

Poverty amidst Plenty – Solving Food Insecurity in Singapore is Essential

Singapore is renowned for great food, with everything from inexpensive hawker centre meals to Michelin-starred restaurants ranked among the top in the world. Amidst this plenty, though, 10 percent of Singaporeans do not have enough to eat. Three steps can go a long way towards solving the problem and should move forward quickly.

Food Insecurity is Rampant

The data is indeed surprising. Along with finding that 10 percent of Singaporean households experienced food insecurity at least once in the last 12 months, a study released in 2020 by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation found that about 40 percent of these households experience food insecurity every month. “Despite Singapore being ranked by the Economist Intelligence Unit as the most food-secure nation in the world,” the Lien Centre commented, “this progress has not prevented the nation from reporting severe levels of food insecurity.”

Unfortunately, food insecurity seems to be getting worse rather than better. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations showed in its Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report 2020 that the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Singapore increased from 2.8 percent in 2016 to 4.7 percent in 2019, the latest data available.

Non-Profits Fill the Void

Also surprising is that a network of more than 300 organisations serve more than 100,000 families and 300,000 people with everything from fresh food to cooked meals. “We currently have 360 organisations in our network,” Food Bank Singapore co-founder Nichol Ng told Channel News Asia (CNA), and “we reach out to more than 250,000 people on the ground.”

Among the largest of these organisations is Willing Hearts, which cooks and distributes about 9,500 daily meals island wide. Beneficiaries include the elderly, disabled, low-income families, children, and migrant workers.

A multitude of community organisations also provide food through Meals-on-Wheels, which served nearly 4,800 meals a day as of 2018. One example is Touch Community Service, which provides 600 home-bound elderly with meals through its programme.

Another approach comes from Food from the Heart, which does everything from delivering unsold bread from bakeries to social welfare agencies, to enabling needy Singaporeans to receive essential grocery items. It reaches about 53,700 beneficiaries.

And there is some government assistance for targeted groups too. The Ministry of Education said that around 49,000 students benefit from its Schools Meals programme, which subsidises meals purchased from school canteens. That number increased last year during the pandemic, and students were also allowed to purchase food at hawker centres and supermarkets while schools were closed.

With these and a multitude of other initiatives underway, it might seem like everyone who needs it would have access to food. Data and reports tell a different story.

Only 22 percent of food-insecure households receive food support, according to the Lien Centre, and 62 percent of food-insecure households did not even seek assistance. Its researchers identified 125 food support organisations, less than the Food Bank found.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) said in response to questions by Nominated Member of Parliament Anthea Ong last year that it does not track the number of Singapore residents experiencing food insecurity. It also said that it is aware of more than 20 registered charities and a growing number of informal groups providing food support, a number perhaps even lower than the Lien Centre identified.

A Better Solution is Needed Soon

While it would be easy to suggest that the government should provide money and food to eliminate food insecurity, and it could help, that solution alone is too facile. Three other steps can make a massive impact.

The first is a two-pronged approach to education. One part is to inform the 62 percent of individuals who did not seek assistance that food is available. Using data to identify people in need and engaging volunteers to reach them could let them know that they can receive food easily. And to make sure that individuals eat well, nutrition and cooking information needs to be provided as well.

Next, food that is wasted can be put to good use. The National Environment Agency estimated that Singapore wasted 744,000 tons of food in 2019. Organisations such as Food from the Heart do use some of it. Member of Parliament Louis Ng said last year that he plans to table a Good Samaritan Food Donation Act that protects companies that channel food still safe for consumption to beneficiaries. Expanding and accelerating efforts to deliver unused food to those in need can provide much more food at a very low cost.

Finally, greater coordination among organisations providing food to those who need it would help. As Channel News Asia (CNA) found last year, some individuals receive more food than they can use and others receive none. "The duplication of assistance comes down to the lack of coordination or information-sharing among the groups," CNA explained. As the Lien Centre noted, there needs to be more strategic coordination of food support that involve multi-sector partnerships sectors. While the Charity Food Workgroup comprised of organisations from multiple sectors is likely developing solutions and The Food Bank says it aims to be the centralised coordinating body for organisations and their food donations, details have not been released yet. Thousands of hungry people in Singapore would benefit if work speeds up.

In a country as wealthy as Singapore, where thousands of tons of food are going to waste, it is hard to explain why hundreds of thousands experience food insecurity. Acting quickly is essential for ensuring that people have the food they need.