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CHILD FOOD SECURITY IN MALAYSIA: A CRY FOR CONCERN

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Abstract

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations has reported that for the third year in a row, there has been a rise in world hunger. The absolute number of undernourished people, i.e. those facing chronic food deprivation, has increased from around 804 million in 2016 to nearly 821 million in 2017. Sad to say among this number of undernourished and malnourished people are children who suffer from food insecurity. Malaysia is no exception to children suffering from food insecurity. Food insecurity in children poses a significant threat to the overall healthy development of children. Precautionary interventions i.e. legislative measures that address food security specifically to provide tangible means of promoting healthy development of children is imminent

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1. Introduction

Food insecurity is a wakeup call to the whole world that one day mother earth would run out of resources to feed her inhabitants. As it is, in certain parts of the world, people are suffering from famine because of war, natural disasters, economic deprivation, poverty and political turmoil even though, on the grounds of humanity, the fortunate are helping the less fortunate through food aid. Nonetheless, sufficiency and accessibility to food aid has become a major barrier in feeding the hungry resulting in widespread hunger and malnourishment. Among the hungry and malnourished population are children. It has been reported that 66 million children go to school hungry, one in four is stunted and nearly half of the deaths of children under five are attributable to poor nutrition (Fram, Bernal, & Frongillo, 2015). Food insecurity in children poses a significant threat to the healthy development of children. Apart from going hungry, children suffering from food insecurity also suffer from psychological problems such as worry, stigma and shame related to food challenges (Fram, Bernal, & Frongillo, 2015). Study conducted in Malaysia indicate that children in Malaysia also suffer from food insecurity (UNICEF Malaysia Press, 2018). Thus, this article discourses issues related to food security, food insecurity, the negative consequences associated to child food insecurity and the possible interventions that should be implemented as a precautionary measure to safeguard the well-being and welfare of children.

1.1. Food security

Food security, as defined by the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security, is the condition in which all people, always, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Child food security is stated as, "a daily diet that is nutritionally balanced and sufficient to allow them to do well at school, engage in active play, and lead a culturally normal life. When access to the right food is not consistently achieved, the negative repercussions flow through to physical and mental health, wellbeing, and life-course outcomes" i.e. food insecurity (Schlichting, Hashemi, & Grant, 2018). Child food security therefore means, children having sufficient food to eat, accessibility or affordability to food and food that is healthy and nutritious. Unfortunately, in many parts of the world children cannot remember what they ate last because they have not eaten for many days. Nearly half of all deaths in children under 5 are attributable to undernutrition, translating into the loss of about 3 million young lives a year. Undernutrition puts children at greater risk of dying from common infections, increases the frequency and severity of such infections, and delays recovery. Poverty, natural disasters and war are the major causes for children suffering from undernutrition and malnourishment which is food insecurity.

1.2. Food insecurity

Anything short of the fulfilment of the definition of food security would amount to food insecurity. The meaning of food insecurity should be inferred as an umbrella term encompassing hunger, undernourishment, malnourishment, obesity and no access to food. Though the reasons for food insecurity have been attributed to war, natural disasters, political turmoil, poverty, the ensuing underlying theories provide the fundamental principles related to the concepts. The Malthusian theory by Thomas Malthus

(2018) states that, populations grow in geometric progression. A geometric progression is a sequence of numbers where each term after the first is found by multiplying the previous one by a fixed, non-zero number called the common ratio. For example, in the sequence 2, 10, 50, 250, 1250, the common ratio is 5. Additionally, he stated that food production increases in arithmetic progression. An arithmetic progression is a sequence of numbers such that the difference between the consecutive terms is constant. For example, in the sequence 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, the common difference of 3. He derived this conclusion due to the Law of Diminishing Returns. In other words, populations will grow faster than the supply of food leading to a shortage of food. In the late 1960s, classic Malthusianism declined in popularity after Ester Boserup, a Danish economist who lived from 1911 to 1999, argued successfully that technological development could boost food production to keep up with population growth for many years. She was mainly reacting against Malthus's model of the relationship between population growth and food security. Contrary to Malthus, she argued that population growth is a major factor determining agricultural development, hence, food security. Ester Boserup's theory is known as an optimistic theory, and she based her theory on the following indications: a) If population increases, there is larger workforce and more food is produced; b) If population increases, mechanization occurs; more food is produced as more effective means of producing high yields of crops using mechanization are devised; and c) If the population increases, there will be increase in fertilizers use and more food production for the growing population, hence more food security (Mende, Mwatawala, & Kayunze, 2015).

Boserup's arguments are shared by other anti-Malthusians, for example, Julian Simon (as cited in Kayunze, Mwageni, & Ashimogo, 2008) who argues that "The ultimate resource is people; skilled, spirited, and hopeful people who will exert their will and imaginations for their own benefit, and so inevitably, for the benefit of us all." Another anti-Malthusian scholar before Malthus was Marquis de Condorcet (1743) who argued that "with high population increase, a very small amount of ground will be able to produce a great quantity of supplies of greater utility or higher quality" (Kayunze, Mwageni, & Ashimogo, 2008). In addition, Condorcet argued that education would result in lower birth rates as rational human beings would see the value of limiting family size, giving their children the prospect for longer and happier lives.

Amartya Sen (cited in Devereux, 2001) in his book "Poverty and Famines" published in 1981, made the point that the starving are often denied access to food rather than suffering because food is unavailable and in so doing introduced the idea of entitlement to food. The Entitlement approach concentrates on each person's entitlement to commodity bundles, including food, and views starvation as resulting from failure to entitlement to a bundle including enough food. Entitlements are defined as "...the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces" (Devereux, 2001). Woldemeskel (1990) opposed Sen's analysis of food security in terms of food access through entitlements rather than food availability (Mende, Mwatawala, & Kayunze, 2015). He argued that the entitlement approach is narrow because it dwells on only possession, while food security attainment is contingent upon four determinants: (a) availability, (b) institutional elements, (c) market forces and (d) possessions. According to Woldemeskel (1990) the entitlement approach recognises the contribution of food availability to food security but dismisses it, and completely ignores institutional elements (Mende, Mwatawala, & Kayunze, 2015). Examples of institutional elements include access to extension services, credit facilities and/or financial institutions, farmer groups and or associations.

Moreover, market forces include food prices in market places and prices offered to farmers for their agricultural produce.

These theories that correlate with the current situation in food insecurity, would suggest that these theories demarcate why food insecurity arises. No doubt, the human population is increasing the world over. However, the advancement of technology, especially in the agricultural industry such genetically modified crops has managed to overcome concerns related to the supply and demand of food. Nonetheless, without precautionary measures, there is possibility that the resources for food would be exhausted not because of population growth but because of the lack of measures to ensure sustainability. For example, concentration on bio fuels, lack of control of migration of workers to industries, land grab by foreigners, never ending economic turmoil, and persistent conflicts are also reasons for concern that affect food security. These reasons also inhibit the entitlement to food as Sen theorised. These theories however, do not reflect on nutritious eating habits nor obesity among children which are also factors for concern under food insecurity.

2. Problem Statement

Food insecurity among children poses a significant threat to the healthy development of children around the world such as stunted growth, poor cognitive development, stress, illnesses and many other negative repercussions which further leads to socio-emotional and behavioural consequences. A new study released by UNICEF reveals higher levels of poverty and malnutrition among children living in low-cost housing in Kuala Lumpur, compared to the national average (UNICEF Malaysia Press, 2018). If children from the urban poor suffer from food insecurity, what more the children living in the rural areas who may suffer the same. Sen's Entitlement theory attributes food insecurity to poverty which prevents affordability and accessibility to food. Political and other tangible interventions should be undertaken to address food insecurity not only to promote healthy development of children in Malaysia but also to assure sustainability of food security as a precautionary approach.

3. Research Questions

- 3.1.** Why should food insecurity among children in Malaysia be addressed?
- 3.2.** How should food insecurity among children in Malaysia be addressed

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discourse on the significance of food insecurity among children in Malaysia and the interventions i.e. legislative measures that should be undertaken to address food insecurity. Malaysia faced a food crisis in 2008. Crops such as rice, wheat and corn depleted drastically in producing countries that it affected imports to Malaysia. Key rice exporters, Thailand and Vietnam stopped exporting rice to Malaysia to cater for their domestic demand which triggered the grain price at one point to surge by 200%. Rice is the staple food in Malaysia and it obviously, is a cause for concern if Malaysia

runs out of rice because it has been said that “if rice supplies dry up, cattle and pigs don't starve, people do” (Menelly, 2016).

Although Malaysia is self-sufficient in poultry, pork, fish and eggs, it is still dependent on the imports of numerous food commodities such as rice, fruits, dairy milk and beef. In 2015, the food import bill was almost RM45.4 billion while the exports were only RM 27 billion leaving a deficit of over RM18 billion. If this situation continues, Malaysia will be unable to render a continuous food supply to its people and it will most likely face a food crisis in the near future. Even though, agriculture is an important sector in Malaysia's economic development, the focus, however, is on commercial crops such as palm oil, cocoa and rubber which are the main agricultural exports. The agriculture sector contributes 8.5 per cent to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) as of 2016 - a slight reduction by 0.3 per cent to the value of A\$27.5 billion in 2015 (“Agriculture - Malaysia - For Australia...”, 2019). In the agro-food sector, Malaysia spent A\$1.35 billion on food imports from Australia in 2015 which included cereals and pulses (A\$283 million), animal derived products including beef, veal and sheep-meat (A\$388 million), sugar derived products (A\$133 million), dairy (A\$193 million) and alcohol including wine (A\$65 million). Raw produce such as cereals and dairy products are brought into the country for further processing. Malaysia is self-reliant for poultry, pork and eggs, but is significantly dependent on importing 14 per cent of its beef demands from Australia (“Agriculture - Malaysia - For Australia...”, 2019). Hence, food supplies in Malaysia are heavily reliant on imports and not self-cultivation of agro based produce. This heavy reliance on imported food that caused the food crisis in 2008 is a cause for concern. Thailand and the Philippines stopped exporting rice to Malaysia for fear that the rice supply would run out in their own country. Consequently, Malaysia had to strike a barter system deal with China to supply rice to Malaysia. Regardless of imported food, self-sufficiency and self-reliance of food is therefore pertinent so that an adequate supply of food is always available to feed its society especially children.

Every household in Malaysia with children should have sufficient and healthy food to eat. A study by UNICEF amongst children living in low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur indicates otherwise (United Nations Children's Fund Malaysia, 2018). The study focusses only on a small population of city dwellers in low-cost flats. It excludes children placed in institutionalised settings and street kids. Nor does it reflect children living in rural settings. Nonetheless, it is understood that if the study by UNICEF demarcates food insecurity among the urban poor, what more the children staying in rural settings below the poverty line. Food insecurity is also faced by street kids or homeless kids. It has been reported that about 500 children are left to loiter at night in the backstreets minutes away from the bright lights of Kuala Lumpur city centre. Some are as young as six-years old. Some have no home to go to; others cannot go home because home is where their mothers work as prostitutes (United Nations Children's Fund Malaysia, 2018). Consequently, whether they have staple food to eat let alone nutritious food is in doubt. Sabah, a state in Malaysia, reports the highest number of street kids (The Borneo Post, 2018). Street kids begging for alms is a common feature seen in most restaurants in Sabah. These kids visibly suffer from food insecurity.

5. Research Methods

The qualitative research method was adapted to seek an in-depth understanding of the social phenomena of food insecurity among children using discourse analysis of primary and secondary sources.

The doctrinal approach that focus on case-law, statutes and other legal sources was applied to analyse the law within itself i.e. past, current future to analyse the lacunae that needs to be addressed. Comparative analysis was used to suggest a proposal for reforms.

6. Findings

Food insecurity can impair a child's ability to concentrate and perform well in school. Food insecurity is also linked to behavioral and emotional problems from preschool through adolescence. A study conducted by UNICEF in 2018 reveals that a segment of children in Malaysia do suffer from food insecurity. The study stated that almost all children (99.7 per cent) in the low-cost flats sampled in the study live in relative poverty and 7 per cent in absolute poverty. About 15 per cent of children below the age of five are underweight; 22 per cent of the children are stunted; 23 per cent of the children are either overweight or obese (UNICEF Malaysia Press, 2018). This study discounts children placed in orphanages and street kids. There are no reports on child food insecurity among children living in orphanages but child food insecurity among street kids has been reported to be serious especially in Sabah. Children placed in Destiny for Children Schools (DFC) report they eat only if parents bring home food to feed them which is only sometimes. The DFC undertake measures to provide breakfast and lunch during the school term (The Borneo Post, 2018). The state government of Selangor, one of the states in Malaysia, introduced food stamp benefits to the lower income group families. Eligible families would receive basic food supplies such as cooking oil, rice (10kg), sugar, flour, and milk every month. However, the food stamp benefit implemented in Selangor does not extend to the other states. Despite this food stamp benefit provided by the Selangor government, a study conducted in rural areas like Kampung Merbau Berdarah in the District of Sabak Bernam, Selangor, the District of Gombak, Selangor and Labu Estate in Negeri Sembilan indicate that people are suffering from food insecurity (Norhasmah, Zalilah, Mohd Nasir, Kandiah, & Asnarulkhadi, 2010).

The Vision and Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry, 2016-2025 and the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework on Food Security, the Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security, 2015-2020 are magnanimous projects undertaken by ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). The undernourished population, however, is reported the highest in Lao PDR, followed by the Philippines and by Cambodia. Indonesia, a large middle-income country, exhibits a serious problem of wasting for children under five, a worsening malnourishment among children under five in Cambodia and an average calorie deficit in the Philippines. The micronutrient deficiencies especially anaemia remains a public health problem in many countries in the ASEAN region.

India is one example where legislative measures have been undertaken at national level to regulate food security. For example, the state of Chhattisgarh, Food Security Act, 2012 law was enacted by the Chhattisgarh government. It was passed on 21 December 2012, by the State Assembly unopposed with the objective of "access to adequate quantity of food and other requirements of good nutrition to the people of the State, at affordable prices, at all times to live a life of dignity." The Act benefits 4.2 million families living in Chhattisgarh. The Act also covers families headed by a destitute, a widow or a differently abled person and is aimed at taking care of poor, children living in hostels or *ashrams*, pregnant women as well as those hit by disaster. Similarly, at the national level, India enacted the National Food Security Act, 2013

(also known as the Right to Food Act). An Act of the Parliament of India, it aims to provide subsidized food grains to approximately two thirds of India's 1.2 billion people. The governments of two other states in India, Odisha and Assam, implemented the Food Security Act 2013 in 2015.

A country whose population suffers from food insecurity would be breaching the fundamental human rights to life. Worst still if the victims of food insecurity are children. It is vicious and inhumane if while children are dying of hunger or malnourishment, we boast of the evolution of science and technology advancing at all quarters of life and yet children don't have sufficient food to eat. Worst still are conflict affected countries. For example, it is a known fact that almost the entire population of Gaza is in need of assistance, and about half of the people in Syria and Yemen are suffering from severe food insecurity. Destruction of infrastructure, together with disruptions in access to markets, renders goods and services prohibitively expensive or makes them unavailable altogether. Therefore, political and other tangible interventions are urgent at both global and national level.

6.1. Suggested solutions: A Precautionary Approach

The precautionary principle also known as preventative measures, has four central components: taking preventive action in the face of uncertainty; shifting the burden of proof to the proponents of an activity; exploring a wide range of alternatives to possibly harmful actions; and increasing public participation in decision making which should be the basis for policy consideration on food insecurity specifically relating to child food insecurity. The precautionary principle is significant in regulating food insecurity because of the perception that the pace of efforts to combat problems such as climate change, ecosystem degradation, and resource depletion is too slow and that environmental and health problems continue to grow more rapidly than society's ability to identify and correct them. The precautionary approach should be applied to the following suggested solutions:

- Embargo on food: to encourage self-reliance;
- Revival of agricultural sector (focus on organic food):to encourage self-sufficiency of pesticide free food and to refrain from reliance on Genetically Modified Crops
- Regulate prices of some commodities;
- Increase state subsidies to the agricultural sector: to encourage farming;
- Introduce food stamps for those living below poverty line: to counter entitlement limitations to food.
- Introduce healthy food aid to children in need especially when they are at school.
- Balance in using agriculture for biofuel
- Monitoring of land grab

These measures will sort out food insecurity among children. Specific measures such as creating awareness of healthy eating, reducing wastage, and health consciousness in schools are preventative measures to educate children about food insecurity apart from providing special meals for children from a poor background.

7. Conclusion

Malaysia has formulated the National Agro-Food Policy (DAN) 2011-2020, which emphasizes on expanding food production to ensure food supplies are sufficient, of better quality, edible, nutritious and affordable. Such measures are meant for emergencies for the population as a whole. Precautionary proactive solutions as suggested specially for children, however, should better combat food insecurity among children.

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