A Food Secure Asia by 2025: Addressing Vulnerable Groups

By Tamara Nair

Synopsis

Despite numerous international and regional conversations on food security of late, the problem of hunger and malnourishment still persists in Asia. There is a need to relook existing strategies to secure food for affected groups in the region if the vision of a food secure Asia is to be realised by 2025.

Commentary

IN RETROSPECT, of the many grand-scale food security conversations that have taken place in 2014, few have been all-inclusive. While there are successes in terms of food security in Asia in general, these do not address the needs of the large numbers of hungry and undernourished in the region.

There are growing challenges posed by hunger and undernourishment in Asia as reflected in the inability to meet the 1996 World Food Summit (WFS) target of halving the number of undernourished people by 2015. Perhaps the time has come to broaden the thinking as to who we should be having conversations with and what else we should do to establish secure and equal access to food for everyone.

Beyond availability and access to food

The persistent existence of great numbers of hungry, undernourished people in Asia should prompt a relook at existing approaches of access to and availability of food. Food security is often intertwined with other human insecurities such as lack of economic growth, unemployment, and even unfair economic competition and gender bias. For example women and girls often suffer food insecurities given cultural bias in resource distribution in parts of Asia.

Recent events in the South China Sea involving illegal fishing can be a result of insecurities due to unfair competition, pushing fishermen further beyond their fishing territories. For these groups, food security may well extend beyond issues of increasing food production. Their insecurities can also be steeped in cultural politics played out at the local level.

If the intention is to achieve a food secure region, where hunger and undernourishment is considerably lowered, our ideas on food security must expand and evolve – from access and availability to include addressing drivers of hunger and undernourishment.

Appreciating local complexities

For most Asian nations equal access to food opens up Pandora's Box in terms of problems that can only be collectively addressed. Some of the ways to address them are the deliberate inclusion of local governments, local communities, welfare organisations, women's groups and cooperatives, clan or caste associations and human rights advocates. But first, we need to acknowledge that existing food policies might not be effective.

Large numbers of rural and urban poor still go to bed hungry despite impressive economic growth in the region. In addition to looking at increasing food production and trade, we also need to look at the reasons why people are still hungry and undernourished. Hunger and undernourishment are complex issues interwoven with several other insecurities, not just joblessness or the lack of money to buy food. Localised strategies to identify specific conditions triggering these insecurities, including that of food, are essential.

Expanding income-earning opportunities would be a positive step in this direction. Local development strategies should aim towards creating employment opportunities for the poor in both rural and urban settings. This should include job opportunities for women. Numerous local projects around Asia show that as female (or combined household) income earning potential increases, household food insecurity falls.

This is an effective strategy and more resources should be channelled at local levels for this to happen. Unfair competition should be tempered through the creation of local cooperatives that can give vulnerable small-scale food producers greater collective bargaining power in food production and food market activities. Local government or other relevant institutions should also exercise effective targeting strategies to identify deserving beneficiaries for various food safety nets, such as public distribution systems, cash hand-outs or meal distribution.

Political participation

We also need to consider increasing capacities of these groups through effective political participation. There should be opportunities for vulnerable groups to participate in development planning and to some extent, be able to influence decisions made. Local level participation in development strategies can create greater trust between various stakeholders in projects that address poverty or income generation and make agencies more accountable to the beneficiaries of various policies put in place.

These strategies are in place in several Asian countries. However, relentless hunger among the poor and vulnerable indicates that the effectiveness of existing policies should be examined and more should be done to fine tune its reach.

Empowering vulnerable groups with income earning potential, removing unfair competition and giving them opportunities to exercise their rights as citizens will go a long way towards removing barriers that result in creating food insecure groups despite well-meaning policies. These are just some of the complexities that need attention in addition to macro-scale solutions like increased food production and trade.

Towards a food secure ASEAN

ASEAN's post 2015 agenda will be looking into a 10-year timeframe for food security. The International Food Policy Research Institute has also chosen 2025 as the year the world should aim to eradicate hunger.

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2015 has strategies to enhance the long-term competitiveness of regional food commodities. In its grand plans however, it is easy for the vulnerable to slip through the cracks. While AEC presents opportunities for greater integration and growth we

need to exercise caution that broad regional agendas do not see some groups become 'outliers' in regional development.

Governments should undertake poverty alleviation strategies and support efforts to promote community participation. Such strategies should aim to promote greater trust between stakeholders, provide jobs to generate incomes and help to effectively target food vulnerable groups.

By identifying the food insecure and addressing the complexities of their daily lives, issues of hunger and undernourishment can be better determined. Enhancing the welfare and rights of the citizens can lead to domestic policies that are more pro poor and are able to address their insecurities.

Similarly, regional trade arrangements should include measures to safeguard those who will be most vulnerable to market instabilities. Fairer market conditions will allow ASEAN to achieve greater equitable regional development, which will in turn contribute towards a food secure Asia.

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