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# Food Security : Poor Planning or Execution?

Nations all over the world are experiencing a spike in food prices. A regular roti canai kosong now costs more than RM2, and chicken prices have risen to RM12 per kilogram<sup>1</sup>. Prime Minister Ismail Sabri has repeatedly imputed blame on external causes, mainly the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict<sup>2</sup>. **While the triggers are indeed brand new, a food crisis is not.** Malaysia is still in the same vulnerable position vis-à-vis food security. **Why?**



## What is food security?

The United Nations defines a country with food security as one where its people, at any given time, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences to live an active and healthy life<sup>3</sup>. The Global Food Security Index assesses a country's food security level using four variables mainly 'food availability', 'affordability', 'quality and safety', and 'natural resources and resilience'.



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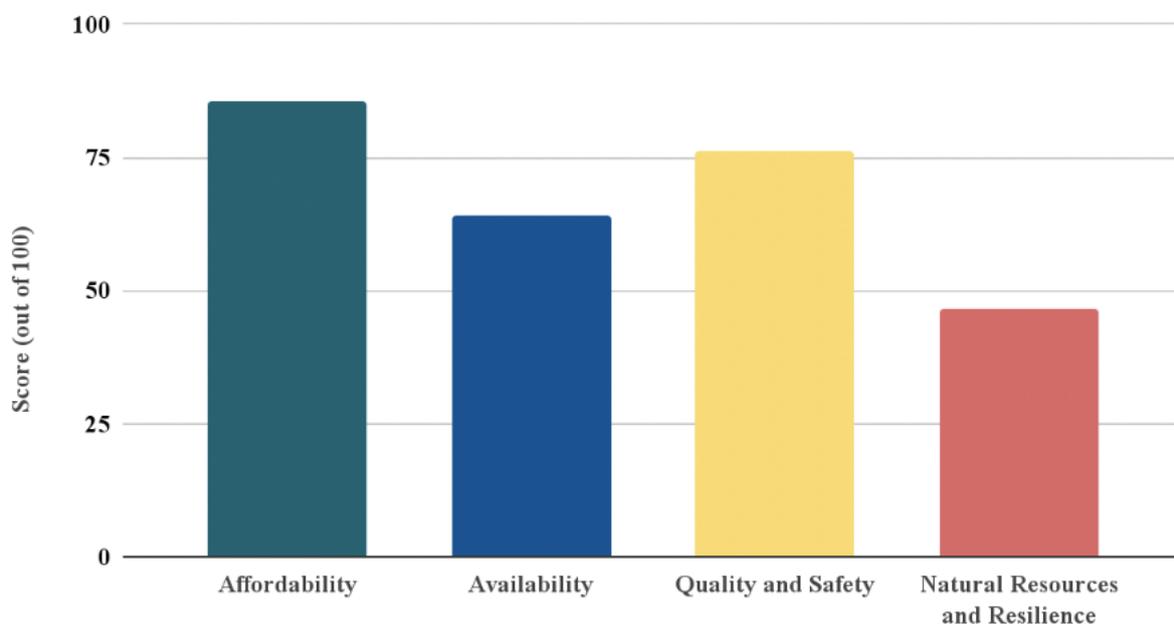
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In 2021, Malaysia fared moderately on the Global Food Security Index (GFSI), ranking 39th out of 113 countries<sup>4</sup>. A closer look into each index reveals the nature of food security in our country. Malaysia's 'food availability' score was below global average in the last five years, while their score in 'quality and safety' and 'natural resources and resilience aspect' also deteriorated. By comparison, neighbouring Singapore, a country with significantly less arable land than Malaysia, ranked 15th in the World and 1st on the food availability index.

**Accordingly, guaranteeing food security is not about how much land one has but the effectiveness of the policies and structures implemented.**

### Malaysia on the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) 2021



Data obtained from <https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/project/food-security-index/Index>

## Background to Food Security Issues in 2022

Malaysia has been plagued with food problems since the 1980s when the nation began to neglect agriculture in favour of industrialisation and developing service sectors<sup>5</sup>. More recently, the war in Ukraine, supply chain disruptions, and the continued economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic have reversed years of development gains and pushed food prices to all-time highs.

The average price of processed chicken in June was RM10.02 per kilogramme compared with RM8.55 a year ago. In March, the price of a 25kg bag of wheat flour increased from RM47 to RM52. In the following month, the price went up again to RM57.50.

Okra, eggplant, mustard, red chilli, cauliflower, and green beans have all seen an RM3 increase in their previous prices. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the increase in the prices of vegetables is attributed to the rise in global prices of pesticides and fertilisers<sup>6</sup>.

## Food Security and COVID-19

Global food security has come under increasing strain primarily due to lockdowns implemented in most countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak has shown structural gaps in food access for people experiencing hunger; in a time of constrained movement, how do households maintain steady access to food?

Moreover, global supply chain mobility has been hampered by logistical and transportation issues<sup>7</sup>. The mobility of labourers was also affected, causing major input congestion. Globalised industries faced significant slowdowns in their logistic operation. The introduction of social distance restrictions caused disruptions in food processing workplaces.

## The Russia-Ukraine War

The Russia-Ukraine war indirectly compromised Malaysia's food security through a surge in prices of fertilisers and animal feed. While trade with Ukraine and Russia represents only 0.5 per cent of total trade, Malaysia's poultry industry is heavily reliant on imported feed, with about 90 per cent coming from countries like Ukraine, Brazil and Argentina<sup>8</sup>.

Senior Defence Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein cautioned that the "worst may be yet to come" on global food insecurity as the Russia-Ukraine war continues into August 2022. Hishammuddin said the damage in Ukraine, a major exporter of many essential commodities, as well as harsh sanctions on Russia, is expected to spur further price hikes in the coming months<sup>9</sup>.

The fact that Russia and Ukraine produce about 30% of exported fertilisers worldwide needs to be seriously considered. Between the sanctions and the war, many farmers are not getting the fertilisers they need, in turn producing less crops than normal, driving prices up<sup>10</sup>.

## However, food security issues are not a recent phenomenon

Rising food prices are not novel events. Malaysians experienced a similar global food crisis in 2008. Fueled by the financial and fuel crises, food prices, especially rice, rose exponentially<sup>11</sup>. Major rice exporting countries like Vietnam, China and Cambodia imposed trade restrictions causing importing countries scrambling to find food supply. The Philippines for example was willing to buy rice from Thailand at a higher price than market rate. In 2008, The Star wrote, "Countries like Malaysia which complacently rely on cheap imports have found their import bill surging. It is time for them to grow more food on their own"<sup>12</sup>.

Food prices continued to increase in 2011 and 2012. The former was caused by a wheat ban from Russia and the latter occurred following maize, soybeans, and wheat global supply issues<sup>13</sup>. Both crises were driven by drought. Climate change was a huge contributing factor to previous food security crises and will continue to be in the future. Countries' adoption of trade restrictions revealed the unsustainability of food imports and the imperative need for Malaysia to ensure food security for future generations.

## Whither Malaysia's food security policies? The case of NAP-4 (2011-2020)

Food security and sustainability have always been part of Malaysia's national agricultural agenda since the 1990s, from the first National Agricultural Policy, NAP-1 (1984-1991), to the recent National Agro Food Policy, NAP 2.0 (2021-2030). Food security was mentioned for the first time in the third national agricultural policy, NAP-3 (1998-2010). The National Agrofood Policy, NAP-4 (2011-2020) further strengthened the goal of food security by including the GFSI indices; food availability, accessibility and affordability.

The results of NAP-4 food security policies can be examined using the Self-Sufficiency Ratio (SSR). The Self-Sufficiency Ratio (SSR) is one of the indicators of food security in a country. **SSR measures the country's agricultural commodity supply's ability to meet the local demand, with a 100 percent score being self-sufficient.** NAP-4 expected that in 2020, Malaysia would achieve 100% SSR on rice, 106.5% SSR on fruits and 95.1% on vegetables<sup>14</sup>. However, Malaysia's rice SSR in 2020 was merely 63% and only certain fruits and vegetables managed to score more than 100% SSR. Malaysia also envisioned becoming self-sufficient in livestock production by promising 50% SSR on beef, 24.6% SSR on mutton and 103.7% on chicken poultry in 2020. Nevertheless in 2020, Malaysia scored only 22.2% on beef, 9.6% on mutton and 98.2% on poultry.

## Planning versus execution

The analysis above reveals that despite the manifold food security and sustainability policies over the last 30 years, Malaysia is moving starkly and alarmingly in the opposite direction. NAP-4 failed to create a more food sustainable nation for Malaysia and the effects are felt today. We are becoming less and less sufficient and more vulnerable to external anomalies that befall us in the 21st century. With the climate crisis no longer a looming threat but a stark reality, this is only expected to worsen.

The situation shares a striking similarity to the flooding issue in Malaysia. Flood mitigation and prevention policies too, have been part of Malaysia's national plan since the 1970s. The country's expenditure on flooding prevention policies increases annually, but the problem persists and worsens, regardless of the projects or policies implemented.

Therefore, when there are calls to make food security a national security plan <sup>15</sup>, the creation of the Jihad Task Force to tackle inflation, and the implementation of the National Food Security Policy Action Plan 2021-2025, we should ask ourselves, how are these plans different from the abundant policies in the past? Why haven't policies in the past been able to solve our food security issue? Were the strategies ever implemented? How effective or ineffective were they?

We need to question the government on the inconsistency between food security policies and their results. Food security is a hackneyed issue, similar to the never-ending flooding problem in Malaysia. With the recent development of the National Agricultural Policy 2.0 (2021-2030) that is projected to drive Malaysia's agricultural policies in the future, it is imperative that we keep the government accountable for the promises they make. With worsening externalities, becoming self-sufficient within the scope of this plan becomes mission critical for the food safety and nutritional wellbeing of all Malaysians.

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