

CHAPTER

3

SUSTAINING THE PLATE: FOOD SECURITY IN MALAYSIA

*Yogeeswari Subramaniam,
Muzqfar Shah Habibullah, and Nanthakumar Loganathan*

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Food security is defined by Mercy Corps as the state in which “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” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 3). From this viewpoint, the FAO presents the four dimensions of food security such as food availability, accessibility, utilisation and stability. Hence, the goal of food security is achieved when all four dimensions are fulfilled and satisfied simultaneously.

The quantity of food available in a country, resulting from imports, food stocks, and domestic production, is known as the availability dimension. The supply side is covered by the physical availability of food, which includes agricultural productivity and production, what is produced, where food is stored, and aspects related to trade. The second dimension of access is ensured when all individuals have adequate physical, economic, and social resources to produce and purchase safe and nutritious food. Appropriate biological use of food is necessary to provide enough nutrients, energy, proper sanitation, and drinkable water. This is known as food utilisation, and it is the third dimension in

food security. A varied diet and equitable practices, such as how food is distributed throughout households, are also included in this. Fourth, the stability dimension addresses the stability of the other three dimensions to lower the possibility of negative consequences on availability, access, and utilisation.

In terms of measuring food security, the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) is widely used as an indicator in nations across the globe. The purpose of the GFSI is to track national trends in food security. The index score comprises four main components: availability, which assesses how well the country's food supply meets consumer needs; variety, which evaluates the diversity and nutritional value of average diets; safety, which gauges the safety of the food supply; and natural resources, which ensure a nation's resilience to the effects of climate change.

3.2 MALAYSIA'S FOOD SECURITY CHALLENGES

Malaysia's food security has recently garnered public attention, with the nation's top priority being to ensure an adequate supply of safe, nutritious food to support an active lifestyle. Following the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, concerns arise that food prices may increase in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa, as these regions heavily rely on the abundant supplies of wheat, maize, and vegetable oil from Russia and Ukraine. Despite only 0.5 percent of Malaysia's worldwide trade being with Russia and Ukraine, the conflict between the two countries could indirectly jeopardise Malaysia's food security by driving up food prices (Glauber & Laborde Debucquet, 2023).

Notably, Malaysia's poultry industry heavily depends on imported feed, with about 90% sourced from countries like Ukraine. Prices for chicken and chicken eggs have recently risen due to this reliance on imported poultry feed (Glauber & Laborde Debucquet, 2023). Additionally, Malaysia imports various chemical fertilisers from Russia, including nitrogenous, phosphatic, and potassic fertilisers (Azman et al., 2022). The prices of locally grown fruits and vegetables, such as tomatoes, lettuce, long beans, okra, mustard green, bitter green, and

pumpkin, are indirectly impacted by the importation of a significant number of fertilizers. Although there is not a significant impact on Malaysia's food security at present, the potential rise in global food prices is anticipated to pose one of the most challenging periods for the country's food security in the future. This challenge is exacerbated by Malaysia's heavy dependence on imports to meet domestic demand, as highlighted by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM). Over the last ten years, Malaysia imported food valued at RM482.8 billion, while exports totalled RM296 billion, according to the DoSM. This underscores the country's reliance on food imports to meet the needs and demands of its people.

3.3 MALAYSIA'S FOOD SECURITY TREND

Malaysia's journey towards food security remains challenging, with the country grappling persistently with issues that have led to a decline in its ranking on the Global Food Security Index, falling short of the world average. Currently, Malaysia is positioned at 41st place, seven positions lower than the previous year, holding a subdued score of 69.9. When comparing Malaysia's total score in 2021 to the preceding year, an additional 1.6 points were deducted. As depicted in Figure 3.1, Malaysia confronts substantial hurdles in ensuring both food security and the well-being of its population.

The decline in food affordability points to inflation or economic hardships affecting people's capacity to make purchases. Simultaneously, a decrease in food supply suggests possible disturbances in the country's supply chain, which could affect the dissemination of necessities. A thorough evaluation of production and storage procedures is required considering the challenges associated with upholding strict food safety regulations, highlighted by the decline in quality and safety. Thus, Malaysians might find it difficult to afford a nutritious diet, which influences their health and general well-being.