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# Strategies to secure Singapore's food supply

Diverse sources, stockpiling, growing locally and innovation are all part of Singapore's toolkit



Goh Yan Han  
Political Correspondent

At your favourite nasi padang stall, you can choose from beef rendang or fried chicken, vegetables in coconut gravy or fried rice. These are the go-to options.

Other options could include grilled squid, assam fish or prawn, and egg, tempeh and sofu dishes. In a country that imports over 90 per cent of its food, these ingredients are sourced from all over – as near as Malaysia and Indonesia to as Brazil and South Africa.

Malaysia's ban on chicken exports since Wednesday has cast a spotlight again on food security, especially amid the Russia-Ukraine war and rising global food protectionism.

India has banned the export of wheat, Indonesia the export of palm oil for three weeks, and Argentina the export of some soy products, exacerbating a rise in food prices and global supply disruptions.

Mr Abdul Hadi Kantarolzaman, owner of Sinting's Nasi Padang at Haji Haji Road in Bishan, said he has had to deal with rising food costs and supply issues for the past two years. He used to buy ingredients in bulk from a few suppliers but now buys smaller volumes from more sources instead.

Earlier this year, the price of chicken increased over a few weeks from about \$4 per kg to \$6 per kg. "But unfortunately we can't increase our price to our customers as they are sensitive to it," he said.

Now he enquires he has at least three suppliers for every food item so that he has backup options.

Ms Mastura Didih, managing director of Haji Haji Mainmiah, a nasi padang chain with five outlets and a catering business, also lamented the increase in prices.

For example, a 17-litre tin of cooking oil that cost about \$30 earlier this year now costs \$40.

To ensure a sufficient supply of ingredients, the business now keeps extra stocks at its warehouse, which it procured in March to store its new line of frozen cooked food, and also stockpiles items such as seafood. With the current disruption in chicken supply, the chain has been looking for alternatives, such as frozen drumsticks, which it does usually.

"We have to be more flexible (endure) for now," Ms Mastura said.

While Mr Hadi and Ms Mastura believe their issues are temporary, they are concerned about the uncertain road ahead.

Singapore pursues three key strategies in ensuring a safe and reliable supply of food – it has diverse import sources, and it grows both locally and overseas, through firms that set up or invest in farms overseas and export the produce back.

These strategies have been developed with the experience of the past, when Singapore had to deal with halts in the import of certain food items or global events causing sharp price increases.

Statistics released by the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) in April show the Republic's main source of chicken is from Brazil, with 48 per cent of imports last year. Another 34 per cent was imported from Malaysia, 8 per cent from the United States, and the rest from nine other countries.

These numbers are similar to those of 2019: 46 per cent from Brazil, 37 per cent from Malaysia and 13 per cent from the US.

Going back two decades, a report by the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) in 2009 showed imports of food items as a percentage of total food imports had increased while the major sources of poultry meat were Brazil, the US, China, Thailand and the Netherlands.

Meanwhile, there has been an

increasing reliance on eggs produced locally over the past three years. In 2019, Singapore produced 1.2 million kg of eggs, and this rose to 30 per cent last year, as the country continued being the second-largest contributor of egg for consumption here.

The dependence on Malaysia for eggs declined from 72 per cent in 2019 to 52 per cent last year. At the same time, SFA has diversified its sources of eggs, from nine in 2019 to 13 last year.

On its website, SFA says its imports of eggs are now from a safe supply of safe food in Singapore.

It took over food-related matters handled by the AVA, the National Environment Agency and the Health Sciences Authority in April 2019.

## LESSONS FROM THE PAST

In terms of diversity, Singapore imports from 180 countries and regions, up from 172 in 2019, as SFA continues to look for more safe-sources.

In 2019, the Government announced a 30 by 30 goal – meeting 30 per cent of the country's nutritional needs locally by 2030, up from less than 10 per cent now.

It has also supported companies venturing overseas, such as Barrauna Asia in Australia and Brunei and Sky Greens in Thailand and China.

SFA spokesman noted that when floods disrupted vegetable supplies from Malaysia last year, the food industry was able to pivot to other sources such as China, Indonesia and Vietnam.

Such diversification reduces the potential for crises in food supplies. For example, Singapore relied heavily on Malaysia for pork after local pig farms were phased out in the early 1990s. But Nipah virus outbreaks in 1999 and 2001 afflicting thousands of pigs in Malaysia led to Singapore banning all imports of fresh pigs from its neighbour.

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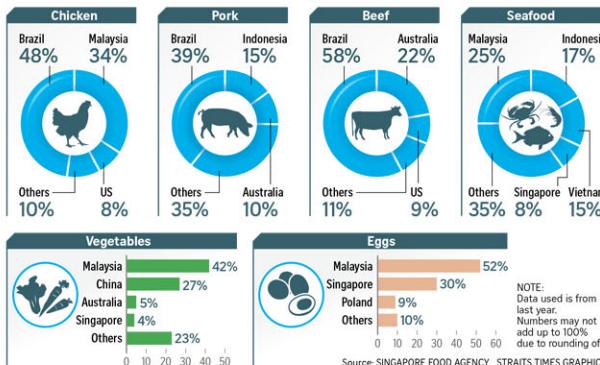
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A worker handling a chicken at a poultry processing hub in Singapore last month. Malaysia's ban on chicken exports from June 1 has cast a spotlight again on food security. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

## Where Singapore's food supply comes from



factored Singapore's food supply from the 2007 to 2008 global food price crisis, said Professor Zhou.

The Government then had to come up with a creative solution that was acceptable by consumers – that's when they decided to educate Singaporeans that frozen pork is good and you can 'eat well for less'. It is an ambitious, but you probably have to be a bit clever," said Prof Zhou.

These efforts have paid off – SFA statistics show that the amount of imported pork in 2020 was frozen while the rest was fresh.

When avian flu hit Malaysia in the mid-2000s, Singapore worked with its neighbour to approve farms clear of bird flu to continue exporting here, said Mr Goh.

The Government then flew in chilled pork mainly from Australia, and helped wet market butchers set up refrigerators at their stalls to handle the chilled items.

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## WHAT LIES AHEAD

Events from the last few months indicate the possibility of a global food crisis, said Prof Zhou. Apart from Malaysia's ban on chicken exports, there have been the bans on wheat from India and palm oil from Indonesia.

The country is in a position to produce all the food that it needs, because it is just not economically effective. Even large agricultural countries like China and the United States are the biggest food-producing countries.

Food security experts warn that there is a same solution that can mitigate food supply challenges – technology.

Singapore is moving in the right direction by beefing up its own capabilities through technology, said Prof Chen.

Eventually, the Republic can transfer such know-how to other countries to help them overcome food supply disruptions. "This is a win-win situation – we don't just buy food from elsewhere but also have a transactional agreement. This way, we have more human touch and in times of crisis, we can overcome limitations together," he said.

which will act as a "shock absorber", he added. These strategies are already in place but can continue to be bolstered.

"We securitised water decades ago but didn't pay much attention to food. Maybe we took food supplies for granted as we never expected such a crisis."

While Singapore has ranked highly in the Global Food Security Index, topping it in 2018 and 2019 and ranking 15th last year, it is because the index puts heavy weighting on availability and affordability, which Singapore does very well in, and quality and hygiene, where Singapore does relatively well.

"But we are more exposed and vulnerable during crisis times, which we get out of food, what happens if we are cut off from food?" said Prof Zhou.

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