

Press Statement by the People's Health Forum on 24 AUG 2021 in Kuala Lumpur

**\*Schools Should Continue Rancangan Makanan Tambahan To Support Students' Nutritional Needs\*** -- Funding has increased, but where is the food?

The People's Health Forum (PHF) welcomes the message from the new Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob's inauguration speech that calls for unity across the government and political aisles to put the nation's, or in his own term, "Keluarga Malaysia's" interest first. We also welcome the Prime Minister's acknowledgement of the hardships which so many households and families in Malaysia are going through. The matter cannot be more pertinent as the COVID-19 pandemic and prolonged lockdowns have greatly affected many people, particularly those from the B40, for more than a year. And sadly, many children are at a higher risk of going hungry as a result. As such, PHF urges the new incoming government to immediately resume the national Supplementary Food Programme for school children, Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (RMT), to prevent students from poor or struggling families from going hungry.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, over 500,000 Malaysian students from low-income households relied on RMT annually to acquire sufficient nutrients. The RMT had helped to alleviate some of the malnutrition effects brought about by poverty. As more people fall below the poverty line due to both the pandemic itself and economic downturn caused by the lockdowns, more school children are suffering from hunger and starvation. Given that the funding for the programme for 2021 has already been approved and allocated, there is no excuse for the programme to stop running. The schools must continue RMT immediately.

In 2019, the UNICEF special report on urban child poverty highlighted the impact of malnutrition on children residing in low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur. “(A)bout 22 per cent of children below the age of five are stunted, 15 per cent are underweight and 23 per cent are either overweight or obese.” (Khalid et. al., 2018)

COVID-19 has further exacerbated food insecurity among low income households, forcing families to adopt less healthy diets and threatening to further exacerbate Malaysia's worsening child malnutrition crisis. Now more than ever, it is crucial that programmes like the RMT continue to provide much needed supplementary nutrition for students, especially those from the B40 group who were previously fully dependent on the free meals at school. While the government has increased its budget allocation for RMT to RM420 million in the Federal Budget 2021, the spate of extended school closures have cut off access to free nutrition at schools.

There is little reason to put the programme on hold during school closures. Food production and delivery has never been banned during lockdowns. The funding of the programme has already been expanded and approved by the Parliament. The schools have the necessary network and database. And the series of National Plan of Action for Nutrition produced by the Ministry of Health have provided us with strategies and plans. Most importantly, hunger does not stop when schools close. What we really need now, is for the schools to turn these plans

into actions and start delivering the food to those in need.

PHF urges the government to work with public schools at local and district level, parent-teacher groups and other relevant bodies to leverage on existing mechanisms, and employ a self-pick up or delivery mechanism that complies with the necessary SOPs, to restart the RMT and resume school children's access to nutritious meals as soon as possible.

The pandemic has heightened food insecurity among poor and vulnerable groups, with considerable impact on children from these households. Action must be taken without delay. Restarting the RMT is a step towards addressing their nutritional needs, protecting them from malnutrition and increased susceptibility to COVID-19 infection, or to any other health issues in the future.

\*People's Health Forum\* 24 Aug 2021 \_\_\* The People's Health Forum (PHF) is a platform created in April 2019 by several not-for-profit organisations and individuals who are committed to the principle of Health for All, i.e. universal healthcare as an entitlement based not on the ability to pay, but on the basis of need.\_\_ Reference:  
Khalid, MA et. al, Children Without: A study of urban child poverty and deprivation in low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur. UNICEF, February 2018, p.9.

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