

Rising prices, fewer donations: Malaysian NGOs giving food aid feel the pinch following price hikes

KUALA LUMPUR, July 21 — While most of us grapple with the rise in food prices, this new reality simply means hunger to those at the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder.

Over the last two years, a significant portion of the population has come to depend on food aid programmes run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across Malaysia.

However, more expensive food items mean these NGOs need to find new strategies to manage their expenses.

According to the **National Statistics Department**, Malaysia recorded a 2.8 per cent year-on-year increase in consumer prices in May.

Malay Mail asked several NGOs to share how they are coping with the food inflation rate in the country.

Longer lines, fewer food packs

When the first movement control order (MCO) was implemented in March 2020, Chow Kit-based Pertubuhan Kesihatan dan Kebajikan Umum Malaysia started the #FoodForAll project to feed those in need.

It began with 100 meals daily and the number grew to over 400 a day until a few months ago.

However, the NGO's president Elisha Kor Krishnan said they have cut back the daily number of food packs to about 100 due to the rising cost, operating expenditure and decrease in public donations.

"Previously we used to distribute breakfast, lunch and dinner to the community. But now we can only afford to provide dinner."

Elisha said they still get a lot of people who come for the free meals but they can only accommodate the first 100.

"It's definitely not enough."

Elisha said previously each pack costs them RM10 but now their operating cost has increased by at least 15 per cent.

"We used to buy a pack of vegetables for RM2 but now it costs us RM3.80. That's a 90 per cent increase."

One Heart Foundation Malaysia, which runs daily food distribution programmes to four Tamil schools in the Sentul area, is also feeling the pinch.

The NGO's secretary and board member Shafina Syahrir said the cost of raw ingredients has increased by at least 30 per cent.

"We have to work twice as hard to accomplish the same food aid programme to the needy as prior to the pandemic."

To keep operating cost to a minimum, Shafina said it has to negotiate food prices with their suppliers.

"We have also been giving food aid to old folks' homes and orphanages intermittently and have been noticing the cost rise in our expenditure when purchasing the necessities for these homes."

Fewer donations, higher operating costs

Over at Kechara Soup Kitchen, operations director Justin Cheah said it has noticed more new faces showing up at their soup kitchens in Kuala Lumpur.

According to him, these are the urban poor who are in need of meals.

"What we feel is that they may have just discovered our programme or they have reached a point where they can't afford to pay for their meals."

Despite the increase in demand, Cheah said they have been receiving fewer donations from the public and corporations.

"When people's cost of living increases, they are less likely to donate to charity organisations. The decline has been happening over the past few months."

Cheah said they are back to the drawing board to find ways to sustain their programmes through fundraising.

Kechara Soup Kitchen serves over 1,000 packs of meals weekly to the homeless and urban poor in KL, Penang and Johor.

This is just the beginning

Despite feeling the pinch over the rising price of goods, Malaysian Relief Agency (MRA) chief executive officer Dr Shahrizal Azwan Samsudin said it's still too early to evaluate how much it will be affected by inflation in the long run.

Dr Shahrizal said MRA is expecting to stretch its budget when purchasing several food items such as cooking oil, flour and rice.

"Cooking oil especially has risen tremendously and we are unable to get any subsidies for it."

Moving forward, Dr Shahrizal said if the price hikes continue, it may need to slash the number of food aid recipients.

"If we previously were able to give 100 food baskets to 100 people with a RM10,000 fund, we now either have to reduce the number of recipients or reduce the number of items in each pack."

Speaking about MRA's operating cost, Dr Shahrizal said it is still managing.

"We are trying our best to ensure the food distribution is done at the best possible cost."

Similar challenges have been experienced by medical relief provider Mercy Malaysia as well.

According to its president Datuk Dr Ahmad Faizal Mohd Perdaus, inflation has affected its food aid programmes such as the Mercy Malaysia's food parcel, which normally comprises essentials such as rice, flour and cooking oil, which have seen steep price hikes.

"As a comparison, the total price of our food packs in December 2021 was around RM100 per basket but the same package costs RM115 in April 2022.

"The most significant item with the highest price increase was cooking oil, which was then RM26 and increased to RM33 for the same five litre bottle. That's a 27 per cent increase."

Dr Ahmad Faizal said that Mercy Malaysia is also facing price hikes in Cambodia and Bangladesh, where it runs international operations.

"The combined impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia war and protracted humanitarian crises, as well as the dire climate change crisis result in the jarring rise in prices and add to the challenges faced by Mercy Malaysia as a humanitarian organisation."

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2022/07/21/rising-prices-fewer-donations-malaysian-ngos-giving-food-aid-feel-the-pinch-following-price-hikes/18401>