



Changing the narrative of ASEAN progress in addressing hunger: ‘snoozing’ the alarm for SDG #2?

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1 Synopsis

In the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations’ (FAO) latest report, the change in narrative from *failure to continued progress* of Southeast Asia in addressing undernourishment, is akin to ‘snoozing’ a much-needed wake-up call for achieving the zero-hunger 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG).

2 Commentary

In the 47th Session of the Committee on World Food Security, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations called for transforming agri-food systems in the face of the COVID-19. This is because COVID-19 has exposed pre-existing deficiencies of the food system. However, the same impetus could have been provided earlier, through FAO reports.

3 Earlier wake-up calls

Undernourishment in the ASEAN region fell significantly in previous decades, given the ASEAN’s Economic Community’s efforts to boost economic development to lift millions from poverty. Falling by approximately 4.5 million

per year, undernourishment fell from 101.7 million people in 2005 to 60.6 million in 2014.

In the 2016 State of Food and Agriculture Report, the FAO warned these trends may not be sustained, given changing environmental conditions like natural disasters and worsening environmental conditions. In fact, FAO statistics showed that the annualized regional growth in cereal yields has slowed down from 2.02% per annum in 1970–1990 to 1.87% in 1990–2010.

The 2018 SOFI Report reflected climate impacts on undernourishment materialise: across Southeast Asia it increased from 60.6 million in 2014 to 63.6 million in 2016 (page 6). Declining yields have led to slower production growth relative to population growth, and diminished farmers’ incomes and livelihoods. An increase in food prices, relative to income, thus led to reduced economic access to food, especially in rural areas.

Loud ‘Wake-up calls’ could have been sent to policymakers by these trends of worsening climate-induced food insecurity. The problem however, is that earlier alarms for Southeast Asia were apparently ‘snoozed’, in the revised statistics starting in the 2019 SOFI Report.

4 Changing narratives: Snoozing the alarms?

The revised statistics in the 2019 Report painted a new narrative of ‘constant improvement’ regional progress in addressing undernourishment, altered from one of ‘worsening/reversing progress in addressing undernourishment’. It showed a steady decline in regional undernourishment from 103.8 million people in 2005 to 61.9 million in 2016, further declining to 61.1 million in 2017. The report, in fact, stated that ‘Western Asia is the only sub-region in Asia where undernourishment is on the rise’ (p. 12).

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Moreover, the ‘clock’ for undernourishment seems to be adjusted annually with each report, ‘snoozing’ the ‘wake-up’ call further. For instance, in the 2020 SOFI Report, one can no longer observe the abrupt increase in undernourishment from 60.6 million (2014) to 63.6 million people (2016). Rather, undernourishment levels in earlier years were adjusted to reflect 66.7 million people in 2015 and 63.9 million in 2017. A gradual decline in undernourishment is reflected, from 10.5% (2015) of ASEAN population, to 10% (2016), and remaining at 9.8% in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

The change in narratives occurs, since the FAO regularly revises its method of measuring the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU). Data on economic inequality (including data on per capita GDP, income inequality or Gini index, and relative food prices) is not regularly available consistently across all countries, so it has discontinued considering their effects in estimating undernourishment. Rather, it is now based on interpolations from existing national surveys, which are inconsistently available, subjecting statistics to biases and sudden changes in the overall messages sent by the data.

The implication of this, however, is that the PoU metric no longer serves as a consistent/reliable metric for undernourishment, reflecting mostly the ‘average national food consumption’ (p.149, 2019 Report; p.220, 220 Report) based on the supply of food relative to demand, in terms of calories. For instance, macro-level data on inequality is not consistently available, and the Philippines has not reported GINI coefficients since 2015 in the World Bank’s database. In contrast, a cursory comparison of median and average income shows a widening gap. In 2016, the median wealth per adult (USD 2474) was at 23.4% of the average wealth per adult (USD 10,591) whereas in 2019, it was only at 21.7% (see Credit Suisse’s annual Global Wealth report). This implies a further worsening of food insecurity, going against the narrative of ‘continued progress’.

5 Implications on regional support for climate adaptive agriculture: Correcting the time

Policymakers may not be concerned with such matters as changes in measurement systems used by the United Nations. However, these create a change in narrative, with important implications on policymaking in the region.

Foremost, the inconsistent messages sent by statistics from one report to another, diminish the usefulness of the Reports in highlighting that the ‘tipping point’ has been reached, that climate change’s direct impact on undernourishment is already upon us. In effect, policymakers are not ‘shaken-up’

to re-evaluate approaches, like blocking the entry of climate-resilient crop varieties, or supporting technology adoption among smallholder farmers.

From an immediate, practical standpoint, it also means that undernourishment figures which may be used to guide policy, may underestimate the actual number of undernourished. States could be allocating an insufficient amount of their budgets to support undernourished groups, potentially leading anywhere from political discontent to violent mass protests from those excluded from the count.

Annual changes in the FAO’s measurement of undernourishment therefore require serious re-thinking, given their potential to serve as signalling mechanisms for states to take action. In doing so, the FAO can better help leaders to appreciate that climate change is upon us, tipping the balance for state and non-state actors to change old ways sooner too, rather waiting for the next world crisis to serve as ‘wake-up calls’. This might just bring the hunger-related SDG#2 within closer reach, before it is too late.



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