

## Creative measures to alleviate Malaysians' cost of living

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The minister with Finance Minister Lim (in red batik) and other VIPs checking the unsold food donated by a major hypermarket to Foodbank Malaysia in Penang last year.

I joined politics with clear idealism to help Malaysians live a better life. Therefore, when I was entrusted to the position of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister last year, the very first question I asked myself was: In my new role, how do I best work together with ministry officials to formulate and implement policies that can better the lives of the people?

With that in mind, I sat with my officers to look for ideas and new programmes which can help alleviate the cost of living of the Malaysians.

Although my ministry KPDNHEP also carries the responsibility of developing the domestic economy, citizens still primarily see KPDNHEP as the ministry in charge of the cost of living and prices of goods. This is not surprising as KPDNHEP is also in charge of protecting consumer rights. On this premise, I realised that we have to move quickly to fulfil the hopes of citizens using the functions and powers under the jurisdiction of the Ministry.

Since then, we have developed many initiatives to help alleviate the citizens' cost of living. These efforts comprise the formulation of new initiatives as well as improvements to existing programs targeted recipients.

As the regulation of the retail sector, such as supermarkets in Malaysia falls under the purview of the ministry, we saw an immense opportunity for close cooperation between the government and supermarkets so that they can become donors to Foodbank Malaysia.

Since the Foodbank Malaysia programme was officially launched nationwide on 22 December 2018, a total of 430 supermarket branches nationwide have agreed to donate their food surpluses to the ministry's cause.

We have also gotten the agreement of voluntary organizations to assist with Foodbank Malaysia because we believe that this program has the potential to ignite the spirit of volunteerism at the grass-root level.

Food Aid Foundation, Kechara Soup Kitchen and Mutiara Foodbank have been appointed as KPDNHEP's strategic partners to help with operational and distribution aspects of Foodbank Malaysia. All these three organisations have been involved in similar initiatives in the past and we are immensely grateful that they have decided to help the ministry.

As of July 2019, 204,279 household members have benefited from this programme. I have always stressed to the ministry officers that this programme has to be sustainable over long period of time and one of the key success factors is the consistency of the supply of food surplus.

The Ministry's decision to launch Foodbank Malaysia was based on data provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, which showed that a huge portion of B40 household spending is on food and beverages (about 27%).

Other than providing food and basic nutrition to B40 recipients, this initiative also helps them save on food spending which frees up their disposable income for other purposes, such as education and healthcare.

The Foodbank Malaysia programme has also caught the attention of the National Action Council on Cost of Living (NACCOL), chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah with KPDNHEP acting as secretariat to the council.

When news broke about university students having to go hungry in our public universities, NACCOL instructed the KPDNHEP to expand the Foodbank Malaysia programme to public universities nationwide.

The implementation of Foodbank Malaysia in public universities, or better known as 'Foodbank Siswa', adopts a slightly different approach where special food pantries are created within the universities for storage and distribution of dried food to students.

Meanwhile, for universities which are willing to contribute spare kitchens, food surpluses in the form of raw ingredients are cooked and distributed to the needy. As of today, a total of 11 public universities have adopted the Foodbank Siswa programme with over 3,000 university students nationwide.

These universities include UiTM Pematang Pauh Sultan Zainal Abidin University, University Malaysia Sabah, Sultan Idris Education University and Technical University of Malaysia.

We hope that by the end of this year, Foodbank Siswa will be successfully launched in all public universities.

Moving forward, the Foodbank Malaysia programme has been enhanced with the establishment of the Foodbank Malaysia Foundation.

This foundation will coordinate the expansion and implementation of this programme nationwide. We are optimistic that this programme will grow with the support of many, including Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng who approved an allocation of about RM3mil for the purchase of lorries with chillers to collect and distribute food surpluses nationwide.

### **Affordable festival**

The Festive Season Price Control Scheme (SKHMP) was implemented under the Price Control and Anti-Profitteering Act 2011. The objective of this scheme was to ensure that prices of necessities remain

controlled and affordable during festivities despite the sharp increase in demand. This scheme is currently known as the Festive Season Maximum Prices Scheme (SHMMP).

After reviewing aspects of the scheme, we identified a few key areas which can be improved to better protect consumer welfare. After extensive discussions with stakeholders, we decided to double the implementation period of this scheme so that consumers are protected for a longer period of time. For example, the implementation period of this scheme for Hari Raya Puasa was extended from 15 days to 30 days and for Kaamatan and Gawai festivals, from seven days to 14 days.

The number of goods under the scheme was also increased so that more necessities could be purchased by consumers at reasonable prices.

For example, for Hari Raya Puasa, the number of controlled goods was increased from 21 to 27. The additional goods were fresh and frozen kembung fish, selar fish and selayang fish, as well as long beans, groundnuts and dried chilli.

The addition of controlled goods and the extension of the enforcement period of the scheme was possible due to the close cooperation between the KPDNHEP and the Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Ministry (MoA).

The MoA, under the leadership of Datuk Salahuddin Ayub, helped play a crucial role in ensuring that the supply of controlled goods was sufficient even though ceiling prices were imposed during a period where prices were high.

This strategy of close cooperation at the supply and retail side bore fruit. Throughout the enforcement period of this scheme, compliance amongst traders was quite high.

Out of the 60,878 business premises inspected by the KPDNHEP's Enforcement Division during the Hari Raya Puasa festivities, only 362 offences were recorded.

Out of those cases, 13 was for selling above the ceiling price, 307 was for not displaying special pink price tags for controlled goods and 42 was for not displaying price tags.

According to reports, besides the high rate of compliance towards the ceiling prices set under the Festive Season Maximum Prices Scheme, many business premises also sold necessities below the ceiling prices set.

We are also glad to see that the improvements made to this year's scheme were received well by consumers, especially on social media. The encouraging comments and constructive feedbacks received signals that we are on the right track and we will continue to work harder and improve this scheme so that it fulfils the current needs of consumers.

### **Enforcement efficiency**

Among the most frequent reports we receive in the KPDNHEP is in regards with enforcement. These reports touch on a wide range of issues ranging from the regulation of prices and supplies of controlled items, combating leakage of subsidised goods, protecting intellectual property to handling consumer complaints.

We believe that frequent inspections and strict enforcement of the law play an important role in protecting consumer rights. The constant presence of our Enforcement Officers on the ground means that KPDNHEP will always have "eyes" and "ears" which sends a strong message to business owners that they have to be ever vigilant and remain ethical in all their dealings.

So far this year, the Ministry's Enforcement Division has inspected 799,736 premises and out of those inspections, 13,661 investigation papers have been opened under various consumer laws with more than RM55mil worth of goods confiscated. Out of those cases, RM7.6mil worth of fines and RM10,883 worth of compounds have been issued.

When the KPDNHEP was faced with the issue of stark increases in the prices of eggs, the Enforcement Division took swift and appropriate measures based on existing laws. In March this year, the Enforcement Division launched a series of operations against major egg producers.

During one of those operations, they confiscated 10,000 eggs from a producer due to suspected profiteering under the Price Control and Anti-Profiteering Act 2011. This series of anti-profiteering operations was the first against egg producers and was largely a success due to the ministry's relentless investigations and continuous inspections.

Moving forward, we are committed to being open to new ideas in order to strengthen the enforcement aspects of the KPDNHEP, be it streamlining training and operations, adopting new technologies and even reforming or formulating more effective consumer laws.

KPDNHEP will continue to be bold and creative in formulating new programmes and initiatives. These are just a few of many initiatives undertaken by the KPDNHEP to improve the lives of people and alleviate the cost of living of Malaysians. I will share more of our initiatives in future articles.

I believe that the new government was chosen by Malaysians who expect to see positive changes in their lives. Therefore, our approach to challenges in the ministry must also be bold and more creative.

We must be creative in exploring and implementing new and uncharted but practical ideas which can deliver a positive impact to people. We must also be bold when it comes to trying new approaches without being tied to old ways and mentalities so that we can move forward with more progressive and high impact policies.

I believe that as long as we are sincere and dedicated in our efforts to better the lives of the people, they will always be support both from the heaven and on earth and surely people of our loving Malaysia will be able to see and judge objectively based on those efforts, no matter big or small.

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