

# POLICY BRIEF

By Lorraine Elliott

## Securing Food Futures in the Asia-Pacific: Human Securitising Regional Frameworks



The global food crisis of 2007 to 2008 drew attention to the importance of food security as a regional challenge for the Asia-Pacific. Regional strategies to achieve food security have recognised the need to provide immediate remedial support to alleviate hunger and restore livelihoods, to enhance capacity to anticipate food uncertainties and to strengthen resilience to the impacts of future food disasters. A human security approach seeks to ensure that people are at the centre of regional food security frameworks, not just through identifying who are food insecure or food vulnerable, but also through ensuring that policies and programmes are participatory and transparent, respond to local needs, and acknowledge community rights.

## Introduction

The global food crisis of 2007 to 2008, and the uneven but almost certainly largely negative impacts of climate change, have drawn attention to the importance of food security as a regional challenge for the Asia-Pacific. The 1996 World Food Summit defined food security as existing when 'all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'.<sup>1</sup> A range of factors can undermine food security in the Asia-Pacific. These factors include: increasingly unpredictable crop-growing conditions as a result of the impact of climate change, such as droughts and changes in rainfall; over-exploitation of fish stocks; reduction in the quality of river ecosystems; re-direction of agricultural production away from food crops to biomass energy production; reduction in agricultural investment; corruption, and 'over-enthusiastic' importing and hoarding of food supplies; contraction in household incomes; and the volatility of food commodity prices in global markets.

Several countries in the region fall within the category of 'low-income food-deficit countries' defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to describe countries that are poor in terms of net income per person, are unable to produce sufficient food domestically to feed their populations and have insufficient foreign exchange to purchase food supplies on the international market. In the Asia-Pacific, these include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK), India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste.<sup>2</sup> The *2010 Millennium Development Goals Report* shows that progress towards the target of halving the *proportion* of people in Asia and the Pacific who suffer from hunger by 2015 (against a 1990 baseline) has slowed. The number of undernourished in the region increased by more than 40 million between 2005 and 2007 after a fall in numbers between 1990 and 2005.<sup>3</sup> Further, 'new groups vulnerable to food security are emerging' as natural resources are degraded and as land, forest and fishing rights are taken out of the hands of local communities through privatisation.<sup>4</sup>

## Policy Responses

The Rome Principles for Sustainable Global Food Security, adopted at the 2009 World Food Summit, called for a 'twin-track' approach that would 'tackle hunger for the most vulnerable' in the short-term and develop medium- and longer-term programmes to 'eliminate the root causes of hunger and poverty, including through the progressive realization of the right to adequate food'.<sup>5</sup> As well as immediate remedial support, food security is also about restructuring and improving the local, regional and global economic practices that influence production and distribution to minimise the likelihood of food insecurities. The modalities and instruments available to governments in their pursuit of food security include the following:

- **Improving agricultural marketing systems** through strategies such as guaranteed minimum prices for local production and the use of import and export controls.
- **Improving the human capacity aspects of agriculture** through, for instance, extension and training programmes.
- **Improving agricultural management practices** through, for instance, efficient irrigation and double-cropping; pest management; increasing the amount of land under cultivation through strategies such as reclamation; rehabilitation of agricultural infrastructure and improvements in post-harvest food and seed storage; and development of alternative food sources including through aquaculture.
- **Addressing the income and financial aspects of food production** through initiatives such as enhancing employment opportunities for those who are landless and those who are unemployed or underemployed, establishing income guarantees for farmers and incentives for 'agricultural entrepreneurs', and promotion of off-farm employment.

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- **Developing food assistance strategies** which can provide safety nets for the poor in both urban and rural contexts including, where necessary, 'conditional cash transfers' and programmes to ensure the physical delivery of food.<sup>6</sup>

## Regional Responses

It is clear from the regional impacts of the 2007–2008 food crisis that the challenge for the Asia-Pacific is how to 'make progress in guaranteeing food security in a context where the production of food will be increasingly stressed in the face of decreasing resources pitched against continually expanding demand'.<sup>7</sup> The 2009 Rome Principles adopted at the World Food Summit called for strategic coordination at a *regional* level in a way that would 'promote better allocation of resources, avoid duplication of efforts and identify response-gaps'.<sup>8</sup> In the Asia-Pacific, this has generated something of a labyrinth of food security authorities and arrangements, established through a variety of declarations, programmes, frameworks and plans. These include the following:

- The ASEAN Food Security Information System (AFSIS) (October 2002).
- The Second Joint Statement on East Asian Cooperation (November 2007).
- The ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Work Plan 2007–2017 (November 2007).
- The upgraded East Asia Emergency Rice Reserve (EAERR; originally established as part of the implementation of the 1974 agreement on an ASEAN Food Security Reserve (AFSR)) (August 2008).
- The Strategic Plan of Action on ASEAN Food Security (SPA-FS) (February 2009).
- The ASEAN-FAO Regional Conference on Food Security (May 2009).
- The Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT) Working Group on East Asian Food Security (July 2009).
- The ASEAN Multi-sectoral Framework on Climate Change and Food Security (September 2009).
- The Cha-am Hua Hin Statement on ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation on Food Security and Bio-energy Development (October 2009).
- The ASEAN Plus Three Roundtable on Food Security Cooperation Strategy (October 2009).

- The 31st Meeting of the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (November 2009).
- The Asia and the Pacific Regional Food Security Partnership Framework (Asian Development Bank (ADB), FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)) (July 2010).
- The APEC Food System and the 2010 APEC Action Plan on Food Security (October 2010).

This complex of frameworks can serve to demonstrate the importance that governments and regional institutions ascribe to the challenges of food security. However, it also runs the risk of policy incoherence and conflictive fragmentation when 'an issue area is marked by different institutions that are hardly connected and/or have different, unrelated decision-making procedures'.<sup>9</sup>

## Human Securitising Regional Food Security Frameworks: Recommendations

The kinds of food security responses described above fall usually into one of three categories: those that focus on food aid, those that focus on increasing food production, and, citing the US Secretary of Agriculture, those that focus on 'advancing a food market that allows agricultural products and food production technologies to circle the globe freely and efficiently'.<sup>10</sup> The human security approach to food security rests on the question, 'Where are the people in all of this?' As the FAO puts it, 'to work towards a lasting solution, you must understand the context, and to understand the context, you must understand the people'.<sup>11</sup> For many, the emphasis on human security changes the debate from one about food security to one about food sovereignty. This advocates a rights-based approach in which access to adequate, nutritious and safe food is only one part of a broader framework that includes 'access to land, water, genetic resources, as well as the people's right to know and to decide about their food policies'.<sup>12</sup> In order to meet these demands, regional food security frameworks should be expected to do the following:

- **Start with questions about who the food insecure are and what food insecurity actually means to them.**

As Arpita Mathur points out, 'food security can only be achieved if food becomes available and accessible to the most vulnerable sections of society'.<sup>13</sup> Food security frameworks should therefore be able to not only identify the most vulnerable but also recognise that vulnerability can take multiple forms. This is about being people-centred and not just people-oriented.

- **Recognise and facilitate community-based responses to the challenges associated with food insecurities.**

The focus on community rights and responses is somewhat akin to the livelihoods model adopted by the FAO which, in echoing the key themes of a human security approach, calls for a 'realistic analysis of [people's] livelihood strategies [to] provide an adequate understanding of how they live and make a living' at the local, household and individual level.<sup>14</sup>

- **Be sensitive to equity concerns.**

Food insecurity is compounded by a range of inequities. Some function at the national level, between 'food-deficit' countries (those that do not produce enough food to feed their populations) and 'food-inequality' countries (in which there is sufficient food but it is inequitably distributed).<sup>15</sup> Food security disparities between urban and rural populations within countries are also pronounced, particularly in countries where poorer households already spend a significant proportion of their income on food staples – as much as 50 to 60 per cent according to the International Food Policy Research Institute. This is further exacerbated by 'gender-based inequalities all along the food production chain "from farm to plate" [that] impede the attainment of food and nutritional security'.<sup>16</sup>

- **Recognise the environmental dimensions of food security.**

Efforts to sustain the natural resource and ecosystem inputs to food production and to diminish the environmental externalities including those which create negative feedback loops are crucial in the pursuit of food security and food sovereignty. Policies to increase agricultural productivity and food yield need to take account of environmental impacts and find ways to 'conserve water, land and energy-intensive inputs while also building resilience to the expected impacts of climate change'.<sup>17</sup>

- **Institute governance arrangements that are transparent and accountable.**

The successful implementation of food security strategies requires 'responsive and accountable government institutions' that can overcome the problems of 'poor institutional set-ups and poor governance'.<sup>18</sup> This is not just a question of institutional design or the policies and strategies adopted or implemented under the auspices of regional organisations. As the FAO argues, food security governance based on a human security or right-to-food approach demands 'participation, non-discrimination, transparency and empowerment'.<sup>19</sup>

- **Address trade, markets and investment in a way that recognises social responsibility and equity.**

Under a market-oriented structure of supply and trade, most small farmers are 'price-takers' with little bargaining power or control over returns and no direct access to the market.<sup>20</sup> In this context, the move towards further trade liberalisation through free trade agreements and tariff reductions can have a negative impact on smallholders and landless farmers unless they include safeguard measures.

## Conclusion

The burgeoning number of regional frameworks will not be able to guarantee food security if they rely on top-down decision-making and technical responses that overlook the concerns of the most vulnerable people. Food security frameworks, and the policies and strategies that they establish, need to be engaged with, and responsive to, the vulnerabilities and security needs of local communities. They require strategies and institutions that are inclusive and transparent. As enabling environments for improving food security and food sovereignty at the community, national and regional level, they need to manage questions of scale. It is these conditions that will ensure that food security frameworks have the potential to increase individual adaptive capacity, build resilience in the face of food uncertainties and save lives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 1996, *World Food Summit Plan of Action (Rome, 13 November)*. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.HTM>

<sup>2</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2011, 'Low-income Food-deficit Countries (LIFDC) – List for 2011'. <http://www.fao.org/countryprofiles/lifdc.asp>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), 2010, 'Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific: Trends, Challenges, Opportunities and Policy Perspectives', Note by the Secretariat, Prepared for the *Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific*, E/ESCAP/MCED(6)/1, 28 July, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Schoenberger, Laura, Ronnie Vernooy and Hein Mallee, 2010, 'Exploratory Workshop: Food Security in East and Southeast Asia', Workshop Report, International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 3–4 June, p. 4. <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/45093/1/131533.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2009, *Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security (Rome, 16–19 November)*, WSFS 2009/2, p. 3. [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/Summit/Docs/Final\\_Declaration/WSFS09\\_Declaration.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/Summit/Docs/Final_Declaration/WSFS09_Declaration.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Asia Society and International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), 2010, *Never an Empty Bowl: Sustaining Food Security in Asia*, Task Force Report: Executive Summary, New York: Asia Society, p. 6; and Akhir, Azmi Mat, Roziah Amar and Hamidin Abd Hamid, 2009, 'Food Security – A National Responsibility of Regional Concern: Malaysia's Case', Paper presented at a conference on *Food Security and Sustainable Development*, Rome, 11–13 November. [http://www.idra.it/garnetpapers/C01A\\_M\\_Akhir\\_RoziahOmar\\_HamidinAbdHamid.pdf](http://www.idra.it/garnetpapers/C01A_M_Akhir_RoziahOmar_HamidinAbdHamid.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Mukherjee, Amitava, 2009, *Securing Food Security in the Asia Pacific: A Partial Analysis*, Beijing: UN Asia Pacific Centre for Agricultural Engineering and Machinery, p. 1. <http://www.unapcaem.org/publication/FoodInsecurity09.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> FAO, 2009, *Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Biermann, Frank, Fariborz Zelli, Philipp Pattberg et al., 2010, 'The Architecture of Global Climate Governance: Setting the Stage', in Frank Biermann, Philipp Pattberg and Fariborz Zelli (eds), *Global Climate Governance beyond 2012*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Arnst, Randall, 2009, *Business as Usual: Responses within ASEAN to the Food Crisis*, Bangkok: Focus on the Global South, pp. 17–19. <http://focusweb.org/pdf/occasionalpaper4.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), n.d., *Food Security and Livelihoods: Thematic Brief*, Rome. [http://www.fivims.org/index2.php?option=com\\_sobi2&sobi2Task=download&fid=27&no\\_html=1](http://www.fivims.org/index2.php?option=com_sobi2&sobi2Task=download&fid=27&no_html=1)

<sup>12</sup> Federasi Serikat Petani Indonesia, 2006, *Rice and Food Sovereignty in Asia Pacific*, Jakarta, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Mathur, Arpita, 2010, 'Rising Food Prices and Food Security: Impact of the 2008 Food Crisis in Asia', *NTS Insight*, August, Singapore: RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies. <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/nts/HTML-Newsletter/Insight/NTS-Insight-Aug-1001.html>

<sup>14</sup> FAO, n.d., *Food Security and Livelihoods*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> World Vision, n.d., 'Facing Food Challenges in Asia and the Pacific', *World Vision Fact Sheet*. <http://wvasiapacific.org/downloads/factsheets/foodsec.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> The World Bank, 2009, *Gender in Agriculture: Sourcebook*, Washington, DC, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Asia Society and IRRI, 2010, *Never an Empty Bowl*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), 2009, 'Towards Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security in Asia and the Pacific', Note by the Secretariat, *65th Session*, E/ESCAP/65/29, 5 February, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2009, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World: Economic Crises – Impacts and Lessons Learned*, Rome, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Prachason, Sajin, 2009, 'Impact of FTAs on Agriculture: Issues in Food Security and Livelihood', Paper presented at the *Asian Regional Workshop on Free Trade Agreements*, Bangkok, 8–9 December, p. 3. [http://www.networkideas.org/ideasact/dec09/pdf/Sajin\\_Prachason.pdf](http://www.networkideas.org/ideasact/dec09/pdf/Sajin_Prachason.pdf)

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