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Rice and shine to avert risks

■ **Cultivate padi strains that are drought- and flood-tolerant to enhance rice production**

■ **Access to nutritional food an important dimension of food security for urban and rural populations**

■ **Innovative marketing and distribution initiatives can help in coping with rising food costs while sustaining agri-food businesses**

RICE is the most common staple in Malaysia. This year alone, 2.91 million tonnes of rice are likely to be consumed in the country, a slight rise over the previous year's consumption.

Malaysia's domestic production can only supply 70% of domestic requirements, and the rest is imported by Padiberas Nasional Bhd, the country's sole rice importer, which buys up to 800,000 tonnes, mostly from Vietnam, Thailand, Pakistan, and India.

The bulk of the imports is white rice, with the remainder being basmati, brown rice and other specialty rice.

With India's ban on non-basmati white rice exports from July 20, 2023, the impact is being felt the most by Malaysia, according to a news report.

We should look into cultivating padi strains that are drought- and flood-tolerant to mitigate the risks of reliance on India or any other rice-growing region outside the country.

These padi strains can also be adapted to micro-regions within Malaysia to enable better yields.

While boosting domestic production, we can ensure sufficient supply at fair pricing, which will help the government in controlling rising food costs.

Sabah and Sarawak have been mentioned as suitable regions for cultivating heritage or specialty rice by Khazanah Research Institute (KRI), which noted that both states have more than 500 distinct padi types.

As recommended by KRI's Dr

Sarena Che Omar, these padi types that are already adapted to local conditions can help boost supply while also relieving the country from the strain on rice reserves during short-term emergencies or when padi production is hampered.

Improving food security in the country requires a transformation of the agri-food system that determines production.

Investing in small-scale farmers, adapting to the effects of climate change and having access to funding and technology can also be part of

the strategy to increase food production while enabling urban and rural areas to have more access to better nutrition.

There are already a number of initiatives that are assisting the transition to longer-term food security.

According to Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives Minister Datuk Ewon Benedick, there are 172 cooperatives in the agri-food industry that are prepared to contribute to boosting Malaysia's food security.

These cooperatives are in activities that include farming, animal husbandry, fishing, and the distribution of agricultural and livestock inputs.

Malaysia Digital Economy Corp's Digital AgTech's CATALYST platform is an effort to equip farmers and agri-businesses nationwide with cutting-edge technology for real-time productivity insights and predictive analytics that will help to manage food security in Malaysia.

Along with focusing on modernising the agri-food industry with automation, mechanisation, and technology, the government can create a sound and encouraging investment policy by establishing strategic alliances with others, including businesses with ties to the federal and state governments.

As part of measures to alleviate food poverty, food and nutrition supply chains must be strengthened, particularly for foods that are therapeutic and fortified for children.

Governments, global organisations, and other stakeholders must work together to accomplish this.

In the near term, it is crucial to keep a close eye on food prices, step up market oversight, and ensure efficient delivery of agricultural inputs like food supplies, efficient logistical functioning of local agricultural and food supply networks, and efficient commerce, all while relying on the global market to ensure a steady supply of food.

Malaysia should invest in sustainable supply chains over the longer-term

as the country aims to strengthen its position as the region's leading investment hub.

This investment can come from the country's publicly-traded firms, who can be the main drivers in improving the supply chain while improving food security.

Besides, policymakers must be aware of how urbanisation affects nutrition and food security.

It is critical to develop resilient agri-food systems that serve both urban and rural populations. This entails resolving geographical disparities and making sure that everyone has fair access to food and nutrition supplies.

Innovative marketing initiatives like the Agro Madani Sale, which serves all societal sectors, can be used to increase access to food resources. This initiative will increase the revenues of enterprises in Malaysia and assist Malaysians in coping with rising cost-of-living expenses.

As part of Malaysia's commitment to ending hunger, which is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is also a need to prioritise child nutrition by ensuring that children have access to inexpensive, nutrient-rich foods and crucial nutrition services.

Initiatives must also emphasise the need to safeguard kids and teenagers against nutrient-poor, highly processed meals.

Finally, food security requires combining expertise and resources and at the same time, thinking out of the box, that can be incorporated into strategies which can then contribute to solutions.

We may gradually but certainly contribute to the solution of the food scarcity problem and fight global warming by cooperating, combining our expertise, resources, and creative notions, and incorporating them into strategic strategies and future actions.

With this, it is hoped that food insecurity in Malaysia will be alleviated, and ending hunger under the SDGs can be accomplished.

