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Malaysian Government's Unified Approach to Address National Food Security

Mohd Zulhelmi Syafuddin Tan^{1*}, Ahmad Naqiyuddin Bakar², Yarina Ahmad³

**Corresponding Author*

Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies,
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Malaysia

Email of All Authors: 2020567013@student.uitm.edu.my, ansbakar@uitm.edu.my, yarina@uitm.edu.my
Tel: +60 13-347 6900

Abstract

In Malaysia, following the COVID-19 disruption of food supply, the Cabinet Committee of National Food Security Policy was set up in 2020 as a whole-of-government effort to bring together strategies and action plans for food security at the national level. This study looks at how the policies of different ministries and central agencies match up with the progressive direction set by the committee. Even though there are varying focuses on the policies between the government bodies, a collective synergy emerges from their efforts. A document analysis of these key policies shows the government's commitment to ensuring enough food for everyone.

Keywords: national food security; food security dimension; food security policy; agriculture

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1.0 Introduction

In 2020, the Malaysian government instituted the Cabinet Committee on National Food Security Policy (FSCC). It was a strategic move to address the immediate challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and to work towards long-term goals of ensuring food security, sustainability, and economic resilience. Implementing stringent food-related policies is expected to enhance the confidence of global investors and aid Malaysia in tackling its pressing food security concerns. Food security, as defined in the report '*The State of the Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022*', indicates that '*all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life*' (FAO, 2022). However, the Global Food Security Index (GFSI), evaluates four fundamental factors similar to FAO in principle but highlighting different aspects. Specifically, while the FAO definition emphasises physical, social, and economic access to food, GFSI provides a more detailed framework that allows it to capture a broader range of factors that can impact food security, including the stability of food supplies, the economic factors affecting people's ability to purchase food, the nutritional value of food, and the sustainability of food production and distribution systems. There is a lack of consensus among researchers and practitioners on a single, definitive food security indicator,

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and various international agencies employ their own sets of indicators for assessing food security; for example World Food Programme's 'Food Consumption Score', United States Agency for International Development's 'Household Food Insecurity Access Scale', FAO's 'Prevalence of Undernourishment' and 'Food Insecurity Experience Scale', and Economist Intelligence Unit's 'GFSI' (Manikas *et al.*, 2023).

Regardless of which definitions, the framework is technically organised around four fundamental dimensions. For the purpose of this study, GFSI's food security dimensions were used, which include 'availability', which refers to the consistent presence of food; 'affordability', which refers to the economic accessibility of food; 'quality and safety', which refer to the nutritional value and safety standards of food; and 'sustainability and adaptation', which refer to the resilience and adaptability of the food system to changes and challenges. Empowering these four dimensions requires cross-agency efforts. A study by Sharpe *et al.* (2020) and Parson (2020) found a coordination problem in strengthening food security in England during the COVID-19 pandemic since no less than 16 government agencies have roles in formulating food policies. Coincidentally, members of Malaysia's FSCC consist of representatives from 17 government agencies.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the presence of food security principles and dimensions in the official documents across the 17 members of FSCC. The objective of this study is to analyse the presence of important themes and examine the corresponding policies related to food security, within the framework of the GFSI indicators and the 'terms of reference' provided by the FSCC. This research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unified government approach to food security by identifying the interconnection of various governmental policies.

2.0 Literature Review

In the previous year, Malaysia faced a significant challenge called the 3C-shock, which involved the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, particularly between Russia and Ukraine, and the detrimental impacts of climate change, including floods and droughts. As mentioned earlier, the shocks significantly influenced Malaysia's food security situation (Syafuddin Tan *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, it has become apparent that Malaysia is currently encountering a 4C-shock, which includes currency-related obstacles (Ludher, 2023). The persistent economic instabilities at the global level have resulted in the oscillation of currencies and inflationary pressures, thereby exerting an impact on the feasibility and availability of sustenance. The fluctuation of the Malaysian Ringgit in relation to other currencies significantly affects the expenses incurred in importing food and agricultural inputs. The introduction of this novel aspect of currency challenges presents a different stratum of intricacy to the food security aspects of Malaysia.

The current global trend towards eradicating food insecurity and malnutrition following 'Goal 2: Zero Hunger' of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is concerning, as only seven years remain to achieve this goal. SDG 2 is not only concerned with hunger-reduction. In addition, it seeks to ensure food security and improve nutrition by promoting sustainable agriculture. Addressing food security needs radical transformation, not just incremental change, but also a huge policy shift (Giller, 2020). Depending on incremental changes in agricultural yields alone cannot achieve this. The trajectory appears to be moving negatively as the prevalence of food insecurity increases. The updated calculations by FAO (2022) depict a harsh truth in which approximately 3.1 billion people worldwide are facing the challenge of being unable to afford nutritious diets.

COVID-19, which triggered the establishment of FSCC, has shown how weak the global food supply chain is and made it clear that more resilient and long-lasting models are needed. In response to the pandemic, trade barriers and slowed economies have made hunger worse, according to the World Food Programme. Therefore, governments need a paradigm shift from the conventional 'business-as-usual' approach to a more adaptive and responsive strategy in addressing global food security (van Dijk, 2021).

2.1 Cabinet Committee on National Food Security Policy (FSCC)

The Food Security Committee (FSCC) was set up after the COVID-19 pandemic messed up food supply chains and clarified that Malaysia's food security system needed to be improved quickly. In terms of its organisational structure, the FSCC is supported by the Executive Committee, which acts as a coordinating body for five different clusters: 'Availability Cluster', 'Accessibility Cluster', 'Food Safety and Nutrition Cluster', 'Stability and Sustainability Cluster', and 'Strategic Communication Cluster'. It is important to note that the FSCC started with only 11 members and four clusters. However, in 2022, six additional members joined in, and the Strategic Communication Cluster was added to the structure to ensure that the FSCC's efforts were communicated to the public clearly and effectively (MAFS, n.d.).

Currently, the Prime Minister is the chair of FSCC, with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS) plays a key role as the secretariat. The committee is made up of respected ministers and officials: 'Minister of Finance', 'Minister of Rural and Regional Development', 'Minister of Plantation and Commodities', Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry', 'Minister of Economy', 'Minister of Agriculture and Food Security', 'Minister of Science, Technology, and Innovation', 'Minister of Health', 'Minister of Internal Trade and Cost of Living', 'Minister of Transportation', 'Minister of Entrepreneurs Development and Cooperatives', 'Minister of Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change', 'Minister of Works', 'Minister of Communication and Digital', 'Minister in the Prime Minister Department (Sabah/Sarawak Affairs and Special Functions)', 'Chief Secretary-General' and 'Central Bank of Malaysia Gabenor'.

2.2 FSCC Clusters' Terms of Reference

Each cluster within the FSCC operates by a unique set of guidelines to ensure the clusters' activities align with the FSCC's goals. These terms of reference encompass a variety of essential objectives for achieving food security, such as the identification of strategies to

increase the self-sufficiency ratio (SSR), the improvement of infrastructure and logistics within the food supply chain, the monitoring of purchasing power parity, and the reduction of food loss and waste (MAFS_a, n.d.).

2.3 Global Food Security Index (GFSI)

There are many ways to measure food security that different international organisations use. Notably, academics, government agencies, and practitioners have all called for these indicators to be more harmonious. Nevertheless, there is still no agreement on a single indicator of food security (Ammar *et al.*, 2023). Even so, GFSI stands out as a prevalent indicator. The thoroughness and analytical strength have led to its wide use, including by the Malaysian government, which uses the GFSI as a point of reference when evaluating food security and making policy.

In GFSI 2022, Malaysia ranks 41st out of 113 countries, eighth in the Asia-Pacific region, and second in Southeast Asia. Compared to the previous year, the country fell seven positions, and scored moderately 69.9, representing a drop of 1.6 points in the overall score. GFSI's scores above 50 indicate a relatively higher performance in food security. Therefore, Malaysia's score of 69.9 demonstrates the accomplishment of MAFS's ongoing efforts to maintain food security, despite the challenges posed by global events. However, the drop in ranking and score also suggests that there is room for improvement and a need for continued vigilance and strategic planning in food security policies and initiatives. (MAFS_b, n.d.).

3.0 Methodology

The study employed document analysis, as the method is cost-effective and non-intrusive, wherein relevant policies were systematically reviewed and analysed to extract key information, themes, and insights pertinent to the research objectives through the existing literature and data.

3.1 Document Analysis

READ approach, a systematic method recommended in health policy research was utilised. The approach comprises four key steps: 'Ready your materials', 'Extract data', 'Analyse data', and 'Distil your findings'. This approach allowed for critical examination and understanding of policy content, processes, and discourse through a comprehensive review and analysis of relevant documents such as policies, reports, and publications (Dalglish *et al.*, 2020). The publicly constructed nature of documents and their role in modern bureaucracies were considered throughout the analysis. The rigorous document analysis method enriched the research by providing critical insights and advancing the empirical and theoretical understanding of the issues. As document analysis is a versatile research method that can be applied across various fields, adapting the READ approach to food security research is not only suitable but can also be extremely helpful. Lajoie-O'Malley *et al.* (2020), for example, in their study regarding the future of digital agriculture and sustainable food systems, arrived at their findings through analysis of high-level policy documents.

3.2 Data Collection

The READ approach suggests a preference for official policy documents when the study focuses on policy content. In contrast, informal documents are considered more appropriate for examining policy processes. Consistent with this guidance, the current study focused specifically on policies or policy directives that have been officially published on the websites of the 17 FSCC members.

3.3 Data Extraction

The data needed for the study were carefully gathered by sticking to the pre-determined themes. These themes were based on the indicators in the GFSI 2022 Model developed by The Economist Impact (2022).

4.0 Findings

From all of the reviewed documents, only nine policy documents labelled C1 through C9 were found to cover the themes related to the different dimensions of food security. Dimensions that were discussed extensively in these documents were marked as "Primary Frame," while dimensions that were addressed lightly were marked as "Secondary Frame", which made it easier to tell the difference between the main themes and those only mentioned in passing in the policy documents.

Table 1: An analysis of documents from the official portals of members of the Cabinet Committee of National Food Security Policy

| Label | Policy Documents | Food Security Dimensions Identified | | | | | | | |
|-------|---|-------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| | | Availability | | Affordability | | Quality and Safety | | Sustainability and Adaptation | |
| | | Primary Frame | Secondary Frame | Primary Frame | Secondary Frame | Primary Frame | Secondary Frame | Primary Frame | Secondary Frame |
| C1 | Building a Civilized Nation' Malaysia MADANI' Policy | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| C2 | National Agrofood Policy 2021 – 2030 | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| C3 | National Food Security Policy Action Plan 2021 - 2025 | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | |

| | | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|
| C4 | National Agri-commodity Policy 2021 - 2030 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| C5 | Shared Prosperity Policy 2030 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| C6 | 12th Malaysian Plan 2021 - 2025 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| C7 | Rural Development Policy 2021 - 2030 | ✓ | | | |
| C8 | National Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy 2021 – 2030 | ✓ | | | |
| C9 | National Nutrition Policy of Malaysia 2.0 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

(Source: Author's Own)

5.0 Discussion

Five policies, specifically C2, C3, C5, C6, and C9, exhaustively investigated all dimensions of food security. In contrast, C4, which originates from the Ministry of Plantation and Commodities - *primarily focused on industrial agricultural commodities* – also addressed all dimensions, but in a more cursory manner. C7 and C8 focused exclusively on a single dimension, with C7 providing a brief overview, while C8 went into greater detail. In addition, C1 touched lightly on three dimensions. It is noteworthy that C1 represents Malaysia's current primary policy, having replaced C5 in the wake of the government transition following the 15th General Election in November 2022. Given its status as the new cornerstone policy, one might have expected C1 to be more comprehensive in its coverage of food security dimensions.

5.1 Availability

GFSI assesses the availability dimension by encompassing nine discrete food security environments, which encompass indicators such as supply adequacy, production volatility, food loss, access to agricultural inputs and R&D, agricultural and supply chain infrastructure, political and social barriers to food access, and the presence of food access policy commitments. In line with this, the present study utilises the set of nine indicators as a framework to identify and analyse food availability principles that might exist in the selected documents.

Availability emerged as the most prominent dimension, with nine mentions across the documents - six as a primary focus and three as secondary. This prominence aligns with the public's concern in Malaysia, where availability, particularly of staple foods like rice, is often at the forefront of discussions (Firdaus *et al.*, 2020; Harun *et al.*, 2021). Notably, documents C2 and C3, which are sourced from MAFS, outline critical support systems to bolster local agricultural production. Among these, agri-insurance is highlighted as a vital mechanism to mitigate risks and ensure that farmers are protected against unforeseen events that could affect crop yields (Alam *et al.*, 2020).

Additionally, transportation is emphasised as a crucial component in the availability dimension, as efficient transport systems are essential for the timely distribution of agricultural products to markets, thereby ensuring that food is accessible when and where it is needed (Bakalis *et al.*, 2020). These measures collectively contribute to enhancing food availability in Malaysia. Interestingly, the 'National Transport Policy 2019-2030' by the Ministry of Transportation (MOT) does not mention availability, which is surprising given the critical role transportation plays in ensuring food availability.

Malaysia was among the few countries in the region without a crop insurance scheme, unlike neighbouring countries such as China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. To address this, the government has allocated MYR80 million, as mentioned in C6, for an agricultural disaster fund, as a measure to compensate farmers for their losses due to unforeseen events. This initiative represents a proactive step in safeguarding farmers' livelihoods and ensuring food supply stability. However, as a step forward, agriculture insurance is a noteworthy initiative that should be introduced in Malaysia to support food availability further, suitably by the Ministry of Finance and Central Bank of Malaysia, which regulate and cater for the insurance industry development in Malaysia.

5.2 Affordability

GFSI evaluates the affordability dimension by incorporating five distinct indicators that encompass change in average food costs, the proportion of the population under the global poverty line, inequality-adjusted income index, agricultural trade, and food safety net programs. Affordability was mentioned five times primarily and two times secondarily across the documents.

Ahmad and Gim (2019) posited that implementing price controls can bolster affordability and enhance purchasing power parity. This notion was put to the test in Malaysia during a notable episode in 2022 concerning the price of chicken. The government initially set a ceiling price under the 'Festive Season Maximum Price Scheme,' but this move inadvertently led to declining production rates. In response, the government took corrective action by subsidising chicken producers to stabilise prices and ensure consumer affordability (Syafuddin Tan *et al.*, 2023).

5.3 Quality and Safety

In the quality and safety dimension, GFSI incorporates a set of five specific indicators, encompassing dietary diversity, nutritional standards, micronutrient availability, protein quality, and food safety. It was the least mentioned dimension, with a total of six counts.

The Nutrition Department within the Ministry of Health, which is responsible for policy C9, has effectively integrated aspects of food quality throughout various policies, as evident in policy C2, which emphasises nutrition at every stage, from cultivating agricultural products enriched with essential nutrients to ensuring the preservation of these nutrients during distribution and retail. Notably, the '*National Agrofood Policy 2011 – 2020*,' which preceded policy C2, was primarily centred on food security. In contrast, policy C2 broadens its scope to encompass both food security and nutrition, reflecting a more holistic approach.

5.4 Sustainability and Adaptation

In assessing the dimension of sustainability and adaptation, GFSI takes into account six distinct indicators: exposure to climate change, management of water resources, land use practices, conservation of oceans, rivers, and lakes, political commitment to adaptation, and disaster risk management.

Tapsir *et al.* (2019) posited that R&D is indispensable in advancing Malaysia's sustainability agenda. Therefore, it is somewhat disconcerting that C8, a policy centred on science, technology, and innovation, does not address this dimension. The integration of sustainability and adaptation measures within policies, particularly those focusing on science and technology, is crucial for building resilience and ensuring the long-term viability of food systems in the face of environmental challenges.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Global food security is a complex issue influenced by numerous factors affecting supply and demand (Lin *et al.*, 2021). The contemporary challenges highlight the importance of sustainability in food security, which goes beyond merely addressing short-term disruptions, such as market fluctuations and conflicts, which are encompassed by stability. Sustainability, on the other hand, examines the interdependencies between ecosystems, livelihoods, society, and the political economy from a holistic and long-term perspective. This comprehensive approach is crucial for meeting the food needs of the current and future generations (Clapp *et al.*, 2022). Notably, sustainability is integral to the global agenda, as evidenced by SDG 2, which exemplified the need for policies and strategies that promote sustainability as the foundation for ensuring food security in an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment.

Malaysia has a robust set of interdependent policies that mutually reinforce one another to support food security sustainability. In certain policies, food security dimensions need to be emphasised more, especially in the transportation sector, which should be integral to ensuring that food is accessible and available to populations. Efficiency in transportation networks impeded the timely delivery of agricultural produce to markets, leading to supply shortages and affecting food availability. In many instances, this resulted in food loss due to perishables not reaching consumers in time. The public transport system should facilitate seamless door-to-door travel for individuals seeking access to food retailers, thereby promoting food security via dependable access to food sources (Workie *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the thrust of '*National Transport Policy 2019 – 2030*' by MOT should have covered the food security dimensions, at least the accessibility aspect. The same goes with the '*National Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy 2021 – 2030*', which focused more on R&D on availability but neglected sustainability and adaptation. This omission suggests a potential area for policy integration and alignment to address food security comprehensively.

The government's commitment to food security transpired in the slogan '*Sufficient and Assured*', launched recently by MAFS, the secretariat of FSCC. Nonetheless, the recent replacement of '*Shared Prosperity Vision 2030*' with '*Malaysia MADANI*' as the national framework policy may have ramifications. In particular, the '*Shared Prosperity Vision 2030*' explicitly outlined the country's overarching goals, objectives, and strategies for sustainable development and food security within a specified timeframe. '*Malaysia MADANI*', the new national policy framework, appears to be less explicit and comprehensive in its approach to sustainable development and food security. The change requires close observation to determine its impact on the nation's food security goals and strategies. A streamlined channel of the scattered food security-related policies should be established to facilitate the desired policy integration. Future research should consider document analysis on the policies that might not be made available online to enrich the data collection.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper emphasises the critical need for policy coordination in government responses to food security, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. It advocates for a cross-government committee to ensure clarity, fairness, and resilience in food policies, ultimately benefiting public health, the economy, and environmental sustainability.

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