

ThinkingAloud

# Chicken, climate and choices in a food crunch

Supply chain disruptions are here to stay – our best response is to ensure we have a range of options and are able to adjust when needed



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Singapore Editor

One of my earliest recollections of live chickens was in cages at the old zinc-roofed Geylang Serai market.

Up till the early 1990s, chicken – and duck – stallholders at wet markets across Singapore often doubled up as butchers, reaching in for a bird when a customer wanted it.

The poultry section was marked not just by the din of chickens squawking, but also by the sight and smell of feathers, blood and guts as they spilled onto the floor daily.

Thankfully, in 1990, the then Environment Ministry announced that the slaughter of poultry would be phased out in wet markets in two years.

It said the move would ensure the birds are killed in hygienic conditions, and prevent the pollution of drains within the markets.

The Straits Times reported that at the time, there were over 600 poultry stalls in 12 wet markets and about 69,000 birds were slaughtered daily.

The announcement was met with mixed reactions from both stallholders and consumers, with some households quoted as saying the few hours' difference needed to slaughter, pack and transport the birds would make a big difference.

Despite the last bird was slaughtered in March 1993, stallholders and shoppers were reported welcoming the cleaner surroundings.

Some 30 years later, poultry sellers at wet markets faced another major shift when Malaysia announced it would ban chicken exports to Singapore.

Last week, Malaysia partially lifted its ban, allowing poultry producers and importers in Singapore to bring in live chickens and whole chickens from across the Causeway.

But a degree of uncertainty remains – and Singaporeans may have to get used to eating fresh chicken-like we are used to, fished over daily from farms in Johor and beyond, slaughtered at local abattoirs and then shipped to wet markets and supermarkets islandwide.

It could happen sooner, or some time down the road.

But just as alternatives were made available, the slaughter of poultry at markets was phased out, this new normal is something companies and consumers might eventually have to brace themselves for.

Already, Singapore is looking at ramping up supplies of fresh chicken from abroad, including Thailand and India.

If Malaysia's ban on chicken exports persists, these alternatives could help meet some of the demand.

The Singapore Food Agency has also been working to diversify Singapore's sources of food imports.



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It is pushing ahead with the "30 by '30" goal – meaning 30 per cent of our annual nutritional needs locally by 2030, up from less than 10 per cent now.

But we should also be open to adjusting what we consume.

## FOOD PROTECTIONISM

Recent conflicts and the climate crisis have underlined the need for change.

A new report published by the Hinrich Foundation last week on the geopolitics of food security and climate change found that the cost of chicken feed is creating various challenges for the world's food supply.

The Hinrich Foundation report noted that climate change, heatwaves and wildfires, flooding, pestilence, soil erosion and water scarcity are conspiring against future crop productivity and continuity.

And leveraging scientific innovation and technology can help a country improve its food security. Technology specialists say that with smaller, more efficient, vertical agriculture technologies, vertical farming, lab-grown protein as well as water scarcity and agri-tech.

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Experts say periods of drought have also increased crop failures in India, a major source of wheat.

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