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Food Security: What it means for a Food-Importing Country

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Synopsis

Most countries depend on three “food taps” – imports, self-production, reserve stocks – to make food available. All countries import some amount of food to meet their increasingly diverse dietary demands. Binding agreements and a regional view of food security are therefore critical.

Commentary

FOOD SECURITY has been generally defined by the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in the broadest of terms. To the FAO, food security means *“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.”*

This “catch-all” description strongly suggests that food security is met only if there is sufficient food (available), physical access to it, economic access (it is affordable) and people eat nutritious and safe food. The FAO purposely developed this definition to mean that food security has to take into account many other dimensions beyond just producing food.

Food security in Singapore

For a city-state such as Singapore with limited food production capacity, how should this definition be interpreted and what are the policy implications? Singapore currently has three “food taps” – imports, self-production and stockpiles (reserves), in that order of importance. Singapore’s main strategy of food security is premised on “food resiliency”, which means having diverse sources to import key food items.

There is no guarantee that if another major supply disruption crisis occurs, such as SARS, this strategy would mitigate shortages. Singapore has set targets for self-production, such as 15% of total needs for finfish, 30% for eggs and 10% for fresh vegetables, commensurate with its limited land area. But all these would not be adequate should supplies be disrupted for a prolonged period.

What about keeping reserves or stockpiles? How much food and at what cost is Singapore willing to stock for peace of mind? How would this be determined? For example, the current two months’ worth of rice stock is based on calculations done several decades ago. While Singapore’s per capita rice consumption has declined, its population has more than doubled from 1973 to about 5.4 million in 2013. At the same time, tourist numbers

have also risen to exceed one million per month in 2013. Reserve stocks will remain a small component of the food security arsenal.

Paradox of Singapore's food security

The recent Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Food Security Index (<http://foodsecurityindex.eiu.com/>) rated Singapore 16th in the world for food security, making it the most food secure nation in Asia. It scored particularly well in terms of food affordability. But Singapore produces only about 10% of its own food (and only for a few selected items), while it imports the other 90% from many parts of the world. *There exists a paradox of being considered relatively food secure, yet producing little and being very vulnerable to external factors and sources of food.*

So what does food security really mean to net food-importing countries like Singapore and how should policymakers plan? Singapore, like other countries with no significant food production capacity, will always rely on imports as the main "food tap". Policies to ensure this "tap" continues to flow uninterrupted, while maintaining the other two taps (of self-production and reserves) need to be firmly in place to secure food availability.

Many economists have argued that even in countries with abundant agriculture, self-sufficiency in food -- producing all of a country's needs in certain food items -- does not make sense as the opportunity costs are high. But many governments, for various reasons, still advocate *self-sufficiency*. Singapore cannot be self-sufficient due to size limitations and so uses the *self-reliance* approach -- importing to make up for natural or planned shortfalls in self production or no production of specific food items -- which is highly dependent on trade.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has proposed that trade disruptions caused by panic action to ban exports can be prevented with more transparency and timeliness in sharing data on food stocks. This is a positive suggestion. Binding regional agreements on transparent data sharing will likely over-ride the tendency of politicians to be risk averse.

Securitising food supply chains

A regional commitment to tackling food security is needed to address the one uncertainty that has always been the "bugbear" of national attempts at food *self-reliance*: In times of food supply disruptions, importing countries have found it difficult to ensure food stability due to a slowdown in supply from exporting countries. Importing countries therefore need to be assured that regional supply chains do not get disrupted in times of crisis - in other words, a reliable "import" food tap.

It is therefore important that regional agreements on food security be truly enforceable. In other words, regional collaboration should be backed up by commitment in line with the regional community spirit. At a recent Food Industry Convention in Singapore, the Minister of National Development stated that, as part of Singapore's food security strategy, Singapore needed to engage in regional and international forums and bodies dealing with agriculture and food. Singapore joined the FAO in 2013; symbolically showing that as a net food importing country, it recognises the need to broaden its participation in international bodies that can enhance its food security.

One of the key regional collaborative efforts, the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework, ends its first five-year phase in 2013. Others like the ASEAN Food Security Information System (AFSIS) and the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR) require stronger support from ASEAN economies for greater effectiveness. High income, net food importing countries like Singapore should increase their support for these regional efforts to ensure their own food security.

New findings, such as those of the United Nations' Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have shown that climate change will affect food production sooner than previously anticipated. This should give further impetus to ASEAN and other regional groupings to step up their efforts in tackling food security, including securing binding regional agreements on food trade.

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