Newsletter

LET'S TALK: MULTILATERALISM

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LET'S TALK: FOOD SECURITY

Discussing Food Security in the 21st Century.
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Reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)- A Perspective

By Alya Elyda Shamsul, Izzati Aisyah Adnan, Noor Amaleena Khirul Azmar & Umaabati Chandrasekaram

On 17 September 1957, the Federation of Malaya (as it was then known) became a member of the United Nations (UN). On that day, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman dapperly stood at the UN General Assembly's (UNGA) podium in full Malay traditional outfit and delivered his inaugural speech that symbolised Malaysia's commitment to upholding peaceful coexistence in the international system. He said, "*it is in the strength of our people that we shall find the inspiration to shoulder the responsibility, which membership in the United Nations bestows upon us.*"

Since its establishment in the late 1945, the UN has been tasked with the responsibility of protecting international peace and security. However, its ability to fulfil this mission has come under increasing scrutiny as its very own Security Council (UNSC) has failed to prevent bloodshed in several major conflicts, such as in Rwanda, Bosnia, Syria, and more recently, Ukraine. In February 2022, Russia blocked a UNSC Resolution which called for the removal of Russian troops from Ukraine. Members of the UNGA in April 2022 then adopted a resolution requiring the five permanent members (P5) of the UNSC to justify their actions every time they exercise their veto power. Although the rule change has been proposed and floated for years, it is now becoming a reality.

Many governments around the globe have consistently expressed their concern on the reform of the UNSC. The majority of today's main global powers, including the ones that contribute the most to the UN system as a whole, are not adequately represented. This leads to the risk of the Security Council losing its relevance due to the lack of representation as its membership does not reflect the current geopolitical realities and dynamics. The reform of the UNSC is intended to make the Council more representative, accountable, transparent, effective, fair, and even-handed.

True to its foreign policy, Malaysia advocates for peaceful mediation and non-interference, based on the principle of neutrality as well as peaceful coexistence. However, in some instances, Malaysia did not hesitate to voice out its opinions, objections or reservations against callous and cruel acts of oppression, injustice as well as inhumanity. Ergo Malaysia, in September 2020, joined the consensus in adopting the Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the UN which outlines Member States' commitment to strengthen multilateralism including to "*instil new life in the discussions on the reform of the Security Council*", among others. Malaysia believes that permanent and non-permanent members play a crucial role in making an inclusive decision-making process which is parallel to Malaysia's commitment to advancing human rights for all and non-discrimination.

Power of Veto

Despite the UNSC's vast range of available settlement methods, the power of veto has made the UN helpless in the face of mass atrocities. Since the UNSC's founding in 1945, the P5 has exercised more than 265 vetoes - with Russia/the former USSR leading with 121 vetoes, wherein the majority of which have been directed to the Cold War and, more recently, Syria. Besides that, the Israeli-Palestinian issue has been at a standstill for a long time as a result of more than half of American vetoes supporting Israel and its use of force against the Palestinians.

The UNSC gathered on 21 February 2022 after Russia declared two regions in Eastern Ukraine as independent states
(Photo by REUTERS/Carlo Allegri)

In the present global scenario, as a united group of nations, Malaysia and like-minded countries can stop the downward spiral of the UNSC in becoming irrelevant as well as restrict the misappropriation of the UNSC's authority for narrow interests. It would be possible for the UNSC to maintain its credibility and build the support required for the peaceful resolution of various international crises that we face today, particularly with increased and improved representation. One of the obvious reasons is that the veto would be used to block the adoption of any resolution or policy that anyone, or all P5 members, believe to be harmful.

When the UNSC was established, the P5 members pushed tenaciously for the veto's adoption, even going to the extent of threatening their withdrawal from the UN if it was not allowed.[1] At that point, states had to choose between establishing an organisation with great power privilege or none at all, which eventually led to the embedment of the power of veto into the UN Charter.[2]

Nonetheless, scholars have argued that the P5 members generally viewed the veto as an insurance policy that was used throughout the course of the Cold War, as a means of security and protection. In addition, those opposed to the use of veto power argued that P5 members tend to frequently abuse the power conferred for their personal advantage even though it was detrimental to the founding principles of the Council as well as international peace and security.

Notwithstanding the above, this article recognises the challenges associated with the reform process. Nevertheless, this article maintains the view that all UN Member States should remain open, flexible, and sincere in exploring various possibilities aimed at moving the reform process forward, in line with the mandates of the UNSC and UNGA enshrined in the UN Charter.

Reality of Representation

When the UN was established in 1945, it gave birth to a new, reformed platform for the leaders to resume diplomacy, as the leaders learnt the expensive lesson of the repercussions of wars. When the Security Council was initially created, there was no issue of representation, but rather how the world can be administered in a safer and secure manner. Almost immediately, the victorious powers of the Second World War (China, France, Soviet Union (Russia), the United Kingdom and the United States) assumed the role and formed the current permanent members of the Security Council, distinctively known as the P5, including six non-permanent members elected by the General Assembly for a two-year term.

Since 1945, a large number of new countries have joined the UN. Logically, as the number of members increases, the number of seats in the UNSC should also be expanded. It was only after a tedious process of amending the Charter of the UN in 1965 that the non-permanent seats achieved expansion from six to 10 and were distributed according to geographical representation. Although the resolution was adopted at the General Assembly, some countries like France and the Soviet Union opposed the resolution, or abstained, as was the case with the United States and the United Kingdom.

By breaking down the current number of global population and its representation in the UNSC, 17 percent of the world's population (the population of the Western and Eastern Europe Group members of the UN) hold 47 percent of the seats at UNSC. The Asia Pacific Group constitutes half of the global population in the United

The five permanent members of the UNSC
(Photo by China Global Television Network)

The UN's General Assembly Hall
(Photo by the UN)

Nations, but only occupies 20 percent of the seats, thanks to China and two other non-permanent members. The African Group also accounts for more than a quarter of the UN members, whereas the Latin American and Caribbean groups account for 8.5 percent of the world's population. However, the reality of representation for these groups in the UNSC are disproportionate to its membership composition, as both groups are given only the non-permanent seats, while left unrepresented in the permanent seats.

Currently, the UN has 193 member states, and the development of the international system underscores the need for better representation. In 1945, the P5 members made up more than 50 percent of the world's population. However today, the statistics are different. The P5 population only constitutes 26 percent of the world's population and is outnumbered by China alone, which accounts for more than two-thirds of it. China aside, the other four permanent members make up only less than 10 percent of the global population.

The chasm in the UNSC representation creates global inequity and misrepresents priorities. While developed countries are discussing issues concerning the high quality of life and advanced technology, the underdeveloped and developing countries are still struggling with issues like poverty, broken infrastructure, war, and hunger. Climate change for instance, is a prime example in the recurring theme of unequal representation. In mitigating climate change issues, developed countries are well equipped with facilities and adaptation strategies, owing to their sufficient economic revenue and advancement in technology. In contrast, underdeveloped and developing countries have limited capabilities and resources, making them vulnerable to climate change. It is the same case when the developed countries – having the larger voice – introduced a cause for limiting carbon emissions on the global platform, while knowing the fact that developing nations are still relying economically on climate-impacted activities such as farming and manufacturing. In this regard, the disproportionate composition of the UNSC makes it a challenge for the least represented countries to outvoice the majority.

Malaysia's Position

Malaysia has long held that the reform of the UNSC should be comprehensive, in terms of its **working methods and expansion of its membership**. The UNSC's function and representation will be strengthened by the expansion of both its permanent and non-permanent membership categories. While more permanent seats are necessary to reflect the geopolitical realities of today, additional non-permanent seats would increase the number of Member States that could be elected to the Council as well as the frequency of them serving in the Council - allowing for greater inclusivity in the Council's decision-making process.

Malaysia likewise views that the **present veto system has to be limited**, if not completely abolished. Under the existing system, only international crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, should be subject to the veto. Furthermore, it could be proposed that the **UNSC's veto should be used by at least two (2) States and backed by three (3) non-permanent members**, rather than just one (1) permanent member. The decision should, thereafter, get a simple majority from the UNGA.

Conclusion

In essence, the UNSC membership does not do justice in reflecting today's geopolitical situation. The current composition of the Security Council mirrors the geopolitical situation of 1945, instead of today's realities whereby it no longer revolves around the structure of power that existed during the end of the Second World War, when much of the world was still under colonial rule. In this connection, the key to the enhanced role of developing countries and significant change in international peace and security should begin with the reformation within the Council in order to better reflect the new realities. The calling and realising of the UNSC reformation is essential for a reliable, effective and representative Security Council.

References

[1] San Francisco Conference of 1945.

[2] Article 27(3) of the UN Charter, states that decisions of the Security Council on all other matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members including the "concurring votes of the permanent members".

Alya Elyda Shamsul, Izzati Aisyah Adnan, Noor Amaleena Khirul Azmar and Umaabati Chandrasekaram are participants of Diploma in Diplomacy (DiD) 1/2022 at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)

Food Security in Malaysia

By Professor Datin Paduka Dr Fatimah Mohamed Arshad

According to the World Food Summit in 1996, "food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life". This definition has been the framework of reference on food security policy worldwide. The stated framework defines four main dimensions of food security namely; **food availability, accessibility and utilisation and stability** of the three dimensions (FAO, 2008).

Food availability refers to the "supply side" of the food security. The left-hand side variables of the equation are: food production and stock and trade.

Food accessibility refers to access by individuals to adequate resources or (entitlements) for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Concerns about insufficient food access have resulted in a greater policy focus on incomes, expenditure, markets, and prices to ensure accessibility.

Food utilisation refers to adequate diet, clean water, sanitation, and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met (FAO, 2008). The determinants of food utilisation include non-food inputs in food production (fertiliser and chemicals), dietary behaviour and availability, and access to food.

Stability refers to a harmonious co-existence of the three dimensions to ensure a sustainable food security over time and space. In other words, the three dimensions must be fulfilled simultaneously as one

A wheat field near Zghurivka in Kyiv Oblast of Ukraine
(Photo by REUTERS/Viacheslav Musiienko)

cannot function without the other (Figure 1). A country is considered food insecure if it has inadequate access to food on a periodic basis, risking the nutritional status of its population. Other challenges include adverse weather conditions, political instability, or economic factors (unemployment, rising food prices). The food security status of a household is, on the other hand, dependent on the country's capacity to produce enough for her population, and import from the global market. The inter-connectedness of the food security at various level (global, national, household) is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Interconnectedness of food security pillars
Source: Author

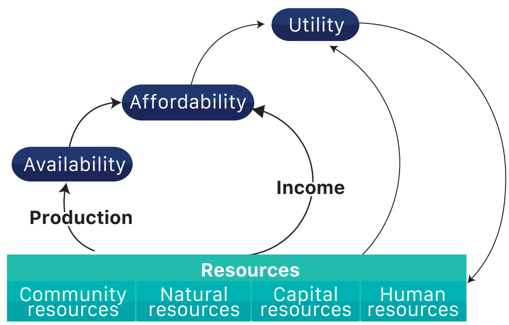
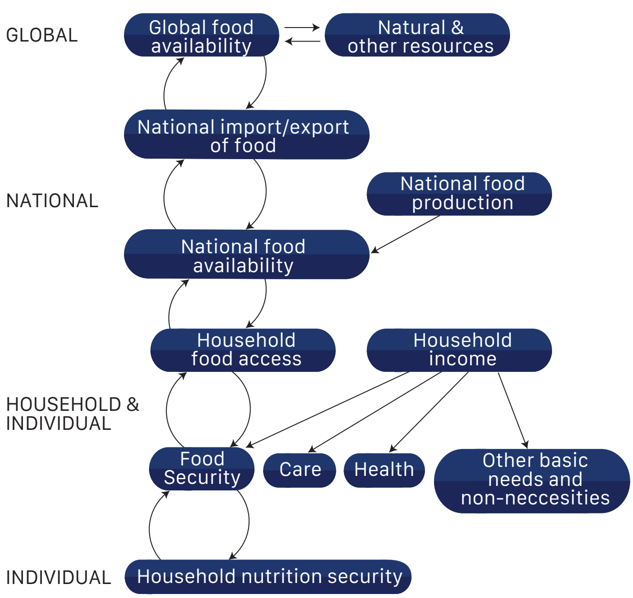


Figure 2: Interconnectedness in food security at various levels
Adapted from Carletto and Banerjee (2013).



According to The Economist in 2022, the pandemic has placed Malaysia in the 43rd position in the Global Food Security Index 2020. However, in 2021 its position has improved to 39th position thanks to the economic recovery of the country albeit at a slow pace. Singapore has climbed from 19th position to 15th position, Thailand maintained at 51st position, Vietnam from 63rd to 61st, Philippines from 73rd to 64th, Indonesia from 65th to 69th during the said period. This index shows that Malaysia's food security can be considered within the safe band.

Food availability. Self-sufficiency level[1] (or SSL) is used as a gross proxy to indicate food availability. With the exception of poultry eggs, meat and pork meat which show SSLs above 100 percent, the rest indicates a declining trend in the last four decades despite five agricultural policy documents[2] (Figure 3). These data suggest that the consumption is growing faster than local production. The determinants of consumption are population growth, increase in income and changing lifestyle. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the influx of immigrant workers estimated at 3.14 million in 2019 have partially contributed to an increase in demand for food, particularly rice.

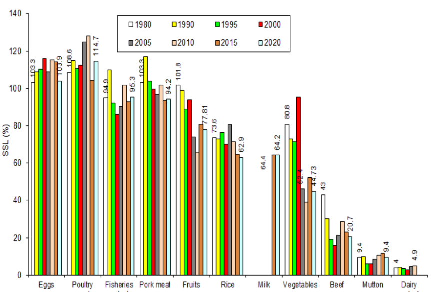


Figure 3 Self-sufficiency levels of selected food commodities (%), selected years.

Note: Data for dairy products after 2015 and milk before 2015 is not available respectively. Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Agrobased Industries for data before 2018 and Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry for 2019 and National Agricultural Policy II for 1990s data.

Import fills the food production–consumption gap. In 2019, the food deficit stood at RM17.4 billion compared to RM28.7 billion in 2021. Malaysia has been in deficit in food trade (since 1950s) due to higher import growth relative to export. Besides imported labour, Malaysia also imports most of input items such as seeds, breeds, feeds for livestock (including soy beans), fertilisers, pesticides, agricultural machineries, and parts. The surpluses are only observed for lives animal, eggs and at times edible products and preparations while the rest are growing in deficit over time.

The import of rice has increased by 32.1 percent under pandemic year (2020) from 2019 to 2020. Other food products that exhibit double digit increase include meat, sugar and flour. In 2021, maize import increased by 40 percent in 2021 indicating a high demand for feed for the livestock industry.

The local food supply has been affected severely by external and domestic forces. The Ukraine-Russia conflict resulted in an increase of energy and cereal prices. The global pandemic has also resulted in a biggest supply disruption on international waters. These developments have caused an upsurge of local fertiliser prices (more than 100 percent) and higher imported input costs.

Despite the poor availability of some food, incidence of food waste is high. The New Straits Times in 2018 reported that Malaysians generally produce 38,000 tonnes of waste per day, and from the pile, about 15,000 tonnes make up food waste. About 8,000 tonnes, or 60 percent, of the food wasted daily is avoidable food waste (which refers to disposal of edible food such bread crusts, juice pulps etc). Rationed well and proportionately, the amount could feed approximately 12 million people three times a day.

[1] SSL is defined as the ratio of production over Production + Import ±Stock - Export (MAFI, 2020).
[2] Ministry of Agriculture (various years). The agricultural policies include; National Agricultural Policy or NAP 1 (1994), NAP II (1992-2010), NAP III (1998-2010), Agrofood Policy (2011- 2020) and Agriculture Chapter under Economic Transformation Programme, PEMANDU (2010)..

A plantation area in Yecheon County, North Gyeongsang Province
(Photo by The Korea Times)

Affordability. Even before the pandemic, the Central Bank of Malaysia, in 2016, estimated that more than half of the Malaysian population is not able to raise RM1,000 to cope with crisis and one-third stated that they could only cover a week's worth of expenses, at most, should they lose their source of income. In addition to this, UNICEF, in 2020, estimated that about three-quarters of flat dwellers were unable to save and buy adequate food during pandemic.

It is no surprise then when the pandemic strikes, affordability became a serious issue among the poor, particularly the urban poor as many were either unemployed, or their pay was cut during the pandemic. UNICEF in 2020 found that 60 percent of the flat dwellers sampled, experienced 40 percent reduction on monthly income with an average of RM1,650 per month (for household of 5.8 members and children 2.5). A quarter of the head of households were unemployed while Malaysia was under MCO.

Affordability is directly related to inflation which reduces consumers' real income and hence, purchasing power. Malaysia's inflation, measured by the consumer price index (CPI), increased 4.7 percent year-on-year (y-o-y) in August 2022 (DOSM, 2022). Nonetheless, the DOSM also noted that August 2022's month-on-month increase of 0.2 percent was lower than the 0.4 percent increase seen in July 2022.

Utility. Malaysia experiences both under-nourished and obesity problems i.e., inadequate nutrition among the poor, and over-weight across classes among its population. A number of studies indicate lack of good nutrition among the population even before pandemic. A study among rural population indicated that the incidence of child hunger was estimated at 77 percent while about 84 percent individual was food insecure (Shariff and Khor 2005). The major factor for this insecurity was low income. In all, 44 percent of the households were living below the Poverty Line Income[3] , with 5 percent as hard-core poverty households.

Under financial constraints, consumers adjusted their dietary intake. It is estimated that 13.4 percent of Malaysian adults had both reduced the size of meals and skipped main meals because of financial constraints (Rushida et al., 2015). During pandemic, the dietary pattern of the flat dwellers was very unhealthy due to losses of income. UNICEF in 2020 indicated that on average, the households consumed more eggs (+50 percent), rice (+40 percent), and less snacks and sweets (-62 percent) and fruits (-40 percent) and more instant noodles (+40 percent). Note the increase in instant noodles for carbohydrates and eggs for protein, resulting in an unhealthy diet.

[3] PLI has been revised from RM980 to RM2,208 in July 2020, DOSM (2020).

Malnourishment is a major concern in Malaysia. Based on a study on children in the urban poor sector, UNICEF in 2018 estimated that 1 in 5 is stunted, and 1 in 10 is underweight. According to the Ministry of Health (2016), the percentage of stunted children are relatively high in Kelantan (about 30 percent), Terengganu dan Pahang (26 percent), Perak, Sabah dan Sarawak (24 percent). The pandemic may have worsened the problem..

On the other hand, overweight and obesity[4] are rampant in Malaysia. Table 1 depicts the increasing trend of overweight and obesity among the population according to various reports from the Institute of Public Health, Malaysia and Malaysian National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) by the Ministry of Health (2016).

Table 1: The prevalence of overweight and obesity in adults of 18 years and above, selected years

Criteria	NHMSII (1996) %	MANS (2003) %	NHMSIII (2006) %	NHMS IV (2011) %	MANS (2014) %	NHMS V (2015) %
Overweight	16.6	26.7	29.1	33.3	32.4	33.4
Obese	4.4	12.2	14.0	27.2	18.5	30.6

Note: MANS- Malaysian Adult Nutrition. Survey
Source: Goh et al. (2020).

Children nowadays more prefer to eat fast food over healthy food
(Photo by CNN Health)

[4] According to WHO classification, overweight is defined as BMI ≥ 25 kg/m2 and < 30 kg/m2 and obesity as BMI ≥ 30 kg/m2. www.who.org

Contributing factors to overweight include high intakes of complex carbohydrate-rich foods choices, such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and legumes, on top of sedentary urban lifestyle, abundance of eateries, eating out habit[5] and new fast food culture through online order and fast delivery (Goh et al., 2020).

Narratives from the crisis. There are a few significant narratives from the crisis which pose as guiding lines for our future food policy. They are as follows.

First, the food crisis was made worse by the lack of local food production, partly due to the legacy of our previous national policies which put more emphasis on the growth of industrial crops (particularly oil palm and rubber) rather than food. The crisis is a global phenomenon, but the low food production is our own doing.

Second, food production is sub-optimal despite our richness in natural resources and the availability of modern technology. Malaysia is rich in natural endowments such as land, water, sunshine, rivers, seas and biodiversity, unlike countries such as Israel or the Netherlands. The latter are the world's largest exporters of food. The failure to mobilise both its natural assets and advanced technology caused the slow growth of the sector.

Third, Malaysia imports both food outputs and inputs that it can produce. Trade provides opportunities to import food and inputs that we cannot produce locally. However, we need not import food and inputs that we can produce, particularly some of our tropical vegetables and fruits. Experiences from other countries indicate that land is not a major constraint in productivity improvement; rather, it requires the application of the right advanced technology that is able to reduce dependency on labour and does not require large areas of land. High dependence on imported items makes the country vulnerable and not resilient to shocks, as proven during the current crisis.

Fourth, the crisis exposes several significant deficits in the sector that are retarding growth. These include the: (i) deficit in food trade; ii) deficit in self-sufficiency levels; (iii) deficit in R&D leading to a failure to produce innovations and in value addition; and (iv) lags in the application of advanced technologies.

Fifth, the crisis hurts the poor most as well as small farmers. The former suffers a big reduction in purchasing power and, for the latter, the benefits of high prices are eroded by the inflated cost of production. Reduction in purchasing power leads to nutrition insecurity and, hence, affects the quality of human capital in the future.

Sixth, business as usual will produce a similar outcome, if not worse. The probability that this idiom will be proven right is high. Continuation of the current policy and economic structure may not yield significant improvement. The future is far more complex than it is today. This has been proven by the current confluence of disruptors in the form of the pandemic-climate change-conflict calamity. The United Nations has shown foresight by signalling the need for food systems that are sustainable, resilient and equitable in the future as concluded at the Food Summit 2021.

The antithesis of the above narratives holds the solutions to our predicament.

First, all the narratives point to one direction: the need to put food first or a Food First Policy to be adopted.

Second, the poor, including small farmers (particularly those in the B40 and M40 categories) are never a liability but an asset to the country. They are the stock of our future human capital. Therefore, nutrition is the input of utmost importance for their growth, along with education.

[5] More than 64% of Malaysians eat at least one meal per day outside of home; of the remaining 36% who eat at home, 12.5% have at least one meal that comes from outside (Ee von Goh et al., 2020)

Hence in the short term, it is imperative that they are subsidised, provided with financial/material aid and have access to effective social safety nets.

Note that neglect of the poor, who currently make up 60 percent of the population, provides fertile ground for social disruption, as proven by recent events in Sri Lanka and previously, during the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa.

Nevertheless, the current pro-rata subsidies (such as for petrol and the price ceiling for chicken) unnecessarily favour the rich. A gross estimate indicates that the government could save RM22 billion by ensuring that the petrol subsidy is enjoyed only by the target group. The use of big data tools that facilitate monitoring, which was shown to be effective in the MySejahtera health app, can be replicated to monitor online payment of subsidies.

Third, under such a multi-dimensional crisis, the biggest game changer is to invest in the future human capital: that is, the farmers and young entrepreneurs with the skills/knowledge to drive food production and innovation. Digitally smart farmers and entrepreneurs are needed to increase food productivity and efficiency and develop a robust supply chain. Digitalisation is size-neutral. Hence, small farms are never a constraint. The role of R&D here is obvious and imperative.

Besides, small farms are sustainable and ecologically friendly. Apart from technology, they need to be organised on a cooperative scale so that their collective operations ensure economies of scale and fair returns for members, as proven in South Korea.

Fourth, the palm oil sector could help by channelling their palm kernel cake for livestock development. Similarly, it is a crime to channel the oil for biofuel when the poor consumers are in need of cheap cooking oil.

PETRONAS, with its big profit, can provide cheaper urea to producers and, in the long term, should venture into fertiliser production for home consumption and export. The multiplier effects are positive, as proven in Mexico.

Fifth, rent seeking, leakages and corruption have to be cut down at all costs. Besides legislation, they can be reduced by enhancing competition with the involvement of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and preventing monopoly control or the centralisation of input distribution. Data shows that monopolies restrict growth and innovation with inequitable distribution of profit along the supply chain (Fatimah et al., 2019). Agricultural agencies need to channel their resources to farmers' development and not to enhancing numerous subsidiaries that are a costly digression of their purpose. Profitable subsidiaries are no substitute to skills training, which is much needed by the farmers. It is imperative to reduce "political and government footprints" in all projects that aim to improve the welfare of the farmers and replace that with total farmers' empowerment with skill and technology so that they can steer the sector towards greater heights. This will naturally reduce leakages and corruption.

Sixth, the agro-ecological farming approach is the only path for sustainability in the future.

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Professor Datin Paduka Dr Fatimah Mohamed Arshad is Fellow at the Institute of Tropical Agriculture and Food Security, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Food Insecurity in a Rich Resources State

By Dr Firdausi Suffian

The COVID-19 pandemic has manifested the importance of food security across the globe. Lockdown and trade restrictions have disrupted the food production supply chain and raised the concern over accessibility of food supply. In particular, developing countries, that prioritise industrial crops over agrofood production, face challenging times to ensure sufficient supply of food within their territories. The pandemic should serve as a wake-up call for policy makers to put emphasis on food security and its supply chain. There is a need for serious efforts to expand food production and capacity. The recent global economic warning by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank that the global economy will be gloomy for the upcoming years means there is potential for food prices to soar, compounded by geopolitical tensions, can further disrupt production chain and other productivity. Therefore, an ecosystem governing the growth of food production and supply chain is necessary so that food is available, accessible, affordable, and stable.

The world's population is expected to reach 9.8 billion people by 2050 with global food demand expected to be at least 60 percent higher than it is now as enumerated by the World Economic Forum in 2016. The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) clearly highlighted the importance of addressing global food security. By 2030, SDG2 aims to eliminate hunger, provide food security, enhance nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. These are major global issues that no single country can tackle on its own. Undoubtedly food is important for all, so achieving a high level of food security means the population can obtain sufficient food from a reliably stable and adequate food supply, at affordable prices, to meet its consumption needs and nutritional requirements.

One issue of food security in Malaysia is food price hikes
(Photo by The Malaysian Reserve)

Shortage of eggs in the market in 2022
(Photo by The Star/Azhar Mahfof)

The underlying objective of achieving food security according to the World Food Summit is when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Any policy moving towards this end requires policymakers to critically develop a balanced policy – with an open market approach but does not undermine the domestic farmers, small and micro food actors' welfare. The former refers to the liberalisation approach by encouraging foreign direct investments (FDI) to venture into food with a business-friendly environment. While the latter requires the government to preserve the rights of the farmers as well as the small and medium-sized enterprises (SME). Subsidies should not be a blanket approach, there is a need to look at entire supply chains and which level is suitable for expanding food sectors. Investment on technology is critical at this point to improve food production. Price ceiling should be avoided as this would put pressure on the supply chain. Though this is easier said than done, whatever policy for expansion for food sector should not undermine the domestic interests.

According to the Global Food Security Index (GFSI), Malaysia ranked 39th out of 113 countries in 2021, while ranking 7th in Asia Pacific out of 23 countries. Malaysia has improved its position compared to previous year, but that does not mean this country is doing good in food security. Although the level of self-sufficiency of basic food showed minimal improvement, it is still low such as rice, vegetables, fruits, beef, mutton, and liquid milk.

Malaysia's food imports have continued to increase due to growing population, and consequently demand for food e.g., rice, which Malaysia still depends on imports from neighbouring countries. According to the Malaysia Central Bank report in 2020, Malaysia's food trade deficit has grown wider in the last decade. Total food imports have amounted to RM482.8 billion compared to RM296 billion in exports in the last ten years. Thus, food import bills are increasing as the demand for food continues to grow.

Palm oil is one of Malaysia's prime industries
(Photo by The Star)

In response to growing demand for food, Malaysia has formulated several agricultural policies to produce higher food production locally and less dependent on food imports. The policies formulated were namely First National Agricultural Policy (NAPI), Second National Agricultural Policy (NAPII), Third National Agricultural Policy (NAPIII) and National Agrofood Policy 1.0 (NAFP1.0). In 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industries (MAFI) (now known as Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, or MAFS) launched the new National Agrofood Policy 2021-2030 (NAFP2.0) to replace the expired National Agrofood Policy 1.0 (NAFP1.0) with the aim to develop a sustainable and resilient agrofood sector, adopt high technology, improving the well-being of the people, as well as ensuring food security and nutrition.

However, Malaysia's agricultural development has somehow skewed towards prioritising commodities crops over food crops. Higher investments are allocated on commodities crops such as oil palm, rubber and cocoa that provide higher export value and as input to the manufacturing sectors. This can be shown by the cultivation area on agricultural land which is dominated by commodities crops over food crops. The lands that cultivated with commodities crops are approximately 91 percent, while other food crops are lesser than 10 percent. During the mid of 1980s-1990s, due to the government's direction towards an industrialised economy, higher concentration was given to the manufacturing sector. They found that agrofood activities require large amounts of capital investment, large expenditure of labour, and less productivity. Furthermore, commodities crops are more lucrative export earning as compared to food crops. Therefore, the agrofood crops are being side-lined. This has resulted in the production of food to decline.

The agriculture and agrofood policies acknowledged issues and challenges such as high food import bills, lack of labour, limited suitable land available, higher cost of input production, lack of rural infrastructures and machineries, limited financial assistance, coordination and implementation among agencies, and the need to enhance food security. However, the sector is still developing at a slower pace, while the country's food import bills are increasing. The government has implemented various agricultural policies since independence. Despite all the policies development and initiatives, the policy outcomes have resulted in limited success.

Countries that rely on food imports are particularly vulnerable to crises such as COVID-19, in terms of disruption of international supply chains. The UN reported that the pandemic is an additional threat to global food systems of which the numbers of the global population affected by food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic was already on the rise. The COVID-19 crisis has emphasised the importance of Malaysia's agricultural and food sectors and food security. Malaysia was affected too when countries imposed restrictions on movements, closed borders, and banned imports. Following the impact, the situation once again reawakened the government on food supply concerns following the Food Crisis 2007-2008 and Asian Financial Crisis 1997-1998. Malaysia was affected negatively by increasing import bills, currency rate instability, higher demand for food, and an increased in food prices.

When there is a lack of focus on food security, severe implications for social and economic impact will happen. Furthermore, high import dependency will leave the country vulnerable to market volatility.

Moving forward, Malaysia has all the ingredients to improve food security and expand food production. The National Agrofood Policy 2.0 laid down three important principles – (i) highly competitive and innovative agrofood sector (ii) wellbeing of food producers and inclusivity in sector development (iii) paradigm shift towards a sustainable food system adapted to climate change. All these principles basically address primary issues in the food sector such as low productivity, lack of technological advancement and R&D, an unconducive food business environment, low income among farmers and limited financial assistance.

However, merely understanding the actual issues affecting the agrifood sector is inadequate if it is not reflected appropriately in economic policies. Policymakers can highlight issues relating to the development of the food sector. But if priority is not reflected in the policy agenda, discussion on policy implementation to expand the food sector would be futile. Policymakers should not fall into 'low hanging fruit syndrome' of commodities crops that serves as a cash cow to the country's coffers. Food sector needs attention just like commodity crops in the early stage. One pertinent dimension to strengthen food sectors in Malaysia is to reinvigorate its vision as a halal hub of the world, further increasing its role as agricultural supplier for the Muslim world. To achieve this, Malaysia should engage in bilateral discussions with other Muslim countries, in order to position itself

The use of drone technology in scanning and surveillance of crops
(Photo by Volcan Post)

within their global agricultural supply and value chain.

Investment in technology is paramount in strengthening domestic agriculture. Malaysia has a partially unexploited potential to unleash in agriculture; ambitious targets can be achieved by technological development. What is necessary is to further enhance the role of certain areas such as Sabah and Sarawak for their agricultural output (in particular rice, livestock and other subsector food crops). East Malaysia can be another agriculture hub for food and other food sectors. This requires government to promote local and foreign investment in food sector instead of focusing commodities crops in which both states are the main contributor to the country's Gross Domestic Products (GDP). Strategic plan is needed to reprioritise agrofood sector as we cannot rely so much on the market forces. Rather, it is the role of the government to provide 'big push' along with collaboration with domestic enterprises to strengthen the agrofood sector.

Dr Firdausi Suffian is Deputy Rector of Academic Affairs and Senior Lecturer in Political Economy at MARA Technology University (UiTM) Sabah. He is also Visiting Lecturer at Mondragon University in Spain.

MInistry of Foreign Affairs
Malaysia

INSTITUTE OF DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS (IDFR)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia
Jalan Wisma Putra, 50460 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
T +603-2149 1000 **W** www.idfr.gov.my

IDFRMalaysia

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