

Policy monitoring, implementation key to addressing food security issues

ESCALATING food prices have sparked another food security debate.

Every few years, whenever there is a spike in food prices or a supply shortage, the blame game would start.

What we should do is to revisit our food security policy. The question: Is it out of sync with current realities?

Does the policy have problems with effective implementation? We are known to be more reactive than proactive to any form of disruption.

As a result, in the current challenge on the restrained chicken supply, we rush to implement what some call knee-jerk reactions, which many suggest can be counterproductive in the long run.

Removing import control and banning export may be okay for the short term. But, we need to also analyse the long-term implications of such measures as we strive to build a viable food industry.

It may be more pertinent for us to re-look at the policy that we have in the first place.

The part we should focus on is the execution of the policy. More



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often than not, implementation is where most of the problems lie. We tend not to monitor closely.

If there is close monitoring of the main items in the policy, then we can take more proactive actions to correct any serious misalignment with targets.

The key parameters to monitor include supply, demand, price, domestic production, including costs, import and export, as well as logistics.

All such data should be regularly analysed and communicated to the stakeholders. Any discrepancies in the data should trigger the appropriate remedial actions.

If such monitoring and evaluation exercise is done as a matter of practice, the policy can evolve.

In fact, done properly, we need

not craft new policies whenever one is not functioning well.

One expert in agriculture, a former Universiti Putra Malaysia's college of agriculture dean, recently asked whether we have been reading the wrong textbooks on food security.

He questioned the effectiveness of our national agricultural policies, despite the many times they have been revised.

He also raised the issue of the restricted land availability for food crop cultivation. We may not be maximising land use. Or, are we infected with the cheaper-to-import-food syndrome?

He called for a paradigm shift in our thinking, moving forward. We should consider alternative methods of farming to increase food production, moving away from traditional methods.

Many may not realise that others are doing exactly that.

The United States is exporting

rice. Australia is exporting rambutan. Japan, which is 10 times our size, is self-sufficient in rice. They deploy mechanisation a lot.

He raised the question on why the size of our idle land is increasing, and what exactly is the focus of our agricultural sector? Where is our third champion industrial crop?

“Food security is but one example which confirms that we are only good at writing policies. We often fail miserably in implementation.”

Why don't we integrate oil palm to livestock? That way we can take advantage of the existing marketing power of big plantations.

He further argues that if we utilise only a quarter of the existing oil palm land, we can be more than sufficient in meat pro-

duction.

In fact, if we use only five per cent of the already cultured land, we can be sufficient in some food items.

We should also tap on our agriculture professionals to offer simple and practical solutions.

He suggested that we study the models of China or the US. Most

of all, we should get our execution process working. Execution can only work if all the stakeholders collaborate.

Food security is but one example which confirms that we are only good at writing policies.

We often fail miserably in implementation. There are countries which have adopted our policies lock, stock and barrel, and made a success of them.

Policy research is more than just concocting the policy. It should involve constantly evaluating the workability of the policy. This is unfortunately lacking.

In fact, funding for policy research is placed at the lowest priority in research allocations.

This has to change. A former minister recently asked why we are not evaluating our foreign direct investment (FDI) policy.

The fact that we are seen as no longer attracting FDIs should have prompted us to re-look the policy.

We should invest more in policy research.

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