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ASEAN Response to Asian Food Security Concerns

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

As global food security rises to the top of the policymaking agenda, new approaches are being explored. Within ASEAN, Singapore's position as a food importer is changing to become an active contributor to a more stable food security system.

Commentary

ASEAN HAS pushed food security to the top of its agenda amid continuing global concerns over the volatility of food prices and food supplies. Rising costs of staples like rice, wheat, grain and dairy products are causing nervousness because of their political and security impact. Vivid in the minds of ASEAN policymakers is the indirect role of food prices in provoking revolts in Tunisia and other Arab countries earlier this year, leading to the fall of governments in North Africa.

ASEAN economic ministers who met in Manado, Indonesia on 10-14 August 2011 noted the continuing risks of rising food and commodity prices. But they cautioned against curbing food trade and erecting protectionist measures to boost domestic reserves as these would only worsen global food insecurity. ASEAN re-emphasised the importance of its five-year strategic plan called the ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework (AIFS). The AIFS aims to assure long-term food security in the region through enhanced cooperation among ASEAN countries.

This point was underscored by Dr Mohammad Maliki Osman, a Singapore government official, when opening the International Conference on Asian Food Security (ICAFS 2011) in Singapore on 10 August -- the same day the ASEAN meeting in Manado began.

In Search of Holistic Solutions

To be sure, food prices have improved somewhat since the global food crisis of 2007/2008, mainly because of larger reserves, according to United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Over the longer term, however, prices of staples are expected to remain volatile and food security therefore uncertain. The drivers for this uncertainty include climate change; increasing water and land scarcity; global population increase; growing demand for meat and dairy products; and the global financial crisis.

The growing concern for food security has galvanised the international community into greater cooperation. ICAFS 2011 itself ended with a move to forge a global consortium on food security comprising various stakeholders of the global food system. ICAFS was jointly organised by the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies of Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and the Philippine-based Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA).

The move towards stronger global collaboration, such as the RSIS-initiated global consortium, would help mitigate the full impact of another global food crisis. This could be pursued as part of the search for holistic solutions to solve food security issues. To begin with, as argued by Dr Maliki, there is a need to re-examine food security policies and approaches, painfully underscored by the recent global food crisis.

Such a review should include Singapore's own food security policies and strategies. Singapore's approach, in turn, should dovetail at least three fronts in the global action to tackle food security: ASEAN, through the AIFS as its immediate hinterland; the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) through measures to enhance food security around the Asia Pacific region; and thirdly, the G20 which aims to tackle the negative impacts of food price volatility on global food security, such as through international coordination.

Singapore's role in Food Security

Significantly Singapore's food security strategy has already undergone a rethink, as gleaned from Dr Maliki's remarks at ICAFS 2011. To begin with, Singapore is repositioning itself along the food value chain. To promote international cooperation in addressing food security and lessen its high dependence on food imports, Singapore is moving from being a passive consumer of food to becoming a contributing player in the quest for a more stable global food system.

There are at least four prongs in this multi-faceted strategy, the first of which is through research and development. Singapore's National Research Foundation recently awarded a US\$8.2 million grant to a joint project to develop new rice strains that can adapt to climate change. This holds out potential benefits for the whole of Asia.

The second strategy is to grow Singapore into a hub for agribusiness. This is being pursued by promoting the role of the private sector such as getting big players to set-up their operational headquarters and trading operations, as well as undertake upstream research in Singapore.

Urban Farming and Domestic Food Resilience

The third strategy is to turn Singapore's own domestic market into a "test-lab" for urban agriculture by leveraging on its highly urbanised environment to find unique, urban solutions to food security. Agricultural production can be creatively brought within the urban population. The results of urban farming can eventually be shared and replicated in other Asian cities, Dr Maliki said. "Rooftop farming" and other urban farming ideas are being pursued with the aim of turning Singapore into a centre for urban farming.

A fourth, but no less important, strategy is the shift towards greater local production of three key food items – eggs, leafy vegetables and fish. A \$20 million Food Fund is in place to incentivise farms to explore new farming technologies and build up capacity to ensure Singapore's food supply resilience.

Singapore's overall strategy is to seek win-win partnerships locally, regionally and globally as food security issues transcend national boundaries. By taking care of its own needs while being useful to the ASEAN region and world, Singapore is poised to play its part in tackling the global food security problem.

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