

Trade openness is critical to securing Asia's food against climate change

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Author: C Peter Timmer, Harvard University

Food security is a chronic problem. In the Asia Pacific region, the sheer magnitude of the challenge, and the complexity of addressing it in a region with nearly 60 per cent of the world's population means that ensuring food security is never far from policymakers' attention. Sometimes, it flares into an acute issue, as during the global food crises of 1972–73 and 2007–2008. Sometimes, it lurks in the background. Four major challenges now confront the region in its quest for sustainable [food security](#) ^[1].



First, the reality of climate change and more extreme weather patterns have the potential to severely impact crop and livestock productivity. Few reputable scientists and informed policymakers doubt that the climate is changing under forces driven by human activity. The key questions for this discussion are: what happens to agricultural productivity and its regional variance as a result, how long do food systems have to adapt, and what are the national and sub-national consequences of failing to adapt?

None of these questions have easy answers, partly because the global models of climate change still have a substantial range of uncertainty in answering the question of impact at the local level.

The perspective here is that the time is already past to stop major climate changes by preventive measures agreed to by the global community. Even if the Trump administration had firmly endorsed the Paris Agreement, successful implementation of policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was always problematic. With the United States leading the charge

against such efforts, all hope now rests on adaptation. Agriculture is in the crosshairs and food security is at risk.

Second, the international trade regime, now challenged by the Trump administration, has become much more protectionist behind costly tariffs. The world has never known completely free trade, especially in sensitive agricultural products such as staple foods. Still, under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO), substantial progress had been made since the 1970s in establishing rules for such trade and gradually opening up national markets for most food staples. Even rice in Asia, the quintessential food staple facing longstanding government interventions in imports, exports and domestic price formation, has gradually become a more 'normal' commodity for many countries.

This progress is now threatened by a rapid return to blatant populist protectionism across many traded goods. The [US-China trade war](#)^[2] is spilling over many countries, with both positive and negative impact. But the most worrisome impact is an increased willingness to defend national economies from the 'threat' of cheaper food imports, just as climate change is increasing the variance of food crop production at local levels. Nearly all economists believe that using flexible trade with few barriers is the most efficient way to smooth out such local variations and ensure reliable access to food supplies in the face of production shortfalls. To take that option away will result in significantly more hardship and wider spread hunger.

Third, concerning demographic trends are confronting both rural and urban areas, with the net result a rapidly ageing farm population and an increasingly sedentary urban population. Historically, the only sustainable pathway to food security for a society has been a successful structural transformation, with its diminished relative role for the agricultural sector and connected demographic changes, led by rural-to-urban migration. Over the space of a single generation, the structural transformation can lift most of a society's poor households out of absolute poverty.

But the demographic changes have longer lasting effects as well. Globally, the age of farmers is rising but because of the rapid pace of structural change in the Asia Pacific region, the age of farmers has risen especially fast. In several countries, the average age of farmers is now over 60 years.

With younger generations happily settled in cities, the threat to continued agricultural production is obvious. Whether land consolidation into larger farms or automation of agricultural activities can stem the loss of elderly farmers is an important challenge throughout the region.

Finally, there is the issue of the deteriorating health and nutrition status for many of the region's children and young adults, with an accompanying rise in chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease. The mirror image of an ageing rural population is the youth of urban populations. There is often a positive 'bulge' in economic productivity as this young working age population is actively employed. But the negative dimensions of urban life are also becoming visible: it is hard to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The difficulties are magnified for households with cultural roots in rural villages and food tastes that mirror that culture.

Highly processed foods from supermarkets and fast food from readily available urban restaurants are tasty and cheap. But they are not healthy. When such a diet is linked to a sedentary urban routine, the result is obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other chronic illnesses, which are now an epidemic throughout the region. Poor diets and a lack of exercise are a regional time bomb.

Dr C. Peter Timmer is Thomas D. Cabot Emeritus Professor of Development Studies at Harvard University.

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[1] food security:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/07/26/sowing-the-seeds-for-better-food-policy-in-asia/>

[2] US–China trade war:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/06/04/resolving-the-us-china-trade-impasse/>