

MY SAY: Of junk food, obesity and climate change

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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There are now reports showing that during these troubled economic times, instant and junk food outlets are making a fast buck with their rather inexpensive (never mind unhealthy) meals. One business chain claims to have achieved higher profit, thanks to the numbers of clients patronising its joints worldwide.

New and cheap menus are also appearing on the table, adding to what is already available. This seems to make economic sense except that it now has a greater ramification than previously understood. How so?

Junk food is already known for its bad qualities. Generally, it can lead to obesity, apart from causing other life-threatening diseases such as hypertension and diabetes. That is why many governments are discouraging children and young adults from consuming it. Some have taken out advertisements to educate and create a new healthy-eating culture. In Malaysia, the effort is described, at best, as "hot-cold", depending on who is at the helm.



Fat people have been implicated in global warming

Meanwhile, junk food companies are relentless in their promotional activities. At times, it looks as if consumers are swayed by these advertisements.

But now there is a new twist. Recently, two British researchers with the Nutrition and Public Health Intervention Research Unit at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine have given policymakers a new reason to act. Phil Edwards and colleague Ian Roberts, in their paper entitled "Population Adiposity and Climate Change", published in the reputable *International Journal of Epidemiology*, suggest that there is a link between increasing rates of obesity and climate change. Adiposity is the scientific term for "body fat". The duo published a statistical model that examines this relationship, which implicated fat people in global warming.

Obesity is when the body mass index (BMI) is 30 or greater, whereas "normal" BMI is from 18.5 to 24.9; anything in between is called "overweight". It is something like the GDP of a country to give some measure of its "health" and what to do next.

According to the study, fat people need more food and that means more farming is required, eventually leading to more greenhouse gas emissions. Hence, the researchers argued that maintaining a healthy body weight is good for the environment.

In developed countries, especially, the number of obese people can be as high as 25% of the population (for example, Canada and the UK), whereas in the US, it could be even higher. The 10th International Congress on Obesity (September 2006) stated that there were about 1.5 billion overweight people globally and that this was expected to increase in the future. If Edwards and Roberts are to be taken seriously, this will put even more pressure on our health and climate.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, food production can account for as much as 20% of global greenhouse gases. By implication, if obesity is about consuming more food, then in all likelihood it is associated with more food production and thus worsening climate change.

It may sound personal, but that is what it amounts to when BMI exceeds the desired limits. For nations of obese people, this cannot be taken lightly (no pun intended) because the consequences can be tragic. Here is where the regular and habitual consumption of junk and instant food needs to be reconsidered.

Alternatively, there can be other approaches as well. Logically, if slimming pills and weight-loss regimes can help reduce obesity, then they can have some impact on managing climate change as well. It may sound laughable, but if there are serious attempts to artificially reduce belching in animals to cap emission of greenhouse gases, then why can we not reduce weight?

However, one must be careful with these aids because they can cause side effects or can turn out to be fakes. Some years ago, the Fen-phen diet pill (now banned) was in the news when some patients developed heart defects while on it. This should serve as a stern reminder of what could go terribly wrong once unscrupulous business practices get in the way.

All told, climate change is more personal than we think it is. It is all about us taking action to save the environment. If we collectively fail to change our old wasteful lifestyle, attempts to promote green economics and technologies may be insufficient. And this can be as personal as our eating habits. After all, as the saying goes: You are what you eat!

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak is Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia.

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