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# A Review on Food Security Policy on Agriculture and Food in Sabah, Malaysia

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**Abstract.** Agriculture and food security are inextricably linked since agriculture is one of the sources of food security. The agriculture sector in Malaysia generates the most revenue for economic growth, apart from other sources, due to Malaysia's vast areas of land and biodiversity. As such, the food security aims and objectives should be aligned with Malaysia's agricultural policies, rules and regulations for economic growth and social development. This paper seeks to uncover Malaysia's relevant and current agriculture and food security policies to identify meeting points to achieve food security goals and objectives in the future. This is also in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and in addition to maintaining the most fundamental human rights of the right to food. While there are many issues relating to agriculture, particularly concerning the advancement of science and technology, it is for the long-term benefits of food security for the population that local and indigenous people should embrace. This article adopts doctrinal method in analysing the policies by examining primary and secondary sources of laws and regulations and thus establishing common grounds for those two related areas of agriculture and food security. The findings show that while the Food Security Plan is still in the building up and perhaps future related-policies, the agriculture policies and rules and regulations should be further improved by taking an advantage of its available natural resources, only varies in line with the current commercial commodity agricultural trend, research and development. This is crucial not only to fulfil the sustainable development goals but also to improve Malaysian's economy, standard of living, social development and their well-being. Thus, Malaysians will not go hungry due to its effective policies and rich biodiversity.

## 1. Introduction

Food security is a concept that has developed over time, shifting from a larger picture at the global level to a narrower context at home and individual levels [1].

Food security as a concept was first introduced in the mid-1970s when it was first discussed in the context of international food issues during a worldwide food crisis at that time. The early focus of effort was on food supply issues, such as to ensure the availability of foodstuffs and, to some extent, the price stability of fundamental foodstuffs on both international and national bases. This supply-side,



international, and institutional collection of problems reflected the global food economy's shifting organisation, which had triggered the crisis. Following that, a series of international negotiations culminated in the 1974 World Food Conference resulted in a new set of institutional arrangements covering information, resources for achieving food security and platforms for policy discourse [2].

In the mid-1980s, there was a shift in emphasis toward rights and entitlements which were by Amartya Sen's key work "Poverty and Famines" published in 1981 demonstrated how "famines thrive even when food availability is not declining". Her approach avoided the concept of food security focusing on food supply but instead focused on consumption and entitlement relating to ownership and exchange [3].

By the mid-1990s, there was a growing worry about the link between food security and the nutritional balance required for an "active, healthy life." In an era of increasing trade liberalisation, there was also fear that people's dietary demands would have to be tied to socially or culturally determined food choices. To this end, the 1996 World Food Summit declared that "[f]ood security, at the individual, household, national, regional, and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" [4].

Based on the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) [5] the following dimensions of food security are identified by this commonly recognised definition: Food availability refers to the availability of sufficient amounts of adequate food, whether sourced locally or internationally (including food aid), Individuals' access to necessary resources (welfare benefits) for acquiring commodity or food for a healthy balanced diet is referred to as food access, Utilization refers to achieving a state of nutritional well-being in which all physiological needs are met, food must be utilised through a proper diet, access to clean water, proper sanitation, and health care. This emphasises the significance of non-food inputs in achieving food security, and to achieve food security, a community, home, or individual must always have access to enough food. They should not be at threat of losing food due to unforeseen occurrences (such as a financial or climate disaster) or periodic events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity). As a result, the term "stability" can relate to both the availability and access aspects of food security.

Food security relating to United Nations' Committee on World Food Security, is based on these three (3) sustainable developments (SDG) goals, namely as follows: SDG 1 aim is to end poverty, SDG 2 aim is for security, enhanced nutrition, and the promotion of sustainable agriculture, and SDG 3 aim is to focus on ensuring healthy lifestyles and enhancing well-being for all ages. Thus, it is critical to emphasise the importance of a country's food security policy or laws as to be in line with the above three SDGs as to achieve the goal of food security.

In terms of food security availability, agriculture is one of the principal strategies to support food security. This can be done through various agricultural developments, in addition to fishery, poultry and related industries. Improvements and enhancements to agriculture infrastructure, with a focus on cutting-edge technology and the existing labour force are required in order to achieve food security availability.

In relation to food security in Sabah; one of the states in Malaysia has been seriously debated especially during the pandemic of COVID-19 [6]. There are several current key issues relating to agricultural and food security have been highlighted. For agricultural production and food security, water is critical. Sabah has been reported to have frequent water disruption all over the states due to the problem at the water treatment centre [6, 7]. This could have badly affected the agricultural cycle and its supply chain. In addition, natural disasters that affect Sabah, such as earthquake in 2015 [8], extreme El-Nino in 2016 [9], COVID-19 between 2020-2021, flood and landslide occur in 2021 [10]. These natural disasters and natural hazards posed special threats to the agricultural sector and would directly impact the availability of the crops, the soil content and the supply of the crops [11].

## 2. Malaysia's Development on Food Security Policies

Prior to Malaya's Independence back in 1957, much of the nation's agricultural lands were economic growth focused due to the interventions from the Great Britain. Such interventions were mainly rubber plantations and palm oil production, which were heavily invested by large foreign companies while food productions were mainly generated by small holders with traditional farmers. Between 1960-1965, report shows that 62% of the agricultural production by a measure of value-added commodities were rubber production, while only around 19% is food related, such as rice, spices, fresh fruits and fresh vegetables [11]. Therefore, when the rubber price drops, so does the agricultural income due to the lack of attention to other products, although it would not matter as much as it would be barely sufficient to compensate for the rubber price decline.

The rapid rise in the production of paddy between 1960-1965 are largely due to proper technology application and sufficient support for the government. Some of them includes drainage expansion, irrigation facilities and provision of subsidies for fertilisers and improved seed variants. These led to an annual output growth rate of 2.3% from 940,000 tons in 1960 to 1,050,000 tons in 1965 [12]. However, the domestic output only satisfies about 60% of total consumption, while Sabah and Sarawak still depend on their imports for about 50% of their requirements, despite making progress on wet paddy cultivation and having an annual growth rate of 2.8% and 1.3% for Sabah and Sarawak respectively [12].

Moving onto the Second Malaysia Plan, despite the drop in paddy production back in 1966 and 1967, the annual growth rate rose up to 11.9% between 1968 and 1970, with Peninsular Malaysia producing about 86% of it [13]. As the role of agriculture becomes significant in Malaysia's economy, more developments were planned to achieve their goal, to bring forth an innovation to agriculture so that its income may rival with other more modern sectors. Some of the efforts to achieve this goal are: providing work opportunities by properly utilising Malaysia's natural resources, increasing the income by improving the production rate and developing traditional work to a higher economic value, increasing the variety and quantity, as well as improving agricultural outputs, especially food produce, export produce and livestock, and solidifying institutions that provide work opportunities to citizens in rural areas to take part in the nation's socioeconomics [13].

The National Food Security Action Plan 2021-2025 launched by the then Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin focuses on initiatives towards a sustainable food system [14]. Among them are food accessibility and affordability in the market, improving domestic food production, apart from reducing dependency on food imports and foreign labour. These are to ensure the country's preparedness in facing food security crises.

The Action Plan will focus on all the four food security dimensions namely, availability, access, consumption and stability and sustainability in accordance with those outlined by the United Nations' FAO. The Agriculture and Food Industry Ministry mentioned that this Action Plan can be achieved based on five strategic thrusts namely by the expansion of technology usage, by enhancing study and research. by strengthening food security data, by the expansion of strategic collaborations and by strengthening governance among the departments and agencies.

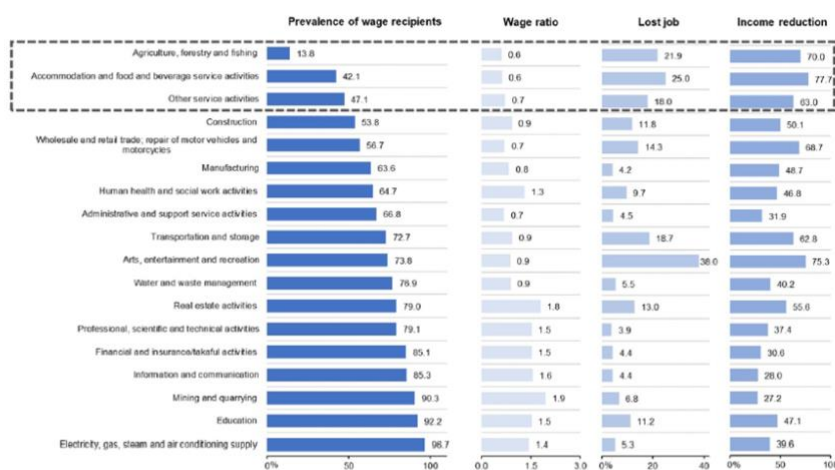
## 3. Food Security Policy Malaysia 2021-2025

- The Government will continue efforts to ensure food supplies in the country remain secured in any circumstances in enhancing the people's health and well-being, especially during a time when the country is facing the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Ministry, under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan will emphasise on initiatives to increase production, strengthen support systems and services, as well as the food chain in achieving overall food system sustainability.
- Smart Padi Field Programme (Smart SBB) involving industry players in improving the paddy industry's productivity, while striving to achieve the 75 per cent self-sufficiency level target under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan.

#### 4. Food Security Policy in Borneo – Sabah & Sarawak

The COVID-19 pandemic has progressed into a health, socio-economic and humanitarian crises of unmatched scale and effect. The condition in Malaysia is combined by the fact that the Government came into power only in early March of 2020 and is already encountering a substantial debt crisis, financial restraints, plummeting oil values and knock-on consequences on trade and tourism from the global shut down.

Effect of Covid-19 outbreak by industry (%), 2020



Source: Department of Statistics

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Figure 1. Non-standard Workers Affected by Covid-19 Outbreak (2020)[15]

	2019 Share %	2019 1Q	2019 4Q	2019 Year	2020 1Q
		Annual growth %			
Services	57.7	6.4	6.2	6.1	3.1
Manufacturing	22.3	4.1	3.0	3.8	1.5
Mining	7.1	-1.5	-3.4	-2.0	-2.0
Agriculture	7.1	5.8	-5.7	2.0	-8.7
Construction	4.7	0.4	1.0	0.1	-7.9
<b>Real GDP</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>0.7</b>

Figure 2. Economic and Financial Developments in the Malaysian Economy by COVID-19 Pandemic. [16]

Figure 2 shows economic and financial developments in the Malaysian economy in the first quarter of 2020. The Central Bank of Malaysia (Bank Negara) reported Malaysia's GDP growth of 0.7%, as compared to 4.5% for the first quarter of 2019 and reflecting the impact of the Movement Control Order (MCO). Despite the agricultural sector being considered low to medium risk, those in informal agricultural work have been seriously affected as they have been unable to sell their products at urban markets.

The tourism sector which has been a mainstay of the economy and among the most dynamic and fastest growing sectors has to be a priority –since it supports so many other activities, such as accommodation and food services, travel, handicrafts and entertainment. Malaysia was ranked 43rd in the index which was published earlier this year based on among others, affordability, availability, as well as quality and safety.

*Stimulus package measures announced by Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin* - 100-million-ringgit allocation to set up storage and distribution food centers. Special fund of RM 64.4 million were also allocated to farmers and fishermen associations that are able to produce food between three and six months to ensure food security.

In Malaysia, the government is highly visible in agriculture not only through direct investment and subsidies, but also by influencing the direction of development in the sector and picking winners. The Law states that the agricultural policies are aiming at improving welfare levels in the agricultural sector by ensuring agricultural development, increasing productivity, strengthening food safety and security, protecting and improving natural and biological resources [17].

The Former Minister of Finance Tun Daim Zainuddin stated that Malaysia has been ignoring the agricultural sector for the longest time. Food import bill has hit almost RM60 billion in 2021 and the current pattern of food imports is not sustainable. The Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (FAMA) needs to link the hypermarkets, cooperatives, and hotel and restaurant associations to farmers and to ensure that the farmers are kept well informed of what is lacking in the market [18]. He further added that Malaysian farmers should also look at other areas such as by planting ginger, chilli, onions, garlic, cabbage, sweet corn, cucumber, eggplant, okra, long beans, potatoes, avocado, coconuts, tamarind, figs, grapes and mangoes. The Ministry of Agriculture of Malaysia is expected to implement more target specific policies and strategies to further expedite the transformation of the agriculture sector in a modern, dynamic and competitive sector with respect to agro-based processing activities and agriculture entrepreneur development [19].

## 5. Recommendation

The food security law, the National Food Security Act of 2013 (also known as the 'Right to Food Act) is an Indian Act of Parliament that seeks to continue providing subsidised food grains to roughly two-thirds of the country's 1.2 billion people. This type of food security law should be promoted to achieve all the goals in food, particularly food availability. Some important frameworks on the food security laws (FAO, 2019) are advocated such as food and nutrition security, as well as the right to adequate food, are multifaceted and cross-sectoral in nature.

The food security realisation cuts across economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political life and is inextricably linked to the realisation of other human rights, such as the right to water, the right to property, property rights and other access to productivity, the right to health, and the right to decent work and fair pay.

Hence, to develop a food security framework, these are among important considerations (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations, 2019) that need to be taken into consideration by the policymakers namely:

- to identify the country's international and regional right to food obligations, as well as the laws, policies, and programmes that may be impacting the right to food.
- to examine the context of the right to food in the country, the state of food security, the groups most susceptible to food insecurity, and the causes of food insecurity.

- to consider the legal and institutional environment, the prospects for reconfiguring policies that may influence the right to food, and the potentials for a successful framework law; considering what form and legal status the law should take in the hierarchy of national legal sources, for example, below the Constitution but with greater priority.
- to conduct an impact analysis, which included a cost-benefit analysis, of the potential social, administrative, budgetary, economic, and other repercussions; this will assist in determining implementation capacity, acceptable budget provision, and effective implementation.
- to create a participatory drafting process by forming alliances with multi-sector partners, including civil society, human rights experts, and academia, and facilitating buy-in from counterpart agencies and ministries.
- to consider inter countries cooperation as to whether the country could help another country at an earlier stage of development with framework laws, or to seek help from examples of other countries in the region/beyond?

## 6. Conclusion

The Malaysian Government has achieved what other poor countries would only dream for; transforming agriculture, eradicating extreme poverty and establishing growth with equity and stability. It was a success in creating a virtuous loop in which the fulfilment of each aim necessitated the simultaneous achievement of the other two. Its policies resulted in synergistic interactions between the three objectives. The pursuit of equity would have been socially divisive, jeopardising stability and undermining growth, without continued high growth. Governments can and should pursue all three aims, as evidenced by past experience.

Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia was considered to be a low-income country. Multiple achievements were attained since then, among others, the GNI (Gross National Income) per capita has increased to \$9,650 in 2017, average literacy for all has reached 95% in 2009 and life expectancy rose to 70s. Some lessons could be taken from Malaysia's achievements such as the use of foreign trade to expand your markets, ensure agricultural research intensity is maintained and expanded, sustainable investments in agriculture for a relatively long period, and have a long-time horizon planning with a short-time implementable segments [20].

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