

# FOOD SECURITY: Another Case for Human Security in ASEAN

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This paper seeks for a holistic approach in looking at the issue of food security. Several incidents at different parts of the world in 2008 such as the ones in Haiti, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, have shown that food insecurity could lead to political stability and social unrest. On the worst scale it may result in conflict and war. It brings the discussion back to the concept of human security. Recent history points to security threat if people are deprived of their basic needs.

The spiking price of food, especially of rice commodity that took place in the first half of 2008 has reignited the significance of food security as a non-traditional security challenge to ASEAN states and the region as a whole. Having to generate intrastate and interstate implications, food security should be framed beyond the matter of demand and supply. It should be linked with broader human security aspects such as poverty, gender, health and environmental concerns.

## Food Security: the Evolving Concept

The concept of food security has evolved over the last three decades to reflect the shift in policy-thinking. Initially, food security was framed with an economic approach that focused at the demand and supply side of the issue. The definition introduced in the 1974 World Food Summit, of which food security was 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”, emphasized on the availability of food supply. 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).

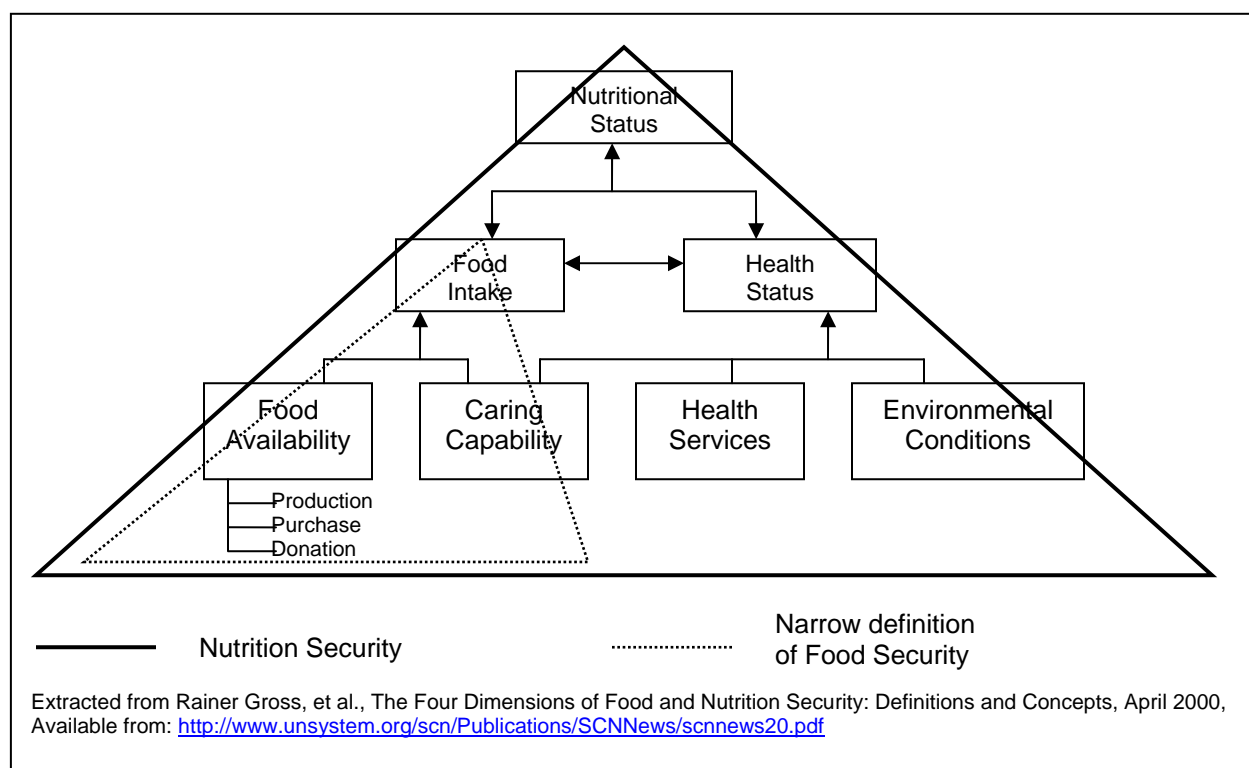
Moving beyond the demand and supply side, the issue of food security gradually evolved to include implementing the appropriate policies concerning the distribution of food and the availability of access to food to those most in need. The principle of “Freedom from Want” – as espoused by Prof Amartya Sen, co-chair of the UN Commission for Human Security – is relevant in this regard as it noted the importance of development in ensuring the security of the individual. The 1994 Human Development Report also stated 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:

*“Food security 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” (FAO, 2006)*

This definition emphasizes the multidimensional nature of food security which include availability, stability, access, utilisation of food. Gill et al. similarly argued that the problem of food security should be approached by looking at the problem of food availability, food access

and food utilisation. Food availability refers to supply of food coming from domestic production, import and food aid; Food access relates to adequate resources of people to obtain food, the affordability of the food supply the seasonal and sudden hazards to food security, and to a certain extent, the issue of intra-household gender discrimination; Food utilisation relates to a wider aspect of health situation of the people and also the culture and livelihood of societies (Gill, et al. 2003).

Gross et al. offer a conceptual approach in looking at the issue of food security within a larger context of nutritional security. According to fig. 1, it can be 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. In addition to Gill et al., an element of stability should be applied to the element of availability, access and utilisation. 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 (Gross et al. 2000). Moreover, this framework emphasizes on having the appropriate and nutritious food for different group of society that correspond to their livelihood and the extent to which the food they obtained could be utilised to create a nutritious diet.



## The Multidimensional Impact of Food Insecurity

Having to understand the extensiveness of the evolving concept, food insecurity 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% of their household budget. The problem of food insecurity should not only be seen as a matter of famine and hunger. With regard to the food utilisation, the increase price of food are forcing people to consume cheaper foods with lower nutritional status. 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 (ADB, 2008).

Furthermore, Southeast Asian countries are developing countries with large trend of urbanisation that has created wider disparities between the urban and rural population. Many of the rural households in Southeast Asia are small farmers that have become net food consumers instead of producers. Thus, they have not gain benefits from the rise of food prices. Meanwhile, the necessary support system to improve their farming is frail. 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 (IFAD,2008). In doing so, these poor rural children may run the risk of further jeopardising 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 (Gross et al., 2000). 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 insecurity, as the latter requires a multidisciplinary approach to the problem.

From the perspective of state security, food insecurity 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 mobilised 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. Similar form of forced control of market also happen in Bangladesh. One of the measures taken under the state of emergency in January 2007 was to have the Rapid Action Battalion of the armed forces to patrol and intervene markets in order to prevent irregularities by traders. 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 insecurity 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. The restriction on rice exports by Asian rice exporters such as India and Vietnam sparked panic to other importing countries in the region and farther afield. Another example was the public announcement of Thailand's former 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.

### **What Role ASEAN Could Play?**

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. This is further complicated by the range of issues that have contributed to the rising food prices such as higher fuel prices; 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; the increasing demand for food due to the increase population in general and also the increase number of middle class people in major developing countries such as China and India; weather related disasters that have destroyed resources for the production of food crops that will have an effect not only to domestic supply but also regional supply; and global financial crises affecting prices and income in general. This therefore raises problems faced by governments, NGOs and also international organisations in coordinating multi-dimensional policies in trying to address the problem.

There is not a one-fits-all policies to the issue of food security. As it was mentioned at the Global Food Summit 2008, means to address the challenges to food security should be tailored to fit country's specific needs. Availability of food in national level might not be distributed equally among different groups in the society and among rural-urban areas. The rising price of food and the seasonality of food availability may have greater impact on rural areas than urban areas. The devastating impact of food insecurity on human security calls for comprehensive initiatives from national, regional and international states and non-state actors. Since the current state of food insecurity is not like those of the traditional famine, the efforts to provide food aid, control food price and curb grain exports in the short term is clearly insufficient. Especially since the short-term solution to this problem might risk the matter worse in the long run.

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.

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

			Cambodia	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Thailand	Vietnam
<b>Consumer Oriented</b>	<b>Tax</b>	<b>Taxes/ Customs</b>						
	<b>Social</b>	<b>Food Assistance</b>						
		<b>Food Subsidies</b>		✓		✓		
		<b>Safety net &amp; other</b>						
	<b>Market</b>	<b>Price Controls</b>		✓	✓			
		<b>Release Stocks</b>	✓		✓		✓	
		<b>Food Procurement &amp; other</b>						
<b>Producer Oriented</b>	<b>Production Support</b>	<b>Producer Credit &amp; Other</b>		✓	✓	✓		
	<b>Market Management</b>	<b>Minimum Producer Prices &amp; other</b>			✓	✓		
<b>Trade Oriented</b>	<b>Import</b>	<b>Import tariffs &amp; other</b>		✓				
	<b>Export</b>	<b>Qualitative Export Controls</b>	✓	✓				✓
		<b>Export price Control &amp; tax measures</b>		✓	✓	✓		

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

Furthermore, regional mechanism offers an alternative solution to problems arising due to reliance to food aid from major donors. From the estimation of US\$ 25 billion to US\$45 billion needed to tackle the global food crisis, only US\$ 12.3 billion was pledged at the FAO Conference in Rome in June 2008. It reflects the reluctance of major donor countries in responding to the recent global food crisis. With the recent multiple crisis ranging from high fuel prices to financial turmoil, even far less attention being paid by rich states to food crisis. Moreover, food aid from major donors often falls short in helping to develop local agricultural capacities. Laurie Garret further argued that food aid is used as a means to bolster domestic agriculture of the donor countries by delivering domestic grown crops instead of money. OXFAM stated that 79 percent of all food aid distributed in 2007 from rich states were delivered in the form domestically produced crops which were transported using giant shipping companies (Garret, 2008). Therefore, a regional concerted effort is imperative to support ASEAN states in responding with the suitable short, medium and long term policies to ensure food security.

Food security has gained more political weight and become the focal point for discussion and cooperation in ASEAN. In the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting Singapore on 21 July 2008, ministers

agreed that rising food prices posed a serious challenge to the region. 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.

A Strategic Plan of Action on ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry (2005 – 2010) is adopted as a continuance of a considerable progress made by the Strategic Plan of Action (1999-2004). 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.

- 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

Reinforcing the existing mechanisms, 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, social security, 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. ASEAN should be able to ensure that trade policies in the region promote development, resilient towards external shocks and ensure 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. ASEAN Community could be a framework to maintain conducive economic cooperation on food liberalisation that will create opportunities to develop agriculture trade in the region and at the same time provide protection to the most vulnerable populations in the region as espoused in the ASEAN Vision 2020.

## Conclusion

The evolving conceptual framework of food security has brought to light a wide array of issues pertinent to be addressed beyond the problem of supply and demand. Being closely connected to the issue of health, poverty, gender, governance and economic, the issue of food security touches upon the multidimensional aspects of human security. It is then imperative to factor in food security issues in various policies on the sub-national, national, regional and international level for both states and non-states actors. 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 strengthen their effort to reduce the adverse impact on their people with the support of ASEAN as the forefront for regional initiatives and mechanisms.

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