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# **Malnutrition, Health Resources and Education in Peninsular Malaysia**

Tan Loong-Hoe

**MARUZEN ASIA**

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by  
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## PENINSULAR MALAYSIA



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Needless to say, I bear sole responsibility for what is written in this study.

# Contents

List of Tables	(vii)
List of Figures	(viii)
List of Appendices	(ix)
Acknowledgements	(xi)
 I. Introduction	 1
1. Malnutrition; Relevance and Importance of Nutrition Education	
2. The Rural Malays and Their Importance in the Malaysian Nation	
3. Scope and Overview of the Study	
 II. Malnutrition in Peninsular Malaysia: With Special Reference to the Rural Malay Communities	 9
1. Definition, Measurement and Mapping of Malnutrition	
A. What is Malnutrition?	
B. Determining the Nature and Extent of Malnutrition	
C. Indirect Indicators	
a. Vital Statistics	
b. Food Balance Sheets	
D. Direct Indicators	
a. Dietary Surveys	
b. Biochemical Surveys	
c. Clinical Examinations	
d. Anthropometric Data	
e. Nutritional Assessment	
E. Summary	
2. The Complexity and Multiplicity of Causes of Malnutrition	
A. Poverty of the Rural Malays	
B. Traditional Malay Customs and Food Practices	
C. Parasitism and Infections	
 III. Health Resources: Evaluation and Recommendation for Change	 51
1. Introduction	
2. The Indigenous Malay Medical Health System	
A. Its Importance Relative to the Modern Health System	
B. <i>Pawang, Bomoh and Bidan Kampong</i>	
C. Sociocultural Foundations	
D. Causation, Prevention and Therapy	
3. The Existing Modern Medical Health System	
A. Institutional Structure	
B. Performance and Limitations	
a. Achievements	
b. Weaknesses or Limitations	
c. Past and Possible Future Trend	



4. Recommendations for a More Responsive Alternative Health Care System for the Rural Malays	
A. The Criteria of Accessibility and Acceptability, and Five Major Recommendations	
B. Normative Prescriptions from Other Studies	
IV. Appropriate Nutrition Education	73
1. Implications of the Recommendations for An Alternative Health System on Nutrition Education Planning	
2. General Considerations	
A. Types of Intervention in the Prevention of Malnutrition	
B. Basic Considerations in Nutrition Education Planning	
3. Specific Considerations for Nutrition Education Planning and Programming	
A. Objectives	
B. Who Will Educate this Clientele of Women? Who Will Educate these Educators?	
C. Content of Nutrition Education Programme	
a. Dietary Topics	
b. Food Production	
c. General Public Health Topics	
d. Suggested Content and Malay Tradition: Contradiction or Conciliation?	
D. Limits and Omissions	
V. Conclusion	87
Appendices	93
Selected Bibliography	111

## List of Tables

1	Range of Nutritional Problems in the Developing Countries and Areas of the Western Pacific Region of WHO	2
2(a)	Incidence of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases	9
(b)	Incidence of Common Child Diseases	9
3	Death and Life Expectancy Rates, Peninsular Malaysia	10
4	Infant Mortality Rates by Countries, 1969 and 1975	12
5	Pattern of Food Availability, Peninsular Malaysia	14
6	Per Capita Availabilities of Calories and Proteins Per Day in Peninsular Malaysia	14
7	Calculated Dietary Figures for Both National and Rural Population as Percentages of Recommended Daily Allowance	16
8	Comparison of Thomson, Burgess-Laidin and Wharton Estimates of Daily Per Capita Intake of Nutritional Constituents for Low-Income Groups in Malaya	18
9	Prevalence of "Significant Malnutrition" by Achievement of Weight-for-Age, Malay Pre-School Children Under 5 years, 1969-72	24
10	Prevalence of "Wasting" (Acute Malnutrition) and "Stunting" (Chronic Malnutrition) According to Deficit in Weight-for-Height and Height-for-Age	24
11	Mean Weight-for-Age, Weight-for-Height and Height-for-Age (on the Basis of Harvard Standards) of Malay Pre-School Children	25
12	Information Useful for Assessment of Nutritional Status	28
13	Probable Value and Feasibility of Suggested Indicators for the Community Assessment of Protein-Calorie Malnutrition in Young Children	29
14	Composition of Food Expenditure — Highest- and Lowest-Income Groups, Peninsular Malaysia, 1973	34
15	Foods Believed to Exacerbate Specific Illnesses in the Folk Medicine of Ulu Trengganu, West Malaysia	40
16(a)	Malaria and Stool Parasite Patterns in Pre-School Children	42
(b)	Prevalence of Helminthic Infections in Rural Pre-School and School Children	42
17	Long-Run versus Short-Run Interventions: "Targeted" versus "Blanket" Approaches	51
18	Percentage of Coverage of Various Health Facilities by Rural Population	58
19	Distribution of Different Health Options for a Rural Malay Community, Kelola, Pahang	60
20	Distribution of Operating Costs of the Federal Health Services, 1971	61
21	Preventive versus Curative Health Expenditures	62

## List of Figures

1	Toddler Mortality, Peninsular Malaysia, 1969	13
2	Sequence of Events Leading to Clinical Manifestations of Malnutrition	15
3	Bar Chart Showing the Percent to which Each Nutrient Meets the Recommended Daily Intake by Households in Kuala Berang, Trengganu	20
4	Bar Chart Showing the Median Values of Household Nutrient Intakes in Terms of "Percentage Requirements Met" in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan	20
5	Weight-for-Age Curves of Five Groups of Pre-School Children Including the Harvard Standard	23
6	The Etiology of Malnutrition (C.D. Williams)	31
7	The Etiology of Malnutrition: Simplified & Modified Version of Figure 6	32

# List of Appendices

A	Malaysia: Key Data 1979	93
B.1	Malaysia's Socioeconomic, Demographic and Health Status Relative to Other Developing Countries	95
2	Breakdown of Health Budget	96
3	Summary Socioeconomic Statistics of the States Encompassed by the Sample of Hospitals and Rural Health Institutions	97
C.1	Distribution of Households by Income, Peninsular Malaysia, 1970	98
2	Peninsular Malaysia: Employment by Sector and Race, 1970-75	99
3	Peninsular Malaysia: Households in Poverty by Race, 1970	100
4	Peninsular Malaysia: Number of Poor Households by Sector, 1970, 1978 and 1980	101
5	Incidence of Poverty and Related Indicators by State	102
6	Malaysia: Some Social Indicators on Standards of Living, 1975 and 1978	103
7	Malaysia: Ownership and Control of the Corporate Sector, 1971-78	104
D.1	A Rural Health Unit Designed to Serve 50,000 People	105
2	Peninsular Malaysia: Availability of Rural Health Facilities, 1978	106
3	The Rural Health System: Health Services Availability	107
4	Peninsular Malaysia: Facility/Rural Population Ratio, 1960-75	108
5	Workload of the Rural Health Service in Peninsular Malaysia, 1955-76	108
6	Demand for Hospital Services, 1955-75	109
7	Admissions and Outpatient Attendances in Government Hospitals and Other Government Facilities, 1955-75	109

# I. Introduction

## I.1 MALNUTRITION; RELEVANCE AND IMPORTANCE OF NUTRITION EDUCATION

Malnutrition has been recognized by the present Malaysian Government as "an important health problem."<sup>1</sup> In the official documents such as the *Economic Report, 1975-76* of the Treasury, the Malaysian Government has shown increasing concern: "From a number of pilot studies, it was found that some malnutrition is prevalent among the lower-income groups."<sup>2</sup> The Institute of Medical Research in its report, *Research Projects For 1975-81*, also reflects this concern by giving "special attention" to topics such as Nutrition, Parasitism, Child Growth and Development and the related Sociocultural Aspects of Health.<sup>3</sup> Underlying the urgency "to reduce the pockets of malnutrition, especially in the rural areas", the *Third Malaysia Plan, 1976-80*<sup>4</sup> indicates that "by the end of 1975, there were (Applied Food and Nutrition Project or AFNP) projects in Trengganu, Kelantan, Pahang, Kedah, Perak and Selangor<sup>5</sup> covering a total population of 2.4 million." Between 1976 and 1980, the AFNP was expected to expand "to those areas with serious malnutrition problems as indicated by high mortality rates. . . ." Nutrition education is also regarded by the Government as an integral component in these efforts to deal with the "multiple and complex" causes of malnutrition in the country.<sup>6</sup> The relative significance of the malnutrition problem compared to that of the other countries in the Western Pacific Region is shown in Table 1.<sup>7</sup>

In Peninsular Malaysia, nutritional disorders<sup>8</sup> like Protein-Calorie Malnutrition (PCM), Anaemia (both child and mother), and Angular Stomatitis are evaluated as "moderate problems" while Xerophthalmia and Goitre are considered "mild problems". Indeed, these five disorders are the very nutritional diseases which "deserve the highest priority" according to a World Health Organization (WHO) report.<sup>9</sup> Bengoa<sup>10</sup> and Berg<sup>11</sup> also made a similar observation on the basis of much evidence: "There is little dispute that malnutrition is the biggest single contributor to child mortality in the developing countries" including Peninsular Malaysia. Similarly, a recent WHO study reiterated the global significance of the malnutrition problem: "Throughout the world, for lack of even the simplest measures of health care, vast numbers of people are dying of preventable and curable diseases, often associated with malnutrition, or survived with impaired bodies and intellects."<sup>12</sup>

TABLE 1. RANGE OF NUTRITIONAL PROBLEMS IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND AREAS OF THE WESTERN PACIFIC REGION OF WHO

Country of area	Anaemia		PCM	Xerophthalmia	Beri-beri	Pellagra	Angular stomatitis	Scurvy	Rickets	Goitre
	child	mother								
Asian areas										
Cambodia	++	++	+++	+	0	0	++	0	0	+
China	?	++?	0?	?	?	?	?	?	?	++?
Hong Kong	+	+	+	0	0	0	+	0	?	0
Laos <sup>1</sup>	++	++	++	+	0	0	++	0	0	++
Malaysia	++	++	++	+	0	0	++	0	0	+
Philippines	++	++	+++	++	+	0	+	0	0	++
Republic of Korea	++	+	++	0?	0	0	++	?	?	0
Republic of South Vietnam	++	?	+++	+	+	0	++	0	0	++
Singapore	+	+	+	0	0	0	+	0	0	0
South Pacific areas										
Cook Islands	+	?	+	0?	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fiji	++	++	++	+	0	0	+	0	0	+
French Polynesia	?	+	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
Gilbert & Ellice Islands <sup>2</sup>	++	++	++	+	0	0	++	0	0	0
New Caledonia	+	?	+	0	0	0	?	0	0	0
New Hebrides	+	?	+	0	0	0	?	0	0	0
Papua New Guinea	+++	++	+++	+	0	0	+	+	0	++
Solomon Islands	+	+	+	0	0	0	+	0	0	0
Tonga	?	?	+	+	0	0	+	0	0	0
Trust Terr. Pacific Islands	+	++	+	0	0	0	+	0	0	0
Western Samoa	+	++	+	?	?	0	0	0	0	0

KEY: ? = unknown; 0 = not a problem; + = mild problem; ++ = moderate problem; +++ = major problem.

<sup>1</sup> Now the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

<sup>2</sup> The Ellice Islands are now a separate territory known as Tuvalu.  
SOURCE: *WHO Chronicle*, 30 : 64-69 (1976), p. 65.

Can all these tragic, possibly unnecessary, mortality and morbidity which are directly or indirectly attributed to malnutrition be contained and prevented from further exacerbation? If the answer inclines towards the affirmative, in what ways and to what extent can education be a supplementary preventive measure? Djukanovic and Mach provide a highly illuminating statement:

High morbidity and high mortality, particularly among infants and children, are an index not only of a community's low health level but also of inadequate health education. *A great number of diseases could be prevented with little or no medical intervention if people were adequately informed about them and if they were encouraged to take the necessary precautions in time.* Prominent among these are childhood diseases, nutritional disease, during infancy, and diseases preventable by immunization. *Health education is particularly needed where the network of services is weak:* there, people must learn to protect themselves from diseases and to seek help if they need it (Emphasis added).<sup>13</sup>

In the rural regions of Peninsular Malaysia, especially in the more isolated, remote areas where a substantial proportion of the rural population is scattered, modern health care services are inaccessible or poor. Preventive health care with nutrition education as an integral part of the total health education efforts cannot be overemphasized as the immediately needed practical measure. The importance of nutrition education, as mentioned above, has been recognized by the Malaysian Government.

What, then, would be the appropriate nutrition education response specific to the malnutrition problem of the rural Malay communities in Peninsular Malaysia? To be operative, this nutrition education response must necessarily be deployed within the context of a comprehensive and effective rural health care system which is accessible to and acceptable by the client-population. What, then, constitutes such a rural health care system specific to Peninsular Malaysia?

These are the two central, intimately related questions that this paper endeavours *to resolve rather than solve*. Based on the interest of finding some solution to the malnutrition problem in the country from the educational perspective, emphasis on issues pertaining to the nutrition education programme planning at the community level will dominate. These educational issues, for example, planning and programming framework, appropriate content for the target population, etc., however, are largely derived from the consideration and formulation of the alternative health care system.

## I.2 THE RURAL MALAYS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN THE MALAYSIAN NATION

In 1980, the estimated total population of Peninsular Malaysia is 11,849,000, which includes the four major groups or communities within this multiethnic society: Malays 53.9%; Chinese 35%; Indians 10.5%; and Others 0.6%.<sup>14</sup> Almost 80% of the total Malay population are found in the rural areas of Peninsular Malaysia. In the 1957 Census, the corresponding proportion was 88.8%.<sup>15</sup> Hence, over the last twenty-three years, the dominance of the Malay population in the rural areas continues with some perceptible rather than substantial changes in the distribution by strata.

Rural Malays, as a collectivity defined by their geographic distinction and sociological grouping,<sup>16</sup> are important within the context of the Malaysian nation in terms of both political and economic considerations.

Politically, by sheer numerical weight and the particular electoral weighting in favour of rural constituencies, the rural Malay population ostensibly has substantial political clout beyond their numerical significance.<sup>17</sup>

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Malaysian development policy in the last two decades has had a distinctively "rural bias,"<sup>18</sup> in marked contrast to the general "urban bias"<sup>19</sup> in the development policies of many developing countries. This rural-biased Malaysian development policy has essentially reflected the political clout of the rural Malay population. The outcome of this rural-biased development policy in raising the material standard of living for the rural Malays, however, is a different matter, facets of which will be discussed in later sections on the economic poverty of the rural Malays (II.2.A) and on the assessment of the Malaysian Government's provision of health services to the rural areas (III.3).

Economically, the rural Malays are mainly found within the peasant sector<sup>20</sup> of the Malaysian economy. The peasant sector or "the traditional rural sector,"<sup>21</sup> comprises the uneconomic smallholder rubber, single-cropped padi, traditional livestock and other agriculture, inshore fishing, and gathering of jungle produce. The smallholdings account for as much as 60% of the total agricultural land in Peninsular Malaysia. The other 40% of the land in the agricultural sector is made up of estates and government development schemes ("the modern rural sector"). In 1978, the traditional and modern parts of the rural sector — which approximately form the economic sector: Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing — contributed almost 30% of the Gross Domestic Product at factor cost.<sup>22</sup> For 1970, the corresponding proportion was 32%. Indeed, in at least the last eight years, the annual growth rate of this economic sector has been significantly low, compared to other sectors, for instance: manufacturing. As the traditional peasant economy has been relatively lacking in dynamism, its contribution to the total national output is relatively less significant, compared to the modern rural sector.



The economic significance of the rural Malays stems not from their lack of contribution to the wealth of the Malaysian nation but rather their chronic and intensifying plight — being left out in their share of the national economic pie produced by the rapid economic growth since 1957 when the country achieved political independence from British colonial administration. Given their dominant political role, the poor health and malnutrition of the rural Malay population is an important development factor which cannot be ignored.

### 1.3 SCOPE AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Schematically, the rest of the study will be arranged in the following sequence: Chapter II will provide a comprehensive assessment of the malnutrition situation, focusing on the rural Malay communities. It will also analyse the “complexity and multiplicity” of the etiology or causal factors producing the pattern of malnutrition discussed earlier. Chapter III will attempt to elucidate the traditional Malay medical health system; and, it will also examine the existing modern medical health care system. An alternative health care system which is more responsive — with respect to the criteria of access and acceptability — to the rural Malay population will be proposed. Within the framework of the proposed alternative system and its recommendations, Chapter IV will discuss the implications for nutrition education with reference to the planning and programming at the micro-community level. The objective here is not the formulation of a complete nutrition programme and a detailed design ready for implementation; but rather, to discuss, selectively, the important areas of preliminary concern in the planning and programming processes.

In conclusion, Chapter V will take up the question of how effective and to what extent nutrition education can contribute to overcoming the complex malnutrition problems amongst the rural Malay population. The intricacy of prescribing simple or sophisticated solutions to the “complex and multiple” malnutrition problems will be illuminated. The possibility and inherent limitations of any educational response (including the recommended nutrition programme) contributory to the eventual solution of the malnutrition problems will thereby be resolved rather than solved.