

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) World Food Day this year focuses on the basic human right of the right to food.



NutriScene
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THE Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) celebrates World Food Day each year on October 16, the day the organisation was founded in 1945 in Quebec City, Canada. This year's World Food Day theme is "The Right to Food".

The right to food is the right of every person to have regular access to sufficient, nutritionally adequate and culturally acceptable food for an active, healthy life. It is the right to feed oneself in dignity, rather than the right to be fed.

The choice of The Right to Food as the theme for 2007 World Food Day demonstrates increasing recognition by the international community of the important role of human rights in eradicating hunger and poverty, and hastening and deepening the sustainable development process.

NutriScene highlights this theme this week, excerpting from the FAO website (www.fao.org). I will discuss this in relation to the National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN) Malaysia (NutriScene, July 8, 2007).

NPAN has always given priority to this basic human right. The general objective of NPAN I (1996-2000) was to achieve and maintain the health and nutritional wellbeing of all Malaysians through access to nutritionally adequate diet, safe foods and healthy living conditions.

The meaning of Right to Food

The right to food is a universal right. It means that every person – woman, man and child – must have access at all times to food, or to means for the procurement of food, that is sufficient in quality, quantity and variety to meet their needs, is free from harmful substances and is acceptable to their culture.

Only when individuals do not have the capacity to meet their food needs by their own means for reasons beyond their control, such as age, handicap, economic downturn, famine, disaster, or discrimination,

The right to food

will they be entitled to receive food directly from the state.

This definition is based on the assumption that hunger and malnutrition are caused not just by a lack of available food, but also by poverty, income disparities, and lack of access to health care, education, clean water, and sanitary living conditions.

The principle that all human rights are interrelated and interdependent is also acknowledged. This means that the right to food cannot be implemented in isolation from other human rights, i.e. right to education, right to work, right to health, freedom of assembly and association.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 first recognised the right to food as a human right. It was then incorporated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 11) adopted in 1966 and ratified by 156 states.

Since the 1996 World Food Summit, FAO has worked with governments and communities worldwide to gain recognition for this basic human right.

A right to food approach complements food security considerations of availability, access, stability and utilisation with concerns for human dignity and cultural acceptability, and for empowerment by means of participation, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability.

This enables individuals, particularly the hungry and marginalised, to actively look for means of realisation of their right to food and to hold government accountable for food security commitments it has taken.

Countries urged to make it happen

Countries have been urged to realise the goals of Right to Food. They must take steps, to the maximum of their available resources, to realise progressively the full enjoyment of the right of every person to adequate food, without discrimination of any kind.

Countries are reminded of three sets of obligations applies: (1) respect existing access to food of their population and abstain from taking measures that prevent such access; (2) protect the right to food from infringements by third parties through measures ensuring that enterprises or individuals do not deprive others of the access to adequate food; and (3) fulfil the right to food through facilitating individu-



This year's theme demonstrates the increasing recognition placed by the international community of the important role of human rights in eradicating hunger and poverty, and hastening and deepening the sustainable development process. – AFP

als' ability to access food by their own means and through providing for those who cannot feed themselves.

In addition, all members of society – individuals, civil society organisations, NGOs and the private sector – have responsibilities with regard to the right to food, when their activities could have an impact on the free exercise of the right to food of others.

In particular, civil society organisations and NGOs are important factors for the implementation of state policies and programmes. They assist populations in realising their right to food through, among other things, dissemination of information, legal advice and training.

The Right to Food Guidelines provide the agreed principles and practical guidance needed for concrete steps to be taken by states for the realisation of the right to food. They demonstrate how the different agencies dealing with food security can work in a coordinated manner with the full participation of all stakeholders.

Improving household food security in NPAN I

Improving household food security was one of the nine thrust areas in the first National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN I) Malaysia (1996-2000). Nine strategies and activities were identified to be implemented to ensure availability of quality and safe food at affordable prices to all households at all times.

These strategies and activities may have contributed directly or indirectly towards improving household food security in this country.

There are also other activities mentioned in other thrust areas of NPAN I that might have an impact on food security. They are – the Poverty Eradication Programme; Programme for the Hardcore Poor; and the Social Welfare Programme.

These programmes are mainly targeted at poor families in the rural areas. Special programmes for poor families in the urban areas, for example the NADI programme in Kuala Lumpur, have been handled by local authorities.

Many of these activities have been successfully implemented and monitored by their respective agencies because they were part of the existing programmes in those agencies.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry closely monitors the self-sufficiency level of major food items such as rice, fish, meat, poultry, fruits and vegetables. They also monitor the local demands and exports to ensure that national food security is maintained.

Several other activities in the NPANM may have contributed to the improvement of household food security. These include the health department's efforts in the prevention and control of infectious diseases, promotion of breastfeeding, care of infants, young children, pregnant women and lactating mothers, prevention and control of micronutrient deficiencies, the promotion of healthy lifestyles, and the Rehabilitation Programme for Malnourished Children from Poor Families.

The Ministry of Education School Feeding Programme can be considered an effort to improve household food security.

Continued emphasis on household food security in NPAN II

The importance of improving household food security continues to be emphasised in NPAN II (2006-2015).

One of the five enabling strategies identified in the Plan is to improve household food security especially among the low income group. The Plan further identifies four main activities to be implemented.

1. Continue existing food aid programmes to the identified vulnerable groups. The two main programmes identified are the Programme for the Rehabilitation of Malnourished Children and the supplementary feeding programmes for children, pregnant and lactating mothers

2. Provide nutritious and safe supplementary foods to eligible pre-school and primary school children.

The School Supplementary Feeding Programme is recommended to be continued and a review of the criteria for eligibility has been suggested in order to increase coverage. The distribution of free milk to eligible children is recommended to be continued under the School Milk Programme.

3. To ensure access to affordable, safe and nutritious food in schools, NPAN II recommended the enforcement of the 2004 School Canteen Guidelines. At the same time, the sale of non-nutritious and unhygienic foods outside the school premises should be banned.

4. Develop food service and management guidelines for boarding schools (hostels), special homes and institutions.

Besides this specific mention on food security, there are several other strategies of NPAN II that would go towards improving. These include:

- Promoting optimal infant and young children feeding practices
- Preventing and controlling nutritional deficiencies
- Promoting healthy eating and active living
- Supporting efforts to protect consumers in food quality and safety

■ NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my.

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