

Introduction

Food security in Malaysia is a multifaceted and urgent concern, shaped by a range of economic, environmental, and social influences. Over the last twenty years, the country has grappled with issues like volatile macroeconomic conditions, vulnerability to climate-related disruptions, rapid population growth, scarce land resources, and the migration of rural labour (Gitz et al., 2016). These challenges have greatly affected Malaysia's capacity to fulfil its food requirements.

Despite structural adjustments and trade liberalization improving macroeconomic indicators like reduced deficits and increased exports, Malaysia's food economy remains fragile. This fragility directly affects national food security, making it a critical area of concern. Efforts to enhance food security are underway, especially with projections of the population nearing 40-42 million by 2050 and significant contributions from agriculture (FAO, 2021). However, challenges persist, including reliance on food imports, particularly for vegetables, due to lower self-sufficiency levels in certain food categories and the impact of past economic crises. As of 2023, Malaysia's self-sufficiency ratio (SSR) for rice stands at 56.2% (Figure 1). The government has set targets to increase this ratio to 75% by 2025 and 80% by 2030. Efforts are being made to boost local rice production through initiatives like the Mini Sekinchan Large-Scale Smart Paddy Project (Nawi et al., 2022). To address the low self-sufficiency ratios (SSRs) and high import rates of certain vegetables and fruits, the government plans to boost the production of vegetables like ginger, cabbage, and chili, as well as fruits like coconuts. The National Agrofood Policy 2.0 aims to achieve an SSR of 83% for fruits and 79% for vegetables by 2030 (The Edge Malaysia, 2023).

KEY POINTS

1. Economic and Environmental Challenges

Malaysia faces significant challenges such as unstable macroeconomic performance, climate shocks, high population growth, limited land resources, and rural labor outmigration. These factors collectively impact the country's ability to meet its food needs and maintain a stable food economy.

2. Reliance on Food Imports

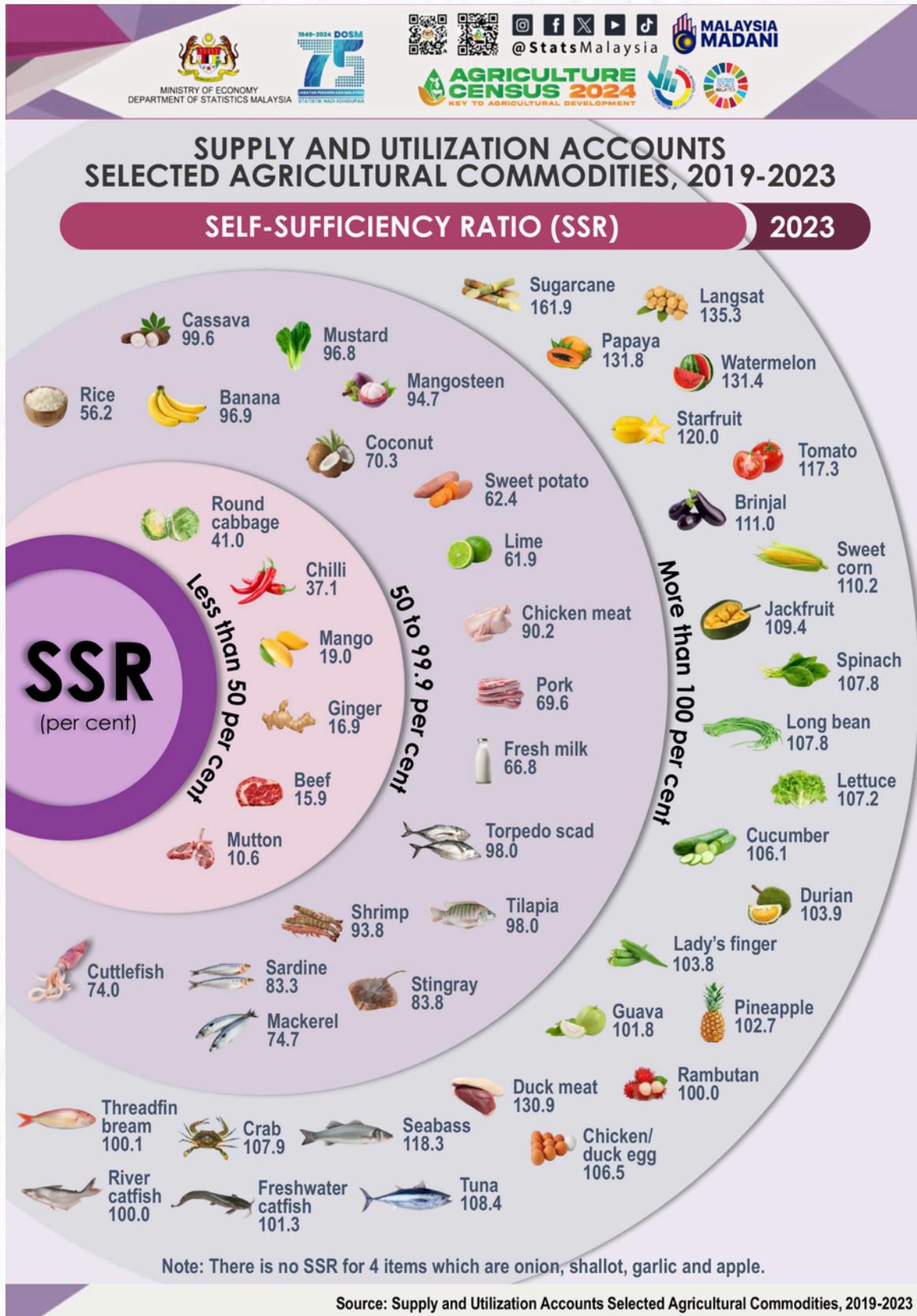
Despite efforts to improve self-sufficiency, Malaysia remains heavily reliant on food imports, particularly for vegetables. This dependency makes the country vulnerable to global market fluctuations and trade disruptions, which can affect food availability and affordability.

3. Impact of Climate Change

Climate change poses a major threat to food security in Malaysia. Changing weather patterns, such as drier seasons and rising sea levels, disrupt agricultural productivity and fisheries. These environmental changes lead to decreased agricultural yields and increased food spoilage, exacerbating food insecurity.

4. Economic Stability and Nutritional Quality

Economic stability plays a key role in maintaining food affordability. During economic downturns, households often face increased food insecurity as they struggle to purchase nutritious food. Moreover, food security encompasses not only the availability of food but also its nutritional quality, which is essential for the health and well-being of the population.



Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2024

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines food security as ensuring continuous and stable physical and economic access to sufficient food for all individuals. This concept includes four key components: availability, access, utilization, and stability (Peng and Berry, 2018). Addressing food security in Malaysia requires a coordinated effort involving government policies, sustainable agricultural practices, and measures to mitigate the impacts of climate change (Mahmood et al., 2022). By focusing on these areas, Malaysia can work towards a more resilient and secure food system, ensuring that all citizens have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food (Azman et al., 2024). In conclusion, while Malaysia has made strides in improving food security, significant challenges remain. A multifaceted approach that includes economic stability, climate resilience, and sustainable agricultural practices is essential for ensuring long-term food security in the country.

Key Findings

1. Inflation significantly impacts food security in Malaysia by increasing the cost of food, which disproportionately affects lower-income households. As food prices rise, the purchasing power of the M40 (middle 40% income group) and B40 (bottom 40% income group) diminishes, making it harder for these groups to afford nutritious food. This situation exacerbates food insecurity, as families may resort to cheaper, less nutritious options, leading to potential health issues. Additionally, inflation can strain the agricultural sector by increasing the costs of inputs like seeds, fertilizers, and labour, which can reduce overall food production. The combination of higher food prices and reduced agricultural output creates a challenging environment for ensuring stable and affordable food supplies in Malaysia.
2. The heavy reliance on food imports in Malaysia significantly impacts its food security by making the country vulnerable to global market fluctuations and supply chain disruptions. In 2023, Malaysia's food import value reached approximately RM78.7 billion, highlighting the economic challenges and increased risks associated with this dependency. Such reliance can lead to higher food prices and reduced availability during international crises or trade restrictions, affecting the affordability and accessibility of food for Malaysian households. Additionally, the focus on imports can undermine local agricultural development, as domestic farmers may struggle to compete with imported goods, potentially leading to a decline in local food production and self-sufficiency. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing Malaysia's food security and ensuring a stable and resilient food supply.
3. The amount of land dedicated to cereal production plays a crucial role in ensuring food security in Malaysia. Increasing the land under cereal cultivation can enhance the country's self-sufficiency in staple foods like rice and wheat, reducing dependency on imports and mitigating the risks associated with global market fluctuations. However, challenges such as urbanization and industrialization have led to a reduction in arable land, which can limit the expansion of cereal production. Additionally, efficient use of available land through modern agricultural practices and sustainable farming techniques is essential to maximize yields and ensure a stable food supply.
4. Climate change is a significant threat to food security in Malaysia. Changing weather patterns are significantly impacting agriculture and food supply chains. Rice farmers in Kedah are particularly affected, facing severe challenges due to drier seasons that lead to droughts, making it harder to cultivate rice. In addition, increasingly erratic weather patterns hinder small-scale fisheries from venturing far out to sea. However, with coastal fish populations depleting, these fisheries are often compelled to go into deeper waters just to secure a catch. Increasing temperatures, rising sea levels, and more frequent extreme weather events disrupt food production and supply chains, leading to decreased agricultural yields and increased food spoilage. These environmental changes exacerbate food insecurity, highlighting the need for sustainable agricultural practices and climate resilience.
5. Economic factors also play a crucial role in food security. Economic stability and growth are essential for ensuring food affordability. Economic downturns can lead to increased food insecurity as households struggle to afford nutritious food. Additionally, food security is not just about the availability of food but also its nutritional quality. Ensuring access to nutritious food is vital for the overall health and well-being of the population.

Policy Recommendations

Ensuring food security is a multifaceted challenge that requires comprehensive and strategic policy interventions. In Malaysia, the rising cost of food due to inflation, heavy reliance on imports, reduction of arable land, and the impacts of climate change are significant issues that threaten the stability and accessibility of food supplies. Addressing these challenges necessitates a coordinated approach that includes price stabilization mechanisms, promotion of local food production, protection and expansion of agricultural land, and enhancement of climate resilience in agriculture. By implementing these policy recommendations, Malaysia can strengthen its food security framework, ensuring that all citizens have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food, thereby fostering a healthier and more resilient nation.

1. Implement Price Stabilization Mechanisms

To mitigate the impact of inflation on food prices, the government can introduce price stabilization mechanisms. This could include subsidies for essential food items, price controls, and the establishment of strategic food reserves. These measures can help ensure that food remains affordable for lower-income households, particularly the M40 and B40 groups.

2. Promote Local Food Production

Reducing dependency on food imports is crucial for enhancing food security. The government should promote local food production by providing incentives for farmers, investing in agricultural infrastructure, and supporting the adoption of modern farming techniques. This can help increase self-sufficiency and reduce vulnerability to global market fluctuations.

3. Expand and Protect Agricultural Land

To address the reduction of arable land, policies should focus on protecting existing agricultural land from urbanization and industrialization. Additionally, the government can incentivize the use of underutilized land for cereal production and other essential crops. Implementing sustainable farming practices can also maximize the productivity of available land.

4. Enhance Climate Resilience in Agriculture

Climate change poses a significant threat to food security. The government should invest in research and development of climate-resilient crop varieties and farming practices. Providing support for farmers to adopt these practices, along with improving water management systems, can help mitigate the adverse effects of climate change on agriculture.

By focusing on these key areas, Malaysia can strive towards sustainable food security, ensuring that all citizens have access to adequate, safe, and nutritious food.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ensuring food security in Malaysia is a complex but critical endeavor that requires a multifaceted approach. The country faces significant challenges, including inflation, reliance on food imports, limited arable land, and the impacts of climate change. Addressing these issues necessitates coordinated efforts involving government policies, sustainable agricultural practices, and climate resilience strategies. By implementing targeted policy recommendations such as price stabilization mechanisms, promoting local food production, protecting agricultural land, and enhancing climate resilience, Malaysia can work towards a more secure and sustainable food system. These efforts will help ensure that all citizens have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food, fostering a healthier and more resilient nation.

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