Addressing Malaysia’s nutrition crisis post-COVID-19: Time for nutrition-focused social protection

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has directly resulted in a severe economic crisis and further exacerbated food and nutrition insecurity.

The pandemic has disrupted food supply chains and social and economic crisis are likely to hit the poorest and most vulnerable groups, deepening the gap of food inequality between populations and classes. A comprehensive strategy includes initiatives that cover public health, social security, economic recovery, food and nutrition plus security, all of which are needed to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

Understanding the consequences of COVID-19 for food and nutrition security in Malaysia

Intensive public health efforts have been redirected towards fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, but less attention has been paid to nutrition during the pandemic. COVID-19 has contributed to system disruptions, which could impact all Malaysians, especially women and children. Disruption of feeding programmes and critical preventive care services are likely to result in rising acute malnutrition and child mortality.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought economic insecurity and contributed to food and nutrition insecurity. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to a slowdown in the economy, leading to higher unemployment. Income is likely to be affected and this will result in people purchasing the cheapest calories they can find to feed their families which in turn could contribute to a rising threat of food and nutrition insecurity.

People who are already exposed to critical food and dietary deprivation before COVID-19 are most vulnerable to food insecurity. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, about 4.88 million (25.0%) of adults in Malaysia were identified as food insecure. About 4 million children (23.7%) were experiencing food insecurity and 20.8% (3.5 million) of households reported an inability to feed children with a variety of foods due to financial constraints (IPH, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic would double the number of people facing food crises unless swift action is taken.

Food and nutrition insecurity are linked to malnutrition, where children in households with food insecurity are more likely to be malnourished. Indeed, prevention must start as early as possible since children in Malaysia already have a high prevalence of malnutrition. This can affect children’s physical as well as mental and cognitive development.
Children enjoying a nutritious meal prepared from carrots, winter melon, chicken and rice at a Community Learning Centre.

Beyond the consequences for individuals and families, food insecurity has been linked to long-term economic effects such as higher health care expenditures, lower educational achievement, lost productivity, lower earnings in adulthood and increased risk of poverty later in life. Food insecurity contributes to nutrition deficits and is also linked to the decrease in overall health, and the physical, mental and cognitive development of children in the short and long term. The effects are a prominent part of the cycle of food insecurity, poor health and poverty.

Child-sensitive social protection schemes are important to close the gaps in the current systems and support all families in reducing vulnerabilities, building resilience, and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. However, children are often being left out of various social protection schemes. The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened food and nutrition insecurity leading to an increase in malnutrition especially among children in Malaysia. Therefore, child-sensitive social protection schemes should be considered a key policy instrument to support families with children.

Nutrition-sensitive social protection is needed to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic
Nutrition needs to be at the core of social protection schemes to ensure food accessibility among the most vulnerable. Tailored nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes with different transfer modalities such as in-kind, cash or vouchers, and public food distribution systems should be designed to ensure access to diverse, balanced and nutritious meals. It will be worth considering channeling a higher share of transfers to the bottom 20 who are the most vulnerable to food insecurity. Any food aid through Government or community-based programmes should include nutritious foods and reach those who need it most. Any donation, marketing or promotion of unhealthy foods should not be sought or accepted during the crisis.

It is also essential to develop a real-time food security monitoring system to provide timely data to measure the pandemic’s unfolding effects and keep track of those suffering from hunger and malnutrition. The data is critical to maintain intentional focus attention where the risk is most acute and to ensure that stimulus packages reach the most vulnerable.

Integrated social protection programmes that include training and awareness-raising are needed to improve nutritional knowledge and promote healthy eating practices. Long-term nutrition benefits are often only achieved when these programmes are well-coordinated with complementary nutrition-focused interventions. It is important to ensure that children continue to receive financial support for meals, even though schools are closed. An alternative solution such as food parcels for collection or delivery or voucher schemes can be adopted to ensure that children who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals continue to get them.

In the long-term, social protection programmes need to be adapted to support the most vulnerable during COVID-19 and to protect and promote nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets. It is essential to adapt and scale up nutrition programmes to save lives and avoid major increases in child wasting as medium-term consequences of containment measures and the pandemic’s socio-economic impact. Apart from food and financial aids, coordination between national/sub-national governments and the nutrition sector to develop platforms to support early detection of wasting is also critical.

Recommended priority actions
The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic may well be felt for years; therefore, structural reforms to the social protection system to make poverty reduction among children and families should be the top policy priority. Although the Government has launched robust social protection schemes, nutritional support is not adequately considered. Food and nutrition-sensitive programmes need to be integrated into social protection systems to protect food access and improve nutrition outcomes during a health crisis. Women and children especially those from low-income households should be at the top of the priority list. Investments in nutrition-sensitive COVID-19 responses must be leveraged to mitigate the long-term impact and protect our nation’s wellness.

Endnotes