

Press Release

High Level Forum takes stock of Food Systems Transformation in the ASEAN Region Post COVID-19: Responding to Food Security and Inclusiveness Concerns

June 1, 2022, Hanoi: ASEAN member states (AMS) are at a critical juncture. With rapid growth and food system transformation AMS countries have made substantive progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets of ending hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. Yet, several challenges remain, some of which have been exacerbated with the pandemic. Other short to medium term and even long-term challenges like climate change are threatening to undo years of progress in ASEAN region, raising concerns about food security and inclusiveness. As value chains in ASEAN are getting internationalized and geo-political situation is becoming ever so complex, concerns about transformations related to structural change as well as fundamental challenges (infrastructure and institutions) have become imperative. Located next to the most highly populated regions and global growth poles in fast disintegrating value chains, ASEAN region has to recalibrate on partnership and engagement in both transformation as well as integration of the agri-food sector.

The external environment in the region is highly dynamic with arrangements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and quadrilateral economic partnership. In the fast-moving context of AMS, how the agri-food chain of AMS has been transforming and reforming, and the concerns of inclusiveness and sustainability fare have been the focus of the project “Agricultural Transformation and Market Integration in the ASEAN region (ATMI-ASEAN)”, of which a high-level policy forum was organized in Hanoi as a hybrid event on June 1 and 2, 2022. By highlighting the importance of addressing the inclusiveness concerns of the transformative food system, ATMI-ASEAN underlines the difficulties of meeting SDGs in time.

The high-level policy forum is set as a meeting point for analysts, policymakers, researchers, international donors, and public-private entities to deliberate on five years of rigorous research in ATMI-ASEAN and find ways for sustaining the utilization of the project work beyond its lifecycle through an extended network of policy actors and analysts. ATMI-ASEAN internalizes the reshaping of the food system with the public health concerns and the geopolitical complex.

More than 100 stakeholders including representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Government of Viet Nam, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF), Cambodia, Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation (MoALI) Myanmar, other organizations like regional farmer organizations, research institutions, donors, civil society, NGOs, academicians took stock of the progress surrounding food security and inclusivity throughout the ASEAN region and deliberated a way forward for a resilient recovery of agri-food value chains that would ensure the inclusiveness of smallholders in the regional and global value chains and make them resilient to shocks. Unless food security and smallholder inclusiveness are credibly harmonized with ASEAN's competitiveness agenda, improvements in regional agricultural and food markets will be inadequate, leaving them vulnerable to sudden disruptions, the forum reiterated.

Key initiatives like the formation of the Network of Policy Advisors and Analysts in the ASEAN region (NePAAA) were also announced. “Through a partnership with SEARCA, an institution with pan-regional network and the support from the IFAD offices, ATMI-ASEAN has successfully engaged with the stakeholders, prioritized research issues, hosted policy forums, and carried out substantive research with National and Regional Project Steering Committees. The ATMI-ASEAN programme adopted a demand-driven approach and dynamically addressed changing environment and policy contexts in the region,” said Dr. Shahidur Rashid, Director-South Asia, IFPRI. “Over the years the project has generated significant research work and knowledge products, I am pleased that we are able to introduce the Network of Policy Advisors and Analysts (NePAAA) today,” added Dr. Rashid.

The network is intended to provide evidence-based policy options and recommendations to the ASEAN Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF) and other regional stakeholders. It was launched with the objective of sustaining the work that ATMI-ASEAN has generated and facilitate its scaling up. As a way forward, the NePAAA webinar series has been organized focusing on issues that are region-specific.

In addition, the policy forum also showcased work related to the impact of COVID-19 and the policy responses. With the smallholder dominated systems, the effects on farmer organizations (FO) in AMS, based on elaborate primary surveys of farmers were implemented in ATMI-ASEAN. The primary findings on how the FOs have helped farmers to cope with shocks and how a correlated shock like COVID-19 brought in organizational and functional changes in FOs in ASEAN countries were presented.

The forum also reviewed the progress of the ATMI-ASEAN programme and highlighted how innovative transformative knowledge solutions proposed at the forum by different stakeholders can help address the challenges to food systems in the region. The forum further discussed how to reshape the food systems transformation in the ASEAN region through recommended pathways of selected agricultural commodities’ value chain. For example, ATMI-ASEAN programme has developed national roadmaps for value chains within ASEAN countries. The regional road mapping exercise focuses on the “regional value chain”, which is an agricultural value chain whose elements involve intra-ASEAN trade recognizing the interdependence with value chains beyond ASEAN.

“The roadmaps will further help to strengthen the capacity of the targeted ASEAN Member States (AMS) in developing policies and programmes to support the adjustment of the smallholder farm sector to changes in sub-regional and supra-regional agricultural and food markets,” said Dr. Glenn B. Gregorio, Director, Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA).

Empirical analysis conducted for the programme suggests that structural transformation in the programme’s focal countries is positively driven by agricultural productivity, terms of trade, and public investments in infrastructure, with little role for rural to urban migration and market integration. Efficient, sustainable, and inclusive growth requires more investment in agricultural research and extension systems, and diversification of production portfolios toward higher-value food commodities by strengthening institutions that link farmers to remunerative markets. Investing in post-harvest infrastructure for food processing is also essential.

ATMI-ASEAN has also focused on the market integration of the programme-focused countries with ASEAN and its other top trading partners. Studies conducted for the programme highlight the exports of all the focus AMS that are competitive in the ASEAN markets and have high export

potential. A higher trade potential with lower competition (value or volume) would indicate an opportunity for higher returns for agricultural producers. “Market integration and agricultural transformation are very important in the context of post-COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing international integration. ATMI-ASEAN has provided valuable research to support policymakers and allow countries to share their experiences with others,” said Dr. Tran Cong Thang, General Director, Institution of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD).

The programme on ‘Agricultural Transformation and Market Integration in the ASEAN region’ (ATMI-ASEAN) was initiated in 2016, responding to concerns surrounding food security and inclusivity throughout the ASEAN region. It aimed at linking smallholder farmers and small-scale agri-business (SSAB) into the transformation of agri-food system in Southeast Asia.

Since its inception ATMI-ASEAN has been successfully contributing to the policy discussion in the region in general and in the programme focal countries - Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam, and the Philippines (CLMVP). “We are proud that our support has contributed to better coordination of food security policies and the development of regional and sub-regional roadmaps for investments in food and agri-based value chains for the ASEAN region,” said Mr. Abdelkarim Sma, Lead Regional Economist, IFAD. “I am particularly happy that the capacity-building efforts of the programme have helped strengthen national government agencies and ASEAN in their respective planning and programming capacities.”

For press queries write to:

Ms. Rebika Laishram, Communications Specialist, IFPRI, r.laishram@cgiar.org

Mr. Nguyen Tuan Linh, Researcher, IPSARD, linhnquyentuan1997@gmail.com

About IPSARD

Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD) is public science and technology institution under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), established in September 2009. As a think tank of MARD, IPSARD is in charge of scientific research, technology transfer, international cooperation, policy advice, baseline surveys, information, training, and services in the field of agriculture and rural development. <https://ipsard.gov.vn>

About IFAD

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) invests in rural people, empowering them to reduce poverty, increase food security, improve nutrition and strengthen resilience. Since 1978, we have provided US\$23.2 billion in grants and low-interest loans to projects that have reached an estimated 518 million people. IFAD is an international financial institution and a United Nations specialized agency based in Rome – the United Nations food and agriculture hub. www.ifad.org

About IFPRI

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) seeks sustainable solutions for ending hunger and poverty. IFPRI was established in 1975 to identify and analyze alternative national and international strategies and policies for meeting the food needs of the developing world, with particular emphasis on low-income countries and the poorer groups in those countries. Visit: www.ifpri.org

About SEARCA

Since its establishment in 1966, the main mandate of the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) has been to build capacities in agricultural and rural development in Southeast Asia. From 2020 to 2025, SEARCA’s core programmes on Education and Collective Learning, Research and Thought Leadership, and Emerging Innovation for Growth are geared

towards accelerating transformation through agricultural innovation (ATTAIN) to elevate the quality of life of agricultural families through sustainable livelihoods and access to modern networks and innovative markets. SEARCA is hosted by the Philippine government in Los Baños, Laguna. www.searca.org

About the ATMI-ASEAN Project

The Agricultural Transformation and Market Integration in ASEAN Region: Responding to Food Security and Inclusiveness Concerns (ATMI-ASEAN) project was launched in June 2016. The leading project implementer is the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in collaboration with the co-implementer, the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA), and supported by International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The ATMI programme targets five ASEAN Member States—Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam, and the Philippines—and ASEAN in general. <https://www.ifpri.org/project/agricultural-transformation-and-market-integration-asean-region-responding-food-security-and>