law as “all types of buildings and residential units, walls, fences, structures or construction of all kinds of a fixed character or which are adhered to the soil but shall not include trees, plants and growing fruits, and other fixtures that are mere superimpositions on the land, and the value of improvements shall not be less than fifty percent (50%) of the assessed value of the property.”

containers, rooftop gardening, container gardening, and soilless agricultural methods such as aquaponics and hydroponics. All these UA types are packaged as “modern,” “cost-effective,” “space efficient,” and “environmentally safe” agriculture technologies in urban areas.

What is the time frame allowed for UA’s use of land? Two versions of the legislation provide temporal prescriptions. SB No. 1243 stipulates that practitioners seeking to use idle private land for UA may enter into a land-use agreement for an initial term of no more than three years, whereas HB No. 1337 provides a term of up to five years. Both bills provide that any subsequent renewal remains entirely at the discretion of the landowner. This is consistent with the commitment to the ethos of voluntary land use and sanctity of private property deeply embedded in the proposed legislation. For CPDD and JOUF officials, having a contract that clearly identifies the entity with which the landowners are dealing and the duration during which their land will be used for UA gives landowners a sense of security—that they can reclaim their property without the hassle typically associated with unauthorized land use or unclear agreements.

Ultimately, these temporal provisions are anchored in the assumption that urban land will eventually be used for conventional urban purposes. The state of “idleness” is treated as temporary. Following this logic, the criteria of “unfitness” noted earlier can also be rendered temporary. For example, should technological advancements eventually mitigate the risks posed by geological hazards, areas designated as no-build zones can be reclaimed for high-value development. With the proposed legislation, UA is therefore codified as a placeholder, a temporary endeavor intended only to occupy the land until a more profitable investment arrives.

Constructing the official UA. Based on the foregoing discussion, we can conclude that urban land within the proposed UA legislation is conceptualized as a private financial asset whose utility is strictly dictated by market forces and protected by the doctrine of the sanctity of private property. In this highly commodified and financialized spatial regime, agricultural use is structurally relegated to the lowest-priority tier since it cannot yield the financial returns that other land uses—namely commercial, industrial, or residential—can command. If agriculture is permitted to occupy a parcel of urban land, it is restricted to idle spaces or land unfit for conventional development. It is worth noting, however, that these spatial concessions are considered temporary, as private landowners can seamlessly reclaim the land for highly remunerative endeavors.

Building on this conception of urban land, we can see the proposed UA legislation prescribing a type of agriculture that it deemed fit for the urban. This state-sanctioned prescription seeks to make agriculture compatible with urban areas by addressing spatial constraints and elevating its economic value, thereby rendering it competitive with conventional forms of urban development. To achieve this compatibility, the legislation envisions UA as non-land-dependent. Even with a small parcel of land, you can already grow food. A UA practitioner only needs soil. In some cases, such as in hydroponic, aquaponic, and aeroponic systems, even soil is no longer necessary. For the latter, the main investment goes to the construction of advanced UA infrastructure, such as specialized facilities and automated cultivation technologies. This bypasses the need for expansive land traditionally associated with conventional rural agriculture. This vision is clearly reflected in HB No. 1337, which promotes the construction of advanced UA infrastructure, such as artificial intelligence (AI)-equipped vertical farm complexes. The bill provides that these facilities are to be developed through Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT), joint venture, or other public-private partnership (PPP) arrangements.

Thus, instead of vast horizontal tracts of land, agriculture becomes represented by vertical architectures that expand upward rather than outward. Along with this change in spatial representation comes a redefinition of the actors who constitute agriculture. At present, UA is mainly valued as a survival strategy for many urban poor communities. However, given the proposed legislation's preference for capital-intensive, high-tech model, UA is poised to become a specialized field run by technical experts. These representations ultimately position UA as an agricultural model distinct from rural-based agriculture.

Latent Development Ethos of Urban Poor UA Practitioners

The Sunshine Urban Farmers. This group of urban farmers based in Bagong Silangan was formed shortly after the lifting of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. The group cultivated a five-hectare plot within the peri-urban zone of Quezon City. It had a membership of around 100 individuals residing in Bagong Silangan and nearby villages, who were considered renters or lacked homes of their own. The association was born out of a petition initiated by the members to convert the five-hectare tract of idle land within the village into a public row-housing facility. According to its leaders, this parcel is part of a larger

55-hectare estate left in a state of tenurial ambiguity following the death of its original owner. This lack of clear ownership made the land subject to intense conflict among competing claimants.

To formalize their claim over the land, the members established an association, commissioned a land survey, and collaborated with allied professionals to draft a comprehensive Community-Based Development (CBD) plan. The plan envisions establishing a public row housing facility to be allocated to the association's members on affordable monthly amortization terms. The proposed site plan also features vital communal facilities, including a community garden, a health center, a neighborhood market, and a child daycare center. These amenities are intended to make vital services accessible to community members, saving them the cost and inconvenience of long-distance travel. The daycare center, for instance, serves as a critical social infrastructure where parents can safely leave their young children, allowing them to engage in household duties or income-generating endeavors. The association members lobbied for their plan with the barangay LGU and then with the city officials. Since the city has an existing UA program, local officials advised them to use the contested site for urban agriculture while the land-ownership issue is being resolved.

Guided by this instruction from the city government, the group took on the arduous task of transforming the idle land, which they described as a wilderness. They cleared the dense grass covering the area. They hired the backhoe loader to level the rugged terrain. Following this, the 100 association members organized themselves into smaller subgroups, with each allocated a specific portion of the five-hectare plot for gardening. They cultivated various crops, including leafy vegetables, beans, papaya, and bananas. The subgroups took pride in designing their respective gardens. They installed fences, and some groups painted their gardens to further beautify the space.

Maintaining these gardens was physically demanding, especially for the elderly members of the association. Reaching the site required a PHP 20.00 pedicab ride followed by a 1.5-kilometer walk. To water the plants, the urban farmers fetched water from either the river or a manual water pump owned by a nearby household. Both water sources were nearly a kilometer away. During the dry season, watering had to be done twice a day, once in the morning and again in the afternoon.

This grassroots UA initiative unfolded alongside the expansion of informal settlements in the area. Last year, the city LGU initiated a demolition campaign targeting these settlements on the grounds of illegal occupation. The gardens were initially spared because they were recognized as part of the city's UA program. However, the farmers were caught by surprise when the barangay LGU subsequently demolished the gardens. Their fences and crops were hacked down, and the area was cordoned off. This happened when their vegetables were already bearing fruit. Stunned, the farmers watched in tears as their gardens were destroyed. Their hard work was rendered futile, and their hopes of having a home of their own were shattered.

The Krus Na Ligas (KNL) farmers. The KNL farmers differ from the typical UA practitioners we are accustomed to. They are not occupying a temporarily vacant space. They are smallholder subsistence rice farmers. Their farmlands have existed since the Spanish colonial era, cultivated by generations of smallholder farming families. Aside from rice, the farmers also cultivate taro, bitter melon, and other vegetables. These vegetables are planted next to the rice fields or on vacant paddies during the dry season. They are either used for household consumption or sold to earn money to buy daily household needs.

The farmers have been in a long-standing dispute with the University of the Philippines (UP) over land ownership, a conflict that can be traced back to the registration of the land under the Torrens system during the American colonial period by the Tuason family and the establishment of Quezon City in 1939 to create a new political center, provide mass housing, and build a new flagship campus for the University (Pante 2019). The formation of Quezon City and the establishment of UP resulted in the conversion of Krus Na Ligas farmlands. From the 2,000 hectares believed to have been farmed by the community's first settlers (Castillo Llaneta 2019), only around five hectares of farmland remain at present. As UP holds legal rights to the land, KNL farmers are treated as informal settlers, under constant threat of eviction, policing, and land-use restrictions. Currently, the community faces what they fear will be the final squeeze—the Sustainable Development Goal Urban Farm and Wellness Park (SDG Park), a project that UP envisions as a space for sustainable agriculture and wellness promotion (Gali 2025). A substantial portion of the project will be constructed on the land currently used for rice cultivation.

KNL rice fields also seem hidden. The farmers call them “tagong-bukid” (hidden farmland). They are, on the one hand, enclosed by UP’s housing facilities for its employees and, on the other, by patches of government housing projects and informal settlements. They are also non-existent in Quezon City’s CLUP, as they are classified as open spaces within UP territory (Quezon City Government 2011). Under UP Diliman’s Land Use Development and Infrastructure Plan (2020-2038), certain portions of the farmlands are considered part of the University’s residential zone, reserved for the growing student and employee population, as well as a relocation site for informal settlers currently residing within the main section of the campus (UP Diliman 2022). Meanwhile, some portions of the farmland are classified as protected forest area on campus (Dovey and Recio 2024).

The farmers have actively asserted their rights over the land. They applied for Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) coverage in 1990 and in 2006. They also hold local demonstrations, which are strongly supported by activist groups based in UP and their broader networks of youth, urban poor, and farmer organizations. Assertion of land rights, however, is not confined to the legal arena and protest lines. It is also enacted daily through the farmers’ actual cultivation of the rice fields. Farmers believe that by continuing to cultivate the land for rice farming as their ancestors did, they can preserve the land’s agricultural character, thereby maintaining their chances of winning their CARP petition.⁵ The rice plants standing in the field, in this case, have become a symbol of resistance, a testament to the farmers’ unwavering commitment to assert their right to the land inherited from their ancestors.

Land is life. The narratives of Sunshine Urban Farmers and KNL farmers reveal a valuation of land that sharply diverges from the vision of state legislators. For these communities, the value of land is not defined by its HBU as dictated by market forces, but rather as a material guarantee to sustain life. It follows the indigenous peoples’ conviction that “land is life” (Arango, cited in Dang et al. 2025).

5 This appears to be a case of inconsistent ruling. In 1992, the Supreme Court already issued a ruling excluding the farm lands from the agrarian reform law (Lacuerta 1992). However, in 2006, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) issued the farmers a Notice of Coverage (NOC) after the latter refilled their CARP application.

The idea that land is life manifests in the KNL farmers' conviction that their ability to produce their own food, particularly rice, is intrinsically tied to their survival. As one KNL farmer said, "We are afraid of running out of rice. Even if we do not have *ulam*, as long as we have rice, we are okay. It is our indicator that, somehow, we are still able to keep our heads above water." Producing their own rice, in this case, saves farmers and their families the cost of buying rice in the market, which is very expensive these days for minimum wage earners. Sunshine Urban Farmers place the same value on vegetable gardening. While they recognize that this initiative cannot provide their entire daily dietary needs, they value its capacity to reduce their reliance on the market. In this sense, cultivating food within one's immediate surroundings is driven by a desire to reduce absolute dependence on the market for daily subsistence, an aspiration akin to what van der Ploeg (2008) called peasant autonomy.

Producing one's own food also means ensuring the quality of the food families consume. As one Sunshine urban farmer explained, "The food you worked hard to grow tastes completely different from what you buy. They have more flavor. They are fresh, and you know they are pesticide-free. The ones in the market look beautiful, but you know what that means: they are loaded [with chemicals]." The land used to grow food is also a space to escape the city's toxicity. It is where they can still hear the chirping of birds, enjoy the fresh, cool air, and find respite. For many, farming serves as therapy and physical exercise.

Land is life is also manifested in the desire to own land to guarantee shelter. In the case of Sunshine Urban Farmers, using UA as a strategy to secure land for housing may initially appear to reflect the state's valuation of UA as a mere placeholder for future conventional development. On closer look, however, this community strategy is motivated not by a desire for capital accumulation or profit maximization, but rather by the aspiration to have a house they can call their own. Ultimately, the struggle for housing speaks to a profound desire to live with dignity, which can be achieved only by freeing oneself from precarity. This is perfectly captured by this statement of one of the members of the organization: "Ultimately, everyone desires to have a place of their own. Some are just living with their parents, but you cannot truly call that house yours. So, we are taking chances here, hoping that this will eventually be turned into a public housing project."

The assertion that "land is life" carries a temporal dimension. It addresses the necessities of the present while safeguarding the future of the family's next generation. The urban farmers of KNL view the land they cultivate as a patrimony passed down by their ancestors. They hope to permanently

secure it as agricultural land where they can grow crops, raise livestock, and maintain a space they can call home. They also hope to pass this land to their next generation. The Sunshine Urban Farmers share similar aspirations. They refuse housing programs that would make them forever renters. Instead, they seek permanent tenure, hoping that the land and housing they secure from the government will become an inheritable asset for their children.

Conclusion

As the foregoing discussions showed, the sustainability of UA lies not merely in resolving land tenure security, but in overcoming a more fundamental structural and ideological barrier—the prevailing growth-centric development paradigm. Guided by the post-development framework, the paper demonstrated the proposed UA legislation's commitment to a capitalist ethos that values the land based on its HBU, as determined by the market. Market logic dictates that the only rational use of land is the one that guarantees the landowner the maximum financial remuneration. Since agriculture, as practiced by the urban poor communities, cannot yield the financial returns that other land uses, namely commercial, industrial, or residential, can command, it is relegated to the lowest-priority tier or rendered incompatible in the city. If permitted at all, urban agriculture is confined to idle spaces and land deemed unfit for conventional urban development, or allowed merely as a placeholder while landowners await for more profit-maximizing opportunities.

The narratives of the urban poor communities, meanwhile, reveal a valuation of the land that is not anchored on its market value but on its life-supporting functions. This reveals a worldview centered on the principle that 'land is life.' UA is pursued in accordance with this very principle—to provide sustenance for the family, generate additional income, and as a form of exercise, among others. It is also pursued to strengthen communities' struggle for housing and land rights, an endeavor that aims not only to meet the aspirations of the present but also to secure the future of the next generation. Ultimately, this analysis reveals that UA, as practiced by urban poor communities, is not merely a survival strategy but a development disruption—a discursive practice that directly challenges the role of the market in all aspects of living, and therefore, the capitalist logic of profit maximization and the desire for continuous growth.

This disruptive potential of UA, however, is now challenged, as capital increasingly views UA as a new frontier for profit-making. A review of the proposed UA legislation reveals that it aims not only to make UA sustainable,

but also to render it compatible with existing capitalist valuations of urban land. This is achieved by prescribing a capital- and technology-intensive form of UA, one capable of operating on minimal land while delivering maximum financial return. As to the question of who is indeed allowed to cultivate urban land, this paper reveals UA as a vital terrain of contestation between two contrasting worldviews—those of the state and urban-poor UA practitioners. This paper, therefore, contends that a consciousness of these ideological underpinnings is foundational to developing UA legislation that is truly transformative and capable of achieving its envisioned socio-ecological goals.

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Annex

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