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## **Opinion: Palm oil: Malaysian asset or liability?**

By: AHMAD IBRAHIM

Despite the many studies conducted on the benefits of palm oil, it is still being targeted by critics in the West. AHMAD IBRAHIM wonders if the future of this 'net carbon sink' will be just as bright as it is now.

AT 65 years old, Pak Samad is now enjoying his retirement with a decent income from his many years of toil as an oil palm smallholder.

In his younger days, Pak Samad earned a meagre living as a fisherman. It was hard work. The money was pittance; not enough to support his family of four growing children. Then oil palm came along. The government encouraged many like Pak Samad to join others from the country's hardcore poor to trade their fishing nets to a life tending to the growing of oil palms. Many were initially sceptical of the scheme. Not any more. Most now have only good things to say about oil palm. To them the oil palm is truly a golden crop. It is truly nature's gift.

Alleviating poverty is the greatest priority for almost all developing countries. Even developed countries are increasingly attending to the pockets of poverty in their midst. Urban poverty, which afflicts even the most developed of nations, has started rearing its ugly head.

The United Nations has singled out poverty eradication as the most urgent business of its Millennium Development Goals. People like Pak Samad know how much the oil palm has saved them from destitution. But elsewhere in this world, many have yet to appreciate and recognise the tremendous contribution made by this tropical wonder plant to mankind.

The oil palm has been up against controversy after controversy. It was not like that in the 1960s and early 1970s, when palm oil was a comparatively small player in the global oils and fats trade. Nigeria was the largest world producer then. And much of the palm oil ended up in the EU as cooking fats, margarine and soap. But by the 1980s, when the world production of palm oil assumed sizable quantities, palm oil became big news.

In the mid-1980s, massive campaigns against palm oil were launched in the United States. Palm oil was blamed for everything from heart disease to obesity. One advertisement went so far as to describe palm oil as "poison". Another suggested that palm oil may be responsible for increasing sexual dysfunction among American men.

Why? Because palm oil was ostensibly loaded with saturated fats which can clog arteries, slow blood circulation and lead to heart ailments. Never mind that the US then consumed less than two per cent of their total oils and fats from palm oil. The bulk of their fats came from soyabean oil and hydrogenated, at that. But they still singled out palm oil as the culprit.

Palm oil producers had to spend huge sums of money to help fund nutritional studies by credible world nutritionists to get the scientific facts. But they were only proving the obvious: That palm oil is as good as, if not better, than all other vegetable oils.

Like all other oils derived from plants, palm oil is cholesterol-free. But better than the others, palm oil has the right balance of saturated and unsaturated fats. And almost all of palm oil's unsaturated fat is "monounsaturates", similar to olive oil, often touted as the healthiest of oils.

Now scientists have credible evidence that palm oil, thanks to its balanced nature, may even be healthier than olive oil. And with recent revelation of the unhealthy nature of trans-fatty acids associated with hydrogenated fats, palm oil again comes out ahead.

Unfortunately, the story has not ended here. A new controversy has just cropped up. Oil palm has been singled by some environmental groups as entirely responsible for the declining population of orang utans in Borneo. They say the clearing of large tracts of rainforest for oil palm cultivation has destroyed much of the orang utan's natural habitat.

Such critics may not know that almost all oil palm in Malaysia is grown on land vacated by rubber and other crops, or abandoned for years. In Malaysia, nearly 70 per cent of the land area is still under forest. The government has maintained that level for years through the creation of many forest preservation projects.

These groups have been calling on consumers, especially in Britain, to boycott palm oil unless big retail chains there join their roundtable on "sustainable palm oil". This forum was set up a few years ago to come out with guidelines and criteria on the sustainable production of palm oil. Many in the palm oil supply-chain have joined the roundtable, including most palm oil interest groups in Malaysia and Indonesia.

But that has not stopped other environmental groups from continuing to raise the issue. One way or the other, palm oil is publicised as a bad boy. Little is heard of the environmental consequences of expansion in the other oils, such as the massive land-clearing in Latin America for soyabean cultivation.

The other issue is of global warming. Though there is still some dispute among scientists, most agree that the unchecked release of greenhouse gases, principally carbon dioxide, causes drastic temperature changes, with dire consequences for climate, disease and agriculture. The popular prediction is that many island countries may disappear.

Commercial oil palm cultivation can slow down the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The oil palm is, in the language of environmentalists, a "net carbon sink".

Studies indicate that oil palm has twice the capacity of soya-bean to sequester carbon dioxide and generate oxygen. It has been estimated that the four million hectares of oil palm in Malaysia has the capacity to sequester 117.2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide each year and generate 85 million tonnes of oxygen. This compares favourably with the 17 million hectares of soyabean, which can sequester less than 60 million tonnes of carbon dioxide and generate 43.5 million tonnes of oxygen.

A boycott of palm oil by Western consumers would hurt most small oil palm farmers like Pak Samad. They have managed to earn a decent income which over the years has raised them from poverty. But as they all say, life is never fair.

*Dr Ahmad Ibrahim is a fellow of Malaysia's Academy of Sciences.*