



## Whitewashing Food Security: The Malaysian Context

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**Abstract:** Malaysia has for recent years been self-sustainable for broilers and eggs, and is considered one of the biggest consumers for these products per capita. Yet the recent poultry crises in the year 2022 highlighted the event as a food security issue. Misconception on the intended definition of food security puts greater risks on the long-term planning towards stable food production. Whitewashing food security to promote policy driven decisions should be scrutinized, and understanding of the fundamentals of a food production system should be emphasized.



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Whitewashing is the act of glossing over or covering up vices, crimes or scandals or exonerating by means of a perfunctory investigation or biased presentation of data. The concept of food security is clear with its optimal aim to the maintenance of human life and its progeny. This concept in food security is further expanded to the four main components of availability, access, stability and utilization of food, and has been defined by the Food and agriculture organization as;

*“Food and nutrition security exists when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to food, which is safe and consumed in sufficient quantity and quality to meet their dietary needs and food preferences, and is supported by an environment of adequate sanitation, health services and care, allowing for a healthy and active life.”*

(FAO, 2001)

Whitewashing food security meanwhile can be defined as to purposely indiscriminately using the term food security as a reason to justify a decision based on incomplete information on the actual status surrounding an issue of food concern. Recent global events such as the Covid-19 Pandemic showed how fragile countries' food supply systems are. With looming instability around the world, from conflicts to natural disasters, countries have taken upon themselves to evaluate concerns of food insecurity.

## 2. BROILER END EGG SHORTAGE IN MALAYSIA

In 2022, Malaysia was faced with a shortage of chicken and eggs in the market. This prompted policy to import poultry products, and stop its export to neighboring countries like Singapore. The crisis was highlighted as a food security threat to Malaysia by the majority of local media. It is interesting to note that Malaysia is one of the highest chicken consumers in the world. The poultry industry in Malaysia is a rare success story in the country's food industry. It is one of the only successful food industries in the country, making Malaysia almost self-sufficient in both eggs and chicken, and providing Malaysians with their cheapest source of protein. The industry was privately driven to this point over the last three decades without much governmental support, testifying to the acumen of both farmers and investors. The only problem the industry has not solved is feed, for which it relies almost exclusively on imports. The self-sustainability ratio (SSR) for poultry and eggs from 2016 until 2020 have always exceeded 100% (Zayadi, 2021). The question later arises on justifying the no export policy for poultry, which only accounts to 2% of monthly broiler production at that time. Other attempts to increase the diversity of protein sources in the country, including through government policy and funding, have largely failed. Beef and fish are more expensive protein alternatives than chicken and eggs, and the country is not close to being self-sufficient in any of them.

The rhetoric of "cartels" used to describe both the price increases and shortage of chicken is unfortunate and reflects an incorrect view of the problem. The increase in chicken prices can also be due to disruptions in supply chains as a result of the global crisis such as from Covid-19, the Ukraine-Russia conflict, increase in transcontinental logistics costs, or natural disasters in agriculture producing countries. The weakening of the ringgit further adds to the instability to ensure our own food supply stability.

The Malaysian Competition Act 2010 prohibits anti-competitive agreements and the abuse of dominant position in the market. This particular act may not be implemented fully since the Malaysian government still restricts a ceiling for broiler and eggs. Further analysis must look into slowly doing away with ceiling price and allow the market to open up, encouraging innovations to be developed, and actually giving relevance to prevent abuse of dominant position in the poultry market. The negative impacts of discrimination against the agricultural sector through non-compensated cheap food price policies include decreased welfare for farm households and decreased farm investments. This in turn harms the current and future food security of most rural households (Boratyńska & Huseynov, 2017).

## 3. WHITEWASHING FOOD SECURITY

Whitewashing food security has been indiscriminately used to justify actions and approvals at various decisional levels without understanding the complex food production system, which can be detrimental to the country. The pretext of food security in decision making does occur (Candel, 2014) requires policy makers to be well versed in the domain of a food production system before any conclusion is developed. Given the global trend of diminishing arable land, food security pessimists argue that the emphasis must be on increasing yield per hectare, rather than expanding the amount of land cultivated (Pannel and Yin, 2018). However, there are questions about how much more efficiency can be achieved, as many of the techniques used to increase yields over the past few decades are already well-known. Other factors that suggest a less than optimistic food availability scenario in the future include loss of genetic diversity (Voss-Fels et al 2019), pest migration, and pesticide resistance (Kavhiza et al, 2022). Pessimists are also alarmed by the general lack of investment in agricultural technology throughout the world, which will have a negative long-term impact on agricultural sustainability (Calicioglu et al, 2019).

There is also growing concern among food security experts about the gradual change in dietary habits that is occurring in many parts of the developing world (Vermeulen et al, 2020). In Asia, for instance, there has been a notable trend away from a largely vegetarian diet to a Western-style diet that includes meat (Rizvi et al, 2018). Most experts agree that a diet that includes meat places a much greater strain on agricultural resources than a strictly vegetarian diet (Schiermeier, 2019). This means that a vegetarian diet can support a larger population than a meat-based diet.

Policies that have negative impacts on countries that rely on food imports, such as export restrictions and direct price controls, should be avoided. These policies distort price incentives and discourage production (Evenett, 2020). General subsidies should also be avoided as much as possible, as they are

often costly and do not target those who need them the most. Over time, these subsidies can become entitlements (Kasy, 2018) and measures to develop sustainable strategies should be gradually introduced.

All of the measures taken by governments to protect citizens from rising prices come at a fiscal cost, either in the form of reduced tax revenue or increased spending on social safety nets (Elenev et al, 2022) and support measures for small farmers (Searchinger et al, 200). This means that governments must carefully allocate their limited resources to cover these costs. In the long run, prices will need to adjust to reflect changes in the underlying cost of production. However, in the short run, policy measures can be used to mitigate the negative impacts of price shocks. The task of policy makers is complicated by the uncertainty about how permanent recent increases in food and fuel prices are. But we should ensure that short-term measures do not discourage long-run supply responses.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Maintaining food supply stability is a political and economic need for Malaysia, rather than an issuance of food security at this current moment in time. Whitewashing food security is not a pretext to a decision. Without prior understanding of the food production system and its complexity, there is bound to be biases within the decision-making process that does not help to mitigate a potential food crisis. Redefining food stability should be on the basis of a complete value chain to understand critical control points that can lead to probable crisis within the four main components of availability, access, stability and utilization to that particular commodity, and not on the basis of food security, which should be exclusive for the maintenance of human life and its progeny.

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