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Hunger in Southeast Asia – System-wide Solutions Needed



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Hunger is rarely just a result of a lack of food. It is an underlying symptom. A symptom of systematic insecurities and social inequalities that result in limited access to sustenance and nutrition. World Hunger Day, which falls on May 28, aims to spread awareness on the causes of hunger and emphasises sustainable solutions to eradicate global hunger and poverty. Chronic hunger and food insecurity are a result of, among other factors, unstable regimes as evidenced by the famines in South Sudan and Somalia. They can also compromise the stability of nations as seen in the current Venezuelan case. It should be clear to world leaders that aside from military prowess, national security is tied to establishing the various facets of human security including ensuring the availability of and access to food.

The hunger situation in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has done remarkably well in reducing numbers of hungry. From a Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU) – a measure of hunger used by UN Food and Agriculture Organisation – of 36 per cent in 1994-96, the region now boasts a PoU of 9.6 per cent as last recorded in 2014-16. To a large extent, this is a result of

integrating rural markets to the national economy and channelling sufficient funds to the food production base. Despite this accomplishment, five countries in the region, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar, are classified as facing 'serious' hunger rates with one – Timor Leste – as having 'alarming' rates of hunger. Apart from PoU, other factors such as sanitation, infrastructure and female literacy affect hunger rates in these countries.

Measuring Hunger

While the lower PoU indicator values can be interpreted as more people having access to food, equal attention should be paid to other indicators as well. The Prevalence of Underweight Children Under 5 (Cu5) indicator used by UNICEF and WHO is one such indicator. It is important to understand the different trends of these indicators across the country (ies) and over time because it offers insights into the complexity of food insecurity. This should lead to more targeted policy interventions.

In Southeast Asia both indicator values have dropped over the years. However, it is important to note that the PoU and the Cu5 reflect different underlying problems. Both indicator values are affected by the lack of sufficient food. But the Cu5 diverges from the PoU when we consider food utilization or how the body processes and uses food consumed. This is dependent on hygienic environments, which are reflected in, for example, the availability of clean water. This in turn is dependent on investment in water and sanitation infrastructure. Simply put, reducing Cu5 numbers requires more targeted

investments in infrastructure than just policies aimed at enhancing food availability.

The complex problem of hunger

Female literacy rates are also a key indicator of hunger levels in countries. The Hunger Report 2015 by International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), CONCERN Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe, clearly point out the role of women and the importance of their education in reducing numbers of hungry worldwide. Women in the region have been direct beneficiaries of social protection policies such as cash transfers, that have allowed them to make a positive impact on food security and nutrition, especially that of children. But the sustainability of such positive outcomes is only guaranteed if complementary initiatives, such as education, employment opportunities and greater public participation are encouraged. Although the women of Southeast Asia have much higher degrees of freedom and equality when compared to some African or South

Asian States, there are glaring inter- and intra-national disparities that need immediate attention.

Can we solve the hunger problem?

So what would be the key solutions to hunger in Southeast Asia?

Economic growth is certainly a key factor but it must be accompanied by targeted social protection policies that provide opportunities for improving livelihoods of the poor. Greater investments in sanitation and water infrastructure are equally important but so are reducing gender disparities.

It is important to understand how protracted hunger can be instrumental in triggering conflict and civil strife, even if only a small percentage of the population is affected. Equal access to food, proper nutrition and gender equality contribute to human development, which in turn helps individuals fully participate and take advantage of the development process. All three should remain key goals for Southeast Asia to maintain the peace and stability of the region.



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Suggested Readings:

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CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY AND NATURAL DISASTERS

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Women's crucial role in combating climate change

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How China can lead the fight against climate change

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Trump boosts coal as China takes the lead on climate change

*Michael Biesecker and
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The Paris Agreement on Climate Change Has Surprising New Supporters

*Justin Worland,
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Signatories to Paris climate change deal in dispute over financing

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Climate change offers huge investment opportunity, experts say

*Thomson Reuters
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EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

World Symposium on Climate Change Policies and Governance

12–14 September 2017
Manchester, the UK

Third International Conference on Environment, Engineering & Energy 2017

16–17 September 2017
Toronto, Canada

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Handbook for ASEAN government officials on climate change and SDGs

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The United States and the Paris Agreement: A pivotal moment

*Ban Ki-moon and Robert N. Stavins,
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The South China Sea disputes: The energy dimensions

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Nuclear waste problems start gold rush

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China's big play for Middle East oil

*Robin Mills,
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International Conference on Topical Issues in Nuclear Installation Safety: Safety Demonstration of Advanced Water Cooled Nuclear Power Plants
6-9 June 2017
Vienna, Austria

40th Annual IAEA International Conference
18-21 June 2017
Singapore

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FOOD SECURITY



Courtesy of Flickr account of UN Women Asia and the Pacific and used under a creative commons license.

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26 May 2017,
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World Health Organization
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Why healthcare security will only become more complicated
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2-3 October 2017
Philadelphia, USA

Global Ministerial Conference on TB
16–17 November 2017
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Bangladesh detains Rohingyas attempting boat trip to Malaysia

Dhaka Tribune
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Sri Lanka navy detains suspected Rohingya refugees

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Why camps are the wrong way to help today's refugees

The Spectator
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After the Missiles, Remember the Syrian Refugees

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5-7 March 2018
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Report: Global Drug Trafficking Market Worth Half a Trillion Dollars

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Interpol World Congress

5-6 July 2017
Singapore

20th International Conference on Anti-Corruption, Good Governance and Human Rights

20-21 December 2018
Bangkok, Thailand

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF



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CARE International
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The Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation (GAHI): Stakeholder Consultation Report

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Thailand's MTT Arranges Emergency Response Framework

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22-23 May 2017
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29 June-1 July 2017
Reading, United Kingdom

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Fragile countries need water security the most

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Amplification of wildfire area burnt by hydrological drought in the humid tropics

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