



Policy brief

Malaysia's long-term food security

The path beyond self-sufficiency ratios and import-dependent ratios

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Executive summary

- The existing overemphasis on self-sufficiency ratios and import-dependency ratios could lead to inefficiencies and limited resilience. Comprehensive and holistic food security systems should extend to the dimensions of accessibility, utilisation, stability, sustainability and agency.
- Striking a balance between self-reliance and self-sufficiency is crucial for addressing future disruptions. Malaysia's food security should focus on household financial ability, nutritional status and resilience, rather than solely on national production and self-sufficiency.
- Food resilience involves a system's ability to withstand shocks and recover while ensuring a steady and reliable supply of nutritious food. Substitutability and complementarity of food items as sources of the food pyramid and sustainable farming practices are essential components of food resilience, which could benefit from policies incentivising sustainable farming practices, risk-sharing and boosting investments, especially in R&D&I&C.
- IPR-INTAN, introduced as part of the mid-term review (MTR) of the 12MP, aims to strengthen food system modernisation. This can be complemented with other best practices, such as smart farming and large-scale farming by shifting from short-term optimisation to a long-term balance.
- Classification of palm oil as food will transform Malaysia's position from a net importer to a net exporter of food. By aligning Malaysia's classification with FAO's, the World Bank's and UNCTAD's definition, we can position Malaysia as a consistent net food exporter and unlock opportunities for strategic and innovative trade, countertrade and investment arrangements.
- Relatedly, as a net-food exporter, Malaysia could leverage on and actively promote and pursue food diplomacy in relation to food security through its membership in selected multilateral and regional frameworks as well as bilateral arrangements. Towards this end, key stakeholders in other ministries and the private sector will be increasingly involved in a whole-of-nation effort in pursuit of these strategic arrangements, which will enhance Malaysia's long-term food security.
- Multiple policies across eight ministries along with varying local-level considerations challenge coordination, policy coherence and effective governance. As food systems are multifaceted and multidisciplinary, coordination among government agencies, periodic reviews and improvisation in state-level participation to address varying food security challenges are pivotal.

1. Introduction

At its core, Malaysia is a small open economy and large trading nation with a robust annual trade surplus and trade-to-GDP ratio. Further, Malaysia's natural capital, strategic geographical location, and historical advantages should be leveraged for its long-term food security.

In the wake of emerging global, regional, and national level complexities and challenges, a rethinking of Malaysia's long-term food security involves considering innovative policies and strategies built on past gains. This requires course corrections, fostering collaboration between government, industry and farming communities to create a balanced holistic approach to address and manage the multifaceted aspects of food and nutrition security.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlights how black-swan events could exacerbate these challenges. However, a key lesson from the pandemic was that countries that recovered speedily invariably adopted a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach, emphasising the importance of multistakeholder cooperation and policy implementation. These, along with strengthening value chains and trading networks, adopting digital agriculture technology and innovation, are key to Malaysia's long-term food security.

Relatedly, a key impending challenge comprises our preparedness to manage multifaceted disruptions to value chains and trading networks arising from climate change, zoonotic pandemics, armed conflicts, trade wars and disruptive technologies, notwithstanding other black-swan events.

To navigate these challenges successfully and fortify our preparedness, we must return to basics and leverage on our natural capital and inherent strengths, recognising the different models and approaches to long-term food and nutrition security.

2. Analysis

2.1. Food security beyond self-sufficiency

There is currently an overemphasis on increasing Malaysia's self-sufficiency ratio (SSR) and reducing the import-dependency ratio (IDR) of key food items. While being self-sufficient may be appealing from a security standpoint, it can result in production inefficiencies, limited resilience to disruption and the prioritisation of the availability of food items over a balanced consideration of both supply and demand.

Moreover, this continued emphasis on availability and stability of supply comes at the expense of other dimensions of food security, such as accessibility, utilisation, sustainability and agency.¹ Relatedly, the latter two dimensions – adopted in 2021 arising from the High-Level Panel of Experts Report, 2020 – were introduced to ensure the resiliency of food production and distribution networks, as well as to factor in the nutritional and health aspects of food at all production and consumption phases.

“Sustainability” relates to ensuring food security through sustainable production and consumption practices that do not harm the environment or compromise the ability of future generations to meet their food needs. Sustainable agriculture and responsible resource management are key components of this dimension.

“Agency” refers to the ability of individuals and communities to make choices and decisions about their food and nutrition. It involves having the freedom to choose the type of food they want to

eat, as well as participating in decision-making processes related to food security policies and programmes.

Relatedly, food security must account for food pyramid considerations of carbohydrates, proteins, fibre, and macro and micronutrient requirements in diets. This can be complemented by considering the substitutability and complementarity of nutrient sources rather than the SSR of individual food items. The continued reliance on SSR may not capture the full scope of assessing food security as simply having access to cheaper but less nutritious foods may, in fact, worsen health outcomes.

For example, Fanzo and Davis question the relevance of self-sufficiency in their research on global food systems, diets, and nutrition.² In practice, they found that among the countries covered, technology, economic performance and environmental considerations are closely inter-related with the level of nutrition in diets and health outcomes. They propose that a comprehensive dimension of enhancing nutritional values in diets be incorporated into the overarching food security policy framework, as ignoring such an aspect may precipitate a rise in the number of non-communicable diseases.

2.2. Self-reliance v self-sufficiency

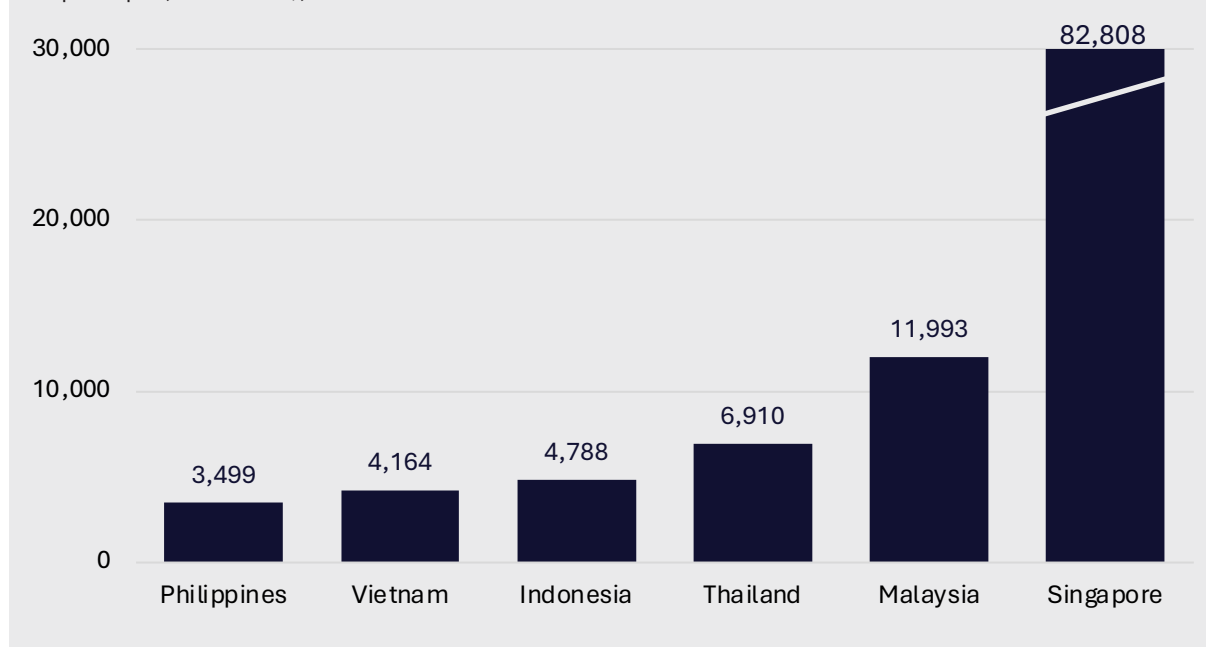
A core facet of preparing for future disruptions entails striking a delicate balance between self-reliance and self-sufficiency in the context of food systems. Rather than the current overt reliance on self-sufficiency, which often results in inefficiencies and limited resilience, a more pragmatic approach would be to emphasise self-reliance involving the production of a comfortable or strategic level of self-sufficiency coupled with the ability to strategically source the balance, wherein nations hone their ability to adapt, innovate, and respond to disruptions.

The income level of a nation also indicates its ability to obtain food, further implying the level of self-reliance. Consequently, in Malaysia, food security should be more a matter of a household's financial ability to purchase food, nutritional status and resilience to shocks rather than a matter of national production and self-sufficiency. Figure 1 suggests that Malaysia is in a better position to weather these shocks among ASEAN member states with its per capita GDP the second highest in the region.

Nevertheless, closer analysis highlights that many children suffer from both malnutrition and obesity. A 2019 Unicef report estimates that 20.7% of children aged between 5-19 suffer from stunted growth while 12.7% struggle with obesity. These figures point not only to unfavourable long-term health outcomes but also reveal substantial income inequality within the country and nutritious diets. This double burden of malnutrition is also prevalent among adults in Malaysia, with a rise in non-communicable diseases (NCD) like diabetes, obesity and cancer occurring together with traditional malnutrition and poor diets.

Consequently, a more holistic approach to food security is important, recognising that self-sufficiency alone is inadequate to address the growing nutritional needs, especially of Malaysia's lower-income segments. The approach of food self-reliance must extend beyond quantity to incorporate nutrition and dietary perspectives, ensuring that the requirements of the people are met comprehensively.

Figure 1: Malaysia's relatively per capita income levels suggest a relatively strong capacity to weather food security challenges among ASEAN nations
GDP per capita, current US\$, 2022



Source: World Bank database

2.3. Food resilience critical for food security

Food resilience is defined as a food system's ability to tolerate external shocks and recover while still supplying a sufficient and reliable supply of nutritious food. It entails strengthening a system's capacity for response and adaptation to a range of problems, such as natural catastrophes, financial crises, climate change and other black-swan events.

While food security commonly focuses on the availability and access to quality food for people and communities, food resilience examines the ability of the entire system to withstand and recover from disruptions over the longer term. A resilient system can provide a steadier and continuous food supply even in the face of localised disturbances by having various alternative substitutable sources and nutritional sources, such as carbohydrates, proteins, micro-nutrients and fibre.

A key component of food resilience is in the diversity in sources. Food for resilient systems come from a variety of sources, including different kinds of animals and crops as well as geographically diverse regions. Diversity serves as a buffer against the effects of agricultural failures, pest and disease outbreaks that affect certain regions or crops.

2.4. IPR-INTAN

The mid-term review (MTR) of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (12MP) emphasised high growth high value (HGHV) agriculture and agro-based industry via strengthening food system modernisation through the adoption of smart farming, promoting low-carbon practices and expanding the implementation of Inisiatif Pendapatan Rakyat-Usahawan Tani (IPR-INTAN) that was introduced in March 2023.

The implementation of IPR-INTAN was identified as one of its "Big Bolds" to be implemented in the remaining 12MP period, coinciding with expanding supply chains while raising the income of local farmers. IPR-INTAN capitalises on suitable sites for agricultural activities, particularly where

pockets of poverty occur. Public funding is provided for infrastructure costs, agricultural inputs, training and technical advisory.

This initiative has been implemented through collaboration with reputable partners and carefully selected participants among the B40, poverty and hardcore poverty groups. IPR-INTAN focuses on producing strategic crops, such as chilli and grain corn, to reduce Malaysia's dependency on imports and improving self-reliance.

Under this programme, assistance is provided in the form of agricultural inputs and modern equipment, training and technical advisory services as well as pre-harvest allowance. Its nationwide rollout has been implemented with cooperation and collaboration between various parties, including ministries, agencies, state governments and the private sector. Since its launch in March 2023, IPR-INTAN has recorded 16 sites covering more than 364ha of land, involving more than 1,000 participants. IPR-INTAN aims to benefit more than 1,000 participants in the remaining 12MP period.

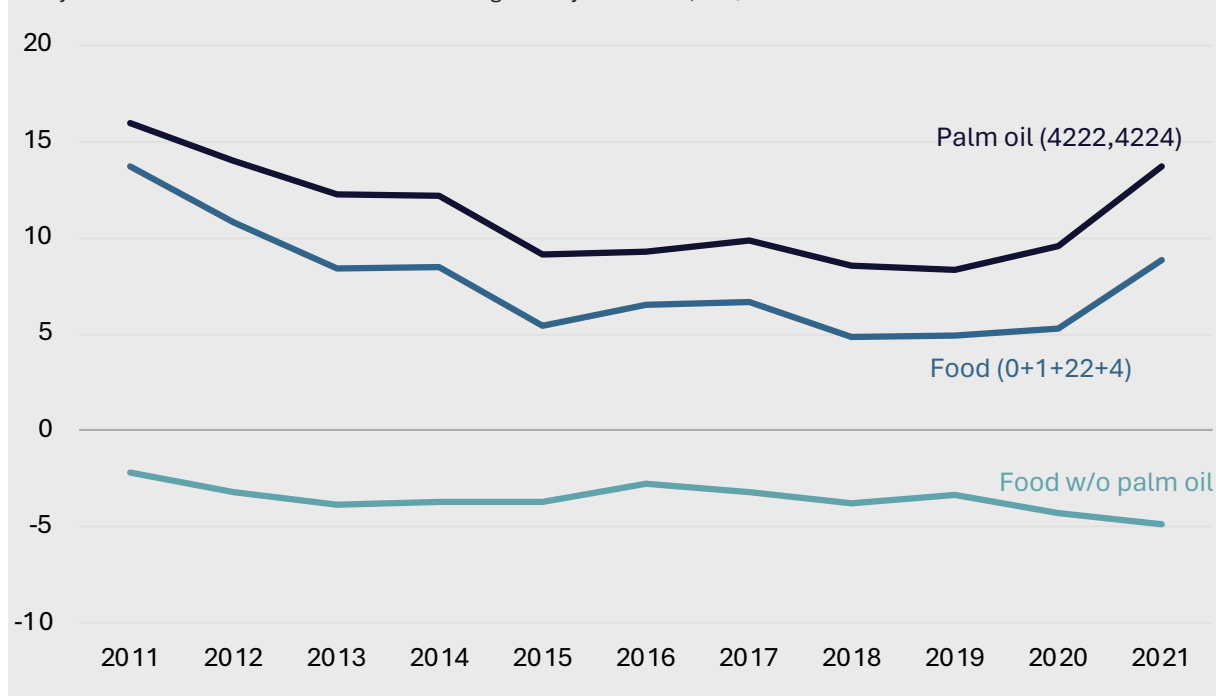
2.5. Food trade – curious case of palm oil

A persistent narrative in Malaysia is the increasingly high food import bill and that despite our natural-resource endowment, we are increasingly dependent on other countries to feed us. However, as pointed out in Chapter 5 on 'Agriculture' in ISIS³, this is a curious case, as Malaysia is considered a big net exporter of food by international organisations. For example, FAO's classification of food comprises cereals, meat, oils & fats, sugar and dairy while the World Bank's classification comprises of cereals, oils & fats, and other food (meat, sugar, beverages, etc.). The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) standard international trade classification (SITC) system defines "all food items" as "food and live animals" (SITC 0), "beverage and tobacco" (SITC 1), "oilseeds and oleaginous fruits" (SITC 22), and "animal and vegetable oils, fats and waxes" (SITC 4). This unfortunate discrepancy appears to stem from a definitional quirk, whereby Malaysia does not classify fats and oil (predominantly palm oil and palm oil products) as food.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the World Bank also reported in 2009 that Malaysia was among one of the five countries that benefited the most from the 2008 global food crisis, largely because of the exports of palm oil and palm oil products, underscoring the above point.

Figure 2: Malaysia can be a net exporter of food if palm oil-related exports are classified as food products

Malaysia's trade balance for food and sub-categories by SITC code, US\$ billion



Source: UNComtrade

Figure 2 shows that Malaysia is a net importer of food when palm oil is excluded (the current practice). However, when palm oil is classified as food, the country “transforms” into a large net exporter of food over the entire period. The similar movement in the trends between “all food items” and palm oil further shows the importance of the latter.

Correcting the existing definitional quirk constitutes a prime low hanging fruit. Consequently, the new narrative is that Malaysia is a large net food exporter given the dominance of the Malaysian palm oil value chain and trading network⁴ and total volume of exports. Malaysia can now claim that “we feed the world!”. This new tagline can also be strategically used to counter the perpetual coordinated attack on Malaysia’s oil palm industry by Europe and the US over biodiversity, deforestation and sustainability issues. To be sure, Malaysia should ensure that we have a comfortable level of self-sufficiency in our major food basket and concurrently strategically source any forecast shortfall of key food items while recasting Malaysia’s food trade in a more balanced and holistic manner. This new narrative will also facilitate a paradigm shift to mitigate long-standing fears of import dependency as we move towards a holistic balanced pathway to Malaysia’s long-term food security.

2.6. Enhancing food security through strategic participation in multilateral and bilateral frameworks and mechanisms

Malaysia participates in many multilateral frameworks, which invariably include a food security dimension. As a small open economy and large trading nation, Malaysia has also formed strategic bilateral arrangements. Some of these frameworks and mechanisms should be leveraged to enhance Malaysia’s immediate-, medium- and long-term food security guided by Malaysia’s elected path to long-term food security.

Among the array of frameworks and cooperative mechanisms that Malaysia has pledged commitments and allocated resources to that have a stipulated focus on food security, a key

standout example is that under the auspices of the ASEAN framework.⁵ This includes the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework and Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security (SPA-FS) 2021-2025, where under “Strategic thrust 1 – Strengthen food security, including emergency/shortage relief arrangement”, Malaysia serves as the lead for the sustainability of the food supply chain with enhancement to the seed industry. This includes opportunities to create commercially viable platforms for seed-information sharing, facilitating technical and economic cooperation among industry players and harmonising regulations related to the seed industry system. This will provide longer-term benefits from the enhancement of Malaysia’s tropical seed industry, besides those stemming from the usual food security dimensions.

The new narrative of Malaysia being a net exporter of food, on account of correcting the definition of palm oil as food, will put Malaysia in a stronger position to promote food security coalition and food diplomacy in multilateral, regional and even bilateral arrangements⁶. This could bring about innovative trade arrangements, including countertrade (especially with palm oil and other food products that Malaysia can competitively export), and innovative cross-border investments.

It is important to note that pursuing and realising these benefits through multilateral and bilateral mechanisms while enhancing Malaysia’s long-term food security will require the coordinated efforts of key stakeholders in various ministries and the private sector. Hence, Malaysia should increasingly inculcate a whole-of-nation response or laser-focused collective effort.

2.7. Challenges in governance and policy trends

Like most Asian countries, Malaysia continues to prioritise food security as a public sector responsibility. Table 1 depicts the key policies focusing on various dimensions of food security at the national level.

Table 1: National policies on food security⁷

Period	Policy or law	Responsible ministry
1983	Food Act, 1983	Ministry of Health
1984 – 1991	National Agriculture Policy (NAP 1)	Ministry of Agriculture
1985	Food Regulations, 1985	Ministry of Health
1992 – 1997	National Agriculture Policy (NAP 2)	Ministry of Agriculture
1998 – 2010	National Agriculture Policy (NAP 3)	Ministry of Agriculture
1996 – 2000	Action Plan for National Nutrition Policy of Malaysia	Ministry of Health
2001	National Food Safety and Nutrition Council (NFSNC)	Ministry of Health
2002	National Consumer Policy	Ministry of Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism
2003	National Nutrition Policy of Malaysia	Ministry of Health
2005	Fair Trade Policy	Ministry of Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism
2005 – 2020	National Biotechnology Policy (NBP 1.0)	Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation

Period	Policy or law	Responsible ministry
2010 – 2020	National Food Safety Policy	Ministry of Health
2010 – 2020	Food Safety Action Plan	Ministry of Health
2011	Economic Transformation Program (ETP)	Prime Minister’s Department
2011 – 2020	National Agrofood Policy (NAFP 1.0)	Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industries
2011- 2020	National Commodity Policy	Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities
2016 – 2025	National Plan of Action for Nutrition of Malaysia III	Ministry of Health
2019	Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV 2030)	Ministry of Economic Affairs
2021 – 2030	National Agrofood Policy (NAFP 2.0)	Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industries
2021 – 2025	National Food Security Policy Action Plan 2021-2025	Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industries
2021 – 2025	National Nutrition Policy of Malaysia 2.0	Ministry of Health
2021 – 2030	National Agri-Commodity Policy (DAKN 2021-2030)	Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities
2021 – 2025	12th Malaysia Plan	Ministry of Economy
2022 – 2030	National Biotechnology Policy (NBP 2.0)	Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation
2023	Madani Policy Framework	Prime Minister’s Office
2023	Mid-Term Review of 12MP	Ministry of Economy
2023 (ongoing)	National Food Security Blueprint	Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security

Source: Authors’ compilation from government publications

With eight ministries responsible for different aspects of food security, challenges of coordination, policy coherence, implementation, transparency and governance arise.

Navigating the evolving landscape of food policy trends and governance presents a substantial challenge. It’s crucial to maintain a holistic balance while maintaining fairness and flexibility along food value chains and regulating pricing structures that maintain costs of living. Effective governance, however, can be hampered by the lack of specific, measurable end goals in public policy – in short, transparency.

Additionally, the existence of different mandates and KPIs within ministries and agencies further impede efforts to implement efficient, coherent and equitable food policies. The road to striking the correct balance and dealing with these problems remains a difficult one that calls for serious thought and cooperation from key stakeholders in the field of food governance.

The relevance of small-scale farming in the face of developing technology and economies of scale is a key point of contention in Malaysia's ongoing philosophical discussion about food security systems. Structural problems make the situation especially challenging as Malaysia is invariably a price taker for most agro-food produce and products, apart from palm oil and palm oil products. It is difficult to reach an equilibrium as structural problems are often exacerbated by the poor execution of well-thought-out policies that have been overtaken by reactionary actions in response to new events.

3. Policy recommendations

3.1. Incorporate nutrition, diets and health into Malaysia's food security analyses and outlook

There is a need to incorporate nutrition, diets, and health into long-term food security, within a more holistic national approach and response. We need to cast food security considerations against food pyramid consideration of sources of carbohydrates, proteins, fibre, and macro and micronutrients requirements in diets as well as the substitutability and complementarity of sources of each group rather than the hitherto practice of considering SSR and IDR of individual food item.

Mainstream and incorporate considerations of nutrition and diets (trans generational) into food security analyses with a better understanding on the changing interplay between science, economics and policy in Malaysia as it progresses into a high-income country. This should increasingly involve both the Health Ministry as well as the Education Ministry alongside the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security at the national, state and local levels.

3.2. Increase food system resilience for long-term food security

A resilient food system provides a steadier and continuous food supply even in the face of localised disturbances by having various alternative substitutable food sources and food categories (source of carbohydrates, proteins, micro-nutrients, and fibre, from a nutrition and diet perspective) and hence crucial for long-term food security.

Enabling policies could contribute towards building food resilience. For example, incentivising sustainable farming practices, sharing risk-management strategies and boosting investments into the research and development of resilient crop varieties could contribute towards creating a more resilient food system.

As food production becomes more profoundly interlinked with climate and environmental considerations, the agricultural sector must thread a balance between ensuring supply and sustainability. This will be critical for long-term food resilience.

The first step towards this is to enhance adaptive farming practices. This includes forward-looking digital agriculture technology and practices to account for changing conditions, especially because of climate change. This includes shifting towards climate-resilient crop varieties, practising environmentally friendly and sustainable farming, and utilising approaches that encourage soil health and effective water management, including regenerative agriculture. New digital agriculture technologies, such as precision agriculture, advanced irrigation systems and smart logistics can enhance efficiency, reduce waste and enable rapid responses to changing environmental or market conditions must also be considered.

These must be underpinned by an effective and cohesive policy framework at the local, national,

regional and international levels for fostering food security and resilience. Governance of consumer behaviour, such as responsible consumption and safeguarding an environment that fosters the growth of resilient food systems, can be bolstered through policies that enhance cooperation between governments, regional and international organisations, and local communities.

3.3. Utilise IPR-INTAN as a catalyst for greater food security and resilience

Areas for catalytic improvement involve scaling up farm sizes and adopting modern farming practices. Consequently, policies and strategies need to shift from short-term optimisation to developing a long-term balance between agricultural growth and leveraging on our natural capital. Through encouraging and championing a wide cadre of agro-food entrepreneurs, policymakers can foster market-based solutions to facilitate the diversification of food production. The IPR-INTAN is designed to dovetail to the MADANI policy framework.

Key initiatives in the MADANI framework revolve around economic structures to “raise the ceiling” while advocating for “raising the floor”, which demonstrate the commitment to social justice by ensuring that any expanded wealth benefits the rakyat equitably. Food security should be grounded in MADANI values and impose a holistic, whole-of-nation and whole-of-society approach. Rakyat, government and industry participation is crucial to foster a sense of unity, practice sound governance and facilitated by a sound public delivery system.

In the context of food security, the MADANI framework aims to enhance food security by intensive focus on optimising the existing land and improving productivity through adoption of agro-technology. This is in line with the vision set forth in the mid-term review of 12MP where it emphasised on achieving high-growth high-value (HGHV) agriculture and agro-based industry by strengthening modernisation in the sector through adoption of smart farming, promoting low-carbon agriculture practices and expanding implementation of the IPR-INTAN.

In the short and medium term, efforts to mobilise IPR-INTAN and direct investments into smart agriculture infrastructure could contribute to noticeable improvements in the livelihoods of low-income families and generate better income stability, leading to more robust local empowerment and employment. In the long term, strategic food crop production is likely to promote more sustainable outcomes, while promoting the enhancement of Malaysia’s natural capital.

3.4. Revisit non-classification of palm oil as food and strategically ‘transform’ Malaysia into large net food exporter

The government should review and correct this definitional quirk in the nation’s interest by aligning Malaysia’s classification of palm oil with that of FAO, the World Bank and UNCTAD. Malaysia’s strategic transformation into a large net food exporter constitutes a prime low hanging fruit as it will unleash its inherent strength in palm oil value chains and trading network, particularly world class R&D&I&C at the upstream, midstream and downstream segments with multiple end-uses for strategically targeted markets and market segments. These strengths could be leveraged to unlock opportunities for innovative strategic trade, countertrade and investment arrangements.

Malaysian companies are also involved in the palm oil industry in many countries, further bolstering its inherent strength in palm oil value chains and trading networks. By galvanising these positives, Malaysia can integrate and link other agrofood value chains and trading networks to enhance not only its long-term food security but also buttress the ability to engage in and lead strategic food diplomacy efforts, including international, regional, and bilateral “trade and food security bubbles”. Such a move would position Malaysia as a key player in strategic global, regional and bilateral food security coalitions in a stepwise manner.

3.5. Reshaping economic geography and trade – economic corridors and ‘trade and food security bubbles’

Malaysia must embrace a systems-based approach that considers the interdependencies along the food value chain and trading networks. There is an increasingly pressing need for a paradigm shift to direct policymakers’ attention away from a reactionary stance towards proactive economic diplomacy measures aimed at preparing for any future multi-pronged disruption. It is crucial to have in place an early warning system as well as better coordination with our traditional trading partners, particularly considering the interplay of supply and demand factors observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted value chains and trading networks⁸. This requires strategic maintenance in open trade and robust supply-chain connectivity, often referred to as “bubbles”, which act as a buffer against disruptions by diversifying food sources and distribution networks. This strategic approach acknowledges the need for economic interdependence in securing global and regional food supplies.

A key strategic initiative is the expansion of intra-regional (especially ASEAN)⁹ food production and trade. This approach encompasses various initiatives, including the efficiency of food supply chains to minimise vulnerabilities, ensuring the consistent availability of essential agricultural inputs to support farmers, strengthening land tenure security to incentivise long-term farm investments and facilitate risk management strategies for smallholders. By prioritising such measures, Malaysia can bolster its domestic food production capacity while mitigating risks associated with global and regional supply chain disruptions.

Concurrently, the development of cross-border economic corridors to reshape economic geography and integrate regions of neighbouring countries should be strengthened to address food security, conflict resolution, economic integration and technical collaboration. A notable example is the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) initiative, where the Straits of Melaka corridor (Trang-Satun-Perlis-Penang-Port Klang-Melaka) has the potential to serve as an international food hub, especially for halal cuisine. This is evident through the development of numerous food terminals and integrated food centres along the corridor. Furthermore, the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines-East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) configuration has built-in regional food security in the planning. The Vision 2025 plan advocates for sustainable subregional development and integration of the agro-industries and fisheries sectors as a key focus.

3.6. Enhancing long-term food security through strategising and rationalising Malaysia’s participation in multilateral and bilateral frameworks and mechanisms

Malaysia’s long-standing involvement in an array of multilateral frameworks and mechanisms and bilateral relations coupled with the new narrative of Malaysia being a net exporter of food on account of correcting the definition of palm oil as food can be leveraged to enhance its long-term food security. Beyond the advantages that this can bring to Malaysia’s inclusive wealth, there is a need to strategise and rationalise its future engagements at the multilateral, regional and bilateral levels to be aligned and in tandem with the elected path to long-term food security.

As elaborated earlier, the pursuit and realisation of these benefits while enhancing Malaysia’s long-term food security will require the coordinated efforts of key stakeholders in various ministries and the private sector as well. Hence, Malaysia should increasingly inculcate a whole-of-nation response and laser-focused collective effort.

Relatedly, this multi-ministry approach, including those seemingly unrelated to food security, and private sector involvement should also be leveraged on in rationalising and streamlining Malaysia’s future commitments and resources to multilateral and regional frameworks and mechanisms.

This would facilitate the realisation of Malaysia's medium- and long-term food security and interconnected benefits, the circumvention of concerns and the prospecting for opportunities.

3.7. Increasing coordination among government and policy coherence

Due to the multidimensional nature of food security and food systems, there must be added emphasis on ensuring coordination in the government and alignment between the various food security-related policies. Given the varying ecosystems within states and between states, there must be concerted efforts at monitoring and evaluation across ministries and agencies.

Policies, blueprints and action plans on food security should be determined at the federal level with built-in flexibility for relative improvisation at the state and local levels where they are implemented. This is particularly important when considering how national average figures may vary vastly between the states and localities in Malaysia.

This approach towards policymaking and implementation can benefit further from building in mechanisms for periodic reviews to enable on course correction in response to changing circumstances and needs.

4. Conclusion

Malaysia stands at a critical juncture in its pursuit of long-term food security, facing global, regional, and national challenges that demand a recalibration of its approach. The intricate dynamics of the food system underscore the need for a comprehensive and balanced strategy that goes beyond the traditional emphasis on self-sufficiency.

The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities inherent in the global and regional food supply chains. Internally, it highlights the importance of adopting a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach, emphasising multi-stakeholder cooperation and implementation.

Concerted efforts should be made to correct the unwitting definitional quirk which has persisted for so long in not classifying palm oil as food despite many, if not most, international organisation classifying palm oil as food, as elaborated in the analysis section. It is obviously a case of better late than never. This correction will bring about a paradigm shift accompanying Malaysia's transformation from a self-acknowledged net importer of food to a large net exporter of food with strategic advantages to the oil palm industry and Malaysia as a whole by unlocking the potential for strategic and innovative trade and investments as well as international and bilateral "trade and food security bubble" collaborations, thereby positioning the nation as a key player in global, regional, and bilateral food security coalitions.

Beyond mere self-sufficiency (availability), Malaysia's food security must recognise the importance of accessibility, utilisation, stability, sustainability and agency. For a more holistic approach towards food security, nutritional and diet considerations must be included, not just for substitutability or complementarity of food items, but also to address the ramifications of the double burden of malnutrition and non-communicable diseases related to food intake into the future.

Challenges in governance and policy trends, illustrated through the historical evolution of food-related policies, highlight the need for coordination, transparency, and a cohesive framework. As Malaysia moves forward, a nuanced understanding of the role of small-scale farming, coupled with a systems-based approach, becomes imperative for effective governance.

The policy recommendations put forward underscore the importance of incorporating nutrition and diets into food security analyses and outlook, increasing food resilience, re-evaluating the classification or definition of palm oil as food, reshaping economic geography and trade, and enhancing coordination among government agencies. These recommendations, if implemented cohesively, will provide the foundation to steer Malaysia towards a more holistic balanced pathway to long-term food security.

Endnotes

- 1 High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security. (2020). *Food security and nutrition: building a global narrative towards 2030*. <https://www.fao.org/3/ca9733en/ca9733en.pdf>
- 2 Fanzo, J. and Davis. C. (2021). *Global Food Systems, Diets, and Nutrition: Linking Science, Economics and Policy* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72763-5>
- 3 Wong, C.Y. L. (2011). Section 2: Economic Growth and Transformation: Agriculture. In Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, *Malaysia: Policies and Issues in Economic Development* (pp. 121-146). ISIS Malaysia
- 4 The 5.6 million hectares planted with oil palm in 2022 dwarf the planted area under the other agrofood crops. The palm oil value chain and trading network also contributed significantly to employment, value adding along its value chain as well as significant export earnings.
- 5 Including ASEAN+3 and ASEAN + X (ASEAN + other individual country or groups of countries).
- 6 Operationally, empirical evidence suggests that bilateral arrangements are often resorted to at times of ‘emergency shortage relief’, despite having in place regional and multilateral arrangements for that purpose.
- 7 There are also policy, blueprints and action plans developed at the state level as well as economic corridors like ECER, NCER, and SEDIA. This list is not exhaustive.
- 8 As Arif Husain, chief economist at the UN’s World Food Programme, puts it “In the past, we have always dealt with either a demand-side crisis, or a supply-side crisis. But this is both – a supply and a demand crisis at the same time, and at a global level. This makes it unprecedented and uncharted.”
- 9 Including ASEAN+3, ASEAN + X and other bilateral arrangements.



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