



# International Seminar on Sustainable Food System in Southeast Asia under and beyond COVID-19: Policy Evidence and Call for Action

Date: 19-20 May 2022

Time zone: Bangkok (GMT+7)

Platform: Online virtual event (or hybrid)

## Concept Note

Southeast Asia is one of the key regions for agricultural and food production in the world. The region has experienced significant growth in GDP, which for most countries has averaged close to 5% per year while the regional population has grown close to 1.3% per year over the period 2000-16 (OECD/FAO, 2017), resulting in very rapid growth in per capita incomes in the region. In 2019, the region produced 188.8 million tons of rice, 51.98 million tons of maize, 210.59 million tons of sugarcane, 362.13 million tons of oil palm fruits, and 74.85 million tons of cassava (FAO, 2021). Southeast Asia is home to the world's two largest rice exporters (Thailand and Viet Nam), and the top three exporting countries for pineapples, bananas, mango, sugar, coffee, cashew nuts, and cassava (BCSD Singapore et al. 2016). It is also the top producer and exporter of palm oil, coconut, rubber, and seafood. Fishery, aquaculture, meat, dairy, and vegetable industries have also expanded dramatically (OECD/FAO, 2017). These agribusinesses are embedded in the value chain of the food systems, and in effect creates a multiplier effect upon the economy through interrelated industries like transportation, logistic, and retail (ASEAN-Japan Center, 2020). With differences in levels of economic development, agricultural and food industries are under different stages of development across countries. Nevertheless, the agricultural landscape in this region still exhibits much reliance on small-scale farming, low capital investment, poor risk management, and the absence of strong supporting institutions. Some countries in the region still rely on the import of processed food due to the lack of processing capabilities which creates a future trend in the region to shift to a more value-added food processing industry and goes beyond farms (ASEAN-Japan Center, 2020).

While the economy in Southeast Asia is growing, the region still faces some challenges in agricultural and food production from climate change, broader environmental challenges, food security, nutrition security, and poverty reduction. The Southeast Asia region is home to around 600 million people. Urbanization, rising incomes, aging population, changing food demand from staple cereal consumption to protein-based diets, diversification requirements of food consumption, increasing demand for healthy diets and higher nutrition even as processed and ultra-processed foods increase their share in diets, all create new challenges to agricultural and food industries. The estimates of the prevalence of undernourishment and moderate or severe food insecurity over the period of 2017-2019 were 9.8% and 19.2%, respectively (FAO, 2021). On the contrary, rising unhealthy diet has

caused obesity and overweight problems in several countries (WHO, 2021).

With many challenges facing the food systems, a common understanding of the concept of food systems is needed. The UN Food Systems Summit proposed a practical understanding of the concept focusing on promoting sustainable development goals, assisting policymakers, and stressing the importance of interconnectivity both within the food systems and related systems such as health, energy, and ecology. In this regard, food systems should not be viewed in isolation and should be addressed holistically (For example, the problem like malnutrition rests upon poverty and causes health issues). The UN Food Systems Summit also proposed 5 action tracks to address problems holistically (Von Braun et al., 2021):

- 1.) Ensuring Access to Safe and Nutritious Food for All
- 2.) Shifting to Sustainable Consumption Patterns
- 3.) Boosting Nature-Positive Production at Sufficient Scale
- 4.) Advancing Equitable Livelihoods and Value Distribution
- 5.) Building Resilience to Vulnerabilities, Shocks, and Stresses

Food systems transformation is at the center stage of sustainable development due to its interaction with various global issues such as malnutrition, chronic disease, poverty, environmental degradation, and climate changes. A recent study on food systems transformation suggested that to address the problem of food insecurities and malnutrition sustainably the topics such as reinventing agriculture, healthy diets, climate change, and evidence-based policy should be the main priorities (Kenedy et al., 2021).

The recent COVID-19 Pandemic is one of the prime examples of food systems shock and the importance of food systems resilience. Recent studies on the COVID-19 impact on ASEAN food systems have shown that the pandemic has affected several spheres of food system transformation including labor mobility, on-farm, and off-farm income and employment, and the increasing need for safe and healthy foods. These effects placed constraints that could escalate into developmental issues such as malnutrition and debt on the region (APFC and ASEAN, 2021; Boughton et al., 2021). These changes occur both to the supply and the demand side from the way businesses are conducted to the altered consumer choices. Technologies such as online payment and delivery services were utilized to address the issues surrounding the pandemic. COVID-19 outbreak stressed the significance and need for the region to implement an evidence-based policy for food system transformation in order to create a food securities program that is sustainable and resilient. This created the need for further studies and discussions which could act as a basis for policymakers' decisions. Transformation towards a sustainable food system thus requires more attention on policy and programmatic responses that recognizes challenges and new evidence related to emerging issues such as healthy diet, traceability of food origin, information management, application of digital technology, enabling e-commerce, and logistics and trade.

Several efforts have focused on achieving food system transformation in the Southeast Asia region. Sustainable agriculture and food system became key objectives following the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) in the region. In particular, ASEAN has a shared vision to promote competitive, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Food, Agriculture, and Forestry (FAF) sector for 2025 goals (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). In addition, promoting responsible growth and investment in food and agriculture, developing and supporting bio-based economy, circular economy, and green economy, inclusive agriculture are emerging as key strategic areas in the region. Given that Southeast Asia is an important region for agricultural and food production, facing challenges post-COVID-19 would require updated and evidence-

based information to provide insights on the issues and challenges to ensure that actions regulations, policy implementation, capacity development would be facilitated. The policy responses and the actions should be guided by the recent evidence and the outcomes of the United Nations Food System Summit in September 2021.

#### Thematic sessions

1. Boosting sustainable production
2. Building resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks, and stress
3. Promoting safe, nutritious, and sustainable consumption
4. Food system profile and policy

#### Objectives

Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at Kasetsart University plans to organize an international seminar focusing on Southeast Asia sustainable food system issues to share knowledge and information from evidenced-based research to provide policy recommendations to promote high-quality research, education, and effective capacity development in Southeast Asia. Key objectives of the seminar are as follows:

- To promote research-based and evidence-based knowledge sharing among academic and research institutions and policymakers in Southeast Asia
- To provide strategic and effective ways to advocate policy recommendations to support the transition towards a post-COVID-19 sustainable food system
- To identify possible areas for collaborative research projects and partnership opportunities and discussion on ways to establish a regional knowledge network on post-COVID-19 sustainable food system

#### Expected Outcome

The presentations and discussions will be documented in the form of a Manifesto presenting a vision of research and policy recommendations. The key outputs of the seminar will include policy briefs for consideration by stakeholders as a basis for policy actions. The outputs of this seminar will feed into the manifesto and eventually be disseminated to policymakers. In addition, new opportunities for regional knowledge network for collaborative research and capacity development is expected.

#### Participants

Selected regional representatives including academic institutions, research institutions, national and international outreach institutions, non-governmental organizations, civil society, as well as policymakers from Southeast Asia.

#### Organizers

Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Kasetsart University; Mekong Institute; Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Food Security Policy Research, Capacity, and Influence (PRCI), Michigan State University; and Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support System (ReSAKSS-Asia), International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and Agricultural Economics Society of Thailand under Royal Patronage (AEST)

Sponsors:

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