



ISSN: 2424-8045

ASEANFocus



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ASEAN

The serious repercussions of lacklustre growth in the Chinese economy on the economies of its Southeast Asian neighbours testify to how inextricably linked China and ASEAN's futures are with each other. China looms large over the region's affairs, and the increasingly frequent close encounters between Chinese and Southeast Asian ships within the disputed areas in the South China Sea exemplify China's difficulty in grasping Southeast Asia's wants – whether as a region or as individual sovereign nations. The impending decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the interpretation and application of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the disputed areas in the South China Sea will set the stage for future interactions between China and ASEAN. It is becoming clearer that the peaceful resolution of the South China Sea fracas ultimately hinges on adherence to international law, guarantees of freedom of navigation and overflight for all vessels by all disputing parties, and the strengthened cohesion and unity of ASEAN as a regional organisation.

In this issue of ASEANFocus, we cast a spotlight on these regional issues which impact most if not all of ASEAN's 10 member states. Dr. Jackson Ewing of the Asia Society Policy Institute shares with us his thoughts on the future of food security in the region. Our focus on food security is amplified by opinions written by the leaders of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) as part of *Insider Views*, an introduction to ASEAN in the Mekong River for *ASEANInfo*, as well as statistics on food security and resilience in the region for *ASEAN in Figures*.

Prominent terrorism expert Sidney Jones gives us a much-needed explanation on ISIS' reach and appeal in Southeast Asia, and its potential to launch attacks much deadlier than the ones in Jakarta earlier this year. David Mann, the Chief Economist (Asia) of Standard Chartered Bank, explains to us the recent turbulence in the Chinese economy and its impact on Southeast Asia. As part of our ongoing effort to shed some light on the various aspects of the ASEAN Community, ASC Fellow Moe Thuzar elucidates five realities on the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Last but not least, we are proud to feature a piece by written by our intern Ashwin Umapathi on the Kuthodaw Pagoda as part of *People and Places*, together with our special feature on the Moken sea-people of Thailand.

The past months have seen how often events in Southeast Asia are sometimes very much beyond its own doing. Violent attacks in Paris and Brussels have put terrorism back in the spotlight, and the growth of ISIS' appeal in the region is very much underlined by the recent arrests of radicalised individuals trying to make their way to Syria. Beyond national security, the region's food security and ability to feed its population is threatened by both natural causes such as climate change, severe droughts induced by El Niño, as well as less-than-natural causes such as China's damming of the Lancang/Mekong River in its upper reaches, limiting the flow of much-needed irrigation in the midst of severe droughts in mainland Southeast Asia.

Fractured But Dangerous

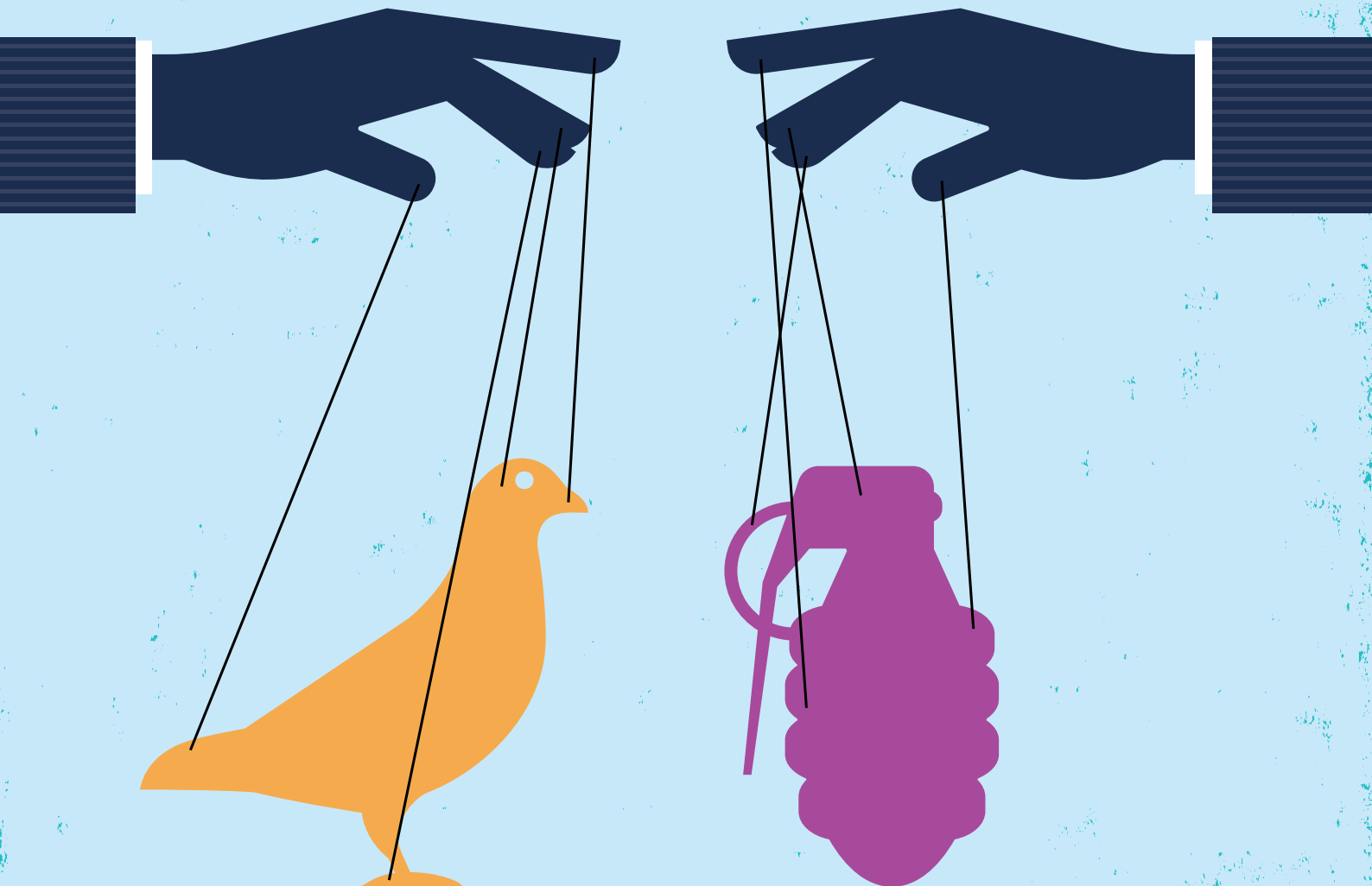
BY SIDNEY JONES

The looming spectre of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) casts a long shadow in Southeast Asia

ISIS does not have, and is not likely to have, a single structure in Southeast Asia. There is no overall commander who can issue orders, no consensus on goals or targets and no obvious strategy. Rival Indonesian ISIS leaders in Syria are giving separate directions to their followers at home, who are grouped in more than a dozen different organisations. They appear to have little coordination, despite some contact, with the Philippine groups that released a video in January 2016 declaring their intention of forming an ISIS province (*wilayat*) in Mindanao. There are ISIS supporters but no known structures in Malaysia or Singapore, and little evidence of any ISIS presence in Thailand.

The risk of violence, however, is high, even if intent to wreak havoc has not been matched thus far by capacity to cause serious damage. The reasons are several:

- As terrorist organisations in the region seek recognition from ISIS, the determination to follow its instructions could increase. Those orders include attacks on citizens of countries involved in anti-ISIS airstrikes.
- The number of Indonesians and Malaysians killed in Syria has likely topped 100, most of them since March 2015, heightening the impact of the conflict.
- Travel across the Turkish border to Syria has become more difficult, leading pro-ISIS leaders in the region to suggest



that if emigration to the caliphate is not possible, supporters should wage war against ISIS enemies at home.

- ISIS strikes outside Syria and Iraq, especially in Europe, serve as an inspiration. It now seems likely that the Paris bombings of November 2015 inspired the very amateurish Jakarta attacks last January.
- The best way for competing ISIS commanders from Indonesia to prove they are No. 1 is to outdo rivals in mounting jihadi operations.
- At least one Indonesian with ISIS in Syria, Bahrun Naim, who has a large following on social media, is known to have urged his readers in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to undertake lone wolf attacks.
- In some cases, there may be a sense of nothing to lose. This is likely with Santoso, the man holed up in central Sulawesi with a few dozen fighters who calls himself the commander of the Islamic State army in Indonesia. Target of a massive manhunt, he has urged his supporters to undertake attacks as a diversionary tactic.

To date, the cells interested in undertaking targeted assassinations or mass casualty attacks have been largely incompetent in both planning and execution. They could, however, get lucky or trained or both. The worst scenarios for Southeast Asian governments are for ISIS central to send trained operatives for attacks, as happened in Paris and Brussels; for individual Indonesian commanders to send back instructors who can whip the would-be terrorists into shape; or for the situation in ISIS-controlled areas of Syria and Iraq

“Even in worst-case scenarios, ISIS cannot destabilise any ASEAN country; governments are too strong and mainstream Muslim resistance too high.”

to deteriorate so drastically that fighters would come back of their own accord. In any of these cases, individuals could use the pockets of “no man’s land” in the southern Philippines to hide out while planning operations.

Police capacity in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to detect extremist plans is fairly high, but law enforcement officials across the region have been stymied by the near-universal use of encrypted messaging services like Telegram to communicate, making interception and gathering intelligence very difficult. Prisons, especially in Indonesia and



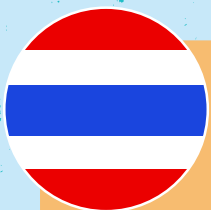
Suspected terrorists captured near Malang, Indonesia

the Philippines, continue to be hubs of extremist activity and recruitment. Government prevention programmes, aimed at immunising vulnerable communities to extremist preaching, have not dimmed the attraction of ISIS for a tiny fringe drawn by the idea of living in a pure Islamic state or taking part in the final battle between Islam and its opponents that prophetic traditions say will take place in Syria. Families are continuing to try and leave, with little accurate information available to them on how dire living conditions have become in areas under ISIS control.

The number of Southeast Asians with ISIS remains low compared with many countries in Europe: some 500 Indonesians and 75 Malaysians, with negligible numbers from elsewhere. Not all are fighters: many are women and children under the age of 15. It would not take more than a handful of committed fighters to upgrade local terrorists’ skills, however, and no one should ignore the women. As more and more Indonesians and Malaysians are killed, one question is whom their widows remarry. While many may take new husbands from within their community, others may marry non-Southeast Asian nationals, expanding international links. Women may also seek a more active combat role: Indonesia has not had any women suicide bombers to date, but no one should rule out the possibility.

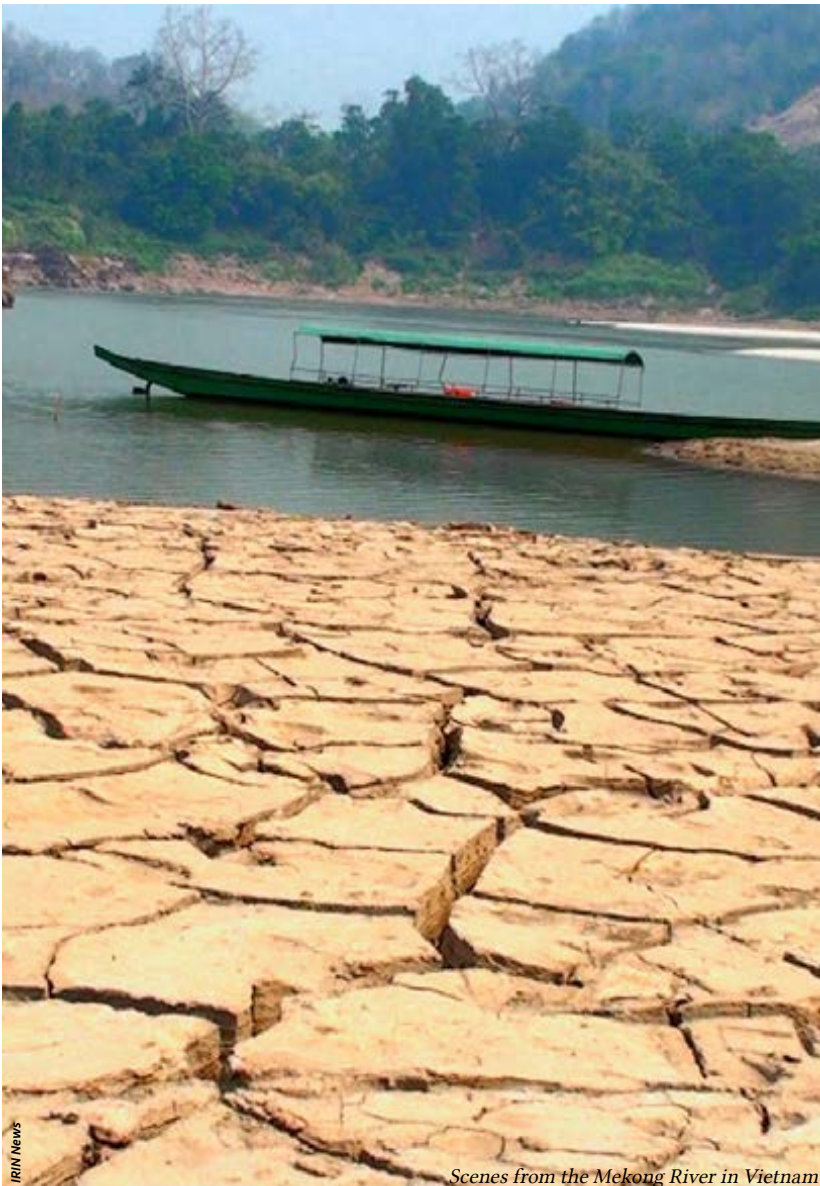
Even in worst-case scenarios, ISIS cannot destabilise any ASEAN country; governments are too strong and mainstream Muslim resistance too high. But the low-tech, low-competence cells that now exist could become a lot deadlier, even without an overarching structure. Intelligence-sharing and community-based prevention programmes are more important than ever. ■

Sidney Jones is the Director of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict in Jakarta, and a former Southeast Asia Project Director for the International Crisis Group



Did You Know?

Weighing only two grams, Kitti’s hog-nosed bat, native to Thailand, is the world’s smallest mammal. It is named after prominent Thai zoologist Kitti Thonglongya.



Scenes from the Mekong River in Vietnam

IRIN News

Weathering Our Food Insecurities

Southeast Asian food systems must integrate to face environmental challenges

BY JACKSON EWING

While the hot and dry weather of Southeast Asia's recent El Niño appears to have peaked, the challenges it revealed for regional food systems are as relevant as ever.

Agriculture looms large in Southeast Asia. Even as they transition towards middle income status, over one-third of the populations of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam remain involved in agriculture. In the less-developed

countries of Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia these shares are still higher. The corresponding land-use totals are unsurprising, with roughly one-quarter of Southeast Asia's land area under the plow.

The outputs of these farming efforts are globally significant. The region supplies half of all global rice imports, and Indonesia and Malaysia alone supply some 85% of global palm oil production. Regional fisheries in just the South China Sea account for 14% of the world's total, and farmed fish and shrimp exports from coastal zones are expanding rapidly to feed markets from China to the United Kingdom.

These sectors can help make Southeast Asian populations more food secure and be a part of the region's trajectory toward a higher development echelon. They depend on continuing agricultural vitality, however, which regional environmental stresses are challenging on a number of fronts.

Environmental Stresses

On land, deforestation has degraded wide swathes of territory. Forests are more often valued for their timber and the opportunities presented by their clearance than for their capacity to maintain local weather patterns, watersheds and soil systems. As a result Southeast Asia has witnessed pronounced forest clearing throughout its modern history – losing some 2.4 million hectares annually during the heydays of the 1990s-2000s. These rates have slowed – in part because fewer easily clearable forests remain – but pressures continue from food production, urban development and land intensive commodities of palm oil, pulp and paper, and rubber. Deforestation causes soil erosion, localised drought and water sedimentation, which in turn threatens the agricultural value of the lands left behind.

Meanwhile at sea, unsustainable coastal resource exploitation practices have been the norm in parts of the region for decades. Annual per capita fish consumption in Southeast Asia rose from 12.8 kg in 1961 to 32 kg in 2009, and consumers continue to increase their fish consumption as the region becomes more affluent. The substantial growth in commercial fishing operations in Southeast Asia to meet

“Warmer temperatures for longer durations also alter germination periods for key crops – including rice – while changing precipitation patterns are leading to dry periods that are drier and wet periods that are wetter. In this sense, the El Niño impacts of 2015-2016 are telling – as prolonged hot and dry weather may more regularly impact food and water systems throughout the region.”

this demand has significantly altered regional fish stocks and reduced yields for many small-scale fisherfolk. Coastal fishing territories are now often overfished, and total catches continue to flatten as major fishing areas become overexploited. The destruction of key reef, mangrove and grassbed habitats accelerates these problems.

Climate change is amplifying each of these challenges and created new ones. Escalating global temperatures are impacting extreme weather events, coastal erosion, and increasing sea levels. Rising ocean temperatures and levels cause coral bleaching, salt water intrusion and flooding in low-lying areas, along with greater coastal wetland and mangrove degradation; all of which challenge Southeast Asia’s coastal food production zones.

Warmer temperatures for longer durations also alter germination periods for key crops – including rice – while changing precipitation patterns are leading to dry periods that are drier and wet periods that are wetter. In this sense, the El Niño impacts of 2015-2016 are telling – as prolonged hot and dry weather may more regularly impact food and water systems throughout the region.

During the last 12 months Thailand has been hit with one of its worst droughts in the past twenty years, leading among other impacts to an expected 20% drop in sugar cane exports. Vietnam’s current drought is by some measures the worst on record, reducing Mekong water levels to their lowest points since records began nearly 100 years ago. Saltwater intrusion in the Mekong delta has destroyed some 159,000 hectares

of rice paddy so far, with paddies up to 90 kilometres inland tainted with salt. Meanwhile El Niño is adversely impacting food production in nearly half of Indonesia’s provinces, and in the Philippines, weather conditions have prompted farmer protests for government relief, leaving at least two dead.

Longer-term impacts are in the offing. Water shortages and increased temperatures have led farmers in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to leave land fallow, with rising temperatures driving down production and harming rice output in both of these countries, as well as in Thailand.

This El Niño is drawing comparisons to that of 1997-98, when massive fires caused by dry weather conditions caused US\$5-6 billion in damages to industry, the environment, and concomitant health concerns and a cereal shortfall of 3.5 million tonnes. Such weather volatility can manifest across economic and social sectors, and create unprepared-for challenges for already-strained governments, businesses and civil societies.

The Stakes of Regional Integration

All is far from lost. Southeast Asia is embarking on ambitious regional integration efforts that have the potential to help solve pressing food security challenges. The relative success of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will prove vital to this end.

Where successful, AEC mechanisms can create more sustainable food systems and reduce environmental stresses through best-practice collaboration, improving research, and creating trade links that allow countries

to play to better develop their natural capital. Where they fail, AEC measures may drive small farmers and businesses out of markets, abruptly tear the region’s agrarian social fabric, and create a raft of environmental problems associated with larger-scale farming and natural resource exhaustion.

Regional prosperity requires that Southeast Asian food systems integrate in ways that allow countries and communities to play to their strengths amidst changing environmental and climate conditions. Farmers need tools to meet their unique challenges – from drought and flood resistant seeds to roads, rails and ports that can help them access markets. Consumers need predictable and relatively stable prices built on robust farming and off-farm food systems.

Both these goals require regional efforts, which are essential for facing the environmental challenges of today, and still more important for addressing those of the future. ■

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Food for Thought



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ASEAN has much to be proud of when it comes to food security. ASEAN has achieved the Millennium Development Goal of reducing hunger by half by 2015. However, ASEAN still has a long way to go to eliminate hunger and malnutrition. For instance, children in Southeast Asia are stunted (29.4%, 15.6 million), wasted (9.4%, 5.0 million), and underweight (18.3%, 9.7 million).

How do we tackle malnutrition? The approach that the FAO adopts is one driven by “food systems”. Why is that so? All forms of malnutrition share a common cause: inappropriate diets that provide inadequate, unbalanced or excessive macronutrients and micronutrients. The only sustainable solution is for people to consume diverse foods for healthy diets which will provide adequate but not excessive energy. The “food systems” approach determines the availability, affordability, diversity and quality of the food supply, and thus plays a major role in shaping healthy diets.

What can we practically do to overcome malnutrition? From a consumption perspective, everyone should be more informed on healthier dietary choices and enjoy access to a more diverse range of foodstuffs in order to achieve

those healthier choices. From a production perspective, small farmers should be guided to produce diversified food. These can be combined with approaches to increase production of nutrient-dense foods; maximise the potential of underutilised nutritious foods; and increase legume production for their nutritional value (rich in energy, protein, and iron) among many other ideas.

Experience shows that special assistance from governments will be required to address malnutrition. Enabling the environments for people to make better dietary choices requires improvements in infrastructure, education, markets, and regulations. These interventions will depend on a combination of appropriate cross-sectoral coordination in agriculture, health, water, education and social protection. This was reinforced at the Inter-sectoral Consultation on Food Security and Nutrition held in Bangkok on 23-24 February 2016, which was convened by ASEAN and the FAO, in collaboration with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the World Health Organisation, in the context of the ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework and Its Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security (2016-2020). ■

The effects of severe climate change have resulted in lower harvests in several major rice producing countries in Southeast Asia. Thailand and Vietnam are among the top rice-exporting countries in the world. However, it is precisely these two countries that are most affected by the worst effects of climate change – typhoons and floods that submerge rice crops, droughts that not only deprive crops of much-needed water, and rising sea levels which stunts the growth of rice through oversalinity from seawater entering deltas such as those of the Mekong and Irrawaddy rivers. Across Southeast Asia, the dire situation is further exacerbated by shrinking farmlands due to rapid urbanisation, population growth, and growing demand for rice foreshadow potential global food security crisis and geopolitical instability. This will undoubtedly create an upward trend in prices of seeds and fertilisers, and disproportionately hurt small-scale farmers already having to suffer from less encouraging harvests from year to year.

Past global experiences with food security crisis events and the history of agriculture development underline three key ingredients for an effective response: improved rice varieties that can thrive in unfavourable environments, advanced agriculture technology, and improved crop management techniques. Over the past 56 years, IRRI has helped developed varieties that are not only more resistant to the harsh elements of Southeast Asia but also healthier for people to consume and kinder to the environment. Although ASEAN member states have

been experiencing high economic growth, it has been the Western governments that have predominantly invested in scientific research and technological development of Asia’s rice sector. From 2010-2015, over 95 percent of funding for rice research came from non-ASEAN governments, mostly from the West. With changing priorities of the West and ongoing political turmoil including the refugee crisis in the EU, support for agriculture research and development has declined steadily.

ASEAN is in the right place at the right time to take the leadership position, and drive sustainable agricultural innovation to avert the looming global food security crisis and regional security issues. ASEAN should seize the opportunity to drive the next Green Revolution and secure its own future food needs through increasing funding support for research and development in agriculture. ■



Dr. Matthew Morell is the Director-General of the International Rice Research Institute, an independent, nonprofit, research and educational institute dedicated to research on rice science and based in Manila, the Philippines



In the Right Economic Neighbourhood

*Amidst uncertainties in the Chinese economy,
the prospect for ASEAN economies looks bright*

BY DAVID MANN

Asian growth in 2016 will be lacklustre, but it will still be better than the other regions. No economy is booming and no economy is in crisis. The excessively negative market sentiment seen in early 2016 will give way to less policy uncertainty, both inside and outside of Asia.

At the start of 2016, the world's financial markets went into a tailspin, triggered at least in part by concerns over a hard landing in the Chinese economy. As the world's second largest economy accounting for a third of global GDP growth (well ahead of the US or the Eurozone), China is the most important factor driving world growth today. This panic was driven by policy miscommunication, especially over the path for the Chinese yuan (CNY).

Second, communication of intent for the exchange rate has drastically improved following the detailed explanation of the policy priorities by People's Bank of China Governor Zhou Xiaochuan after six deafening months of silence. The key point that Governor Zhou made was that there were no plans to devalue the CNY exchange rate in the future. While a sudden sharp devaluation is one of the biggest risks to watch for in 2016, given the destabilising impact it would have on markets and the global economy, this is unlikely to happen as such a move would drastically outweigh the potential benefits.

China's economic growth in 2016-17 may not be as pessimistic as expected. Surveys conducted by Standard Chartered Bank (SCB) suggest that growth is stabilising. SME sector sentiments, along with the

6.5%. This is good news for the ASEAN region whose economy is closely linked to demand from China. The transition towards more services and consumption, and away from investment and exports, remains in place. Therefore, demand for primary and intermediate goods exports will not approach the same heady level witnessed in the last two decades.

The implications of China's growth transition for ASEAN countries varies. In terms of pure demand sensitivity, Singapore and Thailand are far more exposed to China's growth than Indonesia and the Philippines.

Economies that depend on selling intermediate goods into China may find that import substitution will be an increasing challenge. On the other hand, the prospects for economies that are able

“Broadly, the Chinese economy is expected to grow 6.8% year-on-year in 2016, above the consensus view of 6.5%. This is good news for the ASEAN region whose economy is closely linked to demand from China.”

The recent switch in the Chinese policymaker's emphasis towards targeting the trade weighted exchange rate was interpreted by markets as an attempt to deliberately weaken the currency. If the interpretation that the world's biggest contributor to global growth was attempting to use competitive devaluation to boost exports were correct, then this would have been a justifiable reason to worry. After all, China has a variety of other tools at its disposal, such as bank lending policy, reserve ratio requirement cuts, and other regulatory changes to incentivise investment and consumption (such as making R&D as well as mortgage interest expenses tax deductible) to stimulate growth. Fiddling with the exchange rate would be an absolute last resort.

However, since the end of the Lunar New Year, two factors have helped to stabilise confidence. First, the USD is coming close to the end of its multi-year rally as the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) gets closer to the end of its ultra-shallow hiking cycle.

official Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) surveys, for example, provide cause for optimism.

The positive sentiments is buttressed by the latest Q1 2016 results of a survey involving 30 housing market developers in tier 2 and 3 cities. Sentiment in this critical sector is starting to recover as inventories continue to draw down.

Finally, SCB's calculation of 'divisia' money supply grew 15.6% year-on-year in February, well up from the 10.9% low recorded in Q2-2015. All this suggests reasons to be less worried about China's growth prospects. Total social financing (TSF), a broad measure of credit in the economy, surged by CNY 3.42 trillion in January. This move appears to be in anticipation of higher lending demand for major new infrastructure projects being rolled out in the early stages of the 13th Five Year Plan (2016-20).

Broadly, the Chinese economy is expected to grow 6.8% year-on-year in 2016, above the consensus view of

to leverage on China's growing domestic consumer market will be brighter.

The standout growth sector is China's outward tourism. China's services deficit has been ballooning in the past few years, driven by tourism. Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore are the prime beneficiaries of some of China's annual 120 million outbound tourists.

The other aspect of China's consumption which can benefit ASEAN economies is foreign direct investment (FDI) followed by greater exports of consumer goods to China. China's shrinking working age population has ended the era of seemingly unlimited low cost workers. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam are best placed to benefit from China's transition away from lower cost manufacturing centres. This development has been visible since 2013 with ASEAN receiving a larger share of FDI than China. ■

David Mann is Chief Economist (Asia), Standard Chartered Bank



The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community: 5 Realities

Among the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, the ASCC may be the least understood, but its work may have the most indelible impact on ASEAN's 631 million people

BY MOE THUZAR

The 27th ASEAN Summit in November 2015 announced the accomplishment of the first milestone of the ASEAN Community project – giving effect to the ASEAN Vision 2020 goals for a “region of peace, stability, prosperity [...] with a strong sense of community”. The Summit also adopted ‘ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together’ as the roadmap for the next phase of regional integration. The objectives for the continued work on ASEAN’s integration have two additions to the Vision 2020 statement’s keywords: people-centred, and socially responsible. These aspirations have found more voice and attention in recent ASEAN documents, especially in the years after the entry into force of the ASEAN Charter in December 2008.

The ASEAN 2025 goals also pledge “to realise a rules-based, people-oriented, people-centred ASEAN of *One Vision, One Identity, One Community*”. This is perhaps the best boost for the implementation of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) in the post-2015 landscape. If ASEAN integration processes are affected by a surfeit of high expectations, the ASCC would be the ASEAN community pillar where high expectations, and equally high frustrations resulting from these expectations, collide. A mid-term review of the ASCC implementation conducted in 2013 highlighted some of these frustrations, which mainly point to the uneven capacity of ASEAN member states to implement the ASCC priorities.

“Why is this so? Here are five realities underpinning the ASCC and its continued implementation.”

1 The ASCC affects and is affected by the effects of economic and political developments in the ASEAN member states. This is because it covers a broad range of topics spanning social and human development issues that also have political and economic implications. A good illustration of this reality can be found in the recurring haze pollution from the forest fires in Sumatra, Indonesia, that affects social and economic lives in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and local communities in Indonesia, and also causes bilateral tensions when haze occurs. Another example would be the movement of persons across borders for political, economic or social reasons. ASCC priorities are thus based on individual member states’ national development plans and commitments. These range from environment and disaster management, education, youth, health, women, social welfare and development (including elderly, disabled, and children), rural development and poverty eradication, labour, civil service matters, culture, and information.

2 Contrary to statements that it has been an ‘afterthought’ to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASCC’s objective for social progress has been part of ASEAN’s goals and plans since 1967. The first operational point of the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 lists the aim to “accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development” as the “foundation for prosperous and peaceful community of South-East Asian Nations”.

3 Compared with the APSC and the AEC, ASCC has the most number of sectoral bodies – and attendant work – ranging from the policy-level ministerial and senior officials meetings to the working-level expert groups and task-forces of both a permanent and ad hoc nature. Of the 30-odd areas of cooperation (i.e. those led by a ministerial framework) in ASEAN, 13 are under the ASCC’s ambit.

4 The ASCC has some impressive (but little known) successes under its belt. These include a commission on promoting and

protecting the rights of women and children; a regional forum on migrant labour that brings policy, civil society, and international partners together to discuss migrant worker issues; credit transfer arrangements among members of the ASEAN University Network; a curriculum sourcebook for teaching ASEAN in schools; ASEAN Resource Centres for civil service capacity-building; a regional agreement on disaster management and emergency response, and a regional centre on humanitarian assistance coordination; and a regional project on managing peatlands at the source of forest fires to tackle transboundary haze pollution.

5 The ASCC has the least resources at its disposal to implement projects. This makes long-term implementation of projects difficult, and results in many of the ASCC projects becoming one-off or ad hoc efforts. Most of the time, the ASCC takes a back-seat to the APSC, whose developments are more headline grabbing; or to the AEC, which has more concrete and identifiable implementation targets.

“The ASCC has a two-fold value. It serves as a regional venue for preparing responses to challenges that affect Southeast Asian countries collectively and individually. It is also a regional platform for sharing knowledge that can in turn influence national-level plans and initiatives.”

The ASCC has a two-fold value. It serves as a regional venue for preparing responses to challenges that affect Southeast Asian countries collectively and individually. It is also a regional platform for sharing knowledge that can in turn influence national-level plans and initiatives. For example, regional discussions among ASEAN members states’ accession to and ratification of UN Conventions safeguarding the rights of children, women, and persons with disabilities persuaded the ASEAN members who had not done so to accede to and ratify these instruments. Similarly, discussions by ASEAN labour ministers on ASEAN-relevant priorities of International Labour Organisation (ILO) led to Brunei’s ILO membership (Brunei was the only non-ILO member amongst its ASEAN counterparts till 2007).

With people-centred priorities now highlighted in all spheres of regional cooperation, ASEAN’s trajectory towards 2025 will structure the ASCC more clearly. Going forward, ASCC implementation needs to focus more on fostering a deeper sense of awareness and identification with regional goals. Linking national needs and challenges to the broader regional goals will also help frame the understanding of the ASCC among the wider populaces in ASEAN members. This will require ASEAN’s communication strategies to take advantage of the explosion of social media platforms and networks, and the passion and interest of the younger generation. ■

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Moken children having fun in the sea

Wild Frontiers Travel

The Call of the Sea

Having stood the test of time, the Moken people of Thailand may be facing their biggest challenge yet: modernisation



A Moken settlement

Departure Oslo

The pristine waters and stunning beaches of Thailand's south-western seaboard is home to some of Thailand's most famous tourist destinations – Phuket, Krabi and Phang Nga. Millions of tourists from all over the world descend upon the region each year for their dose of sun, sand and sea. However, for a particular group of people, the seas surrounding this area has been their home for countless generations. They live on the sea, off the sea, and are more connected to the ebbs and flows of the sea than any other people in the vicinity. They are the Moken, the indigenous sea people of southern Thailand and Myanmar.

The Moken people are known for their legendary mastery of the sea and its many mysteries. It was said that the Moken people predicted the devastating Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004 moments before it made landfall because of their intimate understanding of the sea and the natural world. They realised that not only were land animals fleeing for higher ground, but most of the marine life in the surroundings were heading out to sea to deeper waters. Taking this as a sign that a “laboon” – a “wave that eats people”, as a tsunami is commonly known as in the Moken imagination – was impending, many Moken people fled their boathouses and stilt homes by the seashore precious minutes before many in the urban areas started doing the same. As a result, many Moken people's lives were saved that day amidst the horrific devastation and destruction across the Andaman Sea and the Indian Ocean.

However, their mastery of the sea is perhaps only the tip of the iceberg to understanding why the Moken people have such an affinity for the sea. Research done by Dr Anna Gislen of Lund University in Sweden showed that young Moken children are known to have close-to-perfect eyesight underwater, which makes it more interesting given that it is seawater that they swim and live in. The research showed that they were not only able to vary the size of their pupils to increase their underwater visibility, but that their eyes were also much less prone to irritation by saltwater compared with European children of the same age, giving them the ability to swim underwater and catch fish freely without the need

for any goggles. Although these young Moken children would gradually lose this underwater eyesight because of the hardening of the eye-lenses, their childhood experiences with seawater would only serve to enhance their above-the-surface fishing effectiveness when older.

Over the years, the Moken people have had to face many adversities in order to preserve their way of life. Younger generations of Moken people today are not only far less willing to make their living from the sea than their elders were, but are slowly losing touch of the linguistic and cultural inheritance of their ancestors. They are constantly harassed by illegal fishermen and overzealous naval officers on the seas. On land, government bureaucrats have jumped on the cultural tourism bandwagon and are attempting to resettle the Moken people to exhibition villages and remove them from their traditional habitats in the sea.

Despite these challenges, there are several projects underway to help them preserve their way of life. The most prominent initiative is Project Moken, which has used the proceeds from the several documentaries on the life of the Moken people to support eco-tourism initiatives and provide livelihood for the communities they work with.

More can certainly be done by Southeast Asians to ease the plight of indigenous peoples like the Moken people, spread across the beautiful seas, mountains, and rivers of Southeast Asia. For them, even awareness of their situation would definitely go a long way in keeping their traditions and identity alive, and ensuring that Southeast Asia's rich diversity would last in perpetuity. ■

A Symbol of Devotion and Defiance

Kuthodaw Pagoda's Pali Canon in the heart of Myanmar is famously known as the "world's largest book"

In 1853, Burma's Prince Mindon Min seized power from his brother after a disastrous war with Britain in which Burma lost its entire coastline areas. The then landlocked kingdom had also lost control of the Shwedagon Pagoda, one of the holiest sites for Buddhists in Burma. For Mindon's subjects, who either faced colonial oppression in British-ruled areas or economic hardship in independent Burma, it seemed that Burmese civilisation has entered its twilight. Throughout his 41-year-reign, Mindon saw it as his mission to prove this defeatism notion wrong.



Wikimedia Commons



There are 729 of these stupas in the Kuthodaw Pagoda complex

An example of the marble tablet inside each stupa

He started in 1857 by ordering the construction of his new capital of Mandalay, which would include the Kuthodaw Pagoda. At the grounds of this pagoda, Mindon planned to display what many now regard as the world's largest book: a copy of the Theravada Buddhist Pali Canon. It was to be the ultimate demonstration of his commitment to uphold Burmese civilisation and it required a painstaking process that lasted over a decade. This process began with a review of the scriptures by three committees totaling over 130 monks. This was followed by the creation of a 12,000-page palm leaf manuscript, written by over 100 scribes. After two different committees of clerks and monks edited the manuscript, the monumental task truly began.

In 1860, over 50 stonemasons started inscribing the approved text on to 153 cm-by-107 cm marble tablets. The task was extremely tedious as only 16 lines could be carved per day and a tablet's inscriptions had to be highlighted in gold after they were fully carved. In all, it took 8 years and 729 tablets to record the entire Pali Canon (along with a 730th tablet giving an account of the book's creation). The sheer scale of Mindon's project sent a clear message: Buddhism, the very heart of Burmese culture, would endure under the protection of his dynasty.

Ironically, Mindon's dynasty would collapse less than 20 years later when Britain annexed northern

Burma and deposed Mindon's successor, King Thibaw, in 1885. After their victory, British troops occupied the Kuthodaw Pagoda's grounds and closed it to the public. After protests by local officials, they withdrew in 1892, but by then, the grounds had been looted and the book stripped of its golden script. Restoration work began immediately. However, forced to use shellac, paraffin lamp oil, and straw ash instead of gold, the restorers were unable to fully revive the book's original luminous aura.

Today, the world's largest book is preserved in an enclosure of 729 stupas - each housing a single page - and is a popular attraction for pilgrims and tourists alike. Nowadays, it is no longer just a poignant symbol of an anxious king's ultimately futile attempts to protect his realm from foreign domination. It also stands as a testament to the fact that the devoutly religious nature in the Burmese society remains steadfast to this day. ■

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ASEAN and the Mekong River

Cooperation processes over the Mekong River must prioritise the needs of its downstream states, and ASEAN is one vehicle for that end

BY **TERMSAK CHALERMPALANUPAP**

The Mekong, which is about 4,350 km in length, is the world's 12th longest river. The Lancang, as it is known in China, originates in the Tibetan Plateau and flows through the three Chinese provinces of Tibet, Qinghai, and Yunnan before it makes its way through five mainland Southeast Asia countries – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam – and finally discharges into the South China Sea. Recent Chinese overtures in the form of the inaugural Lancang-Mekong summit held in Sanya, Hainan Island on 23 March, have only served to emphasise the importance of this shared resource to both China and the five ASEAN member states. The Chinese initiative was not, however, the first attempt by the Mekong riparian states to share the resources of the mighty river.

The first major international initiative to promote cooperation among the Mekong countries began in 1957 with the establishment of the Mekong Committee under the auspices of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (UN-ECAFE). During the 1960s, the Mekong Committee undertook what was considered to be one of the UN's largest development cooperation programmes in the world. In 1995, the Mekong Committee was transformed into the Mekong River Commission (MRC), with secretariats in Vientiane and Phnom Penh.

Relatively more successful than the MRC is the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) framework for economic cooperation, which has strong support of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The GMS was established in 1992 and includes all the Mekong riparian countries, including China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Yunnan province. The GMS promotes sustainable economic development cooperation, cross-border trade and transport connectivity, energy, tourism, and industrial zones in border areas. GMS priority infrastructure projects worth about US\$11 billion have been either completed or being implemented.

At the ASEAN-China partnership level, the ASEAN Economic Ministers in 1996 teamed up with their Chinese counterpart in launching the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC). Perhaps the most famous programme in this process is the Singapore-Kunming Rail Link (SKRL), to connect Kunming

in Yunnan with Singapore through the railroads via Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia.

From outside the region, Japan, South Korea, India, and the US have their own Mekong initiatives to engage the Mekong riparian countries. Japan and South Korea each has regular meetings of foreign ministers, economic ministers, and occasional summits with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) to discuss Mekong cooperation. In May 2016, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida unveiled the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative, which will cost 750-billion yen (about US\$7 billion) over the span of three years.

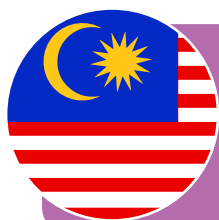
“The plethora of initiatives have taken a toll on the Mekong. A recent UN report noted that water levels in the Mekong and its lower tributaries are at their lowest level since records began nearly one hundred years ago, causing damage to approximately 159,000 hectares of paddy fields and affecting the water supply for 976,000 people in the Mekong Delta alone.”

The Mekong countries themselves also have their own cooperation processes. Thailand initiated in April 2003 the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), with emphasis on transport linkages, trade and investment facilitation (among border twin towns) human resource development, tourism, agriculture, and public health. Foreign ministers as well as the CLMV leaders meet among themselves from time to time to discuss and coordinate their positions on Mekong issues.

The plethora of initiatives have taken a toll on the Mekong. A recent UN report noted that water levels in the Mekong and its lower tributaries are at their lowest level since records began nearly one hundred years ago, causing damage to approximately 159,000 hectares of paddy fields and affecting the water supply for 976,000 people in the Mekong Delta alone. Given that China is scheduled to complete 14 dams at the end of its twelfth Five Year Plan (2011-2015), and that Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam too have extensive plans to build dams in the Mekong tributaries, this can only serve to exacerbate the already-acute humanitarian crisis at hand, let alone the economic impact of such extensive damming on the five agricultural-dependent countries of mainland Southeast Asia.

With so many Mekong cooperation processes on the ground, involving different sets of participants pursuing different objectives, how effective the international efforts have been in assisting the poor riparian countries in addressing transnational development policy issues and harnessing the vast resources of the Mekong River remains a big question. Nevertheless, by ensuring that the primary interests of five of its member states are put front and centre vis-à-vis external parties, ASEAN has a crucial part to play, and should take up a more active role, in resolving that most important question. ■

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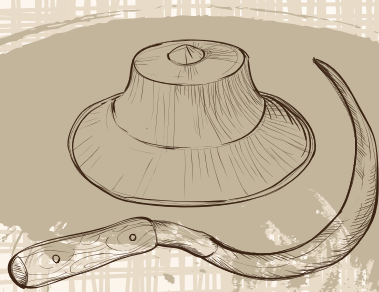
Did You Know?

The Kuala Kangsar District Office in Perak, Malaysia, is home to the last surviving rubber tree from the original batch that Henry Ridley (of Singapore Botanic Gardens fame) brought from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, England, in 1877.

Food Security in ASEAN

Food security has been an increasingly important issue on the ASEAN agenda in light of the steadily growing combined population of over 631 million

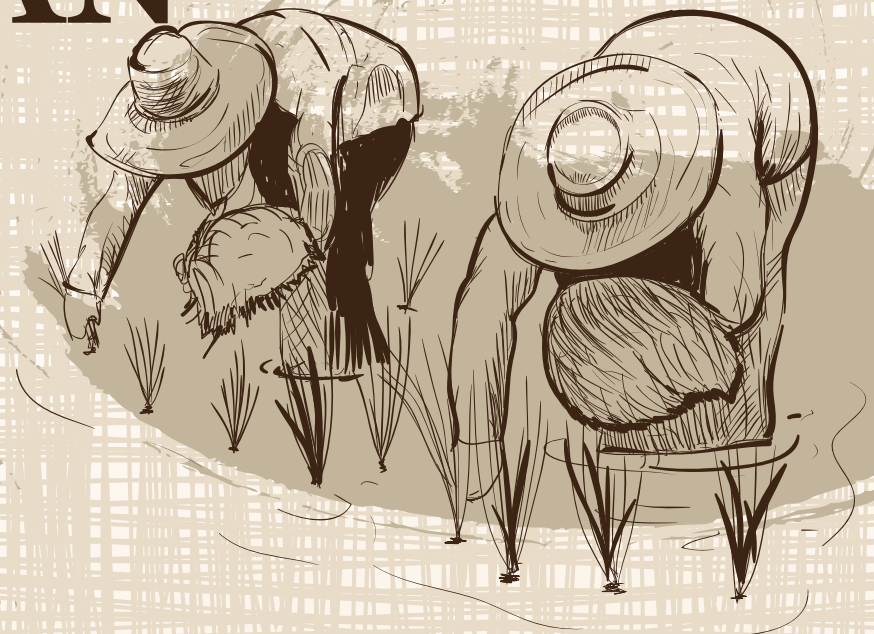
BY PHAM THI PHUONG THAO



ASEAN member states have worked hard over the past decade to overcome the chronic shortages in food supplies for its 631 million people. Statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) have shown the promising results yielded from these efforts, with the number of undernourished people in ASEAN almost halved from 117 million in 2000-2002 to 60 million in 2014-2016.

However, much more can be done to help the large swathes of malnourished rural and urban poor across the region. Besides Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia, which have less than 5% of their respective populations undernourished, the other seven ASEAN countries still have to surmount high prevalence of undernourishment in their respective countries, especially Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. According to the 2015 Global Food Security Index (GFSI) issued by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), which comprehensively assesses the affordability, availability, quality and safety of food supplies across the world, Singapore was the most food-secure country among the ten ASEAN member states. Singapore also placed second in the global rankings, whilst Cambodia came in last at 96th place worldwide.

Commodities remain one of ASEAN's major exports worldwide – if not its most important product. As such, it plays an outsize role in enhancing food security both regionally and globally. According to the 2015 Report on ASEAN Agricultural Commodity Outlook released by the ASEAN Food Security Information System (AFSIS), ASEAN's milled rice production yielded 136 million tonnes – a slight decrease of about 1 per cent compared with 2014. As with previous years, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand remain the largest rice producing countries in ASEAN.



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Moving forward, issues of global climate change, growing populations, and chronic security and economic instabilities within and outside the region will exacerbate the pressing situation today. ASEAN leaders have endorsed the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework and the Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security (SPA-FS) 2015-2020, both aimed at realising the common goal of long-term food security and nutrition in the ASEAN Community. It is imperative for ASEAN to ensure the long-term sustainability of its food resources, and cooperation between the member states will go a long way in realising the vision of a food-secure ASEAN. ■

Pham Thi Phuong Thao is Research Officer, ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

ASEAN in the 2015 Global Food Security Index

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit

	Overall Global Food Security Ranking (out of 109 countries)	Global Food Security Score	Affordability Score/100	Availability Score/100	Quality and Safety Score/100
Brunei Darussalam	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Cambodia	96	34.6	30.3	39.1	32.8
Indonesia	74	46.7	44.3	51.2	40.1
Laos	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Malaysia	34	69	68.1	69.2	704.0
Myanmar	78	44	29	54.3	52.9
Philippines	72	49.4	44.4	53.4	50.8
Singapore	2	88.2	100	78.9	84.6
Thailand	52	60	63.4	58.6	55.5
Vietnam	65	53.4	48.9	58.4	50.7

Prevalence of Undernourishment in ASEAN

Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations

	Total Population (million)	Number of people undernourished (million)		Prevalence of undernourishment (%)	
	2014-16	2000-02	2014-16	2000-02	2014-16
Brunei Darussalam	0.4	n.s.	n.s.	<5.0	<5.0
Cambodia	15.7	3.6	2.2	28.5	14.2
Indonesia	255.7	38.3	19.4	18.1	7.6
Laos	7.0	2.1	1.3	37.9	18.5
Malaysia	30.6	n.s.	n.s.	<5.0	<5.0
Myanmar	54.2	24.3	7.7	49.6	14.2
Philippines	101.8	16.1	13.7	20.3	13.5
Singapore	5.6	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Thailand	67.4	11.6	5.0	18.4	7.4
Vietnam	93.4	20.7	10.3	25.4	11.0
ASEAN	631.8	116.7	59.6		

Rice Production in ASEAN by tonnage

Source: ASEAN Food Security Information System

	2008	2010	2012	2014	2015
Brunei Darussalam	911	1,072	1,756	1,382	1,636
Cambodia	4,305,000	4,854,957	5,618,794	6,009,575	5,967,626
Indonesia	35,298,935	41,972,048	40,390,092	44,298,977	44,599,787
Laos	1,781,946	1,886,880	2,093,526	2,401,455	2,520,000
Malaysia	1,582,788	1,641,985	1,637,702	1,634,241	1,684,897
Myanmar	19,808,753	20,311,437	18,311,053	16,591,242	17,753,877
Philippines	10,997,368	10,315,097	11,793,204	12,404,958	12,474,406
Singapore	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Thailand	21,185,604	21,196,600	25,323,088	24,263,103	21,529,352
Vietnam	25,174,370	24,740,294	43,665,100	29,233,750	29,237,650
ASEAN	120,135,675	126,920,370	148,834,315	136,838,683	135,769,231

• n.a. - Not applicable • n.s. - Not statistically significant

ASEANFocus

is published by the ASEAN Studies Centre
at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

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