Food security in today's changing world

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In the observance of World Food Day on Oct. 16, attention was given to the effects of climate change and bioenergy on the poor. This theme emphasized the results from the High Level Conference on World Food Security in Rome (June 3-5, 2008), which focused on the challenges of climate change and bioenergy.

Food security undeniably remains the major concern of the modern era. According to the report from the High Level Conference, during the first three months of 2008, "international nominal prices of all major food commodities reached their highest levels in nearly 50 years while prices in real terms were the highest in nearly 30 years." The report also stated that food prices are likely to remain high in the next few years. Developing countries will certainly suffer the most.

It is also predicted that skyrocketing food prices will destroy about 800 million people who are already affected by chronic starvation. More people are believed to be having greater difficulty buying healthy food for their families. What is most worrying is that this could trigger social unrest across the developing world. Hence, the food crisis is becoming the main obstacle to global development and could risk global stability.

Climate change is believed to be one of the causes of the global food crisis. Unpredictable seasons and drought, which are linked to global warming, are the major causes of the decrease in agricultural production. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) forecasts that every temperature increase of 2 degrees Celsius will cause China's and Bangladesh's food production to drop by about 30 percent by 2050.

Global climate change may not be the only cause of this. However, adaptation strategies to this problem have to be developed. Poor countries will suffer more because they are more vulnerable to natural problems. The majority of poor people are dependent on natural resources. Countries that lack development must be equipped with appropriate plans and policies to secure their future agricultural production.

Biofuel is also worsening the food problem. The soaring price of fuel and the need to react to climate change has favored the development of biofuel. Palm oil is one of the major energy crops planted in many developing countries, including Indonesia.

In their report in June 2008, anti-poverty group Oxfam International reiterated the threat of bioenergy development to food security. If more farmers stop planting food crops and farm oil palms instead, food stocks will certainly decrease and affect the supply of food.

Unclear regional planting policies, including agricultural land policies, have made the problem worse. Oxfam therefore urged poor nations to think twice before jumping on the biofuel bandwagon. The hike in food prices is to blame for about 30 million people worldwide being dragged down into poverty. Therefore, appropriate steps must be taken to tackle the problem.
In the Indonesian context, the recent food crisis has to be used to the nation's benefit. The crisis has alerted this country to get back to basics: the agriculture-based nation. This spirit has to be shown in policies and actions that reflect a willingness to improve the agricultural sector.

On many occasions, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono emphasized the need to reactivate the country's agricultural sector. The President also popularized the term 'sustainable green revolution'. However, political discourse will not solve the problem. Action needs to be taken. The agricultural sector has undeniably become a marginal sector in the Indonesian economy. Since rice is the staple food of Indonesian people, a rice policy has to be prioritized. There are several steps that need to be considered.

First, to increase agricultural production, infrastructure has to be built and maintained. In the past decade, no new irrigation systems were built. This is ironic because, in the main, the irrigation system will determine the success of agricultural development.

Second, the target for increasing agricultural production must be in line with the target to reduce poverty. Land reform, consequently, must be the main focus of agricultural revitalization. Reducing the number of landless farmers has to be prioritized.

Vietnam's success in becoming one of the rice export giants is a good example. Land reform in that country successfully reduced the number of landless farmers to 2 percent, compared with other Asian countries, including Indonesia, where the number stands at about 20 percent.

A people-oriented approach to agriculture has to be built up. Inviting investors to invest in the Indonesian agricultural sector, such as the rice estate concept, is not a bad approach. However, without a clear plan in hand, agricultural development will not solve the problem of poverty.

Third, the food export target has to be integrated with the domestic food security target. Export liberalization, without good management, will result in food insecurity. The target also has to be based on the foundation of increasing farmers' income.

Last but not the least, the government needs to be serious in preparing future human resources for the agricultural sector. It is sad to hear that fewer young people are interested in agriculture.

For many, agriculture is not a prospective career, or they even believe there is no future in this sector. The last entrance examination for state universities showed that 2,894 positions in university agricultural programs were not filled. Without willingness and initiatives to solve this problem, we will face a serious shortage of skills in agriculture in the future.

If the government really wants to secure the food supply for future generations, its only option is to address seriously the task of improving the agricultural sector.

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