

'Use technology to keep greens supply chain running'

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PETALING JAYA: The difficulty in getting vegetables in the current health crisis has shown with stark clarity that new methods are needed to keep the supply chain intact.

Among the proposals put forward are investment in technology and widespread urban farming.

The theory is that new technology will enable farmers to get their produce directly to consumers, thus improving the supply chain.

The proponents said that widespread farming in or near urban areas would ensure there will always be adequate supply.

However, converting such concepts into reality is a different matter altogether.

Associate Prof Dr Norsida Man, who heads the Department of Agriculture Technology at Universiti Putra Malaysia, said technology is crucial in helping farmers reach their consumers directly.

She said marketing their produce online is one way to go. On the other hand, farmers are

not adequately equipped with the right technology to implement such a concept.

Norsida said technological advances are also necessary to help farmers cultivate their crops more efficiently and for timely delivery of the produce to the consumer.

She said however, the government has been "slightly slow" in taking this forward.

"We need to improve the supply chain. We don't know when another tragedy will strike."

The on-going Covid-19 pandemic and the movement control order (MCO) enforced to curb its spread have caused disruptions in the vegetable supply chain.

This has forced farmers to donate, discard or peddle their produce for a pittance.

Norsida noted that urban farms have begun sprouting close to cities but they remain small-scale.

"Urban farmers also tend to cultivate organic vegetables that can fetch high prices," she added.

On the other hand, large-scale farming in urban areas is next to impossible because land in these areas are usually reserved for other

purposes, she said.

"Farmes have also become comfortable with the traditional logistics," Norsida added. "They supply to the wholesaler who then sells it to the retailer and finally the customer."

She said the fact that many people have taken the opportunity to cut deals with farmers during the MCO and then selling the vegetables online shows that it is viable.

"Farmers can outsource the online sale and marketing process," she said.

Cameron Highlands Agriculture Association chairman Ng Tien Khuan said transporting vegetables directly from the farmer to the consumer's doorstep would be costly.

"You will need a lorry with a refrigerator to ensure the vegetables remain fresh," he told *theSun*.

Ng said door-to-door delivery would also require farmers to segregate and pack the vegetables, and that would incur labour cost.

"In the end, the consumer will have to pay double or triple the price compared with what they normally pay at a wet market," he added.