

A month of blessing and food waste

On Friday, a few days before fasting, I went to do some pre-Ramadhan shopping. The supermarket was bustling with what seemed to be half of the population of the city of Bogor. In Sundanese, the tradition of “Munggahan” — where families gather to break the first fast together — entails buying copious amounts of food, especially sweets and meat.

To say that the grocery store looked like the scene of a natural disaster would be an understatement. Herds of stampeding customers ravaged the sweets aisle while the meat section looked as though it was devoured by a pride of hungry lions. Bags of raw chicken were half opened, with blood dripping on the floor. There was barely any beef left and the butchers, standing in a pool of blood and chunks of meat trimmings, struggled to meet the demands of customers.

At the vegetable section, I was horrified to see that a shopper had discarded a bag of fresh beef they decided they didn't want on top of the carrots. By leaving fresh meat on top of vegetables in a non-refrigerated section, food safety was compromised as the meat and carrots were no longer fit for eating.

If there is anything I know as a Muslim about the spirit of Ramadhan, it definitely does not entail wasting a cow. Not only was the meat wasted, all of the natural resources involved in processing the meat such as water, animal feed, the human labor to rear the cow, as well as the fuel to transport the meat to the supermarket were squandered. In sum, the action of discarding that meat resulted in the wasting of energy throughout the food supply chain.

One of the purposes of Ramadhan is to cleanse oneself spiritually by abstaining from the instinctual impulses to eat, drink and be intimate with one's spouse between pre-dawn and sunset. Ramadhan should be the month of moderation in consumption, as another writer said earlier. However, what I saw at the supermarket that day was arguably the antithesis of moderation.

Globally, as reported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other research institutions, 30 to 50 percent of food produced for human consumption is wasted. In Canada, US\$27 billion worth of food is wasted annually.

This staggering waste is occurring while billions globally face food insecurity, and a projected 9 billion people will inhabit the earth by 2050. Agriculture is also responsible for 70 percent of global freshwater withdrawal, therefore wasting food means contributing to decreasing the amount of potable water.

In Indonesia, we are clearly contributing to this scandalous phenomenon due to the extreme income disparity here where some people can afford to consume luxury items in air-conditioned supermarkets while many others struggle to afford a basic meal.

Interestingly, there is an assumption in many developed countries that people in developing countries such as Indonesia are too poor to waste food. While that may be true for most Indonesians who struggle to eat three wholesome meals per day, it seems that the growing middle- and upper-income group can afford to consume and waste significant amounts of food.

This Ramadhan, Muslims should reflect upon their patterns of food consumption and wastage. Not only are individuals wasting food, in urban areas, a significant amount of our waste comes from plastic food and beverage packaging.

I urge Indonesians to consider the environmental impact of non-biodegradable plastics and Styrofoam used to package our food. I remember a time when most things were packaged in banana leaves, and people went to the market with baskets woven from bamboo instead of plastic. Islam has the concept of mubazir wherein the act of wasting or taking for granted what we have is frowned upon.

Can we do better and find more sustainable alternatives? Can we collectively change our habits? What can food suppliers do to come up with innovative ways to use less packaging? What can the government do to manage the growing waste, especially in dense urban centers?

It is crucial that we raise awareness of the deleterious effects of increased food waste and packaging, which include flooding, methane gas and the increase in breeding habitats for the dengue mosquitoes in discarded plastic containers that collect rain water.

We should consider how we can make things better during Ramadhan with a view to preventing the waste issue from becoming an irreversible crisis.

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