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*Jose Ma Luis Montesclaros, Kayven Tan, Mely Caballero-
Anthony and Mercedita Sombilla*



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By Jose Ma Luis Montesclaros, Kayven Tan, Mely Caballero-Anthony and Mercedita Sombilla

SYNOPSIS

Farmers form the backbone of ASEAN agriculture but are increasingly vulnerable amidst crises and longer-term structural challenges, including ageing, urbanisation, and natural disasters. A human security approach that prioritises these vulnerabilities is integral to resilience.

COMMENTARY

ASEAN is projected to be the [4th-largest economy](#) globally by 2030. To ensure ASEAN's economic development remains inclusive, the Philippines, as ASEAN chair, unveiled its "[RISE ASEAN](#)" agenda at a meeting held on 3-6 March 2026. Chaired by its Department of Social Welfare and Development, the meeting covered four themes: i) resilient and empowered families, ii) inclusive development, iii) smart youth and innovation, and iv) environmentally sustainable and food-secure future.

Food security, which falls under the fourth theme, underscores the importance of climate and disaster resilience, as well as sustainable food systems. However, amidst intensifying geopolitical and geoeconomic uncertainty and the long-term impacts of climate change, food security should be elevated to a core, overarching strategic priority rather than a subcomponent of broader environmental goals.

Farmer-Level Vulnerabilities

While ASEAN's agricultural sector contributes only [9.6 per cent](#) of regional GDP and [13 per cent](#) of employment, its small population is relied upon to feed entire nations, sustain food supply chains, and underpin the social stability that all other economic activities depend upon. The agriculture sector is thus foundational to ASEAN's

broader development ambitions, including those in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan, a component of the broader [ASEAN Community Vision 2045](#) (ACV 2045).

Yet today, farmers in ASEAN face many vulnerabilities. Firstly, the farming population is ageing, with limited physical capacity to undertake backbreaking farming work, and requires further support to adopt productivity-enhancing technologies and practices. In Indonesia and the Philippines, as ASEAN's most populous countries, workers above 50 years old form [nearly half of agricultural employment](#) (48 per cent and 49 per cent, respectively). Among older farmers (60-64 years old), agriculture accounts for about 35 per cent of employment in the Philippines and 50 per cent in Indonesia.

Secondly, farmers live predominantly in rural areas, which suffer from urban-rural [disparities](#) in infrastructure, technology, and market access. Myanmar, for instance, has a [49 per cent](#) urban-rural gap in access to electricity and an even higher 75 per cent in the use of digital payments. These disparities further compound already worsening labour shortages in agriculture, as urbanisation draws younger populations and [financial resources](#) away from rural areas.

Thirdly, farmers are often members of communities prone to disasters amidst changing climates. An earlier report on the [typhoons and floods](#) of December 2025 highlighted that approximately 15-21 per cent of the populations in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore live in flood-prone areas. In 2025, more than [400,000 hectares](#) of rice land were affected by floods.

Food System Vulnerabilities

ASEAN's demographic transition in agriculture and the increasing frequency of extreme weather shocks brought about by climate change have created systemic vulnerabilities in ASEAN's food system. These challenges have hindered ASEAN's domestic food production, increasing dependence on imports of key staples. ASEAN as a whole relies on imports to meet [26 per cent](#) of cereal consumption (i.e., rice, wheat and maize), and [13 per cent](#) of meat consumption.

Beyond import dependence, regional food supply chains are today increasingly exposed to geopolitical disruptions. This growing exposure owes to ASEAN's high reliance on extra-regional sources for [68 per cent](#) of its cereal imports, [94 per cent](#) of its meat imports, and [82 per cent](#) of its fertiliser imports. ASEAN's high extra-regional dependence exposes it to risks of rapid inflation in food and fertiliser [import prices](#), and greater uncertainty about availability, amidst the [Middle East tensions](#) today.

Integrating Human Security, Aligning with ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

Escalating global disruptions, alongside the challenges faced by millions of smallholder farmers in the region, have created a tenuous food security environment not just for farmers but for consumers as well. Stronger regional responses from ASEAN are thus required amidst an increasingly unstable global order.

However, ASEAN's dominant strategy for agriculture in its [Food, Agriculture and Forestry \(FAF\) Sectoral Plan 2026-2030](#) makes only scant mention of the kind of support vulnerable communities need today. The FAF plan mentions the term “safety nets” in the context of support for farmers, through the [“responsible investment in food, agriculture and forestry”](#) programme, but not in the broader context of the financial needs of the poorer consumers. Such framing of safety nets in purely economic agricultural support terms can be attributed to agriculture falling under ASEAN's [economic pillar](#), which focuses mostly on agriculture's contributions to GDP and employment.

In contrast, the impacts of disruptions clearly go beyond the agricultural sector. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, ASEAN saw an increase in the share of [people experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity, from 14.7 per cent in 2014 to 17.1 per cent in 2023](#). What appears lacking, therefore, is a more strategic integration of a focus on human security into the FAF plans, defined broadly as individuals' “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear”, as noted in the 1994 [UN Development Programme's Human Development Report](#).

Re-framing ASEAN's approaches to agriculture and food security from a human security perspective is thus critical. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) pillar provides a useful framework to bridge the gap for vulnerable groups in agriculture. In the earlier [ASCC Strategic Plan 2025](#), safety nets provided a more explicit focus on the security of individuals in times of crisis, ensuring that food, water, energy, and other resources are more “available, accessible, affordable and sustainable”.

Strengthening Food and Agriculture Resilience with Digitalisation

Farmers are the linchpins of ASEAN's agriculture and indispensable stakeholders in advancing a more human-centric approach to food security.

A key application of the human-security-focused approach to agriculture is digital inclusiveness. Digital technologies are increasingly relied on to improve the agricultural sector's resilience to shocks. Singapore's [Earth Observation Initiative \(EOI\)](#), for instance, will use satellite technologies to track problems at the intersection of disasters and food-related humanitarian crises, as well as in forestry and land management. The forward-looking ASCC Strategic Plan also highlights how the transformative potential of digital infrastructure, literacy and skills can increase productivity and strengthen coordination capacities amidst geopolitical disruptions.

The problem is that, as vulnerable populations, farmers face [uneven adoption](#) of digital technologies, further deepening existing inequalities and leaving these groups at a disadvantage despite their critical role in regional food security. Addressing this gap will require ASEAN to expand rural digital infrastructure, strengthen farmer training, and promote knowledge sharing to scale the adoption of digital agriculture technologies.

Taken together, the long-term trends identified in both the ACV 2045 and ASCC Strategic Plan demonstrate that ASEAN food security is a multidimensional issue.

Within ASEAN's agenda for 2026 and beyond, food security should be elevated as a core focus, with greater inclusivity, while paying attention to the human concerns of vulnerable groups, including bridging knowledge and skill gaps in digital technologies. This holistic approach will better align agriculture and food security approaches with the ASCC's long-term vision, enabling ASEAN to adapt to disruptions and emerging challenges and secure sustainable, inclusive, and resilient food systems for all its people.

Mely Caballero-Anthony is the Ngee Ann Kongsi Professor of International Relations and Head of the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros is a Research Fellow and leads the Food Security (FS) Programme at the NTS Centre, where Kayven Tan is a Senior Analyst. Mercedita Sombilla is the Director of the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA), an institution of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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