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Food Affordability in Malaysia: When Markets and Money Decide What to Eat

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Food Affordability in Malaysia: When Markets and Money Decide What to Eat

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Executive Summary

Food affordability in Malaysia is increasingly shaped by urbanisation, wage structures, and market dynamics. With nearly 80 percent of Malaysians now residing in urban areas, access to food is no longer determined by availability but by affordability. Unlike rural households that may engage in subsistence farming, urban residents must purchase all their food, making income levels the key determinant of food security. While Malaysia benefits from relatively low food prices due to open trade policies and government subsidies, low wages and income inequality continue to limit many households' ability to afford adequate and nutritious food.

Although Malaysia's food prices remain below the global average, this does not automatically translate into affordability for all, particularly for low-wage earners. Malaysia's minimum wage is low compared to international benchmarks, and a disproportionately large share of the workforce earns less than two-thirds of the median wage. As a result, a significant portion of the population faces food insecurity despite relatively stable prices.

“While a minimum-wage worker in the Netherlands needs only 4 minutes of labour to buy one litre of milk, a Malaysian worker must work for 58 minutes to afford the same amount”

The study finds that Malaysia is significantly more expensive than many peer countries when it comes to purchasing healthy food options. For instance, while a minimum-wage worker in the Netherlands needs only four minutes of labour to buy one litre of milk, a Malaysian worker must work for 58 minutes to afford the same amount. This affordability gap forces many households to substitute unhealthy, calorie-dense alternatives such as instant noodles and fried foods, which are cheaper but nutritionally inadequate. This dietary shift contributes to rising malnutrition rates, including both undernutrition and obesity, particularly among urban low-income populations who face limited access to fresh and healthy food.

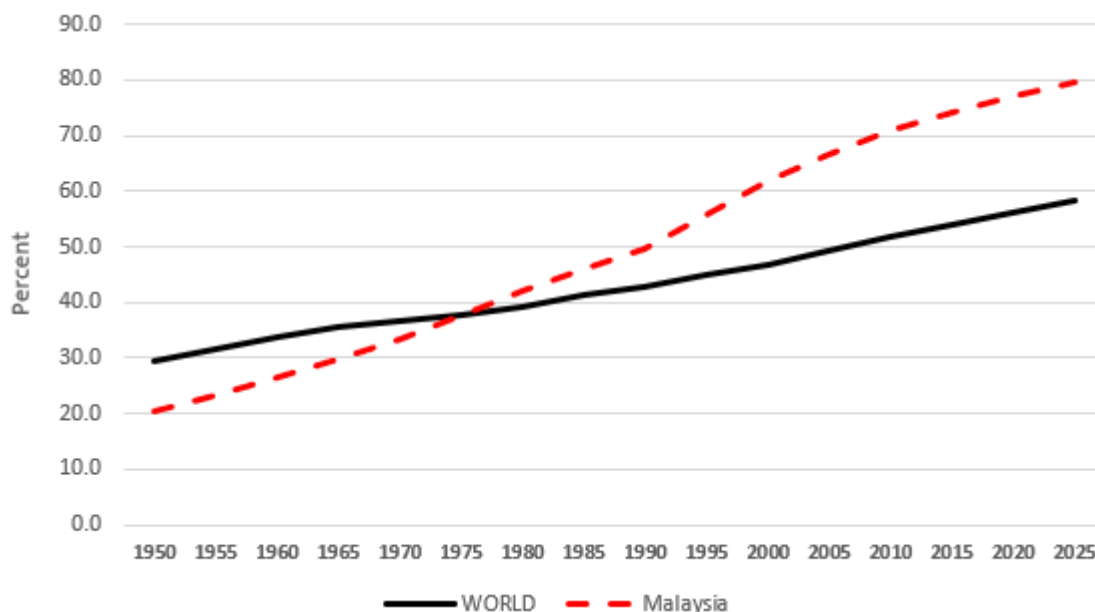
The study identifies three key policy interventions to bridge the affordability gap and enhance food security. First, establishing a social protection floor would provide income security at critical stages of vulnerability, ensuring that all individuals—especially children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities—have the financial means to access sufficient and nutritious food. Second, expanding and strengthening school feeding programs would address both food affordability and nutritional security by providing children with at least one healthy meal per day, alleviating household food costs, and improving educational and health outcomes. Third, implementing an automatic minimum wage adjustment mechanism based on a low-wage indicator, such as two-thirds of the median wage, would help ensure that wages rise in tandem with inflation and economic growth, preventing further income erosion and strengthening the purchasing power of low-income households.

Keywords: Food affordability, food security, minimum wage

1. Context

Malaysia has experienced rapid urbanisation, outpacing both regional and global trends. In 2009, for the first time in human history, the global urban population surpassed the rural population (UNDESA, 2018). Malaysia followed a similar trajectory but at an accelerated pace. At the time of independence in 1957, only 23.4 percent of Malaysians lived in urban areas. By 1990, the country became an urban majority, and today, nearly 79.7 percent of its population resides in cities (UNDESA, 2018). This rapid transformation has been driven by industrialisation, economic diversification, and policies promoting urban-centered development.

Figure 1: Percentage of Urban Population in Malaysia and the World, 1950-2025



Source: (UNDESA, 2018)

At first glance, urbanisation should be beneficial for living standards. Cities are hubs of economic activity, fostering ‘agglomeration economies’—a concentration of industries, services, and labour that generates cost efficiencies for both producers and consumers. Urban density also facilitates cost-effective public service provision, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Historically, urbanisation has been strongly correlated with higher per capita income, making it a hallmark of economic progress (Todaro & Smith, 2014). In Malaysia, urban dwellers, on average, enjoy higher incomes and better access to services compared to their rural counterparts (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024).

Unlike rural households, which have direct access to land and can engage in subsistence farming, urban residents are entirely dependent on markets for food. This structural shift means that food security in cities is determined not by availability but by affordability. Without land to grow their own food, urban dwellers must purchase every meal, making income the primary determinant of access to nutrition.

For low-income urban households, this dependence on the market often leads to difficult trade-offs. The rising cost of living, coupled with stagnant wages, forces many to prioritise cheap, calorie-dense, processed foods over fresh, nutritious alternatives. This dietary shift has

contributed to a growing public health crisis, with increased rates of obesity, malnutrition, and diet-related diseases in Malaysia's urban centres (FAO, 2021). The 2022 Malaysia Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey reported that nearly 20 percent of urban households face some level of food insecurity, with financial constraints cited as a primary reason (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023).

Moreover, urban food markets are highly volatile, with prices fluctuating based on global supply chains, inflation, and market shocks. In 2022, food price inflation in Malaysia reached 6.8 percent, with staple items such as rice, chicken, and vegetables experiencing sharp price hikes (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023). Unlike rural communities, which have some resilience through local food production, urban households have no alternative when prices rise. As a result, the urban poor are disproportionately affected by economic downturns and global food crises.

2. Affordability of Food: Supply and Demand Factors

In cities, access to food is not about availability, it is about affordability. Urban residents must buy every meal since they lack land for self-production. Food affordability is determined by two key factors: The supply side, which encompasses the cost of food production, distribution, and market regulation, and the demand side, which pertains to people's ability to purchase food based on income, wages, and social protection measures.

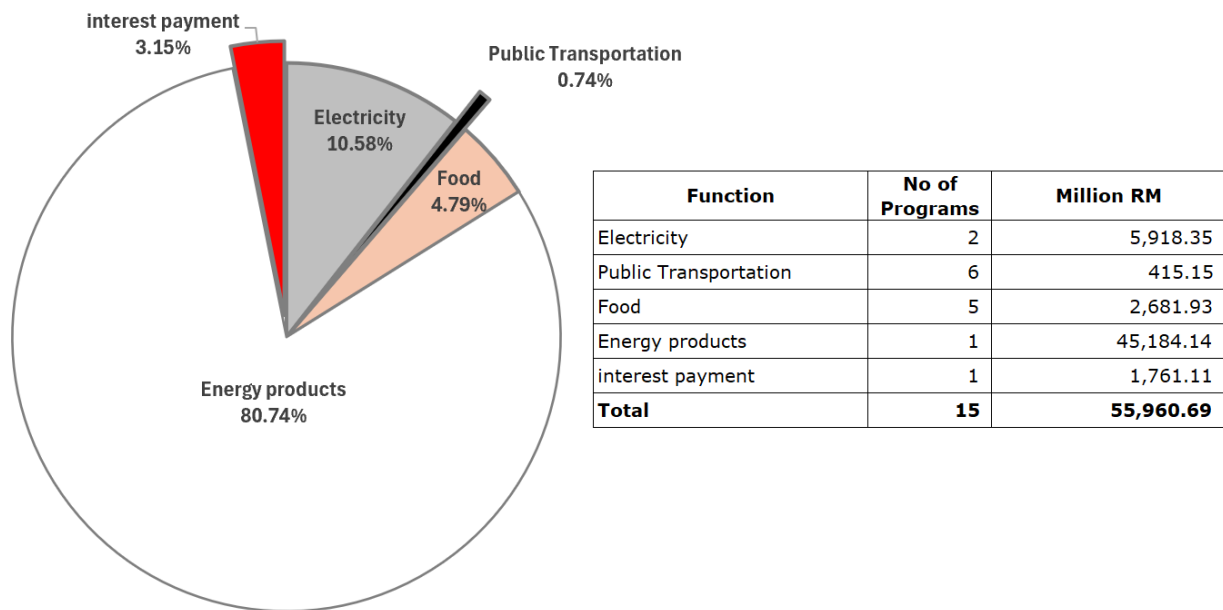
Understanding these interrelated dimensions is crucial for designing policies that ensure equitable access to adequate and nutritious food.

2.1. Supply Side: Food prices

Food affordability on the supply side is influenced by a range of factors, including agricultural production costs, transportation and logistics, and government policies. The cost of food production is highly sensitive to external economic pressures, such as fluctuations in energy prices, labour costs, and climate-related disruptions. Rising fuel prices, for example, increase the cost of farm operations, food processing, and transportation, thereby raising food prices for consumers. Additionally, global trade policies and market fluctuations impact food costs by affecting the availability and price of key agricultural inputs, such as fertilisers and animal feed (World Bank, 2022).

Government interventions play a crucial role in shaping food affordability through subsidies, tariffs, and price controls (FAO, 2023). Malaysia has long relied on extensive subsidy programs to manage food and energy costs. In 2022, a total of 15 subsidy programs were in place across six ministries, with a total allocation of RM55.96 billion, equivalent to 3.12 percent of GDP (Ministry of Finance, 2023) (Ministry of Economy, 2024).

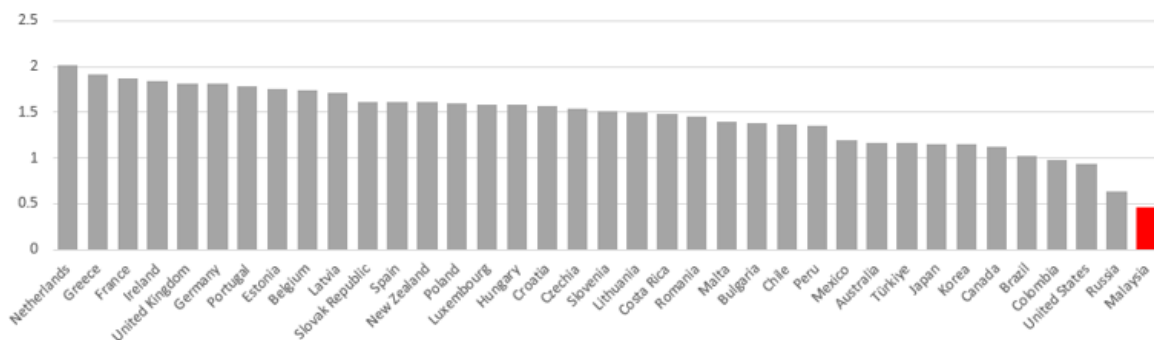
Figure 2: Relative size of disaggregated public spending on subsidies, 2022



Source: based on data from MoF (2023) and Ministry of Economy (2024)

Figure 2 shows subsidies to energy products¹ account for over 80 percent of the total subsidy bill. Consequently, Malaysia enjoys one of the lowest fuel prices globally.

Figure 3: One litre of Gasoline in USD, Selected Countries, 2023

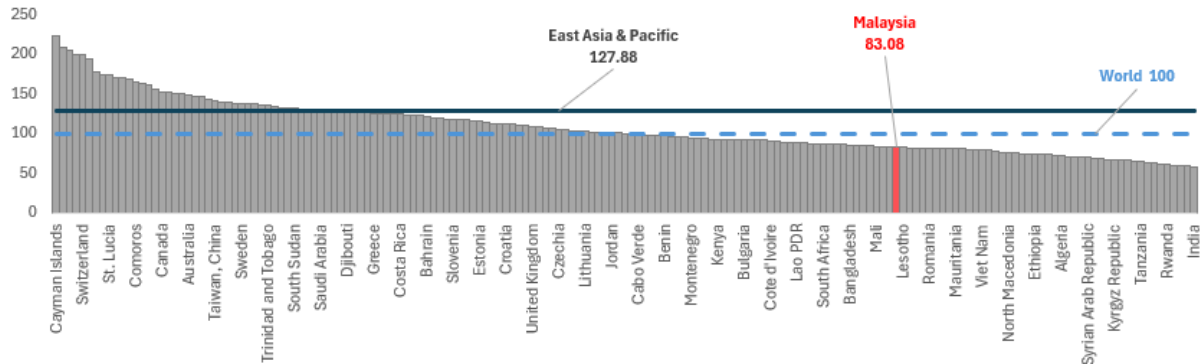


Source: Calculation is based on data from (Numbeo, 2025) and (World Bank, 2025).

¹ Fuels subsidy not only skew the price mechanism, hampering the efficient allocation of resources towards cleaner and more sustainable energy consumption patterns, but it also exacerbates socioeconomic disparities as wealthier households tend to disproportionately benefit from subsidised energy products, such as Ron 95 gasoline, in stark contrast to their less affluent counterparts. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that energy subsidies can impede economic efficiency and innovation. By artificially lowering the cost of energy, subsidies disincentivise investments in energy efficiency measures and renewable energy technologies, hindering the transition to a low-carbon economy. Research has shown that phasing out energy subsidies can spur innovation and investment in cleaner energy alternatives, leading to long-term economic and environmental benefits. (Hosan, Rahman, Karmaker, & Saha, 2023). Further discussion can be found in (Rabi & Mansor, 2024)

Malaysia's combination of open trade policies and a robust subsidy system has established it as one of the more affordable countries globally. According to the World Bank's Price Level Index (PLI)², Malaysia's food price level stands at 83.08 percent of the world average, indicating that food remains relatively inexpensive compared to global standards.

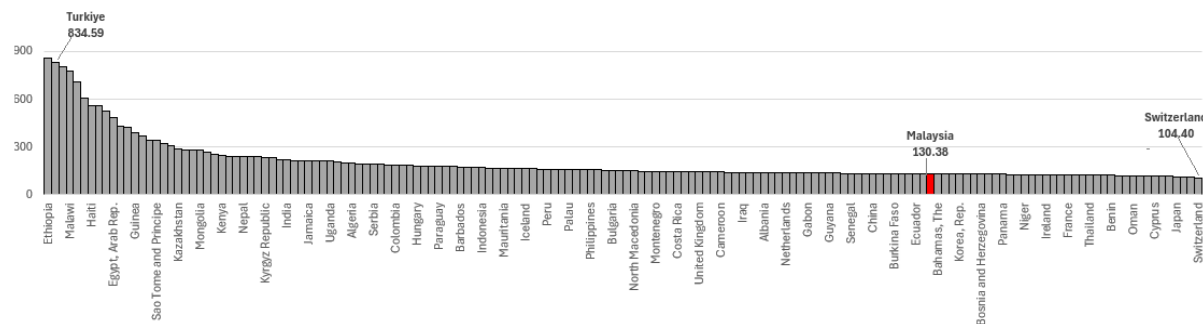
Figure 4: Food Price Level Index, Selected Countries, 2021



Source: Based on data from (World Bank, 2025)

In addition to maintaining lower food prices, Malaysia has experienced moderate inflation over the past decade. Between 2010 and 2023, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) recorded an accumulated increase of 30 percent (World Bank, 2025), a rate lower than that observed in many peer countries. This stable inflationary environment has contributed to limiting drastic fluctuations in food affordability.

Figure 5: Cumulative Increase in CPI between 2010 (base year=100) and 2023, Selected Countries



Source: Based on data from (World Bank, 2025)

While food prices in Malaysia are lower than the global average, price levels alone do not determine whether individuals and households can access adequate and nutritious food. Even when food remains relatively inexpensive, affordability remains a challenge if incomes are insufficient to meet basic needs. The demand side of food affordability is therefore equally crucial, as it encompasses people's purchasing power, which is shaped by income levels,

² The World Bank's International Comparison Program (ICP) compiles the Price Level Index (PLI) to compare living costs across countries. The PLI is derived from Purchasing Power Parities (PPPs), which adjust currency values based on the cost of identical goods and services. It is calculated by dividing PPPs—where 1 PPP equals 1 USD in the U.S.—by market exchange rates and normalising the global average to 100. A PLI above 100 indicates higher-than-average prices, while a lower PLI suggests relatively cheaper costs of living (World Bank, 2025). Further information can be found at: [How does the ICP measure price levels across the world?](#)

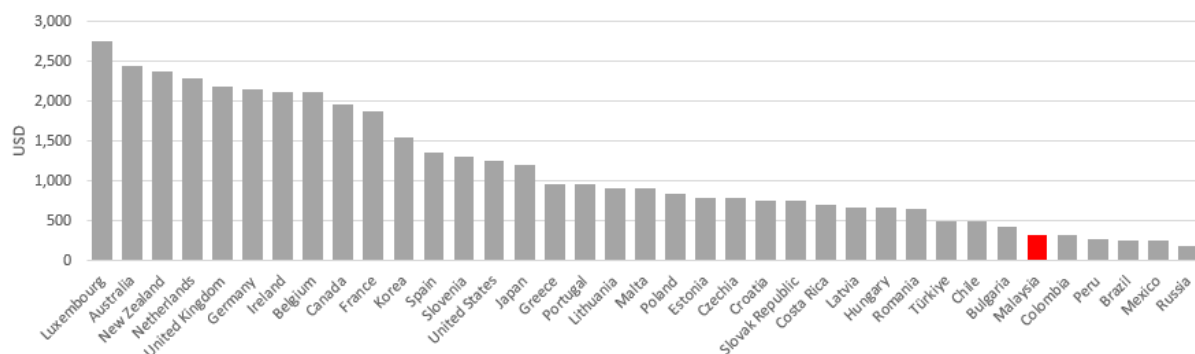
wages, employment conditions, and social protection measures. The next section explores these factors in detail, highlighting how economic disparities and social policies influence food security in Malaysia.

2.2. Demand Side: The Role of Income in Food Affordability

Unlike rural communities, where food can often be grown or acquired through barter systems, urban residents are entirely reliant on the market for their food supply. As a result, income becomes the key determinant of food security in urban settings. Research indicates that urban poverty, rather than food scarcity, is the primary driver of food insecurity, as low-income households struggle to afford sufficient and nutritious food (Frayne, Crush, & McLachlan, 2014).

In Malaysia, despite relatively low food prices compared to global standards, discussed earlier, the inability of many households to earn sufficient income remains a significant barrier to food security. The minimum wage continues to fall below the national poverty line (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023), making it difficult for low-income households to maintain consistent access to nutritious food. International comparisons further highlight Malaysia’s income challenge—minimum wages remain lower than those of peer countries, limiting the purchasing power of many workers.

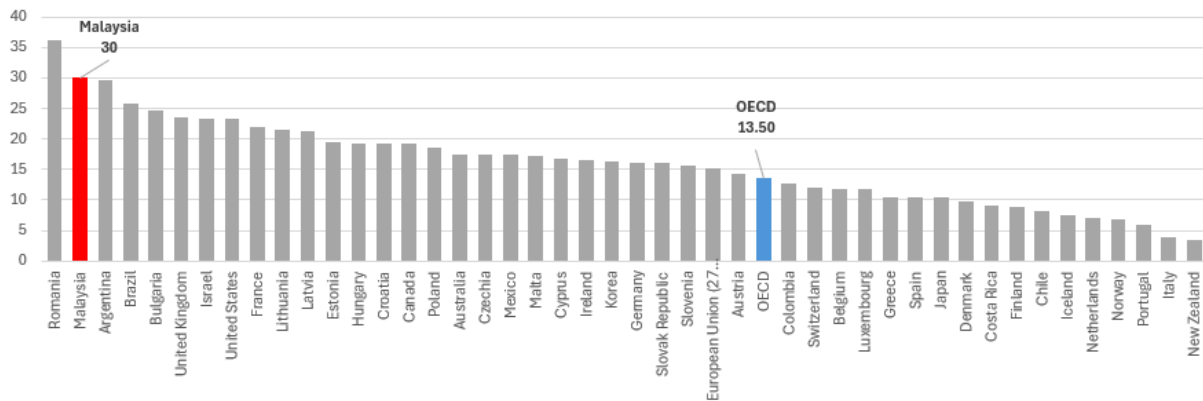
Figure 6: Minimum Wage in Selected Countries, USD, 2023



Source: Calculation is based on data from (World Bank, 2025), (OECD, 2025), and (IMF, 2023).

In contrast to many other countries, where only a small percentage of workers earn at or near the minimum wage, in Malaysia, a substantial portion of the workforce falls into the low-wage category. The incidence of low pay—defined as earning less than two-thirds of the median wage—is exceptionally high, affecting over 30 percent of workers, more than double the 14 percent low-pay incidence rate observed in OECD countries (OECD, 2025). This means that not only are wages lower in absolute terms (depth), but also a much larger segment of the population is affected by inadequate earnings (width). The combination of these two factors intensifies financial constraints on food affordability, leaving many households unable to consistently access a nutritious diet.

Figure 7: Incidence of Low Wages, 2023 (or latest year)



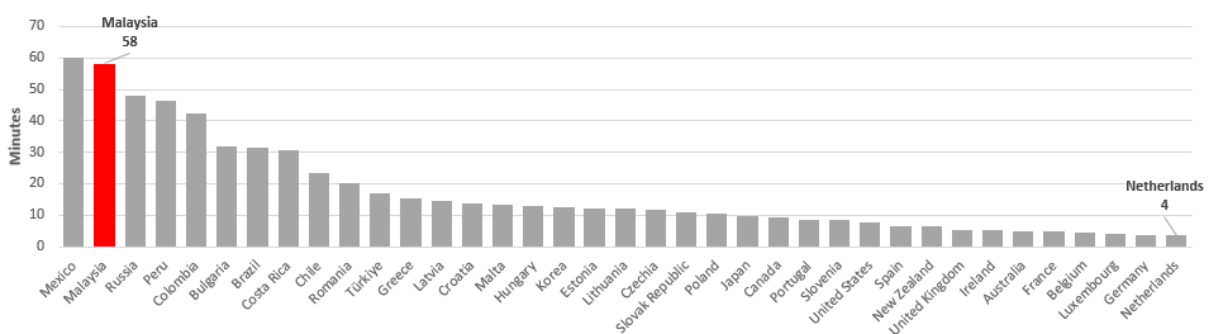
Source: Based on data from (OECD, 2025) and (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024)

The combination of low wages and a high proportion of low-wage workers creates a significant affordability gap, particularly in relation to food security. Even in a country with relatively low living costs, the widespread prevalence of low wages continues to constrain food affordability.

A cross-country comparison reveals that minimum wage earners in Malaysia face a greater burden when purchasing basic nutritious food items than their counterparts in other nations. This disparity arises because, while food prices may be lower in absolute terms, the purchasing power of low-wage workers remains weak relative to food costs.

A comparative analysis of work time required to purchase essential food products further illustrates this challenge. For instance, while a minimum wage worker in the Netherlands needs only four minutes of labour to buy one litre of milk, a worker in Malaysia must work for 58 minutes to afford the same amount. This significant difference underscores the structural wage inadequacies in Malaysia, where minimum earnings do not align with basic nutritional needs, thereby reinforcing economic barriers to food security.

Figure 8: Cost of one Litre of Milk Measured in Minutes of Work at Minimum Wage³, 2023



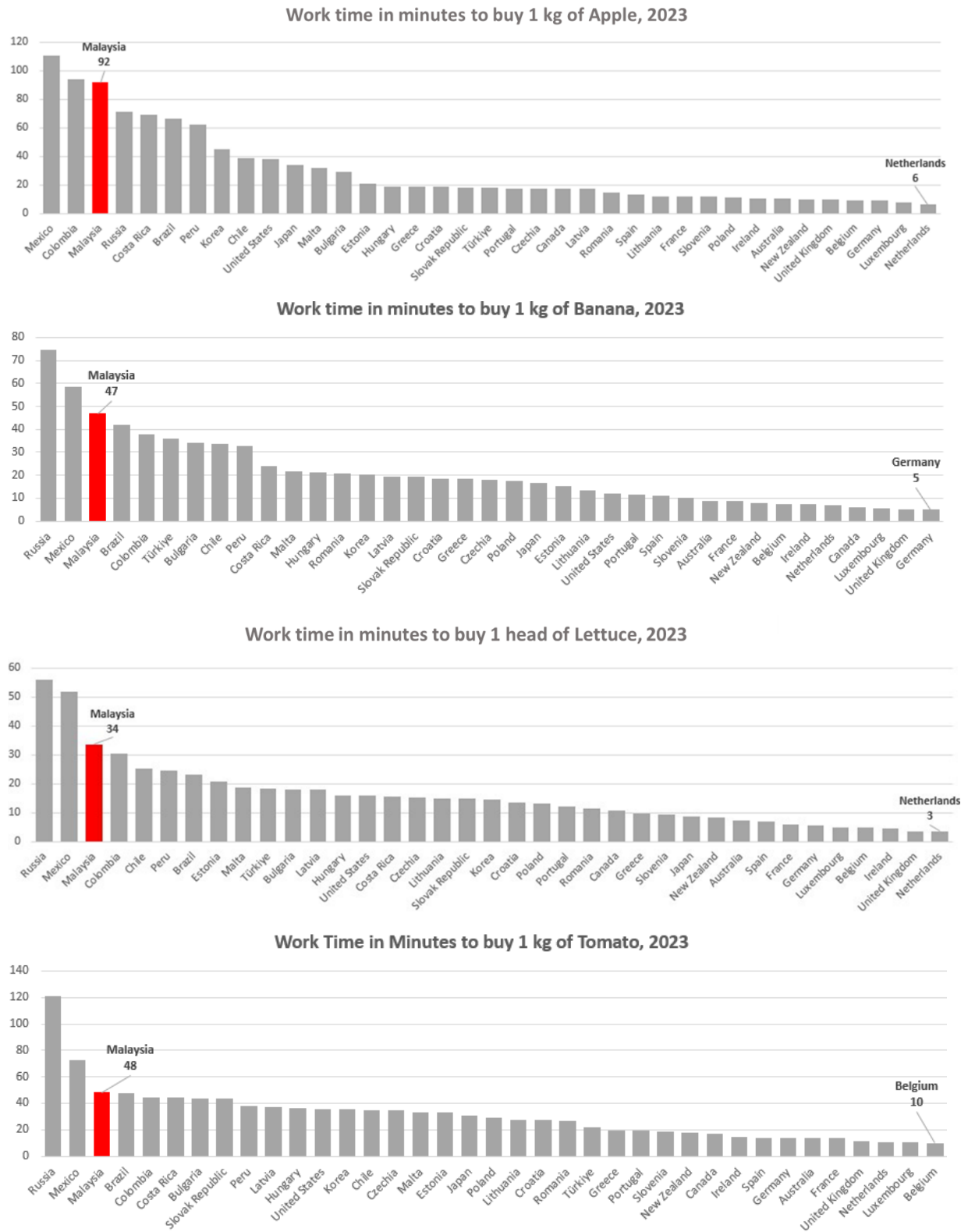
Source: Calculation is based on data from (Numbeo, 2025), (OECD, 2025), and (World Bank, 2025).

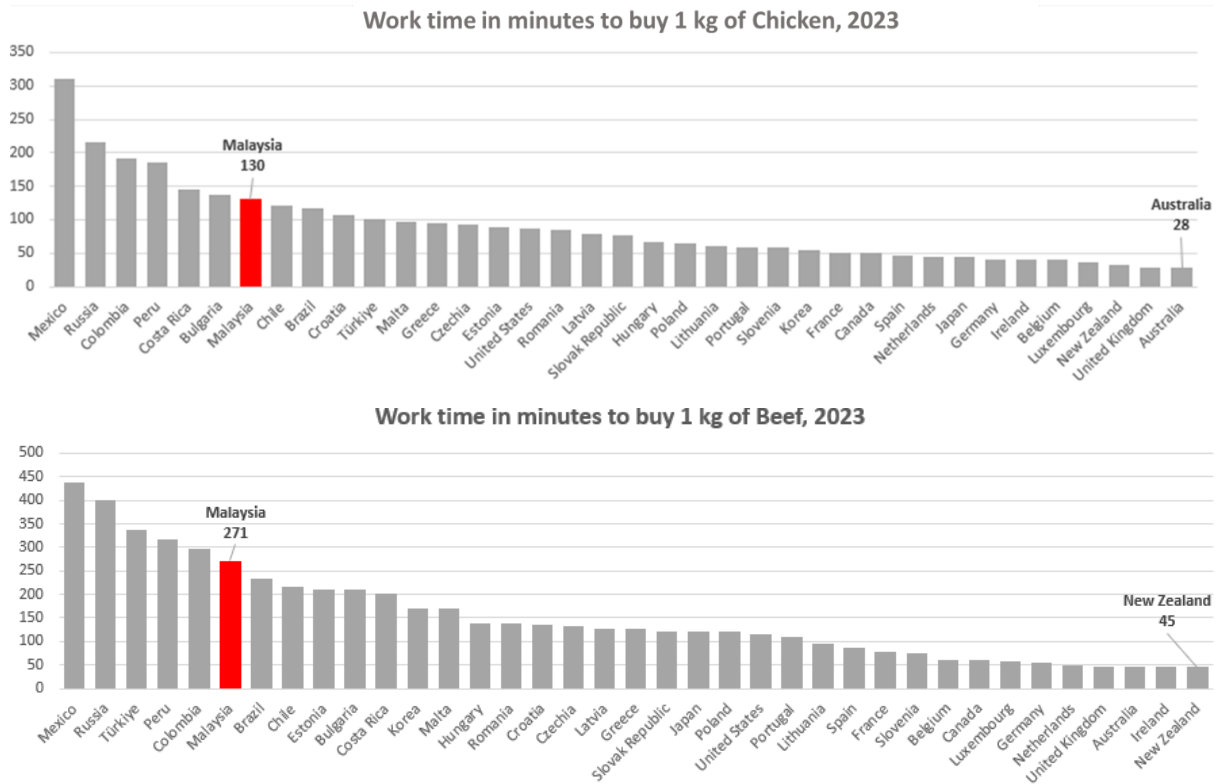
Similar disparities can be observed across various food items. The following comparison presents the time of labour required by minimum wage workers in Malaysia and selected

³ Minimum wages are obtained in national currencies, then converted into USD using the average exchange rate for 2023. The wage per minute is calculated based on each country’s specific hours of work per year.

countries to purchase staple food items, further highlighting the affordability gap faced by low-wage earners.

Figure 9: Cost of Selected Food Items Measured in Minutes of Work at Minimum Wage, 2023





Source: Calculation is based on data from (Numbeo, 2025), (OECD, 2025), and (World Bank, 2025).

Income Constraints and the Nutrition Transition

The high cost of nutritious food relative to wages, as discussed earlier, not only limits access to a balanced diet but also drives low-income populations toward cheaper, calorie-dense alternatives. Urban residents, particularly those earning low wages, often resort to processed and fast foods that are more affordable but contribute to rising rates of obesity, malnutrition, and non-communicable diseases—a shift known as the "nutrition transition" (Popkin, 2017).

In Malaysia, this trend is evident among low-income urban households, where financial constraints limit access to healthier food options. This challenge becomes even more severe during periods of rising food prices, such as in 2022 when high inflation further eroded purchasing power, forcing many low-income families to substitute nutritious meals with cheaper, processed alternatives. A UNICEF study found that not only are families struggling with rising food costs, but their dietary habits have shifted toward unhealthy options, with 46 percent of surveyed families in 2023 reporting eating more instant noodles, up from 40 percent during the pandemic, reflecting a growing reliance on highly processed, low-cost meals to mitigate the increase in cost of living (UNICEF, 2024).

Research indicates that as traditional diets rich in whole foods are replaced by industrialised food products, there has been a surge in diet-related health concerns, including cardiovascular diseases and metabolic disorders (International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), 2022). This is particularly concerning in urban low-cost housing areas, where the dual burden of malnutrition is starkly evident. This trend is evident in Malaysia, particularly among urban residents living in low-cost flats. A study by UNICEF Malaysia revealed that 15 percent of children under five in these areas are underweight, and 22 percent are stunted, both rates

significantly higher than Kuala Lumpur's average. Concurrently, 23 percent of these children are either overweight or obese, indicating that urban poverty is not just linked to food insecurity but also to poor nutrition quality, further reinforcing long-term health risks (UNICEF, 2024).

3. Policy Recommendations: Bridging the Affordability Gap

Food affordability is not just a matter of food prices; it is fundamentally linked to household income, wage policies, and social protection mechanisms. Even in a country like Malaysia, where food prices are relatively lower than global averages, a significant proportion of the population struggles to afford adequate and nutritious meals due to low wages and inadequate income security. This affordability crisis disproportionately affects low-income urban populations, who must purchase all their food from markets and have no alternative means of food production.

While there are various important policy interventions to improve food affordability, including agricultural policies, price regulations, and trade measures, this section focuses specifically on demand-side solutions. Given the scope of this study, this section focuses on three high-impact policy interventions designed to enhance the purchasing power of low-income households: (a) establishing a social protection floor, (b) expanding and strengthening school feeding programs, and (c) introducing automatic minimum wage adjustments based on a low-wage indicator.

While these are not the only relevant policy tools, they represent feasible, evidence-based solutions that can significantly improve food affordability and economic security in Malaysia.

a. Establishing a Social Protection Floor

A comprehensive social protection floor is essential for ensuring income security and food affordability, particularly at critical stages of vulnerability such as childhood, old age, unemployment, and disability. During these periods, individuals and families face heightened risks of food insecurity due to income disruptions and increased nutritional needs. A well-structured social protection system, aligned with ILO Recommendation No. 202 (R202), would provide basic income security and access to essential services, enabling all Malaysians—regardless of employment status—to afford adequate and nutritious food.

In Malaysia, gaps in social protection coverage leave many individuals, particularly those in the informal sector, low-wage employment, and economically inactive, without adequate financial security. Strengthening child benefits, and income support for older persons and persons with disability would ensure that households are not pushed into food insecurity during periods of economic hardship. By adopting a life-cycle approach, Malaysia can reduce poverty and improve long-term health and development outcomes, particularly for children and elderly populations, who are most vulnerable to nutritional deficiencies and economic instability.

A detailed roadmap for financing and implementing this policy has been outlined in the study *Creating Fiscal Space for Constructing Malaysia's Social Protection Floor* (SWRC & UNICEF, 2024). Policymakers seeking a concrete strategy for building a sustainable and inclusive social protection system should refer to this report.

b. Expanding and Strengthening the School Feeding Program

A universal school feeding program is a cost-effective intervention that addresses both food affordability and nutritional security for all children, especially those from low-income households. School meals ensure that students receive at least one nutritious meal per day, alleviating household food costs while improving cognitive development, school attendance, and overall health outcomes (FAO, 2023). Research shows that school feeding programs contribute to better concentration, reduced absenteeism, and improved educational performance, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (WFP, 2021).

Although Malaysia has existing school feeding programs, they remain limited in coverage and quality. Expanding access to all primary and secondary school students, particularly in low-income communities, would directly improve nutritional intake and economic security for vulnerable households. International evidence indicates that well-designed school feeding programs have long-term socio-economic benefits, including higher educational attainment, better employment outcomes, and improved public health (FAO, 2023) (World Bank, 2022).

To maximise effectiveness, the nutritional quality of meals must be enhanced, ensuring that school meals provide adequate protein, micronutrients, and balanced caloric intake rather than relying on cheap, processed foods (FAO, 2023). Strengthening meal composition and diversifying food sources within school feeding initiatives can further contribute to better dietary habits and long-term health improvements among school-aged children (UNICEF, 2020).

c. Automatic Minimum Wage Adjustments

Malaysia's minimum wage system has lacked an automatic adjustment mechanism, leading to stagnant real wages that often fail to keep pace with inflation and economic growth. Between 2020 and 2023, the minimum wage remained unchanged at RM1,200, despite rising living costs, significantly eroding the purchasing power of low-wage workers (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). Following public pressure and economic considerations, the government raised the minimum wage to RM1,500 in 2023 and later announced an increase to RM1,700 by 2025 (New Strait Times, 2024).

However, these adjustments remain sporadic and reactive, lacking a structured mechanism to ensure wages keep pace with the cost of living. To ensure that minimum wage earners maintain purchasing power, Malaysia should introduce an automatic adjustment mechanism. Specifically, the study recommends setting the minimum wage equal to the low wage indicator (two-thirds of the median wage).

International evidence strongly supports the benefits of automated minimum wage indexation. In France, the minimum wage is indexed to inflation and revised annually, with adjustments also incorporating real wage increases of blue-collar workers (OECD, 2022). In the Netherlands, the minimum wage is adjusted every six months based on predicted wage growth in collective agreements (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), 2023). In Poland, if the minimum wage falls below 50 percent of the average wage, it is adjusted based on inflation and GDP growth to prevent wage stagnation (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), 2024).

By implementing the proposed automatic wage adjustment mechanism, Malaysia can ensure that real wages keep pace with rising living costs, preventing the erosion of purchasing power among low-wage workers. This measure would provide greater income stability, allowing households to maintain consistent access to essential goods and services, including adequate and nutritious food. Strengthening wage-setting mechanisms would also contribute to narrowing income disparities, aligning Malaysia's labour policies with international best practices observed in countries with well-regulated wage indexation systems, such as France, the Netherlands, and Poland.

More importantly, a predictable and transparent wage adjustment framework would enhance food affordability by enabling workers to sustain an adequate standard of living without financial distress. With higher and more stable wages, low-income households would be less reliant on cheap, calorie-dense, and nutrient-poor food options, ultimately improving overall health outcomes and reducing diet-related illnesses. In both urban and rural settings, ensuring that wages are systematically adjusted in response to inflation and economic growth would mitigate food insecurity and enhance long-term economic resilience, particularly for vulnerable populations.

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