



## MEDIA RELEASE

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### The Impact of Covid-19 on Food Systems

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected food security, not only in Malaysia but all over the world. With the broken supply chain, shortage in labour, closure of restaurants, and countries banning export and many other issues plaguing our food systems, there is an urgent need to realign our fragile agriculture ecosystem.

Pre-pandemic issues such as ageing farmers, climate change, emerging diseases, poverty among farmers and access to technology are still unresolved, forcing us to adapt to the new normal. Asia has 80 per cent of the world's small-hold farmers amounting to 100 million in the ASEAN region. Due to the high number, their plight needs urgent attention from scientists, policymakers and governments, with the public made aware of food production

To address these issues, the Science Media Centre (SMC) Malaysia in collaboration with the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) hosted a webinar on Saturday 2 May 2020 to discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on food systems. The webinar was moderated by Dr Mahaletchumy Arujanan, Global Coordinator at International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) and co-founder of SMC Malaysia.

The panelists who comprised of experts from food security, biotechnology to urban farming analysed the key issues relating to Covid-19 pandemic and the food systems in the region. They were Adjunct Senior Fellow (Food Security), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore, Prof Dr Paul Teng; Director, Institute of Agricultural and Food Policy Studies UPM, Associate Prof Dr Shaufique Fahmi Ahmad Sidique; and Design Director of Eats, Shoots & Roots, Shao-Lyn Low.

The panelists discussed various issues from the impact of pandemic-affected food systems, food security and farmers' livelihood, to the effects of food insecurity on the economy, and the "new norms" during and post-crisis including the role of technology and innovation.

Associate Prof Dr Shaufique Fahmi Ahmad Sidique opined that food security should be addressed from a multi-dimensional aspect.

“It is not just about your ability to produce as a country but also to make sure food is available to everyone and you’re also talking about a myriad range of nutritious food and they are all accessible.

“This is what food security is really about. It is not just availability but affordability, you have choices and you are presented with not just only normal choices but also nutritious food”, he said during the webinar.

Meanwhile, Prof Dr Paul Teng stressed that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to start rethinking about our food systems.

“Agriculture needs to be given a priority. We have seen in the last few weeks, early in the pandemic, agriculture was not seen as an essential service. As things dragged on, we started to realise, if you stop people from being involved in agriculture, you will suffer a disruption in the food supply. So countries like India and China started to change this,” he said during the webinar.

Dr Teng added that the food systems is not just limited to farmers but the entire food chain.

“It is time to invest a lot more in agriculture research and development (R&D) that empowers your own farmers. By empowering your farmers to produce more, you are also empowering your consumer and all the way the supply chain, upstream, downstream. So investment is really key indeed.”

“Sadly, in all the studies that we have done, agriculture R&D generally received among the lowest in the public sector. We have got to change that. If we don’t change that, then when the private sectors takes over, we all complain. So it’s a chicken and egg situation,” he said.

He asserted the Covid-19 pandemic is a wake-up call for countries to prepare for future food crises.

“Governments need to prioritise. Because in the end, even though we all believe food is so important but as an economic activity, agriculture is never able to compete with computer chip manufacturers, services and so on. Most governments tend to go for economies that create a higher value.”

“Covid-19 is not going to be the only food security disruptor that we are going to experience in our lifetime. There is going to be many others and countries need to be prepared to ensure their food and supply chain continuity,” he added.

On the community and awareness level, Shao-Lyn Low said there has been an increase of public interest in urban farming during the Movement Control Order (MCO).

Eats, Shoots & Roots is a social enterprise aimed at reconnecting urbanites with the skills and tools to grow their own food.

“We have seen a lot of people starting to look into edible farming and suddenly during the MCO, there has been a surge of people on our online shop. It is encouraging people are starting to realise

how important to know and understand how their food grows. Before this people often see farming vegetables as a senior citizen activity, but now more younger people are getting into it,” she said.

Describing it as an important living skill, Shao-Lyn added that growing food should be included as part of education in schools.

“It needs to be part of the main syllabus so every child has a basic knowledge of how food grows as it is good survival skills,” she added.

Watch the full webinar here: <https://youtu.be/bqzqmV9bsPk>

## **About us**

### **Science Media Centre (SMC) Malaysia**

SMC Malaysia is a virtual platform recently established by the Malaysian Biotechnology Information Centre (MABIC) and a former journalist and Chevening scholar, Tan Su Lin. The platform links scientists and media and provides media with science and research information and expert reactions on current issues related to science.

### **ISAAA**

International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) is a not-for-profit international organization that shares the benefits of crop biotechnology to various stakeholders, particularly resource-poor farmers in developing countries, through knowledge sharing initiatives and the transfer and delivery of proprietary biotechnology applications.

### **UPM**

University Putra Malaysia (UPM) is recognised as one of Malaysia's leading research universities offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses with a focus on agricultural sciences and its related fields. Founded in 1931 as the School of Agriculture, UPM's main campus is in Serdang, Selangor. It was formerly known as Universiti Pertanian Malaysia or the Agricultural University of Malaysia.

### **Eats, Shoots & Roots**

Founded in 2012, Eats, Shoots & Roots is a Malaysian social enterprise which aims to empower urban communities with the skills and tools to grow their own food. This is achieved through designing edible gardens, garden programmes and products for communities of all shapes and sizes.

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