

FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD CONSUMPTION IN MALAYSIA

R.Nik Mustapha Abdullah, Mohd. Ghazali Mohayidin, Samsinar Mohd. Sidin, Alias Radam and Mohd. Zabid Abdul Rashid

*Faculty of Economics and Management
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor,
Malaysia*

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Introduction

Food plays important roles in social, cultural and religious life of most communities. The problem of food deficit in developing countries, like Malaysia, is generally caused by combination of factors like high population growth rate and high income elasticity for food. Malaysia is a net importer of food and in 1997, the food import bills was about RM11 billion and increasing. The purpose of this study was: (i) To evaluate food situation in Malaysia; (ii) to estimate the demand for selected food items and to forecast future food consumption and supply; (iii) to investigate factors affecting consumers' perceptions on food; and (iv) to propose policies to enhance food security in Malaysia.

Materials and Methods

Both primary and secondary data were utilised in this study. The food balance sheet approach to appraise food availability and consumption utilised secondary data which was obtained from various government and international agencies' publications while the food demand studies made use of primary data from the 1990 Household Expenditure Survey conducted by the Statistics Department, Malaysia. The Almost Ideal Demand System Model was estimated to compute own price elasticity and income elasticity of demand for 16 food categories. The consumers' food perception study also utilised primary data collected from 35 wholesalers and 212 retailers in the food industry and 180 final consumers. The data was analysed using ANOVA and Chi-Squared tests.

Results and Discussion

The results indicated that in 1995 Malaysia was self-sufficient only in fruits, poultry meat, eggs and vegetable oils, and nearly so in pork. The requirement for other major food items must be met through imports. Malaysia produced 75% of her rice requirement, 81% of fish, 57% of vegetables and only 19% of beef and veal. In terms of food intake, on average, a Malaysian consumed 2807 calories, 84.2 gm of fat and 65.2 gm of protein per day in 1995. However the intake of calories and protein was increasing while the fat intake has reduced since 1985. The estimates of the food demand model for the 16 food categories were encouraging where the majority of food items were found to be price inelastic but the income (expenditure) elasticity for all food items were also positive but less than one, indicating that they are necessities. The results were consistent with other studies on food demand in many developing countries. These findings imply that most of the food items categorised in this study occupy important position in the Malaysian diet. Finally, the wholesalers and retailers perceived that freshness, price and hygiene conditions were important attributes to indicate food quality. Meanwhile, price, product quality assurance and speed of delivery were important attributes to suppliers. As for the consumers, evaluations of food quality were specific to the food item. Freshness was found to be the most important factor for the meat category. Although the Malays and Indians emphasised quality in food consumption, the Chinese were found to be the most concerned. Overall, the consumers' level of satisfaction in food quality was satisfactory.

Conclusions

Based on current level of food production and consumption there would be a short fall of production to meet the amount required by the population in the future. Although the country can import food to meet the needs of her population it is important that domestic food production be improved through increased productivity of resources used in food production. With a steady economic growth it is also expected that demand for quality food among the more affluent consumers to increase in the near future. The challenge to policy makers now is to ensure enough quality food for all at a reasonable price.