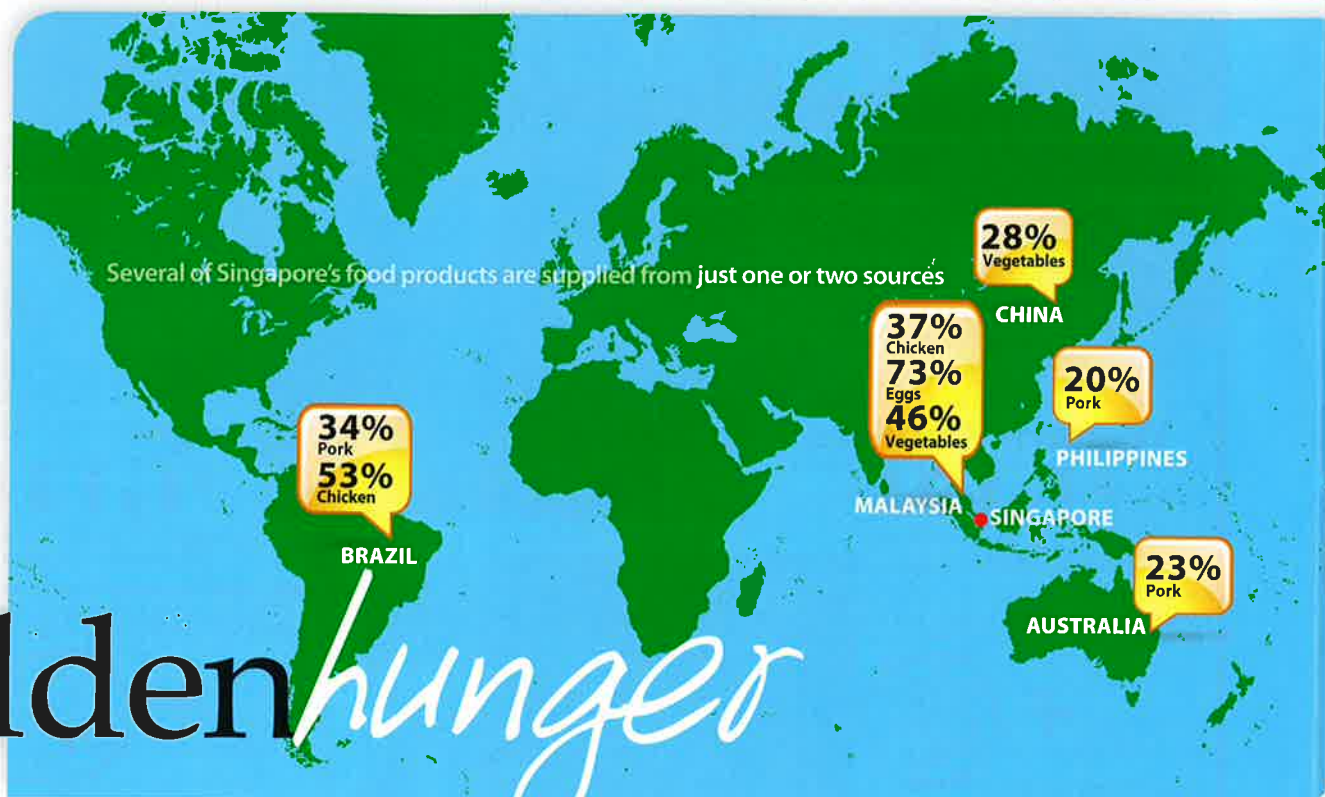


Right: Singapore depends on a number of countries for most of its food.



Hidden hunger

Asia is home to two thirds of the world's undernourished people. **Sally Trethewie** examines why this is and what it means for Singapore.

When we think of true hunger, we think of Africa and the devastation of famine that the continent has experienced. Images of the unimaginable severity, scope and emergency of food deprivation have haunted us and prompted widespread international support.

But what many may not know is that Asia is currently home to almost two thirds of the world's one billion undernourished people. It's not famine, but it is real and pervasive hunger all the same.

A most prevalent problem in Asia is 'hidden hunger' – people are often getting enough calories (mostly through eating rice) but do not have physical or economic access to an adequately nutritious food basket.

Despite its rapid economic growth, India houses 25 per cent of the world's hungry poor, and 40 per cent of Asia's malnourished. It is estimated that 43 per cent of children under five in India are malnourished. China also accounts for many of the region's food insecure

people, housing 16 per cent of Asia's undernourished population.

Southeast Asia is scattered somewhat unevenly in terms of hunger and food insecurity, from fewer than five per cent of people in Malaysia undernourished, to 25 per cent in Cambodia. Poverty and uneven development across the region (and within countries) are underlying triggers of food insecurity, but there are many more nuanced reasons, such as natural disasters, unexploded weapons from past conflicts on agricultural land, intensifying weather events, and poor transit and storage facilities.

Emerging dynamics

A 'supermarket revolution' has taken hold in Asia at a speed and scope never before seen in the world. In the mid-to late 1990s, much of Southeast Asia saw modern food retail sweep into the food markets of not only major cities, but small cities and rural villages. This revolution continues and is increasingly influencing dynamics right down to the farm level.

Hundreds of millions of Southeast Asians work as smallholder farmers, so food security is more than just about feeding people. Having strong agricultural sectors is important for livelihoods, economies, and the health of international markets. Food prices are another critical issue, with the region's consumers and smallholder farmers suffering the effects of global food price hikes and instability.

With some households in Asia spending up to 70 per cent of their income on food, even small fluctuations in price can have a major impact. Many smallholder farmers are buyers of food; therefore having stable and affordable food prices is as crucial for them as it is for the urban poor.

Rice remains a staple food for many in this region. Studies do show a gradual reduction of rice in the diets of many Asians in favour of more meat, dairy and processed food, due to higher incomes and other factors, but rice will continue to be important to Southeast Asian diets and livelihoods for decades to come.

In terms of production, extensive research is being done to develop weather-resistant varieties of rice and monitoring systems to improve lagging yields and overall rice availability.

Singapore does have pockets of food production but mostly depends on imports to feed this wealthy city-state. Singapore's food security therefore depends on the region's food systems being healthy and robust. Therefore, from improving yields, achieving food-secure populations, investing in storage and transport infrastructure, to developing open and strong international food trade, it is clear that what is good for Southeast Asia is good for Singapore.

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