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Ann Hill ^a

^a Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Program, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

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A helping hand and many green thumbs: local government, citizens and the growth of a community-based food economy

Ann Hill*

Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Program, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Minority world consumers are being asked to rethink about their I-ness fixations and the individualism apparent in community food practice. Meanwhile, poor and economically marginalised in the majority world are prioritising civic we-ness and taking collective responsibility for meeting local food needs. In Mindanao in the Philippines, a municipality-wide communal gardening project is feeding malnourished children in schools, supporting poor families in self-provisioning and generating income and employment opportunities for volunteer gardeners. As such, it is benefiting the individual households and the community simultaneously. Of interest is how different actors within this project “successfully” negotiate I-ness and civic we-ness in ways that achieve desired outcomes such as reduced malnutrition. In this paper, I examine the ethical economic decision making of various actors within the Opol Food Project in Mindanao. I reveal how economic decisions are generating social surplus, creating and sustaining commons and building a community-based food economy. I also demonstrate the valuable role that local government can play in enabling and cultivating civic we-ness and in building a different food future.

Keywords: community gardens; the Philippines; local government; community economy; ethical practice

Introduction

Costa Georgiadis, host of popular television show “Costa’s Garden Odyssey”, recently addressed the community garden conference in Australia, from which, papers in this special issue hail (Community Garden Conference, 2010). He began by recounting his hunger en route from Sydney at 4:30 am and his consumption of what was once regarded an apple: an out-of-season, tasteless, mass-produced commodity. He tossed the core over his shoulder in disgust of production and consumption practices in our now globalised predominantly capitalist food economy (see Costa’s keynote address in Community Garden Conference). Costa talked about an array of communal gardening projects across Australia, representative of minority world practice, whereby individuals as consumers have sought ways of reconnecting with the food on their table: an argument well rehearsed in the community food literature. The industrial food system has distanced and detached production from consumption. Producers and consumers have sought out community gardens and farmer markets (i.e. local food) as a means to resocialise and reclaim quality, fresh,

*Email: m.ann.hill@anu.edu.au

organic and authentic foods (Marsden *et al.* 2000, Whatmore *et al.* 2003, Venn *et al.* 2006). In recent years, individuals as consumers have become somewhat fixated with their consumption practices and choices (DeLind 2010). DeLind (2010) typifies three seeming fixations: (i) the locavore emphasis – the locavore being the person who eats from his or her food shed sometimes fanatically; (ii) the Wal-mart emphasis, whereby corporations such as McDonalds cunningly adopt a “go local” philosophy profiling local farmers on their packaging, for example, in order to increase their global market share and (iii) the Pollan emphasis, whereby a movement of experts and popular foodie heroes (Costa Georgiadis included) produces manifestos on what their followers ought to eat from where, how much to consume and so forth. This paper is motivated by DeLind’s (2010) questioning about whether these three points of emphasis in knowledge making as well as practice are taking the community food movement where we want it to go. “Why are we so totally concerned with *consumers* and not *community members*?”. Are we privileging individuals’ rights to consume over community concerns and shared responsibility for meeting local food needs? Do we want to do this? I think not.

While thinking about food in the minority world has arguably taken us into some problematic territory (individualism and “I-ness” fixations), when we consider the role of community food projects in helping people who are poor and economically marginalised, be they in the majority or minority world, foodies – practitioners *and* scholars – tend to re-orientate themselves. In this light, food projects are commonly framed in terms of community-wide benefits or what DeLind (2010) refers to as “civic we-ness” benefits such as improving food security, reducing malnutrition, improving waste handling and sanitation (e.g. see Holmer and Drescher 2006). At the same time, food projects such as community gardens have long been understood as a means by which many poor and marginalised urban dwellers eek out a living and pay for education expenses and medical bills (Irvine *et al.* 1999). Thus, communal gardening projects can enable “I-ness” where there is need through improving household well-being and access to basic services. And this “I-ness of well-being” is as important as the cultivation of “civic we-ness” among community members. Moreover, gardening projects can and perhaps ought to benefit the individual (I-ness) and the community (we-ness) simultaneously (Sherriff 2009).¹ Of interest is how different actors within a project “successfully” negotiate I-ness and we-ness in ways that achieve desired outcomes such as reduced malnutrition. Here, I take up this question in relation to the Opol Food Project (OFP), a municipality-wide communal gardening project in Mindanao in the Philippines that is feeding malnourished children in schools, supporting poor families in self-provisioning and generating income and employment opportunities for volunteer gardeners. I examine the economic decision making of various actors within the project in relation to I-ness and we-ness.

The empirical data I draw on were gathered on two visits to Opol. The first visit, April–May 2009, was in conjunction with a regional food workshop that I organised in neighbouring Cagayan de Oro.² The second, a follow-up visit in June–July 2010, took place in conjunction with the Philippines national election and the ending of another food project that I am researching in the region. I conducted open-ended qualitative interviews with several key project actors including a municipal agriculturalist, zone leaders, communal gardeners and the outgoing and incoming mayors of Opol post the May 2010 election. Interviewees consented to the use of their names and to the use of the material that appears here. Some interviews were conducted sit-down style across a table and others as “walk and talk” sessions around gardens and farms. Research assistants Erecson, Mark and Jojo proved invaluable in translating, transcribing, videoing and photographing long (sometimes 3 h) sessions and in ensuring that I was not travelling alone, which is important, given current travel

advisory warnings for westerners visiting Mindanao. Besides conducting Opol interviews, I visited several farms and gardens across Northern Mindanao and gained useful general knowledge about community-based food production in the region. To a large extent, empirical gathering was dependent on my following local leads and webs of connection, a loose version of snow ball sampling. Back in 2008, when I was in Mindanao, working on a different project as part of a documentary film crew, a Filipino colleague alerted me to the fact that Opol had an innovative local government doing interesting things in the local community. Keen to know more, in April 2009, I invited representatives of the Opol local government to the food workshop. Thus, began a conversation with Opol, spanning 15 months.

Of particular interest in the Opol findings is the evident role that local government plays as enabler and cultivator of civic we-ness. Often communal gardening projects are constrained by short-term funding, temporary resource access and a high turnover of labour, typically volunteers. Not only are there community limits such as “volunteer energy”, but there are also limits to “what community-based initiatives can achieve unless they are working in a supportive policy environment” (Irvine *et al.* 1999, p. 35, Sherriff 2009, p. 88). In their analysis of local government-led sustainability initiatives, Keen *et al.* (2006, p. 213) go as far as to say that local government executive support is needed from the outset if any *real* advances are to be made. In Opol, not only is the executive initiating the project, but is also taking a hands-on role ensuring that there are resources within the community to keep the project going. Opol is a local government that is “helping Filipinos help themselves” (Gibson *et al.* 2009). Whereas the Opol Local Government Unit (LGU) adopts a “helping-hand approach” to developing a sustainable food project, elsewhere, institutions and governments have taken “an arm’s length approach”, as noted by Hobson (2004, p. 136) in her analysis of sustainable consumption practices in the UK. Arguably, when at arm’s length, a government can inhibit community capacity for meaningful action (Hobson 2004). With the “helping-hand approach”, the community is seen as the real partner in local development and social service provision. Cultivating civic we-ness through training community leaders and skilling and remunerating volunteers is a key strategy.

In this paper, I examine Opol LGU’s “helping-hand approach” in detail with a focus on food. I demonstrate how a food initiative that began as a small idea in one neighbourhood became a successful municipality-wide initiative with little money and little help from outside agencies. I begin with an overview of the OFP. Then, I examine four aspects of the helping-hand approach that have made it possible for neighbourhood practice in Opol to be scaled up to the municipal level. The four aspects are the presence of a catalyst and enabler who can push things along; the emphasis on community mobilisation and citizen empowerment; the emphasis on utilising resources and assets already in the community and an understanding of how ideas travel and lead to new practice. Lastly, I consider the negotiations of various Opol actors around I-ness and we-ness as ethical economic decision making constituent of a community economy and examine emerging opportunities for growing community-based food economies across Northern Mindanao.

Given the dearth of literature on community food projects in the majority world, this analysis of a local government-facilitated gardening project in an urban–rural municipality in Mindanao provides rare and valuable empirical analysis. But this is not to say that the Opol analysis is irrelevant to minority world food scholarship. On the contrary, the Opol analysis speaks directly to community food debates in the minority world in three important ways. It responds to a global call for research interventions that document growing public sector involvement in food projects (Sonnino 2009). It answers DeLind’s (2010) call for food projects and equally for research of projects “that cultivate civic we-ness”. Lastly, it

moves community food debates beyond the mere speculation of other “possible food economies” towards an empirically grounded conceptualisation of a community food economy using the language of the community economy to reveal an economy constructed through ethical economic decision making (Holloway *et al.* 2007, p. 1).³

The Opol Food Project

National governments are increasingly involved in community-based food production. Michelle Obama’s White House vegetable garden in the USA and federal government provision of AUD 50–100,000 grants to over 100 schools in Australia in conjunction with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation are examples (Hobson and Hill 2010, Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation 2004). In the Philippines, where the poorest sector, roughly 40% of the population, spends 60% of its weekly income on food and as many as 40% of school-aged children are suffering for some kind of “poverty-related illness”, the national government has seen backyard and urban vegetable gardening including the use of vacant lots and unused government land as a deliberate strategy for poverty alleviation and livelihood development (Holmer and Drescher 2006). In 2009, the government released Executive Order 776, which committed three hundred billion pesos (over six billion US dollars) to economic stimulus programmes in various regions of the Philippines, with emphasis on communal food production (The LAWPHiL Project 2009).⁴

At the local scale, it is harder to gauge how widespread government adoption of community food concerns has been with notable exceptions around the world such as Havana, Cuba and the City of Rome, where motivations to meet local food needs with fresh quality produce have resulted in local government driving communal food production (Cuba) and a “quality economy” of school meal provision (Rome) (Sonnino 2009). Local governments often have external challenges to contend with and regional and national imperatives which, for example, make availing land and resources for local food production difficult. For Opol, these include encroaching urban development from Cagayan de Oro and the increased number of subdivisions; the ongoing impacts of local mining; an agricultural agenda for Northern Mindanao that is heavily export orientated and the comprehensive agrarian reform programme that has incited national debate and conflict spanning two decades. These issues impact on local capacities to produce food for local markets and social needs. Given that there are significant challenges to contend with what is it about the Opol case that has enabled a communal food project to be developed and sustained, moving in this direction requires further explanation of the project and what it entails.

The municipality of Opol is in the province of Misamis Oriental in Northern Mindanao (Figure 1) and has a population of approximately 47,000 (National Statistics Office 2010). Although historically a rural municipality with a focus on fishing and agriculture, today, Opol is characteristically both urban and rural. This is due to the sprawl of neighbouring Cagayan de Oro City and the industrial development of the region over the past few decades.

The OFP was developed between 2002 and 2006.⁵ Seventy-six communal gardens were established and 350 community members were enrolled in the task of overseeing and maintaining the gardens and supplying 500 meals a day of communal garden produce to malnourished children in nearby elementary schools.⁶ At the time of writing in 2010, around 60 gardens were still operational in the OFP: further comment on this will be provided later. The gardens are located on a privately owned vacant land that has been released by owners for a fixed term free of charge under a memorandum of understanding in many



Figure 1. Location of the municipality of Opol.
Source: Cartography, CAP, ANU, 2009.

cases because landowners fear squatting and illegal rubbish dumping; using the site for a communal garden prevents these encroachments.

Food production in the communal gardens is typically carried out by three to four gardeners who work Monday to Thursday growing vegetables and herbs and, in some cases, also raising livestock and managing fish ponds. Household volunteers (on average, 15) who attend the weekly garden working bee held in conjunction with the neighbourhood meeting called a *zonal assembly* assist the communal gardeners with general maintenance. Communal gardeners (paid in kind) are encouraged to take as much produce as they wish. Mostly, this is for household consumption, but some is sold to provide them with additional household income. Usually, this occurs within the zone (neighbourhood) or the *barangay* (equivalent of a ward) where the food is produced via door-to-door selling and street vending; a small amount of food is sold in other barangays of Opol or Cagayan de Oro city. Communal gardens gift the garden produce and rice donated by households or the LGU to the elementary school in their barangay. Each garden supplies the school feeding programme for 1 week, once a month.

A variety of food production methods are used including mixed row cropping; companion planting; organic and non-organic pest and disease control; short-season easy-picking crop planting in 10 l drinking water containers and other smaller vessels and square foot gardening, whereby a square foot planting table is planted heavily with four crops such as *pechay* (bok choy), lemon grass and *kangkong* (water spinach) that can be transplanted. Other common crops are gourds, cucumbers and bell peppers. Depending on the land available bananas, coconuts and small-scale life stock raising are interspersed with vegetable gardens.

The helping-hand approach

In many parts of the Philippines, there is no mechanism for formal meetings and formal decision making at the neighbourhood level. Citizens can attend the barangay assembly, but this covers a larger geographical area. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people do not feel that they have a voice in this assembly or in front of *their* barangay council. When Dixon Yasay became mayor in 2001, he created a new neighbourhood network across the Opol municipality in order that everyday citizens could play a more active role in political and economic decision making. This involved dividing six coastal barangays into 67 zones and 8 midland barangays into 19 zones. He then appointed a volunteer zone leader in each, who among other things was tasked with chairing the weekly zonal assembly. All this was established for the purpose of going deeper and empowering the people to become community builders and local development activists. For example, at that time, Opol had one of the highest rates of malnutrition in the region. D. Yasay explains “we felt that the source of the problem was the solution to the problem” and that “the community members themselves should solve malnutrition” (personal communication, 1 July 2010). Today, Opol has one of the lowest malnutrition rates in the region (D. Yasay, personal communication, 1 July 2010). The school feeding programme was adopted by zones across the municipality to address this problem.

One of the first things Dixon Yasay did to get the community engaged in the process of local development was to construct a Local Training Centre where volunteers including zone leaders and barangay workers could go for various kinds of trainings on a weekly basis. Community volunteering is often seen as a means of becoming an elected representative on a barangay council. But in Opol, volunteering is popular for additional reasons. D. Yasay explains “we give [volunteers] value . . . we consider them the real partners in development” (personal communication, 1 July 2010). Not only are there lots of free trainings at the training centre, but every 3 months, the Opol LGU also holds a volunteer assembly, where awards are handed out and the work and achievements of volunteers are publicly acknowledged. Also, many volunteers including zone leaders are paid a small honorarium.

A point-based financial reward system was also developed in Opol in 2005 after Dixon Yasay visited Korea and saw a similar model in operation there. Municipal agriculturalist E. Maape explains – “gone are the days where [barangays are] just dependent on what [funds] the LGU will give to them” and passive recipients of hand outs (personal communication, 5 May 2009). Now, in addition to general base-level funding given to each barangay, communities are awarded points and funding based on community works such as waste segregation, livelihood product development from recycling (e.g. painted vases made from old bottles) and the communal gardening and school feeding programme.

The role of the motivator, enabler and catalyst

I asked Dixon Yasay how he first came to believe in the ideas and vision that he instils in others. He replied simply that it was his personal belief. In many respects, Dixon Yasay’s personal belief has become the *modus operandi* for the municipality. He is a motivator and a good orator. He tells me that in every public address, a portion of his talk is about volunteering and the value of volunteers. He motivates not only community members but also his municipal staff and other mayors across Mindanao. He recounts a recent address where he said – “If you want to move forward as a municipality invest in the social capital” (personal communication, 1 July 2010). He explains that very few mayors are doing this. They prefer

to invest in fiscal capital and to ensure that taxes are collected. For the Opol LGU, investing in the social capital has meant making strategic, sometimes difficult choices on how to address poverty and provide jobs for local people. For example, Opol hires local people to build all the local roads, whereas many other LGUs outsource this work to private contractors, because that is easier and cheaper and generally the quality of work is better.

Dixon Yasay and the LGU have also acted as the enabler and catalyst by adopting ideas that stem from the community and decentralising political power. With OFP, the school feeding programme began in one zone with a few backyard producers who wanted to allocate their surplus to their local school for feeding malnourished children. When the experiment worked, the municipal government eagerly adopted this idea and developed it across the municipality adding in the communal garden sites and labour arrangements that exist today. A recent address to mayors on decentralising the powers in local governance highlights Opol LGU's perspective. The "community must be involved especially the marginalized . . . We must see to it that the power of the mayor is shared by everybody" (*Manila Bulletin* 2011). In another report, Dixon Yasay is quoted as saying it is "easy to exclude and difficult to involve everybody . . . But when you deliver your services you have to think first is the community involved? The mayor does not know everything . . ." (balita 1994–2011).

Community mobilisation and citizen empowerment

Certainly, the mayors do not *know* everything, but also they simply cannot *do* everything. Many green thumbs working together make for light work in the task of growing food. In Opol, over a 1000 citizens have become volunteer gardeners. They donate time and their skills each week at the communal garden working bee held in conjunction with the zonal assembly each Friday. This is in addition to the three to four gardeners who work in each of the 60 communal gardens mentioned previously.

In Opol, citizens have taken on the helping-hand approach for themselves and begun to enact it in the community. A specific example of this is found in zone eight in the barangay of Barra where the zone leader Adalyn Hallazgo and others are door knocking and encouraging households to contribute to the children's education and to reduce incidence of malnutrition. She explains, "by June (before the school year commences) if every household gives just one pencil (3 pesos) and one pad of paper (5 pesos) . . . if they have 10 pesos they can give a donation to the school children . . . [And] . . . all the people in the zone, if they give one glass of rice we can feed 50 children . . . we are teaching [our zone] to be self-reliant" (A. Hallazgo, personal communication, 5 May 2009). Adalyn is one of a number of citizens in Opol who through her own transformation to become zone leader imparts an "ethics of care" to others.

Utilising community resources and assets

Rejecting a need-driven approach to community development, populated by images of "needy and problematic and deficient neighbourhoods" and "needy and problematic and deficient people" (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993), the Opol LGU develops policies and activities around local capacities, skills and assets using an approach termed asset-based community development (ABCD). Dixon Yasay's training abroad in the ABCD methods reinforced his own conviction that significant community development would only take place in Opol if local people were committed to investing themselves and their resources (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, p. 1, E. Maape, personal communication, 5 May 2009). In relation to the OFP, the municipality-wide farming and food networks that existed prior

to the project have been tapped for expertise, skills and labour. These include 2000 members of farmer associations, 1000 members of rural improvement clubs (RICs) and 2500 members of cooperatives. For example, women in a RIC who attend a Friday zonal gardening session offer advice on the companion planting techniques that they have learnt in their club; farmers offer to transport surplus produce to the market on the market day. Another asset that has been utilised in Opol is vacant land. Being further from the urban centre has meant that land values in the Opol LGU have not increased as rapidly as they have elsewhere. In barangay Lapasan in Cagayan de Oro City, some of the vacant lots/communal garden sites made available to relatively poor allotment gardeners for little or no rent have since been taken back by the landowners, because the rental return offered by cut flower growers, for example, was much higher. In Opol, the LGU and the zone leaders opportunistically search for new vacant lots so that if and when landowners wish to take back the land, there are other available spaces in the pipeline. In the life of OFP, 10 communal gardens have already been transferred to another plot and continue to operate.

Understanding how ideas travel and lead to new practice

Copy and paste

According to Eddie Maape and others, if Filipinos see gardening working well, they will likely take the ideas and use what materials they can find to set up a new operation in a new area. They will “copy and paste and download the technologies” to their own backyard or other vacant land nearby (personal communication, 5 May 2009). This notion of making vacant land anywhere productive, a version of “guerrilla gardening” (Guerrilla Gardening 2004), while not technically legal is often tolerated as a food security strategy. Eddie readily uses the communal garden sites to demonstrate what he knows the community will replicate. For example, a square foot table densely planted with lemon grass is strategically located on a communal garden perimeter. Household members relocate the young plants ready for transplantation elsewhere.

Word of mouth from trusted people

Dixon Yasay and zone leaders have worked hard to gain the trust and respect of community members. Giving motivational talks to volunteers has been a vital strategy. Eddie Maape explains – “At first we really encountered all the pains and insults from the people. In 2003, only an average of 3 people [attended] the zonal assembly”. Over time, however, confidence grew to such levels of enthusiasm and commitment that today even around significant events in the religious calendar and during festivals, people will attend: “Now even in Holy Week people will come to the zonal assembly”. Attendance varies but, on average, the number is 30 (personal communication, 5 May 2009).

Research and education

In 2001, Dixon Yasay, then the new mayor, discovered that his personal beliefs about community development were already being taught at SEARSOLIN (South East Asian Rural Social Outreach and Leadership Institute), Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro. He “became very excited” about the opportunities this presented for LGU training (D. Yasay, personal communication, 1 July 2010). Since then, the Opol LGU has held annual strategic planning sessions at SEARSOLIN. Also through SEARSOLIN, Dixon

Yasay connected with the Coady Institute, birthplace of ABCD. This year having served the maximum term as mayor, Dixon has taken on a new position as the head of the Governance and Leadership Institute (GLI) of Xavier University. He continues to lead and educate, but now, disseminates ideas to a wider audience, for example, speaking to 54 mayors across Mindanao about their first 100 days in office in June 2010.⁷

Creative arts and digital media

Songs, paintings, oral storytelling, YouTube video and other art forms free up gardening ideas. They speak an “emancipated language” that allows room for (re)interpretation, imagination, innovation and experimentation (DeLind 2010). In Opol, Eddie Maape is extending gardening practice among poor rural households using a traditional song *Bahay Kubo*. Using the song has many benefits. It is widely known, often sung and passed on orally to those with poor literacy skills (e.g. see youtube 2008. Bahay Kubo with Marian Rivera, and youtube 2009. Bahay kubo with lyrics). It describes diverse plantings in a traditional food garden surrounding a Nipa Hut, everything that is needed to sustain a family including protein derived from nuts and beans. Using *Bahay Kubo* and other creative ideas generates and regenerates gardening practice in innovative ways.

Through the helping-hand approach, the Opol LGU is disseminating ideas and motivating practice of civic we-ness. Citizens like zone leader Adalyn Halazgo are prioritising “collective necessity” over household necessities in contributing rice, garden labour and vegetables to the school feeding programme (DeLind 2010). They are taking “collective responsibility” for solving malnutrition in their community (DeLind 2010). Admittedly, citizens’ responses have been varied and there has been resistance. What is of interest is how individuals have translated the helping-hand approach for themselves. Through negotiations of I-ness and civic we-ness, in Opol, citizens are building a local food economy.

Negotiating “I-ness” and “civic we-ness” in order to grow a community-based food economy

Citizens as ethical economic decision makers

Individuals “work up” their own ethical practices in ways that forge connection with others (Hobson and Hill 2010, p. 225). With OFP, they have to work with and consider actors as diverse as the gardeners, other volunteers, the barangay council, LGU workers, Department of Agriculture workers, plants, livestock, landowners, backyard gardeners, households and parents and children in the feeding programme. The ethical decisions of individuals in the OFP are economic decisions. Economic decisions around “I-ness” prioritise individual household needs and wants. For example, a communal gardener takes produce from the garden for self-provisioning and sells produce from the garden to pay for his or her children’s education (Table 1). Economic decisions around “we-ness” prioritise collective responsibility for addressing shared concerns (collective necessity) such as improving waste handling or reducing malnutrition. For example, a group of landowners avail their land to communal gardeners for a 5-year period rent free, in order to support the barangay feeding programme (Table 1). In the process of working up their own ethics, actors weigh up and negotiate I-ness and we-ness perspectives. Sometimes, a “win–win” result is possible in the case of landowners who gift their land for communal gardening. Not only do the gardeners gain from the use of the land, but the landowners also gain. Their land is improved in aesthetics and fertility, and the likelihood of illegal squatting and rubbish

Table 1. Economic I-ness and civic we-ness in a communal gardening project.

Actor	I-ness perspective	Civic we-ness perspective
Communal gardener	I take produce from the communal garden to feed my family	My neighbours are struggling to feed their family. Children at the local school are malnourished. We grow food in our communal garden to meet these food needs
Landowner	I sell from the garden in order to send my children to school	I negotiate with other landowners to ensure communal gardeners can use our land free of charge for a five year term to grow food for the barangay feeding program
	I loan the use of my land for communal gardening so that squatters won't inhabit it and rubbish won't be dumped there	
Zone leader	I take back possession of my land and cultivate it with high-value commercial crops	I encourage zonal assembly members to go door knocking with me each month to raise awareness about the communal garden and to ask people to contribute a cup of rice to the feeding program
	I have my own political ambitions. I use this position as a stepping stone to getting a position on the barangay council	
Mayor	Vote for my political party and you will get funding for your gardening project	We will invest in your training and development. You must solve your community's problems such as malnutrition. When you have solutions ask the government for funding
Barangay Captain	I oppose the mayor and advise all zonal assemblies and gardens in our barangay to stop functioning. I withdraw all financial support from zone gardens	I oppose the mayor politically, but in the interest of community development we continue to work together. Our barangay receives funding through the points system and we use this for our livelihood projects including the garden

dumping on the site is diminished. At other times, I-ness and we-ness perspectives are in conflict, and negotiation is more difficult. Leading up to the May 2010 election, some barangay captains who did not support the Mayor politically withdrew all zone support and pressured the zonal assembly to cease involvement in the gardening and feeding programme (Table 1). In one barangay alone, 10 communal gardens ceased operations. Challenging the barangay captain and council proved too difficult and costly for citizens and zone leaders who lived in that neighbourhood.

Building a community economy through decisions of we-ness

Both the LGU and citizens of Opol have found ways of circumventing oppositional barangays. The LGU disseminates ideas directly to the zones often bypassing the barangay councils. Zone leaders meet with the LGU staff each week, and this provides an opportunity for information exchange, accountability and practical tasks such as the distribution of seeds donated by the LGU. The Local Training Centre continues to train and nurture zone leaders and communal gardeners. Opol citizens are also finding ways of sidestepping political obstruction. Post election, some of the gardens in an "oppositional barangay"

have recommenced production. According to Eddie Maape, gardeners are confident of continuing gardening without structural support because of their training and skills. They have become communal gardeners and now appear to feel some ownership for the process and decision making, “claiming their ethical self-formation as one of choice” – where barangay support has been withdrawn and a zone leader has stood down – it is now wholly the gardeners’ decision to keep the garden functioning (Hobson and Hill 2010, p. 225). Now, they practice guerrilla gardening flavoured with civic we-ness.

Sidestepping obstruction and opposition is one way through which OFP actors are growing a local food economy. Another way is through forward planning and considered practice. Although communal gardeners are entitled to take as much produce as they wish as payment in kind for labour, they are deciding to take little or no produce for the 1 week each month when their zone supplies the barangay feeding programme. Landowners are deciding to give as much as 5 months’ notice prior to taking possession of the land, to guarantee gardeners the opportunity to harvest any crops and to allow for relocation to a new site. These ethical decisions are based on an understanding of and respect for the needs of others within the community.

J.K. Gibson-Graham (JKGG) (2006) describes this kind of economic decision making as constituent of a community economy. That is, an economic space constructed through ethical decisions around social, ecological and economic concerns. A community economy is a space of negotiated interdependencies in which individuals as social beings as well as economic subjects engage directly in constructing their economy. JKGG sees four coordinates as key foci of negotiations: needs, surplus, consumption and commons. Not only does communal gardening provide for the *needs* of gardeners who receive payment in kind for their garden labour, but it also generates *surplus* through producing far more than the gardeners can consume, working vacant land rent free and drawing on available government funding. Prior to producing collectively in the communal gardens, several economic decisions are made. In deciding how much produce to take as payment for labour, gardeners make a decision or negotiation about “What is necessary to their personal and social survival?” Collectively, the Opol LGU and the gardeners ask “Should we produce a surplus?” “If yes, how will we re-distribute this?” The goals of reaching the poor and malnourished, ensuring that everyone in Opol has access to fresh food, mobilising local assets including labour and building a local food economy are all important drivers of the communal gardening initiative. In Opol, these drivers motivate a decision to prioritise generating *social surplus*. This surplus is, in part, gifted to the school feeding programme and to households that cannot meet their own food needs. Rough estimates are that 30% of produce goes to the gardeners as payment in kind, 40% is appropriated in the school feeding programme and reaching out to poor households in the barangay and the remaining 30% is sold to generate income (E. Maape, personal communication, 5 May 2009). This income is sometimes given to the gardeners as a form of “bonus” or to the barangay for the upkeep of facilities such as the community hall, but primarily it is used for the upkeep and further development of the garden. Collectively, a decision is made about how to allocate this surplus by asking – “How can we best invest communal income from the sale of produce?”

The building and maintaining of the communal gardens are creating a form of *commons*. The gifting of private land creates a temporary commons. Communal gardening turns the once waste dump into a productive commons that meets social needs, household needs and helps the poor and economically marginalised across Opol. Ongoing decisions in relation to distributing surplus are in themselves creating and reshaping the communal gardening practices that are taking place and thus also creating and reshaping the commons.

Maintaining this commons is the work of all the gardeners, the wider community, for example, when a *pahina* call for collective voluntary labour is issued to clean streets and vacant land of rubbish. Communal gardening ideas and practices have themselves become a commons. Copy and paste to all space guerrilla gardening practices are creating a temporary commons and food and income generation opportunities for citizens of Opol.

Emerging opportunities for growing community-based food economies in Northern Mindanao

Given the diverse and varied ways in which ideals travel and lead to new practice, there are many opportunities for the OFP to be supported, replicated and extended in the region. Admittedly, there are some current challenges and uncertainties. I met Opol's new mayor Dexter Yasay on his first day in office in July 2010. He was quite open in stating that he felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the task that lay ahead for his new government (D. Yasay, personal communication, 1 July 2010). One ongoing challenge for local food production in Opol is that there are no fresh water catchments in the municipality. Water supply for the coastal barangays, where the majority of the population resides, comes from the Cagayan de Oro via pipeline. Communal gardens in Opol are largely dependent on regular rainfall. According to E. Maape, when changing weather patterns associated with El Niño events produce severe drought, as was the case in 2009, communal food production may be reduced by as much as 50% (personal communication, 1 July 2010). While it remains to be seen how the OFP will fare over the next 4-year term, Dexter Yasay has a great deal of support and a highly mobilised citizen base to carry on the work of the OFP. Furthermore, with Dixon Yasay as the head of the GLI of SEARSOLIN, there are exciting prospects on the horizon for the development of regional community-based food economies in Northern Mindanao. Dixon Yasay and GLI are already supporting other municipalities in developing their own communal gardening projects in conjunction with ABCD. GLI is looking to develop connections between municipal projects, for example, through gardener-to-gardener training drawing on the best practice that OFP demonstrates (personal communication, 1 July 2010).

Conclusion

The Opol analysis foregrounds a space of ethical decision, using the language of a community economy, a space where the negotiations around surplus and the building of commons are prioritised. To some extent, ethical negotiations around food concerns and the means by which ethics are worked up are contextual and place specific. In Opol, there is LGU support and the helping-hand approach providing training and development opportunities for citizens whom it considers partners in development and in solving malnutrition and poverty. Elsewhere, there are other guiding ideas and enabling factors such as social enterprise development support from an NGO, in the case of a container gardening project for typhoon victims in Manila.⁸ The guiding ideas, geographical context and collective concerns vary, and arguably, this shapes the particular community-based food economy that evolves. Yet while acknowledging place and context is important, equally important are insights from Opol that speak of community food scholarship and practice at large. For example, it is clear from the Opol case that the role of the catalyst and enabler in a community food project cannot be underestimated. I began this paper with the popular television gardener Costa Georgiadis for good reason. While I share DeLind's (2010) concerns that consumption and I-ness fixations in the minority world are leading us astray, I am cautious

in arguing that popular foodie heroes are necessarily the wrong stars to be hitching our wagons to. Television personalities can be seen as the wrong stars to follow, because they promote individualism and privileged consumers over community members. But this is not necessarily the case. According to Bonner (2010, p. 239), Costa Georgiadis

examines gardening practices across a [wide] range of backgrounds (immigrant, indigenous and refugee) and includes regular visits to communal gardens. He is quite emphatic in promoting organic practices, but his interest in communal gardening is the locus for the most distinctive ethical component. Green concerns are not framed by fashionability or individualised consumption, but are shown as continuing communal responsibilities.

Perhaps, Costa is a star worth following after all. Because of his persona, communal gardening ideas and practice travel far and wide not only through television, but also through internet video blogs, websites and other means. Costa also takes time to connect with people and hear their stories, for example, spending two days alongside gardeners and community activists at a recent community gardening conference and attending the launch of the Newcastle Community Gardens Project website (Newcastle Community Gardening Project 2010; 3.0 beta Placestories, 2010; Community Garden Conference 2010). In promoting gardening projects such as Newcastle, Costa is cultivating civic we-ness and generating an understanding of collective necessity and collective responsibility. The important point which emerges here is that seemingly unlikely community food citizens such as television gardening personalities can and do work up their own ethics and contribute to building community-based food economies, both as enablers and catalysts and as ethical decision makers in their own right.

As with television gardeners, first impressions of communal gardeners in the Philippines can be misleading. Gardeners who are poor and economically marginalised are often seen as dependent on financial handouts (or as having a dole-out mentality) and unable to make a valuable contribution to economic development and social improvement in their communities. The Opol story demonstrates that poor and economically marginalised citizens can work up their own ethics to create and re-create communal gardening practice that meets both household and community needs. Through their own ethical self-formation, Opol citizens are making economic decisions that prioritise civic we-ness and build a community economy.

For DeLind, empowering community members, assuming and sharing responsibility for generating and re-distributing surplus and protecting and expanding the commons are the important works of creating a local food system. Here, I have shown that this is also the vital work of creating and sustaining a community-based food economy in places such as Opol, where the transformative potential of both the gardener and the garden is ongoing.

Notes

1. "Community" is a slippery concept. No utopian inference of an always caring, sharing and inclusive group of people is intended. In this paper, community along with "local" is used with spatial reference to both neighbourhood- and municipality-wide networks and activities. Following Mathie and Cunningham, this paper connects community in "community development" to citizen-to-citizen ties and negotiations around "active citizenship" and civic we-ness (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, p. 475, DeLind 2010).
2. In April 2009 forty people from local governments, NGOs and community groups involved in gardening/farming projects across Mindanao, attended a 3-day regional food workshop held at SEARSOLIN, Xavier University.

3. This paper is part of a broader doctoral research project entitled “Growing Community Food Economies for a 21st Century world”. One of the objectives of this project is to conceptualise a community food economy.
4. I use this example merely to indicate that food security is on the national government agenda in the Philippines. I do not intend to set up motivations for the OFP with this mention. In fact, the Municipality of Opol did not qualify for funding under EO776, as statistically it was not among the municipalities deemed most needy. Also, note that it is unclear as to whether EO776 is still in effect post the change of government in May 2010.
5. This estimate of the key period in which the OFP was established is based on anecdotal evidence. The project is ongoing and it continues to develop.
6. A low estimate based on anecdotal evidence. Every communal garden supplies 20–50 meals a day for 1 week in a month.
7. The author’s doctoral research project has also played a role in generating and shaping ideas in ways that lead to new practice. Eddie Maape introduced the author to the OFP at the regional food workshop in 2009. The author and other participants introduced Eddie and Dixon Yasay to communal gardening projects in Cagayan de Oro and elsewhere. These webs of connection are growing and strengthening local practice.
8. This urban container gardening project in Manila (UCG) is another component of the doctoral research project. At the time of writing, NGO worker Perfecto Rom Jr and Dr Doracie Nantes at ANU were working with the author on a UCG publication.

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