

by Hemananthani Sivanandam

KUALA LUMPUR (April 12, 2009) : A return to simple things and less dependency on subsidies are some of the ways to beat the economic downturn, says a consumer researcher.

Speaking at a forum on the global financial crisis in Malaysia last week, Consumer Research and Resource Centre CEO Paul Selva Raj (pix) noted that resources such as oil, natural gas, topsoil, fresh water and forests are non-renewable and will someday be depleted.

"We should realise this and change the way we do things," he said.

He said the government has neglected the agriculture sector by focusing more on manufacturing.

"We should go back to simple things. Manufacturing was good but it was at the expense of agriculture. We need to import more food."

The government should focus more on agriculture as it has been neglected. I am not saying that manufacturing is bad but both should be given priority as both are important," he said.

He said only with better agriculture policies will the country have security when it comes to food stability.

The forum, Diverse Perspectives: Rethinking Strategies, Surviving Challenges, was organised by the Socio-Economic Development And Research Institute (Sedar), Centre for Public Policy Studies and Wawasan Open University.

The forum addressed key issues such as trade, business strategies, the second stimulus package, the 9th Malaysia Plan and investment performance.

Paul, who is also a committee member of Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations (Fomca), said consumers need to realise the reality of depleting non-renewable resources as well as re-analyse their consumption pattern.

He said consumers are comfortable with their lifestyle and make no effort to change it to adapt to changing situations.

To them (consumers), if prices go up, the government needs to make the changes, but not them as they want to maintain their lifestyle," he said.

Describing the trend of subsidies as one of the reasons consumers do not change, he said, Fomca has been heavily criticised for not demanding for more subsidies or not fighting more for price controls but we (FOMCA) realise that is not the right way. It is not a sustainable model."

He stressed the need for the younger generation to understand the economic crisis, saying they don't understand inflation, thus don't feel the need to change their lifestyle to adapt to the current situation.

They would say, 'what recession? If there is a recession, my father needs to work harder but I still need my iPod and my coffee from Starbucks'," he said.

He noted that consumer culture among the younger generation starts at a young age, in some parts of the world as young as pre-school.

Quoting author Susan Thomas who wrote about how consumer and culture manipulate parents and harm young minds in her book 'Bye Bye Baby', Paul said kindergarten kids in the US appear to be exposed to branding at a very young age.

I thought that was the lifestyle of the people in the US, but when I met my sister in law who runs a kindergarten in Klang, I was shocked to hear how some kids in her kindergarten also behave the same way.

They (the children) demand for branded products and will not use anything else," he said.

He said the effectiveness of promoting consumption brand awareness among children is a serious issue as it determines the consumption patterns of the current and next generation.

As such, the government should encourage more communications with the youth, he said.

It's time we reach out

and explain to them (youth). They should be educated on social-economic issues as well, he said.

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