

Welcoming festive season with circular economy

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Food is an indispensable aspect of any festive celebration in Malaysia. With a happy mix of ethnicities and cultures, the country is a host to numerous varieties of food. During the fasting month of Ramadan, Muslim communities produce and consume a large amount of food as they normally organise iftar (breaking of fast) gatherings.

The advent of Eid al-Fitr does not ease their love for food as the festival demands another set of traditional dishes and delicacies be served to friends and visitors. All this results in a huge amount of food waste. There are reports that no fewer than 9,000 tonnes of food are discarded per day during Ramadan.

The development of modern agriculture in many countries has led to the displacement of food production at the individual, local and community levels as it is, in many cases, being outsourced to multinational corporations or large agribusinesses.

Most of the people today are consumers rather than producers of food. People do not produce their food anymore like they used to and this has somehow led our communities to lose their connection with the food production practices and traditions.

Currently, we are also facing some worrying issues in terms of our food system as the largely centralised industry has failed to meet some expectations. In terms of distribution, the global community is witnessing a considerable decrease in food production despite increasing demand. To meet the population demand by 2050, our global agricultural production must increase by 60 per cent. The disparity between demand and production will lead to serious dysfunctional imbalances in food distribution globally.

Added to this are food waste issues we face at the national level. Food waste as defined by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations is the removal of food from its overall supply due to economic behaviour, poor stock management or neglect.

Reportedly, a third of the overall food that is grown is wasted between any point from farm to fork daily, which is valued at more than US\$1 trillion (RM4 trillion), and if consumed the amount would be sufficient to feed 870 million people worldwide.

One of the main contributing factors of the food waste phenomenon, despite individual attitude, is the linear trait of our food chain, whereby food supplies tend to move linearly from producers to consumers. This results in the generation of vast quantities of food that consumers do not need. It is the sad reality of all segments of the food market and this has led to another linear economic culture of “buy, use and dispose”.

What is needed is a food system model that emulates the cycle of life. Experts call this circular economy. Such a model keeps resources in use for as long as we can, thus maximising value for everyone. By connecting producers of food and consumers in a balanced loop, the circular model gets rid of the “buy, use and dispose” mindset. Also, such a model enables us to regenerate the products and materials at the end of their service life.

Information technology enables the circular economy to operate effectively, as it is able to connect consumers directly to food producers without any boundary.

For instance, an initiative known as Farmigo in the United States has been connecting consumers with local farmers through an online platform whereby they can order fresh products directly from their preferred producers. In this system, the farmers will only harvest fruit or vegetables when they have orders to fulfil, as an approach to prevent waste. In South Korea, households need to pay to the government according to the amount of food waste they are likely to dispose, and this has led to the recycling of 95 per cent of food waste annually. In Malaysia, Hayati Food Aid Foundation has been collecting unserved dishes from hotels and canned food from supermarkets to distribute to charities and kitchen soups.

As we are celebrating the month of Syawal with the spirit of returning to our God-given natural selves (fitrah), we need to reflect as well on our food production system and consumption patterns in order to ensure they operate in such a way that conforms to the natural cycle of life. It is a crucial step at preventing wastage in any sphere of our life, as Allah, May He Be Glorified, has declared: “Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and ever has Satan been to his Lord ungrateful,” (al-Isra’, 17:27).

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