

Farmers need aid to face food production challenges

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PETALING JAYA: A lack of workers and logistical challenges are key issues that need to be addressed to strengthen the agriculture sector against the Covid-19 pandemic, according to experts.

Dr Tey Yeong Sheng, a researcher at the Institute of Agricultural and Food Policy Studies at Universiti Putra Malaysia, said the labour shortage and disruption of supplies were becoming the main challenges in local food production.

He said many Indonesian farm hands had returned home, fearing a loss of income here.

"Farm workers and service providers face difficulty crossing states during the movement control order (MCO) and many farms rely on contract services from land preparation to harvesting crops," he said.

Tey said similar movement

restrictions being enforced in other countries also disrupted raw material imports for farm chemicals.

Traditional markets, he added, were more vulnerable to the impact of Covid-19 and movement controls.

"Modern market operators such as chain mini-markets, supermarkets and hypermarkets, plan for supply disruption for years.

"Farmers and agribusiness operators, who did not invest in or have limited possession of downstream facilities, have struggled to find buyers," he said, adding that some have taken to adopting online platforms to sell produce.

The Star reported earlier that a Cabinet Committee on Food Security will be set up soon to improve national food security and strengthen the food supply chain.

Tey said the aid announced in the government's stimulus packages, while helpful to agribusinesses, might not give enough of a leg-up

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"This means that many farmers without business registration are left out in all financial support programmes," he said.

Tey said the question of food supply would be important in the coming months, adding that the Statistics Department reported that household expenditure on food and beverages increased by 27%, a stark contrast to the overall 48% decline in total household expenses.

"There are pandemic-induced supply chain disruptions, which would affect our domestic food availability. Without public interventions, it is safe to hypothesize that household spending on food may take some time to normalise post-MCO," he said.

Ahmad Ashraf Shaharudin, a research associate at Khazanah Research Institute (KRI), said smaller agribusinesses were more vulnerable to the shocks of a weakened economy.

He said some 56% of agriculture

sector workers were "non-standard" workers – which was much more than in the other sectors, adding that such workers were those who did not have formal employment contracts.

He said this was compounded by the fact that over 30% of agricultural workers were foreigners.

"Almost 90% of agricultural establishments are SMEs, and about 40% are micro-enterprises with annual revenue of less than RM300,000 and with fewer than five employees," he added.

Ashraf said while the current food supply in the country was sufficient, the government should proactively identify farmers and fishermen who needed help to market their produce.

He urged the government to consider providing the Employment Retention Programme assistance to self-employed agricultural workers who contributed to the Social Security Organisation.