



## Weighing Issues: Human Security in ASEAN's Fight for Food



*Recent global food price shocks have demonstrated the urgent need to effectively address food insecurity in Southeast Asia - both at the national and regional level. This think-piece goes beyond issues of supply and demand of food, and provides greater insight to the role of Human Security in understanding the issue of food security in a holistic manner.*

**by Irene Kuntjoro and Sofiah Jamil**

The rising price of rice in recent months has caught most of the attention of both the people and policymakers in the ASEAN region. According to the Asian Development Bank, Indonesia and Vietnam are amongst the Asian countries that have experienced a double-digit food price inflation of double digits in early 2008. Needless to say, food price inflation has also been on the rise in their neighbouring countries. The impact of this on the region has been crippling as rice is considered as a primary commodity - both economically and socially - in Southeast Asia. It distinguishes itself from other commodities such as corn and wheat that are considered to have "multi-end-use". For many Asian countries, rice has no substitute in many diets. This is reinstated in the fact that Asia was noted as both the producer and consumer of approximately 91 percent of the world's rice in 2007 by the US Department of Agriculture. Countries like Vietnam and Thailand are among the largest rice exporters in the region, while the Philippines was listed as the world's top importer of milled rice for 2007.

While the functions of the ASEAN states may differ, one factor remains constant amidst

the global food crisis is that the poor and marginalised are the worst affected. This is significant in ASEAN member states as much as it is in developing countries. However it should also be remembered that the issue of food security is not new but rather has been re-ignited due to the high food prices. While these price shocks may be useful in highlighting the urgency of the issue and hopefully spur governments to act responsibly and effectively, the issue of food security must be addressed in a holistic approach, encompassing not just matters of demand and supply of food, but broader human security aspects such as health and environmental concerns.

### **What Is Food Security?**

The concept of Food Security has evolved considerably over the last three decades. Initially, the food security framework emphasized an economic approach in which food was seen as a commodity. This was evident during the 1974 World Food Summit where food security was defined as the “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices”. Concerns raised in this regard are – transitory food insecurity (cyclical/ seasonal such as rice gaps during “lean season”) and temporary food insecurity (unpredictable shocks, natural or man-made disasters).

However, this definition, which indicated the role of maintaining just the supply of food resources, gradually evolved to include demand-side factors as well as the extent to which these demands are met. The principle of “Freedom from Want” – as espoused by Prof Amartya Sen, co-chair of the UN Commission for Human Security – also received more emphasis in this regard, as it noted the importance of development in ensuring the security of the individual. In addition to this, the 1994 Human Development Report made mention of food security as one of the seven pillars of ensuring human security. It was only in 1996 during the World Food Summit in Rome, where the definition of food security reflected a truly holistic approach to the problem.

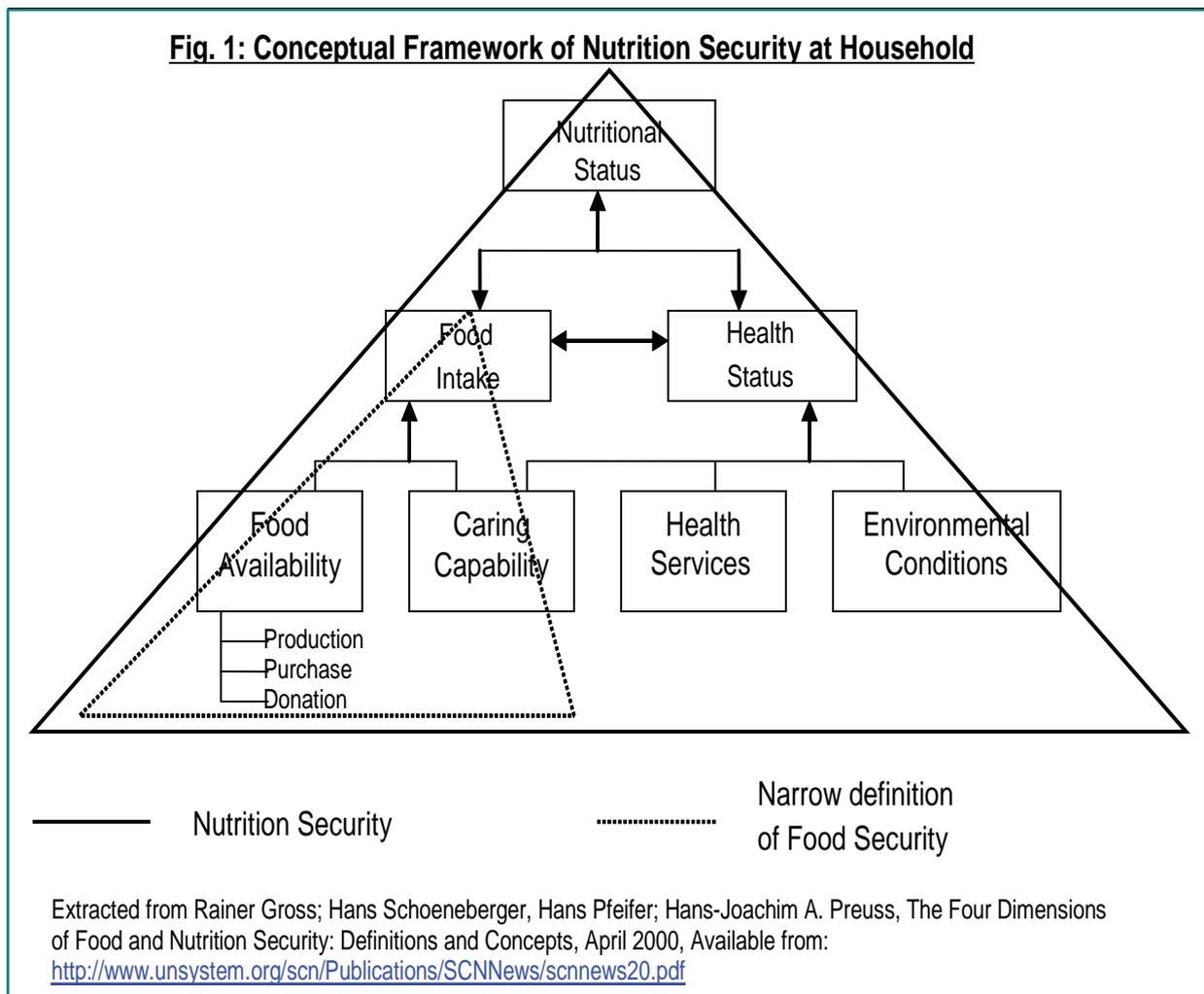
According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), Food Security “[is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

While the definition is holistic and takes into account the various needs of an individual, it is also much more complex and tedious to achieve. According to fig.1, it is seen that at the household level, the narrow economic approach of food security is a subset of the larger and more comprehensive approach that includes health and environmental concerns. Gross et al. noted that the difficulty in addressing the problem occurs when the link between a causal factor of malnutrition and the nutritional status is less direct, wherein more time is required to improve the situation. This therefore raises problems faced by governments in coordinating policies at difference levels and ministries in trying to address the problem.

This is further complicated by the range of issues that have contributed to the rising food prices such as (1) higher fuel prices; (2) the demand for biofuels as an alternative energy source, which has put a strain and competition on the use of agricultural lands for food

and cash crops; (3) the increasing demand for food by major developing countries such as China and India and; (4) weather related disasters that have destroyed resources for the production of food crops.

Food insecurity, as a result of high food prices, has several repercussions on other aspects of human security. Most significant is the fact that food insecurity threatens individuals' survival, especially the poor and marginalised. Soaring food prices has a significant weakening impact to their purchasing power. According to Robert Zoellick, President of the World Bank, there is no margin for survival in regions where food comprises from half to three quarters of household purchasing power. Asia is home to two-thirds of the world's poor, for whom food takes up 30 to 50 percent of their household budget. High food prices could also threaten to reverse the gains in poverty reduction in the Asia Pacific region, and thereby, undermine the global fight against poverty. International organisations such as the ADB and FAO have noted that if high food prices persist, the Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty by 2015 could be jeopardised.



Furthermore, Southeast Asian countries are developing countries with large trend of urbanisation that has created wider disparities between the urban and rural population. Not only would the rise in food prices have adverse impacts on the poor rural populations, but it would also raise the likelihood of increased rural-urban migration, as many flock to

the cities in hope of better livelihood opportunities. Such trends are evident worldwide. According to a survey conducted by the IFAD, rural families are sending their children to the cities or abroad to look for work in ever greater numbers due to the dire need to support their rural relatives. In doing so, these poor rural children may run the risk of further jeopardizing their own security – such as falling prey to human traffickers, as is the case in various parts of Southeast Asia.

Food insecurity also has grave implications for public health. The lack of food would give rise to increased incidents of malnutrition, which could exacerbate the spread of infectious diseases – such as diarrhoeal diseases and acute respiratory diseases – especially in developing countries. This would inevitably affect the productivity levels of the populations. As seen in fig.1, the need to effectively engage public health services would be essential to support efforts in addressing food security, as the latter requires a multidiscipline approach to the problem.

From the perspective of state security, food security would also have implications on the political stability of states, both as a cause and effect. Food security can be jeopardised by the lack of political or social stability. Likewise, food insecurity can lead to political and social instability and, in turn, a regime's survival. The food riots in Indonesia and the Philippines are prime examples of this in the ASEAN region. Many Asian governments nevertheless recognise food security as an essential element of their national security. This is reflected in their protectionist agricultural policies such as securing new agreements on imports, increasing the budget to boost rice production and also curbing rice exports and other policies that reflect a sense of “national vulnerability” towards the availability and access to food supplies.

In the Philippines, for example, the government mobilized the military to guard the distribution of cheap rice to rice distribution stations and poorer areas of Manila and ordered authorities to charge rice hoarders with economic sabotage, a crime that carries a life sentence. This clearly reflects the significance of food security as a political issue, and to a further extent, as a matter of regime survival.

Apart from its implications on domestic stability, food security could destabilise regional security. The policy to curb food export in order to secure national food supply in one country could have a negative impact on other countries. A recent example was the public announcement of Thailand's Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej on 30 April 2008 to form an Organization of Rice Exporting Countries was seen as a political threat to the region as it might hamper the economic cooperation built among ASEAN countries.

### **Food Security As Human Security In ASEAN**

The soaring prices and its effects (as mentioned above) also threaten the progress towards Millennium Development Goal in halving poverty rate by 2015. Jonathan Pincus, chief economist for the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Hanoi argued similarly that the gains made in meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals are under threat as higher rice prices will certainly mean a number of households that had risen above the poverty line will fall back below it.

While some ASEAN governments claim to have the problem under control at the macro level – via securing domestic food supply and price, especially rice commodity – the problem that requires greater attention is ensuring proper access to food for a large percentage of the population that cannot afford it. In Indonesia, despite the government's efforts to reduce poverty following the crises in 1997-1998, over 50 percent of the population still live on less than US\$2 per day and an estimation of 37 million people live below poverty line. The situation is similar in the Philippines, where 68 million people live on less than \$2 per day and over 50 percent of the population in the region is living below the national poverty line of 60 cents per person per day.

**Fig.2 Undernourished people (millions) in ASEAN**

	1990-1992	1995-1997	2001-2003
<b>Brunei</b>	0.0098	0.0093	0.0117
<b>Cambodia</b>	4.4	5.4	4.6
<b>Indonesia</b>	16.4	11.8	13.8
<b>Laos</b>	1.2	1.3	1.2
<b>Malaysia</b>	0.5	na	0.6
<b>Myanmar</b>	4	3.1	2.7
<b>Philippines</b>	16.2	15.4	15.2
<b>Thailand</b>	16.8	13.7	13.4
<b>Vietnam</b>	20.6	16.7	13.8
<b>Total</b>	80.1	67.4	65.3

Source: FAO, Food Security Statistics, by Country, (last updated 3/3/2006) Available from [http://www.fao.org/faostat/foodsecurity/Cous\\_en.htm](http://www.fao.org/faostat/foodsecurity/Cous_en.htm)

\*Statistics on Singapore unavailable

The spiking price of rice also threatens the Accelerated Hunger-Mitigation Programme (AHMP) of the Philippines government, which seeks to address both the supply and demand side by increasing food production and food delivery while at the same time putting more money into people's pockets. The high prices have also forced the government to scale down efforts to address malnutrition among children.

There also seems to be a vicious cycle where chronic poverty – the main factor contributing to the lack of food accessibility and malnutrition – has also resulted in

slow human development and poor health and living conditions. Apart from the lack of food, the limited access to safe water, proper sanitation and health services are prime contributors to the levels of malnutrition. Since 1990, ASEAN has been home to about 80 million undernourished people, with the bulk of them residing in Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines (as seen from fig. 2). This seems somewhat ironic as most of these countries are prime producers of rice in the region. Cambodia takes the cake with close to half its population (in 1990) being undernourished, with its neighbours trailing not too far behind (as seen in fig 3).

Rising food prices thereby only serves to exacerbate the situation by putting a strain on the poor's expenses. To ensure sufficient levels of food, many poor families opt to either spend less on other essentials, such as healthcare and education, or resort to 'stinting', which is the act of buying cheaper (and likely less nutritious) food products.

This situation is amplified in regions that have poor infrastructure or have been destroyed by the calamity of natural disasters. The increasing incidents of weather related disasters such as floods and droughts, as a result of climate change, would put a further strain on states' emergency response capacities and their ability to adapt to changing climates – some of which have been insufficient to begin with.

In the case of Myanmar, the level of food insecurity is still in dire straits, three months after the devastating effects Cyclone Nargis that hit southern Myanmar. It is estimated that about 924,000 people will need food assistance until the November 2008 harvest, while around 300,000 will need relief until April 2009. According to the recent Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA), 42 percent of all food stocks were destroyed and 55 percent of families only had stocks for one day or less.

**Fig. 3 – Proportion (%) of Populations that are Undernourished**

	1990-1992	1995-1997	2001-2003
<b>Brunei</b>	4	3	3
<b>Cambodia</b>	43	46	33
<b>Indonesia</b>	9	6	6
<b>Laos</b>	29	28	21
<b>Malaysia</b>	3	<2.5	3
<b>Myanmar</b>	10	7	5
<b>Philippines</b>	26	22	19
<b>Thailand</b>	30	23	21
<b>Vietnam</b>	31	23	17

Source: FAO, Food Security Statistics, by Country (last updated 3/3/2006) Available from: [http://www.fao.org/faostat/foodsecurity/Cous\\_en.htm](http://www.fao.org/faostat/foodsecurity/Cous_en.htm)

\*Statistics on Singapore unavailable

Policy options—such as export restrictions and minimum export prices—intended to protect domestic consumers, reduce incentives for producers and increase uncertainty thereby weakening the supply response. Lower-than expected production during a food crisis could keep supplies tight and prolong the crisis. Farmers need to produce more, not less, in the short run and short-term government policies should target this objective.

Despite this, restrictions on exports may not have a positive regional domino effect. When Thailand and Vietnam as major rice exporters, imposed restrictions on rice exports to meet their domestic demands, most people in Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos have to make do with whatever production levels they have as they do not have any surplus to fall back on. This would therefore only increase the latter states' vulnerability in coping with rising food prices. Thailand and Vietnam imposed such bans on exports in the early half of 2008, but Thailand has since retracted their restrictions due to regional as well as global reactions, as the measure did little to alleviate the problem regionally. Vietnam, however, still maintains its bans.

### **Beyond National Response**

According to the FAO, several initiatives have been made by individual member states in ASEAN to ameliorate the effects of the high prices (as seen in Table 1). However, national responses are hardly enough as there may be a clash of interests, which would impede development and the overall security in the region. Regional mechanisms are therefore vital to ensure that states are headed towards the same goal without jeopardising the security of its neighbour.

Food security has gained more political weight and become the focal point for discussion and cooperation as a non-traditional security issue. In the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting Singapore on 21 July 2008, ministers agreed that rising food prices posed a serious challenge to the region. They also reaffirmed the importance of regional and international efforts in addressing the issue of having access to adequate and reliable supply of staples, and stable prices.

ASEAN has taken action concerning food security in the region by agreeing to an ASEAN Food Security Reserve Agreement in 1979. Under the ASEAN+3 framework, ASEAN has implemented two food security project related namely the East Asia Rice Reserve (EAERR) and the ASEAN Food Security Information System, the latter which was a result of the first Strategic Plan of Action (SPA) on ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry (1999- 2004). This plan was to be consistent with the first phase of the Hanoi Plan of Action to implement the ASEAN Vision 2020.

In reviewing the progress of the SPA (1999-2004), a research project commissioned by the ASEAN Australia Development Cooperation Programme (AADCP) was undertaken. This study alongside consultations and meetings of ASEAN officials concluded that the overall ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry has made considerable progress in accordance to the stated objectives. The review also concluded that the current strategic trusts, as stated in the SPA (1999-2004), were still consistent and relevant with the trends and issues for cooperation in the next 5-year period. This then led to the adoption of the new SPA on ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry (2005 – 2010). This SPA was endorsed by the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry in October 2004 in Yangon. Food security takes up the first section of the SPA and has four main programmes, primarily aimed at strengthening the region’s capacity to address food insecurity.

**(Table 1): Policy Measures Taken by Governments to reduce Impact of High Prices**

			Cambodia	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Thailand	Vietnam
Consumer Oriented	Tax	Taxes/ Customs						
	Social	Food Assistance						
		Food Subsidies		☒		☒		
		Safety net & other						
	Market	Price Controls		☒	☒			
		Release Stocks	☒		☒		☒	
		Food Procurement & other						
Producer Oriented	Production Support		☒	☒	☒			
	Market Management			☒	☒			
Trade Oriented	Import	Import tariffs & other		☒				
	Export	Qualitative Export Controls	☒	☒				☒
		Export price Control & tax measures		☒	☒	☒		

Source: Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), July 2008, Crop Prospects and Food situation, No. 3

- 1) Strengthening of ASEAN food security statistical database and information to provide technical and institutional assistance for initiative hitherto undertaken by the ASEAN Food Security Reserve Board (AFSRB) and its secretariat to compile, manage and disseminate statistical data and information on food and food security which will pave the way for a more effective planning of food production and trade within the region.
- 2) Establishing a Regional Food Security Information System for ASEAN to allow Member Countries to effectively forecast, plan and manage their food supplies and utilisation for basic commodities using up-to-date techniques as well as to provide information for investors to undertake investments and/or joint ventures in food production in conducive areas. The collection and periodic updating of information for this would be from 2005-2010.
- 3) A Review of the Agreement on the ASEAN Food Security Reserve to realise effective cross-supply arrangements of food, especially rice, from food surplus countries, or other Member Countries, to food-deficit countries during normal conditions and in times of emergency; and
- 4) A Study on Long-term Supply and Demand Prospects of Major Food Commodities such as rice, corn, soybean and sugar in ASEAN

## **The Way Forward**

As mentioned at the Global Food Summit 2008, the means to address the challenges to food security should be tailored to fit country's specific needs. Especially by bearing in mind that the issue of food security does not stand alone, as it is a major determinant of nutritional status that relates to other aspect of human security such as health and the environment. ASEAN could strategise its role by assisting countries to fulfil its food security and at the same time creating conducive regional trade on food.

1. *ASEAN to effectively utilise the Agreement on the ASEAN Food Security Reserve as a framework for regional emergency food aid.* With the high level of inflation that threatened food security in the region, this agreement could provide a safeguard that encourage ASEAN states to cooperate in overcoming emergency food supply deficits. As it has been discussed above, in a state of emergency states will exert any policies that will improve their own food security condition that often on the expense of their neighbouring countries' food security. This situation could destabilise regional security. Effectively utilising this agreement can be useful to coordinate ASEAN states to overcome their food security problem by avoiding negative impacts to the security of the region. Furthermore, as region with a number of natural disasters, this agreement which stated to have a purpose of meeting emergency requirement should also be used to provide emergency food aid whenever any member states suffered a natural or man-made calamity.

2. *ASEAN to actively fulfil its goals and as espoused in its Strategic Plan of Action on ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry, which has already set the stage for addressing food insecurity in the region.* The SPA has provided an avenue that will pave a way to a more effective planning of food production and trade in the region. When this is implemented well, ASEAN could assist its member states by providing an ASEAN

food security database and information that could benefit the region in two ways. First, it could encourage the increase of food and agriculture production of member states in order to reach self-sufficiency and at the same time to share information and analysis on other member states' policies on food security as well as investment on food production in the region in order to create a positive regional food trade. The SPA could also be further extended to be a venue for sharing of agricultural technology in order to support agricultural state-sufficiency.

3. *ASEAN Community to be the gateway to further galvanise and synchronise initiatives from various ministries (such as health, environment, agriculture and trade) to effectively address the issue of food security.* Empowering ASEAN Community is expected to alleviate the risk of liberalisation of food that can disrupt food security. Sharing information on agricultural technology, investment, and also policies could help each member states to set up food security policies that suit them best. Moreover, ASEAN Community could also be a framework to maintain conducive economic cooperation on food liberalisation.

## **Conclusion**

While Southeast Asia as a whole still seems to fair rather well compared to other regions in the world in addressing poverty and food security (see Fig. 4), the issue of food security still needs to be carefully addressed in the region. With a number of developing countries residing in the region, the problem of food security becomes a pertinent element of human security as it is closely related with issues of individual survival, poverty, malnutrition, health and the environment. These issues, themselves, have the potential to generate a ripple effect on neighbouring countries. While it is undeniable that the issue of food security is complex and has no immediate solution, it is hoped that ASEAN states would further garner and strengthen their political will to reduce the adverse impact on their people. Effectively utilising the regional initiatives and mechanisms, would be the first step.

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