

Opinion

[Cultural intelligence in building food security](#)

Agus Pakpahan, Jakarta | Mon, 03/19/2012 9:26 AM

What would be in your mind if you knew tomorrow you would have no food to eat? Issues of food security and food safety have been major issues throughout human history, especially in developing countries like ours.

Almost all national mass media in Indonesia publish statements from the opinions of our country's leaders regarding how we must face our food security problems. In light of this, the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kadin) hosted the Jakarta Food Security Summit last month.

At the same time as the summit, governors from the main rice-producing provinces such as West Java, Central Java, East Java, Lampung, South Sulawesi and North Sumatera met with House Commission IV and came with the assertion that national food policy was a disappointment to the provincial governments and farmers.

Marvin Harris, in his book *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (1975) asks why Hinduism prohibits its followers from eating beef and why the Jewish and Muslim religions prohibit their disciples from eating pork?

It all corresponds to the way societies adapt to their environment, or "cultural intelligence". It is all about how societies overcome scarcities in environments where people have evolved for thousands of years.

The role of cows in India was to provide soil fertility, energy and power and other resources that would not be sustained if people were allowed to eat beef.

In the case of pork, according to Harris, the climate in the Middle East, where the scarcest resource is water, is not compatible with pig farming because a pig drinks more water than humans.

For illustration, a 27 kg pig needs 5.67 liters per day whereas an adult man or woman needs only 3.7 or 2.7 liters per day, respectively.

Vietnam is also a good example of cultural intelligence in determining food security, which is why rice flour instead of wheat flour is used as the source of the traditional food called pho hoa. Why? It is because Vietnam has a surplus of rice.

Fabiosa in his paper *Westernization of the Asian Diet: The Case of Rising Wheat Consumption in Indonesia*, showed that Indonesian people change their pattern of consumption significantly to wheat flour-based foods when their income increases or they move to urban areas.

The implication of this finding is incompatible with the interests of national food security, especially when what we mean by development is rising incomes and urbanization.

To what extent such changes in pattern can be redirected is a matter of how successful are our efforts to build our cultural intelligence in food culture.

We can also learn from Europeans when they started new lives in North America. Corn or maize was a new source of food. Now the US not only consumes corn but is also the largest corn-exporting country in the world. The key is their cultural intelligence in adapting to a new environment.

China was known as a country of widespread famine in the past. With a population of about 1.3 billion people, the People's Republic of China now exports rice to Indonesia. The world is amazed by China's success. The highest rice productivity in the world is achieved by China's farmers.

It is interesting to note that Chinese spending on Research and Development (R&D) was only just below the US, with a nominal amount of US\$153.7 billion, in 2011. In contrast, Indonesia only spent \$720 million or only a half of Thai's R&D expenditure.

The point I would like to share here is that increasing food security is also determined by our capacity in technology and this is reflected in R&D investment.

Of course land is important but China's experience shows that success is determined by technology development, not "free land" for food production.

The most important thing to note with China's experience is its innovation in Household Responsibility Systems (HRS) as the next evolution of a commune, in combination with Village and Township Enterprise Systems.

The state offers land to farmers according to the capacity of the household to operate the land and in return farmers give to the state 20 percent of the harvest. The point is that that the best institutions for farmers should be invested in first, rather than facilities for large companies.

Our predecessors have taught us that cultural intelligence in the sense of capability to adapt to our changing environment is necessary not only for survival but also for sustainability. The key to our nation is that Indonesia is formed by its archipelago and its wealth in biodiversity.

So, our food security should be based on our nation's comparative advantage and its advantage is waiting for a new creative and strong cultural intelligence to reshape the present outdated traditions and obsolete cultural practices. We can learn from other nations, but at the end it depends on our own cultural intelligence.

The writer is a researcher and the chairman of the Union of Associations of Indonesian Estate Crops Farmers.

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