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Food security in Malaysia, China: A challenge for the future By Dr Cheong Jia Qi



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THE advent of Covid-19 pandemic saw a growing number of countries experiencing sporadic yet increasingly severe cases of food insecurity, eclipsing years of remarkable achievements in ensuring that people have sufficient food to meet their needs.

Even before the pandemic, hundreds of millions of people were already suffering from chronic and acute hunger arising from fragmented food supply chains and lost earnings. These stem from factors such as conflict, socio-economic circumstances, natural hazards and climate change.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought food insecurity into the limelight, highlighting the difficulties faced by families, not only in Malaysia, but also in China, which is the largest Asian economy.

These families have been dealing with long-term hunger despite living in urban areas and centres of economic activity. The growing incident of food insecurity is predicted to continue through 2021 and beyond as the Delta mutation of Covid-19 continues to threaten global recovery.

While the pandemic hogs the limelight, behind the scenes, the past year

has seen food prices reaching a three-year high, providing a grim outlook of what is to come.

To address food insecurity, China aims at the root of the issue by boosting agricultural productivity. In February 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs launched China's annual rural policy blueprint, known as the "No. 1 Document". It shows the government's increased commitment and heightened emphasis on ensuring food security compared to previous years.

Among other objectives, the plan aims to improve grain yields for all 23 provinces during the 2021-2025 period. At the same time, China aims to increase its production capacity for crops, poultry, farm animals and marine fisheries, including setting up long-term key breeding programmes.

The plan also covers developing a national food security industry belt in order to connect the country's key grain areas. This will shift focus of food processing and manufacturing onto higher value-added products.

Another method of ensuring food security undertaken by China is the conservation and utilisation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. This is done through protecting seed resources, scientific breakthroughs in seed cultivation, and regulating the seed market to attain food security.

The China government will prioritise support for leading seed companies to establish commercial breeding systems. Public investment in research and technology dispersal includes breeding programs and support for local seed systems that permits distribution of locally modified genetic material and grants farmers the right to freely save, exchange and market genetic material.

In comparison, Malaysia needs to strengthen its basic research and cultivation technologies. This is especially when it comes to precise and efficient breeding, where there is demand for high-quality agricultural products. Malaysia should emulate China's technological approach towards plant genetic resources. China, realising the importance of higher quality and yield, focused efforts in technology such as seed breeding and gene editing technical equipment.

In line with the era of digitalisation, the Malaysian Agriculture and Food Industry Ministry should encourage investment in the latest technology to improve productivity, including machinery adoption and support. This would strengthen food supply chains, improving food security of the country.

The Smart Paddy Field Programme (Smart SBB) that involves industrial players in enhancing rice production productivity with the target of attaining 75% self-sufficiency under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan is a good model for this approach.

Malaysia should expand awareness on the importance of decreasing reliance on agriculture imports and boosting self-sufficiency.

This should help provide a greater push in the food sector to expedite R&D in high-tech farming, which hopefully will improve productivity. In addition, higher food quality, enhanced marketplace admission, assistance structures for smallholders such as insurance, social safety and agriculture diversification should be made available.

A controlled benchmark should provide a useful measurement for improvement. This can be attained via international cooperation between countries, particularly in the aspects of agricultural production and innovation, capacity improvements and expertise sharing.

Changing ecological, environmental and biodiversity contexts require continual contributions and dissemination of updated agricultural knowledge.

This presents an opportunity for cooperation between China and Malaysia researchers that will not only improve agricultural harvests, but also contribute to environmental sustainability.

For example, sharing sessions on media platforms would allow Chinese and Malaysian farmers to exchange agricultural knowledge and expertise, as radio and TV programmes are noted to be important sources of information for farmers in both countries that drive adoption of agricultural knowledge.

Government-sponsored R&D can increase agriculture sector scientific investment, especially by facilitating research between Malaysia and China.

In addition, it is equally important to facilitate farmer-scientist knowledge flows on agricultural improvement and human capital. Furthermore, improved financial access, administrative and institutional reform, enhancement of budget planning and human resource management skills will significantly increase the success rate of technological adoption.

Simultaneously, innovative food systems can target poor farmers to enable economic empowerment and improve livelihoods. In the long run,

increased investment in high-quality research will help improve the production capacity of smallholder farmers.

From another perspective, Malaysia should emulate China's Clean Plate marketing campaign in 2020 that aims to reduce food wastage. This is done by reducing unnecessary consumption.

With regards to food security, the Covid-19 pandemic has created an "out of the frying pan into the fire" situation. In view of the upcoming challenges, strategies and initiatives are urgently needed to ensure continued access to sufficient and nutritious food.

The Chinese and Malaysian governments should work together with all stakeholders to attain higher agricultural yield, improved nutrition, stronger agricultural ecosystems, as well as sustainable lifestyles. All of these would contribute to increased food security.

Environmental factors, farming systems, market actors and consumption patterns are systemically interrelated and connected to food security. Thus, policymakers should focus on policy coherence, adaptability and a management approach that embraces the diverse nature of food supply chains.

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The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.

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