

Boost domestic food output, stabilise prices, supply, urge experts

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysians from almost every income group are crying foul over the looming food supply shortage and soaring prices.

Against this backdrop, experts and analysts as well as the relevant parties are of the view that the government should adopt a more aggressive and systematic approach to ensure a sustainable food supply for the people.

This is crucial given the nation's dependency on food imports to meet domestic demand. Last year alone, Malaysia imported more than 50 per cent of food worth about RM63bil.

According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**, Malaysia's inflation, as measured by the consumer price index (CPI), increased 2.3 per cent in April 2022 from a year earlier, led by higher food prices.

"The increase in food inflation, which contributed the highest [weightage] to the overall weight of [the] CPI, remained to be a major contributor to inflation.

The department's **chief statistician Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin** was quoted as saying that food inflation rose by 4.1 per cent in April 2022 with 89.1 per cent of items in the food and beverage group recording increases.

COMPLEX ISSUE

Sharing his thoughts on the bread and butter issue, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Graduate School of Business Deputy Dean Associate Prof Dr Mohd Helmi Ali said the food supply chain management was highly complex and required the cooperation from various parties.

He said the government's price monitoring efforts were among the proactive measures undertaken to ensure adequate supply for consumers and to mitigate the effects of inflation.

"However, monitoring should be comprehensive especially in determining the root causes of the supply chain issue," he told Bernama.

Any hiccups in the food supply chain, he said, would trigger a chain reaction, as such, the issue must be tackled at its root before it worsens.

Mohd Helmi opines that the role of local researchers was crucial in ensuring sustainability was maintained in the food supply chain through empowering local agro product growth, noting that this can directly reduce the nation's reliance on imports.

"The surge in fertiliser prices and poison imports are among the chain effects on the food supply chain and ultimately, the costs will be passed on to the consumers.

"Immediate and simple steps such as through subsidies, could be initiated but the proposal is not sustainable and will not be for the long-term. For me, the strengths and copyright owned by local

researchers can be used during this crisis for commercialisation of products such as poison and fertiliser," he added.

STUDY EACH COMPLAINT

Meanwhile, Kuala Langat Area Farmers Organisation (PPK) chairman Dr Abdul Razak Khasbullah said price monitoring at each level could help the authorities to identify the contributing factors to the surge in prices.

"There's a reason behind the escalating prices. For example, prices of vegetables such as brinjal, ginger and chilli that we offer at the Agriculture Production Collection Centres (PPHP) are much cheaper as we market them to certain wet markets and supermarkets which have collaborated with PPK.

"There's certainly a difference in the prices that we offer as compared to other places as some producers have raised prices of vegetables due to escalating fertiliser costs.

"Most fertiliser imports are from Brazil. As such, a price hike is inevitable. The government should look into the causes of rising costs and seek solutions," he added.

FOOD SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Meanwhile, Associate Prof Dr Haliza Abdul Rahman from Universiti Putra Malaysia's Institute for Social Science Studies, said the government was on the right track in addressing the price hike issue and food supply shortages.

Citing the case of the current chicken issue, she said the government's corn cultivation on a 100 hectare farm in Chuping, Perlis as well as the grain corn project nationwide would eventually alleviate the high chicken and egg prices and the current chicken supply shortages.

"It's already too late, as the Malay saying goes 'sudah terhantuk, baru terngadah', but the initiative is laudable. While it will not be able to significantly solve the emerging issues, at least the initiative can help boost the chicken supply for the long term," she added.

Earlier, Head of Integrated Farming, FGV Holdings Bhd, Abdul Razak Aya said large scale corn cultivation is part of the company's efforts in resolving the chicken supply shortage.

At the same time, the Agriculture and Food Industries Ministry has suggested that palm oil producers allocate a portion of their farm land to grow corn towards reducing the dependency on other countries for cornmeal as chicken feed which is costly.

She said Malaysia should focus on producing food in an integrated, planned and holistic manner to ensure sustainable food supply.

Government agencies and the private sector, she noted, must strengthen collaboration in the food-based agricultural sector through research and development, capital injection as well as expertise and technology.

"Efforts must also be mobilised to engage youths in food-based modern agriculture.

"Certain initiatives can be prepared in the early stage for them such as training, capital and land to encourage them to be actively involved in agriculture," she said.

LARGE SCALE VEGETABLE FARMING

To reduce the nation's dependency on imported goods especially food, bold measures should immediately be implemented to boost food sources especially vegetables.

Universiti Putra Malaysia's School of Business and Economics senior lecturer Associate Prof Dr Anuar Shah Bali Mahomed said the government could embark on large scale vegetable cultivation, including fast growing vegetables that could be harvested within six months.

"This is because, if the food supply crisis worsens, vegetables that are grown will be sufficient for domestic supply and can be the lifeline for the people.

"This must be immediately carried out to provide the country with enough options to face contingencies," he added.

He also suggested that the government take the initiative by "leasing" suitable government-owned land for free for two years to farmers, especially bumiputeras to grow vegetables to meet the food shortage if the food crisis continues unabated.

"This initiative is more of a two-pronged approach. Besides raising entrepreneurs' income, surplus food stock can also be exported to nations affected by food shortages," he added.

Sustainable agriculture does not just lead to short-term improvements, he said, adding that it helps enable food security over the long run.

Having food security dramatically improves the well-being of a nation's people and opens doors to a variety of other benefits, he added.- Bernama

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