

editor :
Wijanto Hadipuro

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KEPEDULIAN : Membumikan Isu - Ilmiah Aktual

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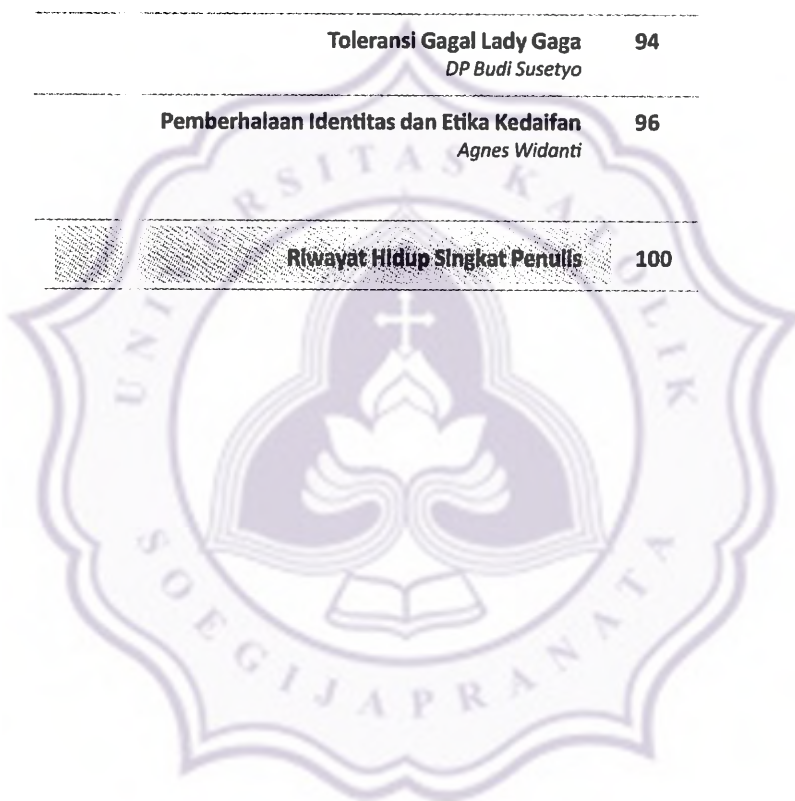
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Rethinking the Food Diversification Program²⁾

Budi Widianarko

Critics have lashed out at the government's plan to import 1.6 million tons of rice, which they view as an economic disaster (The Jakarta Post, Oct. 13, 2011).

As usual, when the issue of rice imports arises, the "same old song" of food diversification follows, as evidenced in a column by Tejo Wahyu Jatmiko (the Post Oct. 16, 2011). Earlier, member of the National Horticulture Board Tony J. Kristianto said that dependence on imported foods could be reduced through food diversification by consuming more varied staple foods like corn.

Food diversification has been around for decades but has not been quite successful so far. This is caused by a narrow understanding of food diversification, namely substituting other staple foods for rice.

With this line of reasoning, food diversification tends to be connected with several purposes outside farmers' — as producers — interests. Food diversification is mostly connected to rice consumption levels and imports (plus export opportunities), or even further, with inflation levels.

The truth is that food diversification is much more than just rice substitution. Diversification is a potent weapon to resist the power of food globalization — mainly if oriented to local food resources and knowledge.

Food diversification can slow the speed of the reduction of local biodiversity and indigenous knowledge related to food.

With prices always being controlled, efforts to diversify staple foods become unattractive, because of the small incentive for producers. In other words, food diversification should be focused on products with high added value.

2) The Jakarta Post 8 November 2011.

Unfortunately, as long as food diversity is still interpreted narrowly, as “substituting rice as a staple food with other food sources”, it will be difficult to succeed.

Actually in food security regulations (Government Regulation No.68/2002 on Food Security) food diversification is already interpreted more broadly as “efforts to improve consumption of various foods with balanced nutritional principles”.

It also says that food diversity is met through (a) increasing food variety; (b) developing food processing technology and (c) improving public awareness to consume various foods with balanced nutritional principles. In essence, food diversification has three elements; the food, technology and the public as consumers.

Changing staple foods is very difficult, not only because rice is already rooted in most Indonesians’ lives, but also because of rice’s advantages as a staple food. Rice has attractive characteristics, in terms of taste and nutrition.

There is an inseparable connection between humans and rice in our food culture. This connection can also be seen in all of East and Southeast Asia. Rice is an indispensable food for Korean and Japanese cultures where noodles (wheat) are also widely consumed.

Rather than constantly struggling to deal with the same problem, it would be better if we changed the orientation of food diversification. This isn’t as radical as it sounds, because actually it has been done by many food entrepreneurs — both small and large — with decent results. They have succeeded in creating hundreds, even thousands of food products capable of filling food market niches in this country.

The variety of food ranges broadly from spinach crackers to white smashed casava cake (gethuk); from starfruit syrup to sweet potato brownies. It is the ingenuity of these food entrepreneurs which leads to the creation of unique products, such as Dodol (Garut — West Java), Gethuk Trio (Magelang), soft boned milkfish (Semarang) and many more.

Lately they have even invented previously unthinkable fusion products like Chocodol (dodol and chocolate), and Torakur (artificial dates made

from tomato flesh). These products have already become icons in their native regions and given high added value.

Food authorities should, therefore, learn from the entrepreneurs' wisdom. The successes of the entrepreneurs rest on their ability in recognizing consumers' needs and wants. Most new food products with high added value are in the snacks category — not regular meals.

Increasing demands for unique regional food products occur alongside growing domestic tourism. In short, these entrepreneurs succeeded in listening to consumers' voices as a major element in their products' developments.

However, most of these entrepreneurs still depend on the trial and error approach. They rely on their business intuition and the accuracy of their judgment of consumers' tastes; similarly with many food-product developments done by the community facilitated and mentored by government, NGOs and universities.

Decades of efforts by those institutions haven't produced good results so far. Outcomes of community empowerment in food diversification are mostly scattered in project reports and documentation instead.

Breakthroughs are needed to cut through the obstacles. Food diversification development needs a more systematic approach. The basic paradigm of food diversification needs to be changed into one with focus on the consumers' voice and product quality.

Quality Function Deployment (QFD), a method already used widely in food industry, is one probable solution. QFD has proven successful in triggering new fields of study in food sciences, the consumer-oriented food product development.

QFD is a systematic method of product planning and development which enables the development team to formulate consumer requests and needs and evaluate a proposed product systematically to determine its effects on fulfilling the aforementioned needs.

Without paradigm changes, food diversification efforts will only produce gimmick products which are impressive at exhibitions or ceremonials only.