Feeding Asia in a Crisis: Guarding Against the Unintended Consequences of COVID-19 Containment

From Pakistan clear across the region to Australia and New Zealand, an unprecedented freeze on movement of people, goods and services is underway – and understandably so. COVID-19 has an ever-increasing grip on the Asia-Pacific, and regional governments are reacting in the best way they know to stop the spread of the diabolical pandemic.

But in the rush to lock down borders and limit all interaction, it’s imperative the measures to address one crisis don’t unintentionally create a new one. The tenuous balance of food security in Asia – and ASEAN in particular – is wholly dependent on regional farmers’ access to fundamental agricultural inputs. With the spring planting season now at hand, ensuring the uninterrupted and timely transboundary movement of crop protection products and seeds that enable farmers to grow safe and nutritious food is more critical than ever before.

It’s not that food security has been forgotten in the midst of COVID-19 regional reaction – far from it. Virtually every day there are new reassurances from government policy makers across the region that an ample supply of food will continue to be available and provisions are in place to meet consumer demand. But as the freeze goes into April and beyond, can those reassurances continue to be given?

The answer is yes – but it will require policy-making that accounts for farmer needs and the uniqueness of agriculture in our region.

There are over 520 million smallholder farmers around the world. Of those men and women growers, nearly 85% of them call Asia home and roughly 100 million live within Southeast Asia. These “food heroes” are both the heart and backbone of the food supply value chain in our region. We rely on them to produce the safe and nutritious crops on which we so critically depend.

These smallholder growers in our region also face a host of unique challenges: landholder rights issues; lack of access to markets and financing; and acute climate change just to name a few. In most cases, they also don’t enjoy the same availability of technology that many of their counterparts in the west have, and are limited to primitive agricultural methods by comparison.

For these growers, access to high-quality agricultural inputs is particularly crucial. If our region’s smallholders are the heart and backbone of Asia’s food value chain, then the inputs at their disposal provide the essential fuel. Crop protection products and seeds are fundamental components in driving seasonal cycles with sowing, harvesting and production. Should their availability to farmers be denied or delayed, it would gravely impact the livelihood of millions of Asia’s farmers – and in turn, regional food security.

Think regional food security doesn’t hinge on our smallholders’ success? Here’s some food for thought: while the top rice exporters globally by volume last year were the APAC countries of India, Thailand, Vietnam and Pakistan; the top two importers worldwide were also within the region (China and the Philippines).

Meanwhile, according to data recently released from the China Chamber of Commerce for Import and Export of Foodstuffs, Native Produce and Animal By-Products, 2019 saw five of the top six exporters of fruit by value into China coming from regional neighbors. Concurrently, the top four importers of China-grown fruit came from within ASEAN (Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines to be exact). That churn of transboundary Asian
agricultural trade is driven by our farmers – the lion’s share made up by the millions of regional smallholders.

Consider Singapore as a microcosm for trade policy and its potential repercussions across the entire Asia-Pacific region. The nation’s government has been an exemplary model of pragmatic policy-making in the face of COVID-19 fallout. That includes steps to ensure an ample supply of food for its citizens and diversifying sources as needed to deliver on this. With over 90% of Singapore’s food supply imported into the country, that strong leadership and extra effort are absolutely essential.

At the same time, Singapore is not only dependent on the continued transport of food into the country, but also the policy-making of the exporting trade partner that enables it. Should measures be put in place by an agricultural exporting country that jeopardize the production, registration, movement or distribution of crop protection products, seeds or any needed inputs, the supply of food into Singapore will also be unnecessarily endangered.

On behalf of our organizations and the industries we represent, we would like to applaud the tireless efforts of those protecting our population. We stand ready to support both the farming communities of Asia that are working to ensure a sustainable supply of food during these challenging times as well as the government leaders whose decisions enable that critically important work to continue.

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