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Future of Food

Securing the Feeding of Asia: Policy Recalibration Needed

By Paul Teng and Christopher Vas

Synopsis

The challenge of having to increase food production by an estimated 50% by the year 2050 is becoming real. Government policies need to be recalibrated if this challenge of feeding many billions of mouths and addressing nutritional challenges are to be realised.

Commentary

FOR ASIA'S leaders, the latest Food and Agriculture Organisation FAO report reinforces the importance of longer term planning and implementation, far beyond the terms of most political leaders. Most politicians desire short term visible improvements that they can be associated with. The reality, however, is that increasing agricultural productivity and food production require long term commitments and stable policies. But there are avenues where action can be taken.

Today's global food system is an inter-linked relationship between countries with surplus production and high agricultural productivity premised on technology-enabled farming, and countries which are regularly in food deficit. The ability to purchase food - a.k.a. "economic access" to food - which is linked to household income levels, is an important determinant of household food security. Food deficit countries are not necessarily food insecure countries. For example, Singapore, with its advanced economy, imports more than 90% of its food and less than 10% of household income is spent on food. It is considered to be one of the most food secure countries in the world.

Asia's Two Trajectories in Food Security

When it comes to food security, an Asian Development Bank 2013 report noted that Asia has two faces or trajectories. One shows fast economic growth with poverty reduction and growth in household incomes accompanied by increases in food demand per household. The other shows problems with nutrition – growing over-nutrition in the presence of chronic malnutrition. One Asian expert described nutrition-related diseases as a “Diet Tsunami”.

Experts concede that there will always be food insecure people because of disadvantages like living on marginal lands, poverty, war, calamities, etc. So it would appear that there is not much to gain from debating about whether there is enough food being produced or whether it is a distribution problem when it comes to food security. It is both, and distribution issues will continue to exist.

Asia is the main food importing region of the world in terms of food volume. Yearly, its hunger for higher protein diets means that Asia uses over two-thirds of the world's surplus soybeans (an essential component to make animal feed for poultry, hogs and fish) and about over a quarter of the world's surplus corn production. Most of these imports come from the Americas, in particular the United States, Brazil and Argentina.

Paradoxical as it may seem, Asia is also the main producer of rice, vegetable oils, and seafood, especially from Southeast Asia. But trade data shows that the ASEAN region exports more to outside the region than between its member countries, for reasons of infrastructure, protectionism and policies. More needs to be done in relation to production, trade and improved governance within the region.

Avenues for Policy Intervention

Increase the area farmed or arrest the decline in farm land:

The FAO report affirms that there is little scope for land conversion from natural ecosystems to agricultural systems in most countries. However, it notes that there are still under exploited areas. In Asia, potential for food agriculture still exists in areas such as those on the island of Borneo (belonging to both Malaysia and Indonesia).

Brazil has shown that with intensive investments in scientific research and infrastructure, certain types of soils which hitherto had been considered unsuitable for agriculture, can be converted into productive farmland. Further areas for expansion of farmland also exist in parts of Australia. Relatively little research has gone into recovering these areas for farming and concerted efforts with longer time horizons of success are needed.

Support efforts at increasing food production in food surplus countries or food importing competitors:

In today's world, one country's food security depends on the food security in other

countries, especially neighbouring ones. But global supply chains have made geographic separation the norm rather than exception. It is therefore to the interest of countries to support international efforts aimed at assuring there is "food for all". This can be achieved by supporting the efforts in strategic research to safeguard crop and animal production.

Entities like the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), which supports the fifteen centres (such as IRRI for rice in the Philippines), and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, exemplify those which support transboundary work. Many developing countries are now donors to the CGIAR, convinced of the need for multilateral efforts to tackle food insecurity. More food dependent countries need to step up and contribute to these efforts.

Need for Food Alliances

Develop alliances with Asia's food bowls:

Asian countries vary in their net balance of food export and import. Food import-dependent countries in Asia are the small states with limited hinterlands, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as countries with agriculture capacity but production is not keeping up with demand, such as China and Near East countries. In Asia, Australia is the only consistent net food surplus and exporting country, exporting more than 50 percent of its domestic food supply, although other Asian countries may export specific food items such as rice.

One way to guarantee reliable supply chains within these regions is to develop mutually beneficial alliances that guarantee the integrity of supply chains. Specifically, contract farming in countries such as Australia which have aspirations to be Asia's "food bowl", but which require investments, offer much more potential than contracted farming in countries which are not robust in their food security. Western Australia's Peel Food Zone is a case-in-point.

Within the Asian region the balance between surplus food and food importing countries is not a "zero sum" game. Many factors across multiple supply chains can disrupt this balance, including short term severe weather events symptomatic of climate change, losses and policy reversals. As long as there are food surpluses in some countries which can be traded and the policies enable exports to importing countries, some of the concerns relating to future food security can be tackled. But make no mistake, beyond policy recalibration, the future of food in Asia also relies on taking action through science, technology and investment.

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