

A sustainable argument for palm oil

DEFORESTATION has taken centre stage in the global discourse on sustainable development and climate change.

The tropical rainforests have somehow come under close scrutiny. This may be because they are the remaining viable forests left to trap the greenhouse gases. Most temperate forests are long gone, decimated in the name of development in the West.

In the tropics, the oil palm industry has come under close watch from the so-called champions of deforestation. This may have much to do with the rising global demand for palm oil, thanks to its many attributes.

Palm oil continues to displace other competing oils from the world market. As the NGOs continue to perpetuate the deforestation controversy, palm oil has emerged as a soft target. They keep harassing palm oil despite the fact that the oil palm is not the driver of deforestation.

We all know deforestation, or the cutting down of forests, occurs because of the need for countries to develop. In the early years of development in the West, deforestation was rampant to grow food, build houses and also to construct infrastructure.

The same thing is now happening in developing countries. But why is deforestation viewed as negative now? It was not a crime when the West did it years ago. And why blame palm oil for the deforestation? Is it because palm oil has taken a big share of the global oils and fats market?

The truth is, palm oil is not only helping meet the oils and fats supply the world needs, but also provides them at affordable costs. Palm oil, because of its compara-



tively higher yield and lower costs, is much more affordable.

Instead of bickering over palm oil, what is needed is a more comprehensive study on how the oil palm crop features in the greenhouse gas equation. It would be a pity if palm oil, which incidentally is the most efficient land-use oil crop in the world, is wrongly judged.

While the world needs more oil, the land to grow them is also growing scarce. Climate change will make it worse. The rain-fed oilseeds growing region of India, for example, is now under intense pressure because of the changing patterns of the monsoon. But the oil palm offers the best option because of its extremely high yield compared to other sources. In fact, there is potential to increase it even further with recent advances made in palm oil genomics through research at the Malaysian Palm Oil Board.

Admittedly, oil palm itself is not spared the impact of climate

change. Palm oil supply will suffer because of climate-induced water stress. On the demand side, palm oil may be misjudged and may be wrongfully penalised as a result of the negativities perpetuated by the NGOs.

Unless these issues are addressed, they will upset the supply and demand equation for palm oil. Its price movement will be impacted.

But of more concern is that the world may be denied the benefits of a highly productive oil source. That explains why the palm oil industry does not take the issue of climate change lightly. That is also the reason why the palm oil industry has taken proactive steps to ensure the sustainable growth of the sector. That is why palm oil should not be blamed for deforestation.

Contrary to the claims by some NGOs, the palm oil industry continues to pay serious attention to land use planning. But the concept of

“zero deforestation” as subscribed by the NGOs is not a pragmatic prescription.

How can a country develop without opening up new land? Or would developed nations pay developing countries for keeping their forests untouched?

We have to be realistic. Lately, there is concern that sustainable development may have been hijacked for other agendas.

Some may have resorted to sustainable development as an instrument for trade discrimination. Worse still, there are groups earning money under the guise of sustainable development by creating fear in some industries that have the slightest implications on sustainability. The palm oil industry is one which has to fight hard to ward off such discrimination.

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