Moral dimension of food security

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: While arguments to address the problems of sustainability and food security are important on many levels, their moral significance is perhaps the most fundamental.


I quoted former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his critique of greed and the need to follow a middle path.

I want to go back to his words and discuss one of specific issues which he used to advance his advocacy of rejection of greed.

He pointed out that: “The environmental crisis that affects humanity today is a consequence of our collective failure to manage our environment in a just and equitable manner. Faith and religion teach us that we should develop a harmonious relationship with the environment (ibid, page 12).”

He went on to argue that: “The looming food crisis which threatens global food supplies is another example. It is unconscionable that some parts of the world enjoy an abundance of food, while some other parts continue to be mired in poverty and starvation. Again we come back to the concept of the ‘middle path’ (page 12).”

Abdullah added that: “When I became Prime Minister almost five years ago, I began to talk about the need to revive food production and agriculture in Malaysia.

“There was some scepticism then; but today, I believe there is a consensus around the need for us to ensure adequate food supplies, especially for those who continue to labour under the shadow of poverty. This is one example of striving for the ‘middle path’ ensuring that the process of development leaves no person behind (page 12).”

His words remind us of an ongoing and important issue that connects the problems of economic development, sustainability and inclusiveness: food security and agricultural sustainability.

This matter has been raised recently in the pages of the New Straits Times.

According to a report in the NST titled Reshaping Policies For Climate-Smart Farming (March 30), the argument was that: “The emergence of a global green economy requires governments, other policy makers and businesses from developed and emerging economies to recognise the inextricable linkages between climate change, the environment and food security.”

Clearly, food security and sustainability are policy makers’ concern.

In a speech titled Invest Malaysia 2010 at Shangri-La Hotel in Kuala Lumpur Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak pointed out that “expansion of modernised agriculture activities can contribute both to higher incomes and to the reduction in income inequality (Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, www.pmo.gov.my/?menu=speech&page=1676&news_id=227&speech_cat=2).”

So it seems that policy makers and the media understand the critical nature of food security development and social inclusiveness.

What I want to do now is highlight...
some research that reinforces and, hopefully, helps keep focus on this critical issue.

Pek Chuen Khee, Lim Yet Mee and Choong Chee Keong of The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman have written an interesting research paper titled The Economic Impact Of Climate Change On Food Security In Malaysia (Munich Personal RePEc Archive Paper Number 37199, online at http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/37199/).

In this paper, these researchers remind us that "the impact of the decline in food production due to climate change will be more severe in developing countries than the developed nations, mainly because rich nations are located in the part of the world with lower temperature."

In a paper by the Centre for Global Development..., many developing countries have reached the average temperature level which is near or above crops tolerance level.

"The need to aggressively engage the issue of food security and further develop Malaysia’s agricultural sector was forcefully argued by Najib in the speech cited above."

"Abdullah’s words are also especially prescient given the concerns over the effects of global warming on developing countries and the way in which the impact of environmental problems is unevenly spread between the developed and developing world."

The research cited above also makes a strong case for government to look closely at “current climate change and food security” (page 16). Such arguments reinforce Najib’s observation that “there is a strategic need to focus on expansion of the high value agriculture sector.”

However, the current dilemma over food security and global inequality suggests that the moral imperative that informed Abdullah’s description of our current malaise with regard to sustainability and food security is also something we need to consider.

The arguments to address the problems of sustainability and food security are important on many levels. However, their moral significance is perhaps the most fundamental.

The economics of food and sustainability are ultimately moral concerns and the language that best justifies and explains our commitment to food security, social justice and sustainability is a moral language.

I hope that this piece of writing when read in conjunction with last week’s provides all my readers with food for thought.

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