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COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

The impact of food supply chain disruptions amidst COVID-19 in Malaysia

JAFSCD
Responds to
the COVID-19
Pandemic



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Abstract

Over the last 10 years, the food supply has been secured in Malaysia through a combination of local food production and supply of imported food. The occurrence of COVID-19 has disrupted the food supply chain with the lockdown restriction known as the Movement Control Order (MCO) put in place to break the transmission mode of COVID-19. This article outlines the chronological events that took place in Malaysia after a COVID-19 outbreak due to a religious gathering. The impact of MCO on the food supply chain, particularly to urban residents, is also described, with recommended approaches to mitigate the situation.

Keywords

Food Supply Chain, COVID-19, Pandemic, Food Security, Malaysia

Malaysians first took notice of COVID-19 when Wuhan, Hubei, China, went into lockdown at the end of January 2020. The initial reaction to this unprecedented lockdown in a city with a population of 11 million was mixed. Many opined it to be an impractical strategy to curb the virus. In retrospect, however, the Wuhan lockdown was a clear warning to the world that the infectious disease would not be an easy one to subdue.

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Malaysia's number of COVID-19 cases began to increase at the end of February due to an outbreak of 22 cases occurring in a huge *tabligh* religious gathering of 16,000 people in Sri Petaling, a town close to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. As new infections rose and the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, the Malaysian government declared a movement control order (MCO) on March 16, and subsequently a nationwide lockdown on the 18th.

The rapidity and ferocity of the COVID-19 spread necessitated this quick action but left many with little time to plan ahead. In the first week after the implementation of the MCO, food supply chains (particularly those in urban areas) were disrupted due to the restrictions on traffic and market opening hours (Surendan, 2020). Food supply to the cities in Malaysia is mainly reliant on land transport such as lorries to carry the products from farms, which are normally located a distance away from the cities. The farm products are transported to wholesale markets before they are redistributed to be sold in shops, malls, and markets. In addition, there are local wet and night open markets whereby the food products sold are mainly from the smallholder farms located on the outskirts of the cities. These farmers usually bring their products directly to the local open markets to sell.

With the sudden imposition of the MCO, the food supply chain to the local open markets was hugely affected. Due to the difficulty in exercising social distancing in those markets, they were not allowed to open during the lockdown. Thus, on one end of the food supply chain there were multiple reports of farmers giving away or dumping their farm produce due to the perishable nature of the produce (Ng, & Wahid, 2020). On the other end of the chain, there were reports of consumers, especially foreign workers, refugees, and those from lower-income groups, facing difficulties in accessing food to meet their daily dietary requirements.

During this critical time, the government's Welfare Department intervened to help deliver food to underprivileged groups. Several volunteer groups were also set up to help in distributing food to the needy. However, this effort was sporadic, and data on people who are experiencing hunger could not be established.

Food security is a measure of the steady availability of food (ideally, healthy and nutritious food) to the population. It involves the stable supply of food even under catastrophic conditions such as earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, tornados, and pandemics. Malaysia is a country blessed with rich natural resources and no natural disasters except for periodic short-term floods occurring in some parts of the east coast. After the country gained independence in 1957, the government developed strategic plans to achieve self-sufficiency in food production through the National Agriculture Policy (NAP) (Sundaram & Tan, 2019). Prior to the lockdown, food availability and access were not perceived to be issues for the majority of the population.

The onset of COVID-19 served as a wakeup call for all who had previously assumed that food accessibility and availability in Malaysia came naturally. Due to the implementation of the MCO, food security in Malaysia is under threat. It is imperative that policymakers take note of this situation and develop strategies to tackle similar shocks if they reoccur in the future.

One potential strategy is to make use of the advancements in communication technology to disseminate food production information to consumers rapidly and readily. Since internet connections are well established in most big cities in Malaysia, the majority of city dwellers can get access to information with a click of the button. Therefore, it would be beneficial to develop a public database of contacts and information about farm producers to directly link farm producers to consumers. This would provide a viable alternative for farm products to be delivered directly to consumers.

Another potential strategy is to look at ways we could provide incentives to farmers to grow food crops. Currently, Malaysia imports 20% to 30% of its food requirements annually, which amounts to approximately RM34.2 billion ringgit (Ministry of Agriculture, 2018). Even though local production for

food such as rice, meat, fish, eggs, oils, vegetables, and fruits have increased significantly over the years, our dependence on food imports remains heavy. This is partially because local food production is still not capable of meeting the demand of the country's growing population, which reached 32 million in 2019. However, the main reason for the lower local food production is due to lower import food prices, which results in farmers switching to growing cash crops instead of food crops (Sundaram & Tan, 2019). Achieving self-sufficiency in food production is crucial, especially under the current pandemic threat. Since overseas transportation was interrupted, the import of food has also been affected. This will, in turn, push up the food prices and affect the affordability and availability of food for the people.

We need a seed bank for food crops to ensure that their genetic germplasms are preserved for crop diversification. Since Malaysia is strategically located at one of the 17 megadiversity centers of the world, it could house the seeds of many plants, including food crops that are endemic to this region. The potential genetic variability provided by the seeds would be a rich resource for breeders and farmers to achieve agricultural resilience. The role of the seed bank would be to serve as a reserve for us to turn to in order to ensure the supply of a good starting growing material. In times like the pandemic, the government could select fast-growing food crops such as bayam and kangkong and distribute high-quality seeds to people to encourage homegrown food.

In short, Malaysia has achieved security in food by international standards. However, much work needs to be done to ensure the stable availability of healthy and nutritious food to the population so that we can be resilient against future threats and unforeseeable shocks similar to the Covid19 pandemic. 

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