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Managing Food Fights from Food Rights in ASEAN

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The unfolding global food crisis and its devastating consequences on human security require no less than a global, multilateral response. The short-term policies adopted by governments to address food shortages are not sustainable in the long run given the severity and complexity of the problem. ASEAN therefore should act expeditiously to initiate regional frameworks to address this problem before it gets any worse.

THE DAILY reports of rising food prices across the globe, coupled with the rising price of oil, appear to have caught many state authorities by surprise. The global food crisis is especially severe among very poor African communities, which find themselves reduced to eating dirt - from making and selling mud cookies (from a mixture of mud, salt and vegetable oil). In Asia, reports of riots breaking out have raised the spectre of conflict - raising the urgency for governments in the region, particularly in Southeast Asia, to act expeditiously.

These worrying trends not only demonstrate the difficulty that some states face in meeting their citizens' basic security needs, but also further strengthen the notion that poverty and human insecurity can be politically destabilizing and have the potential to fuel conflict. With calls for a global action to address this problem, is ASEAN doing enough?

The Unfolding Food Crisis in Asia

For many developing countries in Asia, food takes up almost 80% of poor people's income. According to the World Bank the share of food in the consumption basket of the average household in East Asia and Southeast Asia ranges between 31% and 50%, and could be as high as 70 % in countries like Bangladesh. This is in stark contrast to developed countries like the United States where food takes up only 15%.

Ironically, many of the developing countries most affected by food scarcity are themselves the biggest producers of rice or wheat. Yet, according to the UN World Food Programme, these countries like Bangladesh and India are among the top ten countries receiving rice aid. In fact, seven out of these 10 countries are from South and Southeast Asia – with Burma topping the list - and include Nepal,

Cambodia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. A number of factors explain this perverse situation, including the burgeoning populations of these countries as well as the damage inflicted by climate-related disasters such as droughts, floods and typhoons.

The rising price of crude oil also plays a significant role in fuelling Asia's food inflation, adding another heavy burden for the region's poor. Higher fuel prices translate into higher fares for public transportation and higher prices of kerosene that is widely used by the poor for cooking. The price of fertilizers has also soared, which in turn contributes to inflationary pressure on food prices.

Moreover, the turn to biofuels as an alternative energy source has further exacerbated the food crisis. Enticed by the lucrative market, farmers have been growing cash crops such as palm oil and corn oil instead of food crops. Unfortunately, this trend has also encouraged 'slash and burn' methods to clear land, adding to more carbon emission, more damage to the environment and the list goes on.

Food Fights over Food Rights

The old saying, "a hungry man is an angry man", is now being played out in parts of the world. In Asia, police forces have to be deployed to reign in riots triggered by the potent mix of hunger and discontent. In Bangladesh, about 20,000 factory workers rioted over high food prices and low wages, injuring at least 50 people, most of them police officers trying to break up the protests. In Indonesia, about 500 protesters took to the streets, demanding that the government bring down food prices. Meanwhile, Philippine authorities have to use the military to guard rice warehouses and provide escort for the transport of rice from the warehouse to distribution stations in the poor areas of the country.

The food crisis has led affected countries to adopt a slew of measures to stabilize the situation. These include reducing rice exports, increasing food handouts and criminalizing hoarding of food. Despite these efforts, the severity of the food crisis renders national action inadequate and requires multilateral cooperation on the regional and global front.

Why a regional response?

A regional, multilateral response is needed to address the current food crisis because the issue is not as simple as a local food shortage. Perhaps with the exception of conflict-ridden areas like Darfur and closed regimes like North Korea, the global state of food security is far more complex and interconnected in nature. The critical factor in this crisis is not so much the volume of supply, but more the implementation of the appropriate policies on the distribution of food. As argued by Josette Shireen, the head of the UN World Food Programme, it is the poor governance in food security that creates the problem of food being in the wrong place and at a price the poorest cannot afford. Since the current state of food insecurity is unlike that of the traditional famine, many of the short-term policies, such as providing food aid, controlling food prices and curbing grain exports, are clearly insufficient and unsustainable.

What is therefore needed is a re-thinking of food policies to allow for a better kind of global governance on food. This is particularly critical as short-term solutions without thorough deliberation may make matters worse in the long run. In this regard, initiating a regional framework on food security is a small step forward and there is no better way than to start one in ASEAN now.

Securing Food Security

As proposed by the Philippines government, ASEAN needs to convene a regional meeting to promptly address the current issue of food security that is affecting the region. The meeting could also include the ASEAN+3 counterparts - China, Japan and South Korea - as they are also stakeholders of the food supply and demand in the region. This is of critical importance to ASEAN since two of its members,

Thailand and Vietnam, are among the world's top rice exporters, and the Philippines is one of the world's largest rice importer. Food security should therefore form an integral part of its broader objectives of creating an ASEAN community that is secure and peaceful.

To begin with, ASEAN can take measures to strengthen the implementation of the Agreement on the ASEAN Food Security Reserve given the scenario of a dwindling rice stockpile and the soaring prices of basic food and other commodities. ASEAN should also maximize the function of the pilot project on East Asia Emergency Reserve with China, Japan, South Korea and the UN World Food Programme and also the ASEAN Food Security Information System (AFSIS) so that adequate supply of rice can be provided where and when it is needed.

Given that the current food crisis is now being referred to as the silent tsunami, ASEAN can no longer afford to wait for the crisis to spiral into catastrophic proportions.

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