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No sense in a soda tax

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I **WAS** intrigued by Tony Pua's suggestion to tax sodas, even if his line of reasoning that the "Bottom 40" income group "does not need to drink Coke". Of course, the idea of a soda tax was then backed by a few ministers before finally being mentioned by Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Mahathir asserts that a "soda tax" is needed due to the high prevalence of diabetes among Malaysians. And here I thought it was the sedentary lives of Malaysians spending a minimum of six hours at a desk that caused diabetes. Silly me.

According to the World Bank, the prevalence of diabetes among Malaysians aged 20 to 79 in 2017 was 16.7% and is, in fact, the highest among Asean nations – unless Papua New Guinea joins us. But is it caused by sodas? No.

According to Euromonitor, we aren't even in the Top 10 list of soft drink consumers in the world in 2017.

In fact, according to statista.com, sodas rank fourth among the regular beverages of Malaysians. The top three? Coffee, tea and juice.

And let's be fair – our coffee, tea and juices are just as guilty for being excessively sweeter compared with Coke and Pepsi.

This brings me to a better idea for the government to implement – taxing sugar, not just sodas.

According to an infographic by a daily, our sugar prices are actually the lowest in the Asean region.

A sugar tax makes more sense than a proposed soda tax because Malaysians actually drink more sugar in tea, coffee and juices. While some argue about "natural sugars" it is necessary to point out that all sugar is natural, it's the quantity that matters.

Sugar is sugar, all sugar is natural in all forms, and just because you hide behind terms like sucrose, fructose and glucose don't make sugar healthier. Thus, a proposed tax should definitely be worded to include all of them.

I will also fairly point out that I am not entirely against sugar, because it is a necessity in certain drinks and foods to encourage a healthy lifestyle.

To test that out, try drinking the Honesoy Soymilk without sugar, and you will perhaps understand the need for sugar.

But how much sugar do we consume on average?

This is where it gets iffy. According to the Indian Sugar Mills Association, we consumed 55.1kg of sugar per capita in 2016, second only in Asia to Singapore at 49.9kg per capita – and Singapore has been shrinking that figure since 2010, while ours has been going up after a slight dip in 2013.

Mahathir went to China saying that trade should be free and fair – I do believe this should apply to taxes as well.

To tax sodas for allegedly triggering higher cases of diabetes while letting coffee, tea, juices and even Milo pass, is discriminatory.

But more importantly, a sugar tax would also attach itself on foods and restaurants serving high sugar content food and beverages as well, which would move towards healthier eating.

Of course, this would also have to apply to the kuehs we all love to eat during Ramadan – and, specifically, to the Kelantanese. That would mean taxing your "jalurmas" and "buah tanjung" combo too.

But more importantly, it will move the industry to innovate towards sugar substitutes – it could be natural like stevia and honey, or more chemical compounds such as aspartame.

Some have pointed out that a sugar tax will not change the lifestyles of people who will still want an original soda rather than those with no sugar or a sugar substitute. I disagree.

If a sugar tax is high enough to the point that those dishing out soft drinks the most (read: fast food operators) decide to switch to the non-sugar counterparts, it will have an impact even if it is a minuscule one.

I think KFC is already serving out more Pepsi Zero rather than original Pepsi, which is artificially sweetened. And Coke is now sweetened by Stevia.

However, we should be cautious introducing a sugar tax, particularly because it will impact small and micro traders – the part-time bakers, Ramadan bazaar kuih and beverage makers, the food and beverage stalls at food courts, and even the mamak restaurants will be the worst impacted by this move, which will subsequently domino down to consumers directly.

Such is the price for a healthier Malaysia.

So, tax sugar, not just sodas, especially if this is a move to lower the prevalence of diabetes. Also, park that money into the Health Ministry to continue pushing for healthy lifestyles or better yet, give people a tax credit for bicycles and gym memberships.

But more importantly, people who are overweight or obese have a higher risk for diabetes.

If the government is serious about hindering this, they should tax sugar and also look at the caloric content of foods.

If not, then let's just admit that diabetes was just a scapegoat.

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<http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/09/04/no-sense-soda-tax>