

Petaling Jaya MP laments price shock, impact on food security

Food is a fundamental human right, as per Article 25 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In line with the second goal of the Sustainable Development Goals to eliminate hunger and ensure all people including poor and at-risk peoples have access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food by 2030, it is expected that food insecurity will be eliminated worldwide. Governments have an obligation not to interfere with efforts of their citizens to attain food and provide protection when there is an infringement on rights of food, and provide opportunities to aid citizens in food attainment.

In Malaysia, food consumption accounts for a large proportion of what people spend their money on a daily basis. According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**, in 2020, paid employment and self-employment, which were the main sources of income, recorded decreases of 16.1% and 9.7% respectively. The decline was contributed by households or individuals who experienced loss or reduction of income — reduction in working hours — particularly those with the status of employee, self-employed and others. For those earning less than RM2,500, there was an additional decrease of 12.5% of household income. We also witness 20% of households from the middle 40% income group (M40) with income between RM4,850 and RM10,959 entering into the bottom 40% income group (B40). On average, income of the B40 and M40 declined by 15.9% and 36.9% respectively.

What is also disturbing is a survey conducted by the DOSM in which it concluded that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had had a significant impact on household income and subsequently affected the structure of household groups. The survey showed that the number of poor households increased to 639,800 in 2020 as compared to 405,400 in 2019.

Meanwhile, the incidence of hardcore poverty is estimated to have increased from 0.4% in 2019, which involved 27,200 households, to 1% involving 78,000 households in 2020.

Food prices in recent times have risen dramatically and become exorbitant. A number of inter-related factors have contributed to this situation: The war in Ukraine causing rising oil prices to rise further, the Russian food blockade in the Black Sea, the war severely restricting fertiliser supplies, and that there is an inability of supply chains and logistics to get back to normal to cater to pent-up demand after prolonged shutdowns caused by the global Covid-19 pandemic. In Malaysia, our over-reliance on foreign labour — many of whom have not returned to work in our farms, wholesale and retail outlets — and recent torrential downpours have affected harvests and crop yields.

All this is compounded by our country's own over-reliance on food imports as a result of the neglect of the staple-growing rural economy here. The DOSM asserted that the value of Malaysia's imports surpassed the RM100 billion mark for the first time ever in March 2022 after growing 29.9% to RM104.9 billion from RM80.8 billion in 2021. Consumption goods alone (8.3% of total imports) registered an increase of 22.4% from RM7.1 billion in 2021 to RM8.7 billion in 2022. Added to this, the deteriorating balance of payments situation in the country has caused the value of our ringgit to fall against most major currencies, thereby making prices of food imports even higher!

Key sources of protein like chicken, ikan kembung and ikan cencaru have risen 16.7%, 18.7% and 76.9% in prices in the last three months respectively. Vegetables such as kacang panjang and kubis bulat have

gone up 100% in prices. Chillies, which are already expensive at RM15/kg, have risen by 24.9% in prices.

Even though Malaysia has traditionally been an agricultural society, the recent over-reliance on imported food has left the rakyat in a tight squeeze.

The government has tried intensifying subsidies for food items including chicken, eggs and rice, but evidently that has not stopped food prices from soaring. Lately, the hold on chicken supplies escalated the food security challenge for the poor.

The Malaysian government needs to pay more serious attention to this matter. There is no holistic approach from the Keluarga Malaysia government to solve this problem. Not only is the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs responsible for this, but other branches of the government should step up to the task of enhancing food supplies and security.

Here are a few key issues that need to be addressed and resolved:

Strengthen the present traditional farming methods and fully utilise modern agri-science and technology that will bring about a much more sustainable ecosystem and industry.

The Ministry of Finance should also empower budding farmers or small-scale farmers by providing them with tax incentives and ample credit to replant fallow land, acquire seeds and higher-yielding varieties, fertilisers and technology.

Oil palm and rubber plantations must be made to allocate land for intercropping by the Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities through a system of fiscal incentives. This will increase land use for vegetables including root vegetables, fruits and animal husbandry, adding to plantation workers' incomes.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Education must also develop training programmes and a syllabus to develop youth involvement in the agriculture sector. This would pave the way for more resilient farmers to help sustain the Malaysian food ecosystem.

Establish effective enforcement of monitoring of prices of goods, especially to prevent drastic fluctuations in prices of essential goods.

As noted by the DOSM, the economic fallout from the pandemic has added to unemployment and under-employment. Many who are looking for work find that they are being exploited with low wages. While the minimum wage of RM1,500 has been implemented since May 1, there is no mechanism to ensure that every corporation or small business is complying with the requirement. An effective monitoring mechanism ought to be in place to prevent further suffering of the poor and hardcore poor. With two years of Covid-19 and economic restrictions, the government must also not discount those earning above RM2,500 who are also struggling due to reduced or lack of income.

I certainly would like to see an Anti-Poverty Commission being established to keep track of access and distribution of income and resources. This will help reduce having news of families only being able to feed themselves a few days of the week, or scraping the bottom to keep the families alive, regardless of race, religion or other social economic backgrounds.

Malaysia is well known throughout the world for its delicious dishes and fruits. It would indeed be a sad situation if the rakyat in the country are paying a hefty price just to feed themselves when there should be more than enough to go around.

<https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/petaling-jaya-mp-laments-price-shock-impact-food-security>