



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to the Editor

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When the food on the table is least on priority

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) had warned the government about the dangers of food insecurity for many years and it has fallen on deaf ears, and a reluctance to revamp the entire agricultural policy which includes a total review of the food distribution chain. There have been talks floating around about the existence of cartels and middlemen who profited more than the farmers or the retailers for decades.

We would urge the government not to address the issue of food security on a piece meal basis but first to have an overview, identify all the problems in all sectors and formulate long-term solutions.

In fact, a 2014 study published in the Malaysian Journal of Public Health Medicine showed that 25 per cent of adults experienced food quantity insufficiency; 25.5 per cent had food variety insufficiency, 21.9 per cent practised reduced meal size, and 15.2 per cent skipped main meal for lack of money to spend on.

Malaysians are not taking enough fruits and vegetables as revealed by the National Plan of Action for Nutrition of Malaysia III 2016-2025. It stated that 59.1 per cent of Malaysian adults consumed fruits below the recommended two servings a day and 81.7 per cent consumed below the recommended three servings of vegetables a day.

Food issues have been plaguing Malaysia since the 1980s the country started to sideline agriculture in favour of industrialization and the service sectors. Tackling food security is a major task because an imbalanced diet can lead to malnutrition resulting in wasting of the body, stunting in height, being underweight, or even overweight. An imbalanced diet might even be more pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of global inflation.

More Malaysians can be expected to eat fewer fruits and vegetables during the pandemic because of price increases and people's monthly budget has to tighten up. With inflation setting in, most of the Below 40 (B40) and particularly the lower Middle 40 (M40) income groups will be badly affected as their income is unlikely to increase or won't increase in tandem with inflation.

Since early January 2022, hawker food prices have increased by about 20 per cent (RM4.20 to RM5.00 in some places). This will impact the lower-income groups most because they are likely to eat out as they often take on more than one job even before the pandemic to make ends meet. Jobs during the pandemic are not readily available and how is the poor going to survive?

Food is likely the last item in their monthly budget after prioritizing their rental, bank loans, utilities, education, and perhaps medical fees. The reason is because these will drastically impact their daily lives as compared to food which they can have the option to eat cheaper food, smaller quantities, and/or having to skip meals.

Families might have stayed away from fruits and vegetables in their diet for two primary reasons: the high cost of fruits and vegetables (even for the local ones), and that they are more easily digested than meat thus it is faster to feel hungry. Vegetables take between 30 to 60 minutes to digest while chicken takes about 2 hours, and beef or lamb, 4 hours.

If we base on FAMA's 17 February report on Seberang Perai Tengah's commodity retail prices, a processed chicken was priced at RM9.30 per kg as compared to imported big onions that were priced at RM3.50 per kg; chilli from Thailand, RM15.00 per kg; grated coconut, RM9.00 per kg; and ladies' fingers, RM12.00 per kg. Even the cheapest source of protein is chicken eggs (Grade C) – the smallest size – which was priced at RM3.90 for 10.

Fruits such as papaya are priced at RM5.00 per kg; Pisang Berangan and Pisang Mas at RM6.50; and seedless watermelon, 4.50. The poor will have to choose between food to fill the stomach or those that don't.

With limited financial resources, low-income families have to make a choice in prioritizing what to put on their table. Nutrition is not likely their concern as they have to maximise the quantity of food for the family while minimizing the cost. If this does not work, then they have to consider cutting down meals.

We are concerned that in doing that, they will suffer from malnutrition and that could be a reason for obesity and diabetes among Malaysians because of an increased intake of rice (carbohydrate) to fill their stomach. There can be an increase of diseases associated with vitamins and minerals deficiency from low consumption of fruits and vegetables. Public hospitals and clinics will need bigger health budgets to manage nutrition-related non-communicable diseases that could have been prevented.

“We, therefore, urge the government to emphasize food security which calls for a robust agricultural policy. However, this pandemic has shown us that a good agricultural policy should include diversifying our food production, producing our own animal feed, phasing out use of agricultural chemicals by adopting agroecology principles to attain food sovereignty. These will help to reduce the impact of food supply chain disruption or a weak ringgit.”

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