

# Socioeconomic Factors, Food Supply and Food Security among Communities at the Malaysia-Thailand Border: A Human Security Approach

Bakri Mat<sup>#1</sup>, Ku Nurasyiqin Ku Amir<sup>#2</sup>

<sup>#</sup> *School of International Studies (SOIS), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)*

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding address: bakri@uum.edu.my

<sup>2</sup>kunurasyiqin@gmail.com

**Abstract**— Food security is one of the non-traditional security components that forms the basic needs of a nation, households, and individuals. Any problem in food supply or disruption in any of the four key elements of food security will threaten security and well-being of the citizens. In Malaysia, although food availability is ensured through via local production and imports at national level, accessibility and utilization are not yet fulfilled as certain groups and households are still unable to access and utilise adequate food accordingly. Therefore, this research attempts to examine the socioeconomic factors that may contribute towards food insecurity among Malaysian households within communities in Malaysia-Thailand border using human security approach. This study is conducted using qualitative research method to collect and analyse both primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through official documents and an in-depth interview with key informants among Malaysian households of the communities near Malaysia-Thailand border, local leaders and academicians. Meanwhile, the secondary source of data was obtained from published materials and online documents such as books, journal articles and reports. The findings indicate that socioeconomic factors were pertinent in contributing towards food insecurity among the households in form of household income, insufficient assistance program, and high living costs. These factors form the main foundation in ensuring the sanctity and wellbeing of the households. In designing state policies, the socioeconomic issues should be prioritized as in ensuring human security of the vulnerable groups, specifically the B40 households. In addition, continuous effort in developing societal empowerment and resilience are vital to achieve citizen wellbeing.

**Keywords**— Food Security, Food Supply, Human Security, Malaysia-Thailand border, Non-Traditional Security, Security Studies

## 1. Introduction

Food security is defined by the World Food Summit (1996) as a condition “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life”. As one of the seven core security elements outlined by the United Nations Development Program in 1994 in Human Development Report, food security is an area that may threaten the security of a state from both macro (national) and micro (individuals) levels of analysis. As we deepen the analysis into the perspective of the individuals, the issue of food insecurity is related to many essential facets of human wellbeing including health, dietary intake, work performance and quality of life.

The existing policies in relation to food security issues in Malaysia has been unsatisfactory. Primarily it is due to the understanding that food security of a state comes as a proxy of uninterrupted food supply, hence the food availability dimension. However, this definition is unable to address the capability of households in accessing adequate food items i.e. accessibility. Previous researches have examined the issue of food security in rural areas in Malaysia, as well as a case study of Orang Asli in Perak [9].

Compared to other parts of the world where borders are contested and unstable, the Malaysia-Thai border are relatively calm and peaceful. Padang Besar and Bukit Kayu Hitam area serves as a linchpin for transportation of goods, tourism and trade between both countries. However, there is scarce information on the contribution of the economic development towards the food security of households in the area. Studies focusing on residents in this area despite their small size, are important as it can help us understand the status of

food security among the people especially in the rural areas of Kedah. Hence, this research aims to study the phenomena of food security of the community at Malaysia-Thai border, the food supply, and how socioeconomic factors contributes towards food insecurity, from human security perspective.

## 2. Literature Review

As one of the non-traditional security threats, food security is often discussed within the economic security discourse [9]. However, food security on its own is a multi-disciplinary field that is influenced by many other factors including climate change and environmental degradation. Globally, the measures in eradicating hunger and ensuring food security are still taking place. In the latest World Food Summit report, it is recorded that the number of undernourished people in the world has been on the rise since 2014 and it is estimated to reach 821 million by 2017 [7]. In understanding the phenomena of food security, four dimensions are outlined: availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability [6].

Malaysia has been involved in several regional cooperation strategies on food security, specifically with neighboring ASEAN countries, in ensuring the national rice reserve. With the national rice production increasing gradually over the years, the self-sufficiency level (SSL) has been hovering at 70%. Consequently, we have been relying on rice imports from Vietnam and Thailand to fulfil the overall rice supply and demand. However, major events such as the 2008 food crisis had shown that Malaysia is vulnerable to shocks and had to resort in buying rice supplies from other rice producing countries to maintain the food reserve before dwindling to a threatening level [15]. Several factors have been identified as hindering the ASEAN regional cooperation such as conflict of interests and difficulty in maintaining commitment from participating countries [15]. These factors until now remain as a big challenge in the food security of ASEAN. In comparison to other region such as the European Union, ASEAN has a large room for improvement.

From national perspective, Malaysia is a country that possesses the potential to become global food producer as the nation consists of vast land that is suitable for cultivation including a network of

rivers that spans as efficient irrigation. However, the direction of the national development in agriculture has not been at par with industrial development. Based on an analysis of agricultural development in Malaysia until 2000, the author concluded that the policies implemented in Malaysia had failed to meet the goal of making this country a self-sufficient food producer [4].

Going further down the chain of analysis, food insecurity among the households in Malaysia is considered a transitory event [5]. In the latest report by UNICEF (2018), it is manifested that there is a huge economic gap between the citizens which contributes towards food insecurity. Despite the rapid development in Kuala Lumpur, exists a part of the Malaysian population that are still vulnerable to the socioeconomic factors which hinders them from accessing adequate food. As a result, their food security is compromised in order to survive on daily basis [18].

Human security is an alternative concept which shifted the focus of security from focusing on the state as the referent object, to the human or individuals which made up the core of the state. It is introduced by the middle power states – Canada, Norway, and Japan- as an alternative to the existing approach of security [16]. By using this approach, human security allows us to emphasize the ‘human’ or ‘individual’ element within a state. The multi-faceted nature of this issue must be acknowledged in understanding the relation between food and human security [14]. Hence, for this research, human security will be defined, in the context of food security, as a condition that exists when the vital core of human lives is protected, and when people have the freedom and capacity to live with dignity via attainment of food [1].

## 3. Research Method

This research has been conducted through qualitative methods at both levels of data collection and data analysis.

### 3.2 Data Collection

Primary data were obtained from in-depth interviews with research participants to gain detailed information on the issue of food security. The participants were stratified to involve various groups including villagers, farmer, students, and community leader, and were chosen purposively.

Before the semi-structured interviews, the participants were briefed about the research objectives and expectation by the interviewer. The number of participants was not determined early on but was based upon the saturation point.

Once there were no new themes obtained from the data collection, the researcher stopped conducting more interviews. In this study, the saturation point was obtained at the 16<sup>th</sup> participant and the interview was stopped. Secondary data was obtained from resources such as books, journals, thesis, reports, magazines, newspapers and online searches. This is crucial to gain a background understanding of the research topic and the conceptual framework from the current literature sources. Two layers of triangulation was obtained in order to view the phenomena from various perspectives from different resources and stratified participants [13].

### 3.3 Data Analysis

All data collected from the interviews and literature reviews were organized systematically. The recordings were transcribed before being analyzed manually using content analysis by identifying the themes and codes before proceeding with the writing and reporting process. The research questions and objective were used as a guide the theme identification process as the author attempts to interpret the meanings from the data.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

Out of the 16 participants, all of them came from the M40 and B40 income groups. It is found that food is available within all households, yet their access to food varies. There is no issue in food supply, hence the continuous food availability. However, viewing from human security perspective allowed us to analyze deeper into the 'freedom from want'. In the households, socioeconomic factors play a dominant role in determining food security. This can be further dissected into three sections which are i) household income, ii) insufficient assistance, and iii) high cost of living.

### 4.2 Household income as a determinant of food security

Household income is the amount of money gained by the households, either by the husband, wife and

the children. The Department of statistics Malaysia (DOSM) has categorized the households based on income groups as a guide of understanding the nature of households earning the lowest income (B40), middle income (M40) and highest income in the population (T20). Although there are arguments on the accuracy of this categorization as well as the possibility of not obtaining the real input of the households, this categorization using ratio of 40:40:20 has been broadly used by the Malaysian agencies in planning their policies. For instance, there are several interventions by the Ministry of Education which specifically targets B40 households. These policies, such as prioritizing students from B40 households to enter boarding schools and the school food initiative (Rancangan Makanan Tambahan) utilized the indicators based on household income grouping.

Based on the interviews with 16 participants of various background, it is ascertained that household income is the main determinant of food security. 10 out of 16 participants revealed income-related reasons as a determinant of food security in the households. In the research context of communities residing at the Malaysia-Thailand border, the household income is attributed by several factors including the number of breadwinner and unemployment. In essence, these are the internal precursor to household economic status.

As our pool of participants were coming from B40 and M40 households, on average they earned between RM 800- 4,000 per month. The range covers the mean value determined by Department of Statistics Malaysia for the B40 and M40 group. However, several participants were unable to provide an estimate as the spouse, father, or mother, as sole income contributor of the household, do odd jobs to raise income. Another respondent clearly mentioned that "*...My mom does not work while dad owns a car painting business. It is a small enterprise, so my dad do most of the work*" [2]

In facing the rising cost of living, the B40 households were the most vulnerable on the economic and financial basis. This scenario is supported with a report by Khazanah Research Institute (2018) which explains the relationship between income and food security. For households earning below RM 5,000, their expenditure patterns will be directly affected by the cost of living. As they earn less, a bigger portion of their income will be spent on food items. Other factors such as high number of dependants will push the need for more food item to be bought from the market [12]. In a long run, the households will compensate with their shortcomings and reduce their consumption

gradually in order to cope with the high living cost and the cycle continues.

Employment also plays a big role in contributing income for the households. Based on the interviews, most of the families rely on a single source of income coming from the father, while the mother becomes a housewife. The existing definition of the workforce in Malaysia does not recognize housewife as a type of labour, although it requires as much manpower as other typical workers.

Furthermore, the Malaysian workforce can be categorized into productive and reproductive work. The mainstream understanding of labour focuses on productive work, which refers to the 'production of goods and services that have monetary value and are traded in the market sphere'. However, the capitalist system is unable to identify another type of labour namely the reproductive workers. This may include care-giving jobs and domestic work which often shouldered by the women. 8 participants mentioned that their mother is a housewife and only 1 respondent stated that her mother assists her father's business.

Consequently, although the households can generate monthly income, it is still inadequate in ensuring their food access to healthy diet. By being unable to meet their requirements in accessing food financially and economically, the household is considered to be food insecure [17]. In this situation, although food is available to the masses, there are still vulnerable groups who are unable to access it. The relation between income stability and access to food is an important correlation in understanding the state of food security within the research context [3].

### 4.3 Insufficient assistance program and interventions

The study has identified several assistance program and interventions aiming to alleviate the living condition of specific households, especially B40. The report by Department of Statistics (2017) has classified the households according to their monthly household income. Subsequently, the B40 households were highlighted in government policies to improve their living conditions. Several government aids in the form of cash handouts and food aids are structured to improve the state of the households and are targeted to different vulnerable groups. Until now, there are several types of intervention including the 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M), zakat (alms), Federal Scholarship (Basiswa Kecil Persekutuan - BKP) and Supplementary Food Plan (Rancangan Makanan

Tambahan - RMT). For the research context of communities living at Malaysia-Thai border, state-based assistance program is the dominant intervention available.

Until now, there are several state-based assistance programs dedicated to improving livelihood of the B40 households such as BR1M and Social Welfare Department assistance programs. Although this incentive receives mixed responses from economists and academician, the cash assistance is well accepted by the citizens [10]. The amount given has been gradually increased since its first debut in 2014 until the recent change of government in May 2018 which marks the end of Barisan Nasional as the current government announced a change in the mechanism of the cash aids and it will be renamed as Living Allowance (Bantuan Sara Hidup – BSH). The question that should be asked here is the efficiency of cash assistance in curbing food insecurity among B40 households. The dependency that the system creates after annual distribution of cash giveaways and the impact towards B40 household resilience should be studied critically.

Zakat assistance is a contribution pooled from collections by Muslims according to certain terms and can only be distributed to a specific category of people named as *asnaf* (or beneficiaries). B40 Muslim families are placed under the *asnaf* category thus making them eligible to accept zakat assistance. However, the money is only given away twice every year during Eid Fitri and Eid Adha. The inconsistency of aid distribution makes it less effective in improving the food security of the households. The sustainability aspect of the zakat distribution should be examined in order to come out with a practical mechanism for implementation.

Other government-based intervention includes the Supplementary Food Plan (RMT) which targets primary school students in rural areas. Since the research participants are in secondary school, they do not receive food assistance. Therefore, the situation of food insecurity is not holistically addressed by the current policies and initiatives.

There are still vulnerable groups and B40 households excluded from the policy design and continuous review is needed. The frequency and amount given by the government must be at par with present living cost. As a result, the government intervention should be able to lift the vulnerable group from the circle of poverty and specifically to be food secure. In the research context, the availability of food does not guarantee that it is accessible to the people.

#### 4.4 High cost of living

High living cost is also one of the contributing factors towards food insecurity among the households. For B40 households, they were pushed to limit their spending at bare minimum as the household income is inadequate. Despite the job security obtained by the head of the household, they still need to implement frugal spending as the monthly income is inadequate to fulfil their basic needs. These measures will allow the family to have access to food, but in terms of food utilization, the household is not secure.

This finding is coherent with a report by Khazanah Research Institute (2018) that due to high living cost, B40 households have a tendency to spend a major part of their income over food items. However, to fulfil the pressing needs of other living essentials such as water and electricity will cause them to compromise on food [12]. Although frugal spending such as rationing and reducing food portion allow the household to survive on a low income, they are actually exposing themselves to vulnerabilities as other dietary requirements are not fulfilled [1].

In 2016, households with incomes below RM2,000 spent 94.8% of their incomes in consumption items listed in the household expenditure survey, increasing from 91.9% of their income in 2014. Conversely, households earning above RM15,000 monthly incomes only spent 45% of their incomes in 2016, increasing from 41.9% of their income. For households with incomes below RM5,000, cost of living could be a key factor affecting their expenditure patterns. This is most telling with regards to expenditure on food. While overall money spent increased for food at home, the quantity of food consumed at home reduced. This reduction in the amount of food at home consumed is not substituted by food purchased away from home, as the quantity consumed also reduced [11]

#### 5. Conclusion

Although regarded as a 'soft threat', food security is an issue that is instrumental in the context of the community at Malaysia-Thai border. Despite the continuous food supply attained from agriculture production and imports, the accessibility dimension is not yet fulfilled. This failure, mainly contributed by economic circumstances, has caused the households and individuals to experience food insecurity. As a result, they are facing effects that undermines their wellbeing.

This case study is a manifestation of the food insecurity issue among the vulnerable groups or the B40 households that are still occurring despite the

interventions designed by the government. Both B40 and M40 households are feeling the pinch of high living costs, but the earlier group experienced direct impact of food insecurity due to lack of social safety nets. Ideally, external intervention will be able to curb or improve the food security status within the household. However, findings from the study has shown that there are still groups that seeps through the policy loopholes and are not receiving the protection they need.

Based on the factors manifested during the interviews, it is found that socioeconomic factors remain as the most pertinent cause of food insecurity among households at the Malaysia-Thai border, specifically due to the household income, insufficient assistance program, and high living cost. There are several conclusions that can be deduced from these findings. Firstly, although the policies and intervention meant for food security managed to ensure food availability in the research context, there are still groups that remains unable to access the food items. Hence, the frequency and amount given by the government need to be reviewed in according to the current living cost.

Secondly, the socioeconomic background is a major precursor in ensuring food security in the household. Unstable income abetted by other social environmental factors will cause the state of food insecurity within the households to deteriorate as these factors generally are interwoven with each other.

Thirdly, a re-evaluation is needed in reviewing the current mechanism of aids for the B40 households, specifically on its effectiveness. Although past policies implemented by the government has been able to ensure freedom from fear, the vulnerable groups are still unable to achieve freedom from want.

#### Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the UUM-RIMC under GPCOE-RU grant Code S/O: 13758. We thank our colleagues from Universiti Utara Malaysia who provided insights and expertise that greatly assisted the research, although they may not agree with all of the interpretations of this paper. We would also like to show our gratitude to everyone for sharing their pearls of wisdom with us during the course of this research, although any errors are our own and should not tarnish the reputations of these esteemed persons.

## References

- [1] Adger, W. N., Pulhin, J. M., Barnett, J., Dabelko, G. D., Hovelsrud, G. K., Levy, M., Tarazona, M. Human Security. In *Climate Change 2014 Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects* (pp. 755–792), 2015.
- [2] Anonymous. *Personal Interview* [September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Bukit Kayu Hitam, kedah, Malaysia]
- [3] Chilton, M., Rabinowich, J., Breen, A., Mouzon, S. *When the Systems Fail: Individual and Household Coping Strategies Related to Child Hunger*, Witnesses to Hunger, Participatory Action Research Study 2008-2013, National Academy of Sciences, 2013. Retrieved from [https://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbasssite/documents/webpage/dbasse\\_084305.pdf](https://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbasssite/documents/webpage/dbasse_084305.pdf) (25-07-2018)
- [4] FM Arshad, Agricultural Development Path. In Malaysia. In FM Arshad, Nik Mustapha, R. A., Kaur, B. & Amin Mahir, A. (eds). *5 Years of Malaysian Agriculture: Transformational Issues, Challenges & Direction*. Serdang, Selangor: UPM Publisher, 2007
- [5] FM Arshad, EF Alias, KM Noh, M Tasrif. Food security: Self-sufficiency of rice in Malaysia. *International Journal of Management Studies*, 18(2), 83–100, 2011.
- [6] Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). *The State of Food and Agriculture: Food Security*, Rome: FAO, 1996.
- [7] Food and Agriculture Organizations (FAO). *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*. Rome: FAO, 2018.
- [8] Hasni, N. H., Halim, S. A., Omar, M., & Ghazali, N. Food Security among Orang Kintak in Pengkalan Hulu, Perak, *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 7(3), 851–866, 2017, Retrieved from <https://ideas.repec.org/a/hur/ijarbs/v7y2017i3p851-866.html> (25-07-2018)
- [9] Hough, P. *Understanding Global Security*, London: Routledge, 2008
- [10] Kajidata Research. *Kajian Tentang Persepsi Rakyat Terhadap Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M)*, 2017. Retrieved from <http://kajidata.com/resources/2017/03/REPO-RT-BR1M-2017-BM-brief.pdf> (15-09-2018)
- [11] Khazanah Research Institute. *The State of Households II*, 2014. Retrieved from [http://www.krinststitute.org/assets/contentMS/img/template/editor/KRI\\_State\\_of\\_Household\\_s\\_II\\_FAQs.pdf](http://www.krinststitute.org/assets/contentMS/img/template/editor/KRI_State_of_Household_s_II_FAQs.pdf) (15-09-2018)
- [12] Khazanah Research Institute. *The State of Households 2018 Different Realities*. Retrieved from [http://www.krinststitute.org/assets/contentMS/img/template/editor/FullReport\\_KRI\\_SOH\\_2018.pdf](http://www.krinststitute.org/assets/contentMS/img/template/editor/FullReport_KRI_SOH_2018.pdf) (15-09-2018)
- [13] Kumar, R. *Research Methodology*. SAGE Thousand Oaks, California: Publications, 2011.
- [14] Liu, F. K. Human security in the Asia Pacific: Perspective of food and health security. *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 18(4), 669–673, 2009.
- [15] Mat, B., Othman, Z., Regional cooperation in addressing food security issues in Southeast Asia: Malaysian perspectives. *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 10(6), 37–47, 2014.
- [16] Othman, Z., Mat, B., Jaringan Komunikasi dan Media: Satu Analisis dari Perspektif Keselamatan Insan [Communication Network and Media: An Analysis from Human Security Perspective]. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 34(3) 2018: 21-39. Retrieved from <http://ejournal.ukm.my/mjc/article/view/25346/8428> [25 January 2019]
- [17] Simon, G.-A. History of food security, (March, 2012). Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/ERP/uni/F4D.pdf> (25-07-2018)
- [18] UNICEF. *Children Without: A study of urban child poverty and deprivation in low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur*, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/FINAL-REPORT-1.pdf> (15-09-2018)