

Malaysia's food supply unsustainable in the long term, say experts

ACCESS to affordable and nutritious food is becoming more difficult globally, following the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and climate change.

Consequently, this crisis has propelled Malaysia's food security to the top of national concerns.

Emerging from the pandemic, Malaysia is now ranked 41st on the Global Security Food Index (GSFI), with a heavy reliance on imports for essential food products.

According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM)**, Malaysia recorded 26 food items with more than 100% self-sufficiency ratio (SSR) in 2021 slightly better compared to 19 in 2020.

Economist Dr Nungsari Ahmad Radhi said the country's food security ranking is poor — considering its abundant water, climate and availability of lands — compared to its land-scarce neighbour Singapore, which came in at No 28.

"We should be doing much better than this. Our agrifood industry is quite underdeveloped, which is why we import a lot of food," Nungsari told The Malaysian Reserve (TMR) last Friday.

Last year, a deficit of RM25 billion was recorded as Malaysia's imports of agrofood stood at RM64 billion compared to RM39 billion exports.

For the last 10 years, Malaysia's imports of food accumulated to RM482.8 billion, while exports amounted to RM296 billion, based on DoSM data.

The data also shows that Malaysia is highly dependent on imports of mutton (from Australia), mango (Thailand), coconut (India) and beef (Indonesia) to meet domestic demand. Moreover, Malaysia also saw a staggering high import of chillies, ginger and round cabbage.

"We cannot grow or produce all the food we import, but we can certainly aim to be competitive, not just for local consumption but for export markets.

"It only makes sense to go into agrifood if we are competitive enough to export," he noted.

To tackle the food supply, he opined that the authorities should offer longer land tenures to encourage farmers to invest in technology.

"Right now, we do not have much support for agrifood. We should have support via universities or research and development (R&D) centres to cultivate seeds, pest management and overall horticulture practices to support farmers," he added.

On the fundamental question of whether Malaysia is "food secure", former Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Deputy Minister Sim Tze Tzin said that it is both a "Yes" and a "No".

"It is a Yes because Malaysia can easily import the foods, and it is also a No because the costs are high and will burden the country financially," Sim told TMR.

He noted that food security is measured by four criteria, namely availability, affordability, safety and quality, as well as natural resources and resilience.

“Malaysia is actually in a quite high ranking for food security — No 2 in South-East Asia — which is ironically behind Singapore who is not producing any food but was ranked on top as it fulfilled the four criteria,” he said.

As a trading nation, he said that Malaysia would not immediately be facing any food security issues, however, it is poised to be a problem in the longer term.

“In the long term, our food supply is not sustainable because we are importing about RM64 billion of food and this is very expensive.

“So, we cannot rely on importing food as this will create a financial burden to the country.”

However, echoing Nungsari, Sim noted that importing food for the country is unavoidable as it is impossible for Malaysia to produce all the food for its people.

“For example, we need to import wheat as we do not grow wheat here in Malaysia, same for apples and oranges as we cannot grow these in Malaysia.

“So, the caveat is that we still need to import, but at the same time we need to improve our agriculture sector to make sure that we are more secure if anything happens,” he said.

Meanwhile, Sim said that Malaysia needs to utilise technology in order to realise the full potential of the agriculture sector.

“Our agriculture sector is still stuck at level 2.0, meaning there is very little advancement in technology, very labour intensive and very old fashioned,” he added.

Sim proposed for Malaysia to precipitate in using technology and data to produce more food locally.

“For example, a paddy field can now use autonomous vehicles and a global positioning system (GPS) to plant and harvest.

“Drone is also widely used now in paddy fields to fertilise as well as to spray pesticides.”

Sim also proposed an agricultural land reform as Malaysia needs more land that is accessible to the farmers.

“Agriculture heavily relies on land, but land has a lot of issues as it is under the authority of state affairs. So, there are different ways for every state.

“Sometimes, big land parcels were given to big companies, while small farmers will have problems renting or accessing land.

“I believe if we have a policy which gives land plots to the people who actually want to farm, then we can produce more food,” he added.

According to Sim, around six million hectares or 75% of land are allocated for oil palm plantations and another one million hectares or 12.5% for rubber plantations.

That leaves only a million hectares for all agro-food activities, including growing paddy and vegetables, fruit farms, ruminants, and fish and shrimp cultivation.

Therefore, Sim hopes that agricultural land reform can be done in a more transparent, accessible, flexible manner, with longer occupancy leases for farmers.

“This can help the farmers to have the security of tenure or security of the land that will allow them to invest into technology,” he said.

Universiti Tun Abdul Razak’s Prof Emer Barjoyai Bardai also shares the view that Malaysia should apply technology in the agriculture sector to reduce the country’s food imports.

“The future is about technology and if we apply technology, we can be competitive like other main importer countries such as in the Middle East.

“We should reach a substantial position in food security as this is very important because we have been importing too much food, and this is actually causing more problems to us,” he told TMR.

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