

MY SAY: What waste in a hungry world

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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One of the characteristics of a high-income economy appears to be the correspondingly high amount of waste that it generates compared with a low-income economy. In fact, as countries graduate from a lower to a higher level economy, the amount of waste they generate goes up accordingly. Reports show that many Asian economies are facing a similar predicament as they benchmark themselves against existing high-income countries.

More recently, China has been singled out for the amount of waste it produces as its economy chalks up an unprecedented performance, even as the world is going through a difficult time. China, according to an International Herald Tribune report on Aug 13, has surpassed the US as "the world's largest producer of household garbage".

Nowhere is this phenomenon more apparent than when it comes to food. Reportedly, the UK and US alone waste enough food daily to feed 1.5 billion people worldwide. In 2008, the number of the chronically hungry were said to be growing at a rate of 275,000 a day. So, at the last G8 meeting, when a £12 billion aid deal was announced to boost food security in poor nations, that sounded rather "wasteful" in itself.

Why spend so much money — assuming that this will happen given the G8's track record (remember the "Make poverty history" slogan at the 2005 G8 meeting) — when there is so much waste in just two of the G8 countries? To put it another way, if the amount of wasted food could be saved for the needy worldwide, the so-called aid could be put to other good uses.

In fact, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown hinted at this when he said: "No one should go hungry in a planet as fertile as ours." He also wanted "to make sure that in the modern world, no one goes hungry anymore". While these are indeed laudable statements, unfortunately, that is not really being put into practice. Among the factors is the "trap" that is "inbuilt" in the current economic model.

For one, the culture of thrift or moderation has now been supplanted by mechanisation and mass production. Today, there is an illusion of plenty, fostered by retail outlets that ensure they are well stocked on supplies. This, in effect, forces producers to oversupply even if it means overproducing and over-stacking the shelves at the outlets. Given that food in high-income countries is relatively cheap to produce, it is economically more profitable to "waste" rather than trying to "save" food products if they remain unsold. Never mind if the products have yet to pass their expiry dates. Most retailers are compelled to do so to avoid the risk of being sued in case the products go bad. In any case, the cost of wastage has been computed into the product as part of wasteful economics. In theory, we can take comfort that there is no "waste" as such — all have been accounted for.

But this is how the trap works: it no longer sensitises consumers to the habits of waste and insulates them from the terrible food shortages experienced daily in many parts of the world. It is no wonder that reportedly, each household in the UK buys approximately 21.7 tonnes of food every year, of which a third, or 6.7 tonnes, never passes their lips, with some still in their wrappings, according to a Sunday Times article on July 5 by Richard Girling.

Only 19% of this is genuine waste, while the rest is perfectly edible, but all end up as trash. In all, some £10.2 billion of food is wasted in the UK, a figure that almost matches the proposed G8 food aid deal, although there are those who would claim that the amount is mere "scraps at the table for the world's poor".

So, as Malaysia aspires to break into the high-income bracket, it becomes a very good candidate to fall into this "trap", given our "live to eat" around the clock lifestyle. This is rather obvious at this time of the year where sumptuous breaking of fast promotions have become fashionable in eateries and hotels all over the country. That's not counting the number of food stalls mushrooming in all nooks and crannies. Surprisingly, they are well patronised by Malaysians of all walks of life.

While blessed with such traditions and abundance, we cannot help but wonder if we are not just as guilty of wasting good food. More so, when the spirit of fasting as advocated by all religions is to restrain from excesses and instead, to share whatever little there is in the spirit of One Humanity, beyond just One Malaysia. Fundamental to this is the spirit of equitable sharing in contrast to the high-income economics of the wasteful kind.

* Tan Sri Dzul kifli Abdul Razak is Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia.

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