

Pandemic showed gaps in food waste handling, supply chain–UN report

While restaurants dumped their unsold produce in garbage cans and consumers stockpiled food without a consumption or meal plan, poor Filipinos who have no money to buy would scavenge food from garbage cans.

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4 MINUTE READ



In file photo: Ana Patricia Non, second from right, arranges donated food with village workers before they distribute it at a makeshift stall called “Community Pantry” beside a road in Quezon City, Philippines, on Monday, April 19, 2021. Non started the Community Pantry in Maginhawa Street by placing food on a makeshift stall for people who need it as many have lost jobs due to quarantine measures set by the government to curb the surge in Covid-19 cases in the country. The theme “Give what you can, take what you need” has spread to several communities which have placed their own makeshift stalls to support people struggling to make ends meet.

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THE pandemic exposed gaps in handling food waste and other long-standing institutional gaps in the food supply chain in Metro Manila, according to the United Nations (UN).

In a policy brief titled “Urban Food Systems and the Pandemic,” the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Food Programme, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (Ifad) found issues and gaps in food systems in Metro Manila, especially at the height of the lockdowns.

These issues also included food supply bottlenecks especially at the start of the lockdown last year; information gaps within the food system which bared ineffective ICT systems; and capacity gaps in food provisioning.

“The Covid-19 crisis has shown how the transport and logistical disruptions and the lack of information in the shifting market dynamics contributed to massive food losses from the oversupply of highly perishable agricultural commodities, especially high-value vegetables and fishery products,” the policy brief stated. “This meant income loss for farmers and fisherfolk and reduced availability of produce for consumers.”

The report said efforts to address these losses also mean avoiding food waste in households and adopting measures to mitigate food losses in the country’s food supply chain.

However, as to the magnitude of the losses, FAO Representative Kati Tanninen said in a briefing on Thursday no baseline was created to measure food loss in the country.

The report said in Metro Manila, Food Loss and Waste (FLW) is a “blind spot in finding solutions to hunger.” The UN said even before the pandemic, poor Filipinos who have no money to buy would scavenge food from garbage cans.

This was happening, the UN said, while restaurants dumped their unsold produce in garbage cans and consumers stockpiled food without a consumption or meal plan.

“I think there should be a baseline assessment to really get the understanding of what (are) the amounts we are talking about and that would be very helpful for the planning purposes and for the development of any programs in this area,” Tanninen said when asked how much food waste there is in Metro Manila.

Rise Against Hunger Philippines Chairperson Pauly Ubial said this is why “food rescue” or “food banking” is important. Even before the lockdown, she said their nongovernment organization (NGO) rescued food through partnerships.

Ubial said under their partnerships with hotels and manufacturers, they retrieve excess food supplies then use these in the soup kitchens in Tondo and Taguig that they support.

Ubial said through these facilities, local communities can get clean and nutritious meals.

“[We] just bring in the excess food of our partners to these areas so that the local communities can actually benefit from what would have been waste for these companies and these establishments. I think that is really the concept that we would like to introduce in the Philippines, it’s the concept of food rescue,” Ubial said at the briefing.

Ubial cited as an example of a food rescue the community pantry effort created this year to help poor Filipinos get access to nutritious food during the lockdown.

The UN report said the emergence of community pantries highlighted the “inability of government support to keep pace with the growing needs in Metro Manila.”

A community-based program such as community pantries which started in Maginhawa Street in Quezon City and replicated nationwide, was self-regulating. This means those who are in need can just get food while those who can spare food can donate.

“Food as the main component of relief operations happens all the time especially during disasters but responding to the need for food has required a stronger cooperation among locals,” the report stated.

Institutional standpoint

However, experts believe food security should be addressed from an institutional standpoint. It should be part of the Disaster Risk Reduction Measures (DRRM) of countries, especially in urban areas.

ADB Philippines Country Director Kelly Bird said a food security plan should be part of the DRRM efforts of local governments. This means including efforts to ensure that food distribution lines are accessible for families and that financing is available to rehabilitate critical public utilities that support food security.

Bird noted that not all people can become farmers and be self-sufficient by planting their own food. This means countries like the Philippines will need an efficient, adaptable, and resilient agricultural sector.

In order for this to happen, the agriculture sector should strengthen extension services. These must be delivered to farmers with the help of the private sector.

The country, Bird said, should also invest in skills development of farmers not only through schools or technical vocation facilities but at the workplace and farms.

“There should be continuous skills training throughout the life of workers in agriculture. We are now working with DTI, DOLE, and the Department of Tourism and we are now preparing a pilot project which we hope to launch this year and its going to be designed to train workers, continuously reskill them,” Bird said.

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