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The use of alternative food sources such as laboratory-grown products might be necessary so that Singapore may not be vulnerable to supply chain disruptions that have been happening during the Covid-19 pandemic, a professor said.

Professor Lily Kong, president of Singapore Management University (SMU), said on Tuesday (Aug 2) that people must get used to this idea of alternative food, just as they did when Singapore first decided to purify waste water and turn it into drinking water as one of the means to address water security.

Prof Kong, who specialises in social-cultural and urban geography, is also the deputy chairman at the Housing and Development Board.

She was responding to a question about her views on Singapore's self-sufficiency and food technology plans, speaking as a panellist during a session titled, "What does the future hold for cities?"

It was part of the biennial World Cities Summit, now in its eighth edition, held at Marina Bay Sands until Wednesday.

The discussion, which involved mainly foreign panellists, was moderated by Mr Simon Baptist, global chief economist at The Economist Intelligence Unit, the research and analysis division of the company that publishes The Economist.

Touching on Singapore's self-sufficiency, Prof Kong said that it was an existential one for the country.

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More than five decades ago, as part of plans to make way for industrialisation in the early days after its independence, she said that Singapore made a conscious decision to do away with pig farms and source for food from the region.

“Now, what the pandemic has shown us is that (such a strategy to source for food) can be a real challenge. If your supply of chickens, eggs and water are turned off, then how are we going to survive?”

Prof Kong then spoke about how Singapore has dealt with water security, which includes recycling waste and treated water through the NEWater initiative.

However, aside from the technological and economic hurdles of coming up with such a solution to complement Singapore's water supply, there was a psychological barrier that people had to overcome and to get the population to support the idea of using water that was once considered “not pristine”.

This might be a similar barrier that people here may have to cross when it comes to food security.

The country has a "30 by 30" goal to grow 30 per cent of its nutritional needs domestically by 2030, but Prof Kong said that “we're at best, one-third of the way at this point of time”.

To reach the target, alternative food such as cell-based milk or meat cultured from cells are “going to be a necessary thing to think about”, she added.

As with NEWater, there will be a need to ensure that it is not only technologically and economically possible to create alternative food products sustainably, but that they are also “psychologically acceptable to the population”.

Her view is that there is no way for Singapore to be 100 per cent self-sufficient when it comes to producing food, but she noted that there are plenty of “young innovative minds” who are already working on cell-based food, including those in SMU.

“There's a great need for that sort of innovative and entrepreneurial work that goes on in many startups, that are incubated by universities... and that work must continue if we are to even realise the 30 per cent (food goal),” she said.

Earlier in February, SMU said in a news release that two of its staff members were working on such a related project.

The university announced that Associate Professor Mark Chong (communication management) and Associate Professor Angela Leung (psychology) had received funding from the Ministry of Education to research and identify the most effective messages to foster public acceptance and adoption of alternative proteins as a food source.

When Mr Baptist, the moderator for the panel, pointed out that the “30 by 30” goals is an expensive vision for Singapore, given that the cost of vertical farms is way more than traditional horizontal ones, for example, Prof Kong did not disagree.

However, she said that even if Singapore did not invest in such technologies, the supply chain disruptions already showed that the cost of food will go up.

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“So it's a question of where you place your bets and the answer is ‘not all in one basket’,” Prof Kong added.

This means having to deal with supply chain disruptions, reducing costs through urban delivery optimisation and, at the same time, investing in technologies to ensure that Singapore has alternative sources of food.

POST-PANDEMIC LIVING

Aside from food security, the wide-ranging discussions among the panellists also touched on other topics such as resource shortage in the midst of climate change and the relevance of cities in a post-pandemic world.

Aside from Prof Kong, the other speakers were:

- Mr Flemming Borreskov, president of the non-governmental organisation Catalytic Society
- Mr Joseph Hargrave, a director at the sustainable development company Arup
- Mr Craig Lawton, technical chief of Amazon Web Service's global smart city programme
- Mr David Wallerstein, senior executive vice-president at Chinese gaming and social media company Tencent

Mr Wallerstein spoke about how the fundamental challenges the world is facing now, such as the energy and food crisis, present a need for the world to “re-architect” the way it treats resource consumption.

The journey to solving the problem, he said, will not be without any pain.

“The good news is, once we get that right... (moving) to a resilient energy system, resilient food system, resilient water — once we solve that, I think humans can live safely on earth for the rest of time,” he added,

“It's a very exciting moment that we're living in.”

Separately, Mr Borreskov from Catalytic Society said that although certain jobs can be done remotely as seen during the pandemic, there are still reasons why people choose to move into a city that is in another country.

These reasons include better access to education, the convenience of service, or culture, he added.

Prof Kong predicted that some cities may see a bit of a downsizing.

The panellists said that this may pave the way for second-tier cities taking the lead in innovation if companies relocate parts of their businesses out of megacities and into other urban areas that are less expensive.

The speakers also talked about how the pandemic has shown that there is a need for leaders to create a “humanistic” city.

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Rather than focus on the need for growth, innovation “or the race for the tallest building”, the pandemic has refocused attention on what living in a city means, Prof Kong said. This would be attention to the things that global citizens have taken for granted such as food security and public health safety.

The use of big data and technology may help improve a city, but Prof Kong said that it is not enough.

“Listening is not just through data. Listening is through the heart as well, and recognising the needs of your citizens.”