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# City folk feel the pinch more

POVERTY should be defined based not just on income, but also the quality of life, said Professor Chamhuri Siwar of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

"It's a very complex issue. Some people from the rural areas, whom we thought are poor, don't think of themselves as such," said Chamhuri.

"But in the cities, many who wear flashy clothes and drive a car say they are poor. It's subjective"

But in having to draw up a gauge, income is widely used as measurement.

This definition should not end here, said Chamhuri, without taking into account poverty's multidimensional factors.

Accessibility to information, and social amenities like education and health care, is one aspect.

"Right now, the measurement is done based on the expenditure required to obtain basic necessities, but accessibility is a different aspect.

"No matter how rich you are, if you're distant from the centre of economic activities, there's a big gap in terms of accessibility to those basic needs."

The revision of poverty line should also reflect the nation's developed status, said Chamhuri, who specialises in agriculture economics and poverty.

"Items we used to consider a luxury are no more a luxury.

"Previously, we had never considered things like television, computers and handphones, but now these have become a necessity.



Profssor Chamhuri Siwar



Associate Professor Dr Laily Paim

"The poverty line income should reflect higher status of livelihood."

The current poverty line, said Chamhuri, doesn't reflect the true picture, especially the urban cost of living.

At RM687, the poverty line for urban Malaysian households is too low.

"If the government factors in the price increase in food and fuel, the poverty incidence will go up quite significantly."

But the government will be better equipped in helping the poor if it studies the households' coping mechanism and models its assistance based on the study, said Chamhuri.

He said raising the people's salary is not a means of eradicating poverty.

"If we keep the PLI low, or we increase the salary, are there no more poor people? Poverty will still be there."

Associate Professor Dr Laily Paim of Universiti Putra Malaysia's human ecology faculty said Malaysians now have to live with the shrinking ringgit.

"What we earn today cannot get us

the same amount of food or provisions as yesterday, which is why it's very important for us to redefine poverty.

Increasing cost of living has forced some, who used to be quite comfortable being the middle-income group, to now think twice before parting with their money.

In fact, those who were near-poor in the past could have been relegated to the poor category now, she added.

One sign is an increased spending on food.

A family which allocates more than 30 per cent of its expenditure to food items is in the category of low-income group, said Laily, who specialises in consumption economics and quality of life.

Revising the PLI doesn't just present one with a clearer picture, but also helps in poverty eradication, she said.

Factors like the number of wage earners in a family, whether the household is single-headed or female headed, if there are members who are ill or disabled, should be considered when calculating the poverty line.

When the PLI becomes more detailed, the poor are easily identified.

So, when assistance is given out, it is accurately targeted at the needy.

As for the consumers, improving consumption habits can help lessen the pinch. Behavioural changes are not easy to come by, but it can be done, said Laily.

"People just have to sacrifice in times of need."