

Rising food costs: Equip and empower B40 group, say Malaysian experts

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For families in the B40 group, a large chunk of their household's income is spent on food and so, its rising costs has a huge impact on them, says Academy of Sciences Malaysia fellow Datuk Dr Madeline Berma.

She says that B40 families spend more than 40% of their income on food; their second highest expenditure is on transport.

"The poor are categorised as those with a household income of RM2,208, so can you imagine living in Kuala Lumpur with the high prices of food and transport.

“So when we talk about rising costs now, we are talking mostly about food price increases, which is really impacting them,” she says.

In addition, purchasing power has also reduced due to food inflation.

“In the old days, we could buy a few things with RM10, but now it’s almost nothing. So purchasing power has reduced because the value of money has reduced.

“And secondly, cost of living has gone up as real prices of goods have increased, so there are two impacts here,” she explains.

Rising food prices also has a domino effect on the low-income group, says Universiti Putra Malaysia faculty of human ecology dean Prof Dr Mohamad Fazli Sabri.

“Rising food costs greatly impacts the urban poor and their quality of life (physically and mentally) as it leads to stress or even depression.

“Aiming for a balanced diet will be quite hard, and another concern is stunting among children.

“So one major issue is the long-term effect of the lack of nutrition and how it will affect

their physical and mental development,” said Prof Mohamad Fazli.

He said if the children are not well, they may skip school, and that may affect their exam results, which then affects their chances of pursuing tertiary education.

A lack of education and higher drop-outs will then contribute to the unemployment rate, he says.

“So my concern is that the urban poor will then have the tendency to fall prey to illegal get-rich-quick schemes or seek out loan sharks,” he says.

He says the government has been sensitive towards the needs of the low-income group by implementing various measures quickly.

“I feel that government initiatives like Bantuan Keluarga Malaysia are good. There are urban poverty programmes, food baskets and various ministries have their own programmes to help the poor, which have been rolled out fast. We also see many NGOs and religious institutions organising food banks and other forms of aid.

“But it is hard to comment on the effectiveness of all these initiatives, because there is not one scientific or empirical study that has been done. That is what is lacking.

“There are many programmes but do they reach the target group? We need to do a simple research or survey into the effectiveness of all these programmes. Sometimes one community

may receive more than is needed, if there is a lack of coordination.

“It’s good if we have a one-stop centre to monitor and coordinate these efforts to prevent overlap,” he says, adding that feedback from aid recipients was important as well.

He says that such coordination should stem from the government, which has the resources, and NGOs and other aid-giving institutions can register with them and work together for a more coordinated effort.

“Everybody should play a role, government, NGOs and also the corporate sectors, because Malaysians are a generous lot.”

Creating opportunities

Madeline says food security is a key issue in view of rising prices.

“When I was studying in Britain, there were these council homes where the residents would be given small plots of land to plant vegetables and fruits like cabbages and strawberry.

“But here, the lower-income group is completely reliant on buying food items, from chillies to serai.

“Urban farming projects here need to be further developed to make it accessible and affordable for the B40 to start and manage them so they can be more self-sufficient.

“For the poor, the government has to provide the initial costs of setting up vertical farming projects in PPR flats for example. The government can also allocate small plots of land near the PPRs to grow food.”

Madeline says the emphasis should be on sustainability and how to empower the community.

She also suggested setting up food banks at PPR flats which should be managed by the residents themselves.

“For example, each flat has a space with food items given by government to start with, such as rice, sugar, flour, milk and basic necessities.

“Residents may ‘borrow’ what they need but the items must be returned eventually in cash or kind.

“And they can restock the items later by getting them from a wholesaler, so it’s cheaper.

“The project will build trust among the community and give them a sense of ownership of the project. If it’s not managed well, they will be the ones affected.

“So it’s about empowering the community as well. As much as we create opportunities, we must also create that element of the need for them to manage the project well for their own benefit,” she says.

Upskilling and future planning

Prof Mohamad Fazli says continuously giving out aid is not a long-term solution.

“Therefore, we need to reskill, upskill or cross-skill the B40 group, which is important because the urban poor population is capable of it.

“At the same time, in our 12th Malaysia Plan, there is a focus on the gig economy. So employers and corporations should also give priority to the B40 group and help equip them with the skills necessary for job placements.”

The urban poor also has to play a role in terms of changing their mindset.

“They can’t be choosy in terms of jobs; the priority is their survival.”

Another point he highlighted is long-term financial planning.

“Malaysians sometimes I feel are too focused on current consumption, but they neglect future consumption like children’s education, which will be more expensive, or aspects like health, insurance and emergency savings.

“So I feel that for those who receive aid, they should use the funds carefully on necessary items for the family, and then save the rest.

“Whatever amount you can save, just be consistent in saving, be it RM10 or RM50, so financial literacy is also important.”

Source: The Star