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Singapore's Food Security

Rethinking Self-Sufficiency: Lessons from Singapore's Pig Farming Past

By Choo Ruizhi

SYNOPSIS

In 1984, Singapore shifted completely from pork self-sufficiency to meeting all its pork needs through imports. As Singapore turns toward boosting local food production, what insights can be gleaned from this shift from local production 38 years ago?

COMMENTARY

IN 1981, Singapore farmed nearly 1.25 million pigs annually. Its pig farms were among the most [advanced and intensive](#) in the world. The country was effectively [self-sufficient](#) in pork.

In 1984, however, the Government announced that it would phase out pig farming. By 1989, all pig farms in Singapore had been closed down. Today, Singaporeans consume only imported pork. What were the drivers for this change?

As Singapore steps up efforts to boost local food production to meet its ambitious "30-by-30" targets, what insights can be gleaned from Singapore's historic decision to turn away from pork self-sufficiency?

Policy Justifications

In March 1984, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee announced in Parliament that pig farming in Singapore [would be phased out](#).

He noted the immense environmental and economic burdens of continuing pig

farming. Raising pigs locally consumed valuable land, water, and energy resources. Conversely, importing pigs would not only be more economical for Singapore in the long run, but would also potentially bolster relations with supplier countries.

While these were entirely valid justifications, the Primary Production Department (PPD – the government agency in the Ministry of National Development in charge of farming activities) had been dealing with these challenges for years and had developed many innovative solutions for them. For instance, experiments had been conducted into [using pig waste to generate electricity](#), or [recycling it into animal feed](#). Though the economic and environmental challenges of intensive pig farming were indeed complex, PPD officials had long worked closely with pig farmers to manage them.

The government's economic logic for phasing out Singapore's pig farms was hence only part of the story. There was another more contentious dimension to this decision - the complicated relationship between the government and the local pig farming industry.

Government and Domestic Pig Industry: A Complicated Relationship

Between 1972 and 1984, government agencies clashed [with industry players](#) in at least six notable instances, over accusations of "[blatant profiteering](#)", and [artificial supply disruptions](#). This recurring "[controversy over pork](#)" attracted significant press coverage and public interest.

Remarkably, such supply disruptions occurred even in times of surplus, as pig farmers and pork merchants alike sought to control local supplies and improve their revenues. As pig production came to be concentrated in a small number of large farms, the PPD found evidence of artificial shortages and "speculative manipulation" by pork merchants and influential farmers.

In addition, the Singapore Pork Merchants' Association (SPMA), which represented a significant portion of local pork retailers and butchers, refused on numerous occasions to slaughter pigs and sell fresh pork in local markets, taking extra rest days to "avoid losses". Consequently, there was occasionally [no fresh pork in the markets](#) as the SPMA responded against what it perceived as various "[unreasonable](#)" state levies and fees.

Although government officials decried industry players for their "most irresponsible" efforts to disrupt local pork supplies, these contestations also hinted at the difficulties of regulating the local pork sector.

Hence, although Singapore was virtually "self-sufficient" in pork by 1977, and local farms were producing [over a million pigs annually](#) by 1980, pork prices continued to spike erratically throughout this period.

Finally, in 1981, after years of disputes with local pig farmers and butchers, and price surges caused by artificial pork shortages, the government began highly publicised trial imports of pigs from a jointly-owned Singapore-Thai farm in Hat Yai, Thailand. Agreements were also finalised for additional pig shipments from [Johor](#).

Importing Pigs

Officials stated that “[the government would import more pigs from neighbouring countries to check blatant profiteering by pig farmers](#)”. The increased supply of pork from overseas sources brought prices down, though the SPMA doubted the efficacy of such “temporary” measures.

By March 1982, the increase in pig supplies had caused prices to plunge so precipitously that local farmers [publicly implored the government to halt imports](#), and to [let them sell their surplus pigs](#). Though the government eventually acquiesced to stabilise local pork prices, it also warned that it would [continue importing pigs](#) until local pig prices grew competitive again.

After years of contentious clashes, the government had found a way to stabilise Singapore’s pork supplies and prices. Over the next few years, it conducted increasingly large-scale experiments into importing pork from different countries, leading Dr Goh to eventually conclude that “it is possible to supply the whole of our pork requirements through imports”.

Though Dr Goh’s 1984 explanations in Parliament to phase out pig farming never referenced these tensions between public agencies and the pork industry, the government’s earliest experiments with importing foreign pigs can be traced to these clashes between the government and the private sector. The frequent supply disruptions and price hikes caused by the local pork industry had hence pushed the government to finding alternative sources of pork.

Insights and Implications

This brief account of Singapore’s pig farming past reminds us that although greater food self-sufficiency is a commendable aspiration for a country, it is also a far more complicated process than simply increasing supplies or boosting production capabilities. A small state’s food security is also dependent on the close relationships between the public and private sectors, cooperating toward shared objectives.

Without such synergies, even increased local production might lead to disruptions in food supplies. Despite Singapore’s virtual pork self-sufficiency, the confluence of various unfavourable environmental, economic, and social factors ultimately spurred the government to explore more reliable and secure alternatives overseas.

This additional historical context reminds us that there are also ‘softer’, social aspects to Singapore’s food security, emerging not just from technological breakthroughs, but from the quality of the relationships and interactions between government and other stakeholders from various domains.

As Singapore strives toward developing more climate-resilient, scientifically advanced food systems to meet its “30-by-30” ambitions, it is also important to realise that a nation’s food security is also underwritten by the conviction, imagination, and cooperation among its citizens, corporate agencies, and policy community. A balanced approach with clear long-term vision is essential for securing the country’s future.

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