

Tackling High Cost of Living in Malaysia: A Strategic Analysis

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Abstract

Inflation, high housing costs, taxes on goods and services, reduced subsidies, low-income levels, expensive education and healthcare, and dependence on imported goods are all challenges that contribute to the high cost of living in Malaysia. In particular, inflation has been a major factor driving up living expenses over time. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Costs of Living (KPDN) plays a crucial role in addressing this issue. The article used various strategic management techniques like PEST matrix, internal audit matrix, and TOWS matrix to understand the challenges of high cost of living in Malaysia. It also provided valuable recommendations to tackle the problem. The article is helpful in providing insights and solutions to the issue of high cost of living in Malaysia.

Keywords: Cost of living, Ministry of Domestic Trade and Costs of Living (KPDN), Strategic Thrust

INTRODUCTION

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The issue of high living costs has become a significant challenge that requires attention. The increasing expenses for essential needs like food, housing, and transportation have made it difficult for Malaysian households to manage their budgets effectively. According to Konus (1939), the term "cost of living" refers to the minimum expenses required for a family to maintain their desired standard of living over a specific period. Based on the Gallup World Poll (GWP), the findings reveal that a significant majority of participants perceive that their incomes are not commensurate with the increasing expenses. When asked whether their quality of life had improved, worsened, or remained the same compared to five years earlier, 56 percent of those in the 56 focus groups reported that their lives had become more challenging (World Bank Group, 2022).

Multiple factors contribute to the high cost of living in Malaysia. These include inflation, housing costs, goods and services taxes, subsidy reduction, stagnant income levels, customer behaviors and preferences, education and healthcare expenses, and reliance on imported goods. Inflation, in particular, has played a significant role in driving up living costs over the years. As prices rise, individuals and households find it

increasingly challenging to afford essential items. This decrease in purchasing power means that people's income may no longer cover their expenses adequately, leading to financial strain and difficulties in maintaining their desired standard of living. For example, the price of six fried bananas, which used to cost RM1, has now doubled to RM2, representing a 50 percent decrease in purchasing power (Hassan, 2022).

The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Costs of Living (KPDN) is mandated a pivotal role in tackling the issue of high cost of living in Malaysia. They implement a range of measures and initiatives to address this challenge. One of their key responsibilities is to closely monitor and regulate the prices of essential goods and services to ensure affordability for consumers. This includes enforcing price controls and acting against price manipulation and unfair practices in the market. Additionally, KPDN conducts investigations and imposes penalties on retailers who engage in price manipulation or unfair practices. By doing so, they ensure that consumers have access to affordable prices and prevent price exploitation in the market. Addressing the high cost of living in Malaysia requires collaboration among various stakeholders, including the government, private sector, and civil society. It is a collective effort that involves active participation and cooperation from all sectors to find effective and sustainable solutions.

BACKGROUND OF ISSUE

The high cost of living in Malaysia is indeed a pressing issue. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia's 2019 Household Expenditure Survey, the average monthly expenditure per household in Malaysia was RM4,033. This includes expenditures on food, housing, transportation, education, and other categories (DOSM, 2020). Food was one of the most significant costs, accounting for an average monthly expenditure of RM737 per household. In addition, a 2020 Consumer Sentiment Index (CSI) survey conducted by the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER) revealed that 75.3% of respondents were concerned about the escalating cost of living. The survey also revealed that 80.5% of respondents believed that the high cost of living would have an impact on their personal finances in the future months (MIER, 2021).

The high cost of living in Malaysia is a complex issue that stems from a variety of economic, social, and lifestyle factors. One significant contributing factor is the pervasive preference for dining outside the home. This change in dietary habits has not only altered the culinary landscape, but also has direct financial implications for families.

Convenience and variety provided by restaurants and food delivery services have led to a significant rise in dining out. Approximately 58% of respondents in a survey conducted by Rakuten Insight in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic used food delivery applications (Statista Research Department, 2023). While this trend offers convenience, its effects on personal finances are frequently overlooked. According to the "National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019" conducted by the Malaysian Ministry of Health, the financial implications of dining out in Malaysia are emphasized further. The findings found that individuals who frequently ate out or ordered food were more likely to have higher monthly expenditures than those who primarily cooked at home. In addition, the study revealed a correlation between dining out and a higher body mass index (BMI) among Malaysians. This suggests not only a potential increase in health-related costs, but also a correlation between eating behaviors and higher healthcare costs (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020). Such findings strengthen the financial burden associated with dining out preferences. This article aims to understand the challenges of the high cost of living in Malaysia. In addition, the article also provides valuable suggestions to overcome this problem. This article proves helpful by providing valuable insights and solutions to address the issue of the high cost of living in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses various strategic management techniques to address Malaysia's high cost of living, with a primary focus on the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Costs of Living (KPDN). External and internal analyses were conducted on KPDN, including a PEST (political, economic, socio-cultural, technological) analysis to assess uncontrollable opportunities and threats and a custom internal audit analysis to evaluate strengths and weaknesses under its control. The analysis involved primary and secondary sources like articles, news, reports, and interviews with KPDN representative. The findings were then clustered into SWOT Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat) matrix to allow formulating of several alternative suggestions using the TOWS (Threats-Opportunities-Weaknesses-Strengths) Matrix, considering both internal and external factors to provide recommendations for the challenges identified.

The choice of KPDN as the central focus is justified due to its essential role in regulating factors that influence living expenses. The analysis comprises a PEST analysis, which examines external opportunities and threats, and a customized internal audit to appraise KPDN's strengths and weaknesses within its control. The PEST analysis

explores political, economic, social, and technological factors which are external elements that affect KPDN's initiatives. In the meantime, the customized internal audit offers insights into the ministry's internal capacities and limitations. These insights, in turn, guide the formulation of strategic recommendations using the TOWS Matrix, aligning internal strengths and weaknesses with external opportunities and threats to comprehensively address the cost-of-living challenges. This methodical approach contributes to a well-informed analysis and provides practical strategies for policymakers aiming to alleviate the financial burden on Malaysian citizens.

CHALLENGES FACED IN TACKLING HIGH COST OF LIVING IN MALAYSIA

Limited resource of fund

The challenge of limited resources refers to the fact that the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN) has a finite budget and limited funding available to carry out its various activities and initiatives intended to address Malaysia's high cost of living. Government agencies, including KPDN, receive funding from the national budget, which is allocated to various ministries and departments to carry out their respective functions. However, the budget is limited, and each ministry must strategically prioritise and allocate its resources to accomplish its goals and objectives (Potter & Diamond, 1999; Siddiqi, 2023). According to the Malaysia Budget 2022 announced by the Ministry of Finance, the allocation for the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, which oversees KPDN, was RM 1.217 billion (Ministry of Finance, 2021). This allocation covers a wide range of functions and activities, including addressing the high cost of living. The limited allocation indicates that KPDN has to manage its resources efficiently to implement its initiatives effectively.

In the context of tackling the high cost of living, KPDN needs adequate resources to implement various measures and initiatives effectively. These initiatives may include price controls, market monitoring, consumer protection programs, and educational campaigns on budgeting and financial management. However, the limited resources can pose challenges for KPDN in several ways such as implementing comprehensive programs. KPDN may have to prioritize certain programs or initiatives over others due to budget constraints. This could lead to challenges in addressing all aspects of the high cost of living comprehensively. Based on a news article published, KPDN faced

challenges due to budget constraints in implementing its various initiatives aimed at addressing consumer issues, including the high cost of living (Aman, 2022). Therefore, KPDN had requested a higher allocation to effectively carry out its functions, which encompass consumer protection and regulating market practices. This indicates that limited resources can indeed hinder the comprehensive implementation of initiatives to tackle the high cost of living.

However, limited resources may make it difficult for KPDN to implement comprehensive programs that cater to the specific requirements of various groups. A research report published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2020 titled "Malaysia Human Development Report 2020: Shared Prosperity after Crisis" highlighted the disparities in the impact of the high cost of living across different socioeconomic groups in Malaysia. The report discussed how vulnerable and low-income populations tend to be more affected by the rising costs of essentials such as food, housing, and transportation (UNDP, 2020). This indicates that certain segments of the population are more susceptible to the financial challenges posed by the high cost of living. Given the limited budget of KPDN, it may be challenging for them to effectively cater to the diverse needs of different socioeconomic groups, potentially hindering their ability to provide targeted support and assistance where it is most needed.

In the interview with KPDN, it was indicated that their programmes and activities have limited funding. There is no provision in the budget for emergency situations that may arise unexpectedly. The budget can only be used for specified activities within the allocated limit. Past article discussed how KPDN's Director-General, Datuk Seri Hasnol Zam Zam Ahmad, highlighted the difficulties in monitoring and enforcing price controls effectively, especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Kassim, 2021). The report emphasized that KPDN's ability to carry out thorough market monitoring and investigations was constrained by resource limitations.

Moreover, with limited resources, it can be difficult for KPDN to effectively implement both short-term and long-term measures. To achieve a balance between immediate relief and long-term solutions, thorough preparation and prioritisation are required. KPDN may need to allocate resources strategically, prioritising measures with the greatest short-term impact while establishing the groundwork for long-term improvements. This is evident in their Menu Rahmah initiative where the initiative is beneficial to many people, it can only be implemented temporarily due to limited funds

(Ismail, 2023). The report highlighted KPDN's challenge in managing resources to address both immediate needs and long-term strategies effectively.

Lack of Staff

The dearth of personnel within government organizations and agencies responsible for public services and managing public affairs is commonly called "lack of staff." An adequate workforce is crucial for organizations to achieve their goals and effectively enhance managerial performance (Engetou, 2017). Efficient personnel and human resource management can significantly benefit an organization. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN) needs more staff, particularly in its enforcement unit. The need for more staff in the enforcement division to ensure the efficacy of enforcement efforts is maintained. The Enforcement Division, established under the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) on April 17, 1972, aimed to assist the government in mitigating inflation. Following a restructuring process on October 27, 1990, the KPDN was formed as a distinct ministry, encompassing the Enforcement Division, now rebranded as the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN). A shortage of personnel within the ministry can lead to several negative impacts that may hinder the efficient implementation of measures to address the cost-of-living challenges.

The findings that can be found from the interviews, the recruitment process takes much time to recruit new staff. In the public sector, hiring processes are often subject to strict eligibility criteria, multiple levels of approval, and competitive examinations, all of which can discourage qualified applicants and lengthen the time it takes to fill open positions. By easing government plans, the public sector plays a critical role in propelling a country's goals to become internationally competitive. In the context of the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Hal Ehwal Pengguna (KPDNHEP), the need for more employees and members of the power of attorney at the national level is an important issue that requires immediate resolution. According to the Timbalan Menteri, Datuk Rasol Wahid, the ministry only has 2,300 staff, of which 30 to 40 percent are professionals, including individuals with overseas qualifications. Considering the increase in population and the increasing complexity of the task of strengthening power, the ministry is planning to increase the number of professionals in their team (Yaacob, 2020). The lack of staff poses significant challenges for the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN) in effectively tackling the issue of the high cost of living in Malaysia. A shortage of

personnel within the ministry can lead to several negative impacts that may hinder the efficient implementation of measures to address the cost-of-living challenges.

Firstly, the lack of staff can result in a limited capacity to conduct thorough and timely monitoring and enforcement activities. The ministry plays a crucial role in regulating prices and ensuring fair trade practices to protect consumers from price hikes and exploitation. However, with insufficient personnel, it may be easier for KPDN to conduct regular market inspections, monitor price movements, and address instances of price gouging effectively. This can lead to delays in identifying and mitigating price fluctuations, leaving consumers vulnerable to rising living costs. Secondly, lack of staff can affect the ministry's ability to conduct comprehensive research and data analysis related to the cost of living. Data-driven insights are essential for understanding the factors contributing to the high cost of living, identifying price trends, and formulating targeted policies and interventions. With an adequate workforce, KPDN may be able to collect and analyse real-time price data, hindering evidence-based decision-making and the formulation of effective cost-saving initiatives.

Moreover, lacking staff can impact the ministry's ability to engage effectively with various stakeholders, including businesses, industry players, and consumer groups. Building partnerships and collaborations with these stakeholders are vital for devising holistic and practical strategies to alleviate the cost-of-living burden. More personnel may limit the ministry's capacity to conduct consultations, dialogue sessions, and outreach programs, which are crucial for understanding the diverse perspectives and concerns related to the cost of living.

Income inequality in Malaysia

Income disparities can amplify the impact of high living costs on lower-income groups, making it more difficult for them to afford basic necessities and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and financial insecurity. During a live, televised debate titled "Debate on Malaysia's New Economic Model" against Bachok member of parliament Mohd Syahir Che Sulaiman, Malaysia's minister of economy Rafizi Ramli noted that in the past 20 years ago, people's salaries have not increased in line with the rise in the prices of goods (Naz Harun, 2023). Income gaps are more than just an economic inconvenience as it is a deeply ingrained issue that exacerbates the painful impact of high living costs on marginalized communities. As a result, the less fortunate struggle to make ends meet and

obtain basic requirements, thereby trapping them in a vicious circle of poverty and financial fragility.

According to Kabeer (2003) as cited in Mohamad Azhar & Mohd (2020), poverty line approach assumes that well-being may be equated with the ability to satisfy key physical survival needs, which commonly refers to food, and the ability to meet these needs is demonstrated by income. However, Malaysian workers income was only RM20 above the RM2,580 poverty threshold for households. This is confirmed by Rafizi Ramli in which he cited the Employee Wages Statistics (Formal Sector) Report, which was released last week, and stated that 50% of the country's workers were paid RM2,600, which was only RM20 more than the RM2,580 household income poverty threshold (Naz Harun, 2023). While these workers are officially above the poverty line, the increase in their marginal income does not necessarily imply a meaningful improvement in their living conditions or general well-being. This demonstrates the limitations of applying a single numerical criterion to define poverty without considering the complicated context of everyone's situation. It also suggests that the poverty line may not effectively reflect the true cost of living in the country, particularly considering the rising expenses of necessary commodities and services.

Apart from that, the median pay for young people aged 20 to 24 entering the labour force for the first time is RM1,682 per month, which is only RM182 more than the minimum wage (Naz Harun, 2023). This highlights the broader issue of stagnant earnings and limited upward mobility for the younger generation. This reinforces a cycle in which individuals are trapped in low-wage employment with few opportunities for advancement, restricting their potential and deepening wealth disparity. It also puts into question the effectiveness of minimum wage legislation in providing workers with a genuine safety net.

Furthermore, high living costs might stymie the upward mobility of individuals and families from lower-income origins, as they try to break free from poverty and improve their economic condition. Income gaps not only harm lower-income groups' current well-being, but also their ability for future plan and provide the groundwork for economic stability. They may face restricted options for progression and remain locked in a cycle of low-income earning potential if they do not have adequate access to educational opportunities, skill development, and better-paying jobs. Inflation erodes the purchasing power of their earnings, making it increasingly difficult for them to keep up

with growing prices of goods and services, exacerbating the impact of high living costs on lower-income groups. This economic pressure can cause financial stress, debt build-up, and even reliance on costly credit facilities, continuing the poverty cycle.

Extremely low wages in Malaysia

Obtaining a minimal acceptable living standard has proven to be challenging for numerous low-wage workers worldwide in recent times (Chong & Khong, 2018). Low wage can amplify the impact of high living costs on lower-income groups, making it more difficult for them to afford basic necessities and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and financial insecurity. During a live, televised debate titled "Debate on Malaysia's New Economic Model" against Bachok member of parliament Mohd Syahir Che Sulaiman, Malaysia's minister of economy Rafizi Ramli noted that in the past 20 years ago, people's salaries have not increased in line with the rise in the prices of goods (Naz Harun, 2023). Income gaps are more than an economic inconvenience as it is a deeply ingrained issue that exacerbates the painful impact of high living costs on marginalized communities. As a result, the less fortunate struggle to make ends meet and obtain basic requirements, thereby trapping them in a vicious circle of poverty and financial fragility.

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KPDN has identified low wages as one of the main challenges contributing to the high cost of living in Malaysia. To address this issue, KPDN can urge the Ministry of Human Resources (MoHR), to take stern action to revise the wage structure. By advocating and championing this issue, MoHR can help to address the problem of low wages and its impact on the cost of living in Malaysia. It is important to note that low wages can have a significant impact on the cost of living in Malaysia. According to a report by National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE), lowering the cost of living is a top priority for industry groups and unions. Therefore, revising the wage structure can help to address this issue and improve the standard of living for Malaysians. While there were no specific search results related to MoHR's efforts to revise the wage structure, it is important to note that addressing low wages is a complex issue that requires collaboration between various stakeholders. It is also important to consider the potential impact of revising the wages structure on businesses and the whole economy. Therefore, any efforts to revise the wage structure should be carefully considered and implemented in a way that balances the needs of workers and businesses.

Rising prices and inflation

According to Department of Statistic Malaysia (DoSM), the inflation rate recorded in August 2023 was 2.5 percent at it is surpassed the overall national inflation rate. The impact of inflation on consumer purchasing power is manifested by the erosion of the actual value of currency, hence having influence on consumer spending and saving patterns. Furthermore, it has a direct influence on the Consumer Price Index (CPI), an essential indicator used to monitor inflation and evaluate the expenses associated with maintaining a certain standard of living. Excessive and volatile inflation can give rise to economic difficulties for people, enterprises, and governmental entities. The group that had the most significant rises was the category of food and non-alcoholic beverages, which saw a rise of 5.1 percent. This was followed by the group comprising restaurants and hotels, which exhibited a growth of 4.7 percent. The category of transport experienced a comparatively lower gain of around 3.6 percent (The Star Online, 2023).

Inflation has the potential to diminish the purchasing power of individuals, resulting in a rise in the prices of goods and services (Yusof et al., 2021). The phenomenon of rising costs can surpass the rate of wage growth, thereby presenting challenges for individuals and families in managing the outrageous expenses associated with daily living. The phenomenon of inflation and the subsequent escalation of prices

exert a significant influence on the daily existence of individuals living in Malaysia, thereby impacting their ability to make purchases and their overall quality of life (Murdipi & Law, 2016). When there is an increase in the general price level, the purchasing power of money reduces, necessitating individuals to allocate more funds to acquire the same goods and services that were previously affordable at lower prices (Halim et al., 2022). This phenomenon can have particularly adverse effects on households with lower incomes, as a greater proportion of their earnings is allocated towards fulfilling essential requirements, leaving limited capacity for saving or non-essential expenditures (Cingano, 2014).

Moreover, some products and services, including housing, healthcare, and education, may be hit worse than others by inflation (Iacurci, 2023). Families often face a substantial financial burden due to the higher inflation rates experienced by these essential expenses in comparison to other goods and services (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2021). The increasing cost of housing in Malaysia, specifically in urban areas, has resulted in challenges for numerous individuals and families in acquiring affordable and satisfactory accommodation (Su et al., 2017). Potential strategies to address the escalating expenses of vital commodities encompass the implementation of well-planned subsidy initiatives, the provision of focused monetary allocations to poor households, and the allocation of resources towards infrastructure development and social welfare programmes, which can effectively mitigate the burden of living costs (Impin & Kok, 2021). Briefly, to successfully address the issues posed by inflation and rising prices, one needs to take a comprehensive strategy that strikes a balance between macroeconomic policy measures and tailored interventions to assist those who are most negatively impacted. The development and implementation of long-term solutions to reduce the burden of Malaysia's high cost of living and to promote economic well-being for all Malaysians requires significant collaborative efforts between government agencies, corporations, community organisations, and individual people (Jayasooria, 2016).

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

This section offers various recommendations to address the high cost of living in Malaysia. These recommendations were derived from a TOWS matrix technique, which uses SWOT (Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat) analysis elements to create strategies for tackling these challenges. The TOWS matrix has four (4) quadrants namely (i) Strength-Opportunities (SO), (ii) Weakness-Opportunities (WO), (iii) Strength-

Threats (ST), and (iv) Weakness-Threats (WT). Each quadrant suggests different strategies, such as leveraging strengths to capitalize on opportunities (SO), using strengths to counter threats (ST), minimizing weaknesses, and maximizing opportunities (WO), and minimizing weaknesses and threats (WT). The strategy selection for this paper involves using the Comparative Table of Strategies Attractiveness, which considers low cost, fast execution, and high impact. As a result, four (4) thrust strategies are recommended in this paper as alternative approaches to overcome challenges.

<p>SO Strategies S6O6 : Launch public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about the benefits and accessibility of existing initiative from KPDN</p>	<p>WO Strategies W1W2O4: Task specific expertise</p>
<p>ST Strategies S3T3T7: Optimize specialized division’s capabilities to address food inflation and customer shopping trends</p>	<p>WT Strategies W2W3W5T2T4T5T6T9: Collaboration with various stakeholders</p>

Figure 1: TOWS Matrix

Launch public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about the benefits and accessibility of existing initiative from KPDN

Launch public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about the benefits and accessibility of existing initiative from KPDN is the first strategy in the SO quadrant. The strategy of launching a public awareness campaign to inform the public about the benefits and accessibility of programs that have been introduced by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN), including Payung Rahmah, has excellent potential to help reduce the burden of the high cost of living in Malaysia. The Payung Rahmah program is to help the low-income (B40) and the resilient poor in Malaysia deal with the increasing cost of living issues day by day (Noh, 2023). Initiative Payung Rahmah includes vehicle loans (transportation), physiotherapy Rahmah (health), menu Rahmah (food), simen rahmah (housing), etc. More people may start using the services by educating the public on how to use and benefit from these programs. Through this campaign, it is hoped that community participation in these programs will increase, ensuring that the limited funds allocated by KPDN are used efficiently. In addition, by raising awareness about the existence of these programs, people may be more prudent in

using their funds, reducing wastage, and ensuring that more people can feel the benefits. Public support and awareness can also pressure the government to allocate sufficient funds for these programs. Local economic growth can be boosted by helping communities reduce living costs through initiatives such as Payung Rahmah, as communities have more money to spend. Therefore, launching this public awareness campaign provides direct benefits to the communities in need and can positively contribute to the country's economy. Under this strategy there is one program known as "Digital Transformation and Public Awareness Campaign", and under this program, there are three main activities that can be carried out to overcome the challenges.

First activity is developing mobile apps, the strategy involves partnering with technology companies and start-ups to create apps that incorporate services related to transportation, health, food, housing, and other essential sectors of the Payung Rahmah Initiative. The app becomes a one-stop solution for users, allowing them to quickly access relevant services and information. Activities related to the app's development involved partnerships with technology companies and initiating a voluntary donation campaign, which raised awareness of how these voluntary contributions directly help reduce the cost of living in the community.

Second activity is online awareness webinar, the campaign also involved organizing a series of online webinars to provide the public with an understanding of the challenges faced regarding the high cost of living in Malaysia. Financial and economic experts were invited to discuss strategies to manage spending and investments in these webinars effectively. Raising awareness of cost-effectiveness is a critical step in the right direction (Gorfinkel & Lexchin, 2023) In addition, success stories from families or individuals who have benefited from the Payung Rahmah program took centre stage, motivating the audience to donate and contribute.

Last activity is fundraising events such as healthy walks, food festivals, and talent shows are organized to engage the community directly. In these events, the involvement of local businesses as sponsors and participants plays an important role. Through these activities, statistics and real-life examples are shared to show how the funds raised help ease the community's cost of living. This creates a sense of transparency in the use of funds, encourages more significant contributions from businesses and individuals, and, in turn, increases the resources available to address the high cost of living in Malaysia.

Optimize specialized division's capabilities to raise awareness on customer preferences to eat outside

Optimize specialized division's capabilities to raise awareness on customer preferences to eat outside is the sixth and last strategy in the ST quadrant. This strategy has been chosen where it is a strategy that does not use high costs, fast execution, and gives high impact. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia reported in 2020 that Malaysians spend an average of 17.7 hours per week on work-related activities, leaving less time for cooking (DOSM, 2023). This statistic underscores the considerable amount of time individuals allocate to their work commitments, highlighting the busy nature of modern lifestyles. The substantial time invested in work leaves individuals with limited time for cooking at home. In addition, the increasing participation of women in the workforce, has transformed traditional family dynamics. With both parents often engaged in full-time jobs, the available time for cooking has decreased. Working mothers, in particular, face time constraints due to their professional commitments (N. Ali & Abdullah, 2012; Ashari et al., 2022). As a result, the practice of cooking at home becomes challenging, and families might increasingly opt for dining out as a convenient alternative.

However, the changes in eating behaviour has direct implications for the high cost of living in Malaysia. Dining out regularly, especially in urban areas, can strain household budgets due to the cumulative costs associated with restaurant meals or food delivery services. A study conducted by the Khazanah Research Institute in 2018, titled "The State of Households 2018: Different Realities," provided further evidence of the cumulative costs of eating out in urban areas of Malaysia. The study revealed that households in urban areas spent an average of 31.1% of their monthly income on food and non-alcoholic beverages (Ng et al., 2018). This spending pattern shows that a considerable part of their income goes towards food-related expenses. Furthermore, the study highlighted that city households spent more money on food from outside. This trend was especially visible in urban places, where the convenience and variety of food options made eating out a popular choice. The study's results showed that dining out accumulated costs affect urban families' financial plans. Since a big portion of their income goes to food, frequently eating out can strain their finances. The study's information supports the idea that the appeal of dining out leads families to dedicate a significant part of their budget to food expenses, and this has a direct impact on managing the challenges of high living costs (Ng et al., 2018). Thus, this strategy and recommendation aim to make people more aware

of the consequences of eating out frequently instead of cooking at home. Under this strategy there is one program proposed known as "Cooking for Life: Embracing Home-Cooked Meals", and there are three main activities and several sub activities and projects that can be carried out to overcome the challenges.

First activity is known as Wonder Food, or the Cooking Workshops and Demonstrations program, which aims to encourage and inspire people to cook more at home. In Malaysia, a recent survey conducted by Rakuten Insight showed that around 58% of the people they asked are using food delivery apps more often because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista Research Department, 2023). However, what many people might not know is that constantly ordering convenient food through these apps can lead to spending more money (Chen et al., 2021). This can be supported by a study by the Department of Statistics Malaysia in 2020 highlighting that the Consumer Price Index, which measures the average price change over time for a basket of goods and services, increased by 1.4% compared to the previous year. This means that the cost of living has been going up in Malaysia, and our spending choices, like using food delivery apps, can play a part in this financial challenge (Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, the workshops are designed to teach practical cooking skills and provide knowledge about preparing healthy and affordable meals and reduce the dependency of Malaysians on restaurants, food stalls, food delivery apps etc. (Garcia et al., 2016). Expert chefs and nutritionists will lead the workshops, covering various aspects of home cooking. The workshops will cover topics like cost-effective meal planning, meal prepping, cooking for dietary needs, and using seasonal ingredients.

Second activity for this program known as Online Recipe Repository. The part of this activity involves creating an online recipe database. The "Cooking for Life: Embracing Home-Cooked Meals" initiative aims to provide people with a convenient platform to access a wide variety of healthy and affordable recipes that can be easily prepared at home. According to past studies, food expenditure is one of the burdens that steadily increase and burdening the household in Malaysia (Ismail et al., 2022). Besides, The Household Expenditure Survey conducted by the Department of Statistics Malaysia provides comprehensive data on the spending patterns of Malaysian households. The survey consistently shows that a substantial portion of household income is allocated to food. For instance, the Household Expenditure Survey (HES) 2019 reported that food and non-alcoholic beverages accounted for around 29% of total household expenditures, making it one of the largest spending categories (DOSM, 2020). Therefore, the main goal

of this activity is to motivate individuals to cook their own meals by offering a practical and comprehensive source of recipe ideas. The online recipe repository will be user-friendly, allowing users to explore recipes based on different categories such as cuisine, dietary preferences, cooking time, and ingredients. The collection will include recipes from chefs, home cooks, nutritionists, and culinary experts, all curated to ensure quality and alignment with the program's objectives.

Besides, there is another sub activity under Online Recipe Repository which is online training for IT staff that handle the platform. It's crucial to provide online training for the IT staff to ensure they have the necessary knowledge and skills to manage the online recipe repository platform effectively (Goroshkevych, 2022). To harness the advantages of technological advancements, economies require specialists in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). These experts possess the ability to write code, create applications, oversee networks, and analyse large sets of data, among other capabilities. These skills not only foster innovation in a digital-driven economy but also sustain the essential infrastructure that businesses, governments, trade, and users depend upon (OECD, 2015). However, beyond these specialists, the digital transformation also necessitates that all workers possess a reasonably proficient level of ICT skills, even in jobs that are not highly skilled. This is necessary to ensure that everyone can effectively participate in the digital age and its demands (OECD, 2016). Hence, the training covers technical aspects such as platform functions, database management, content updates, security, and troubleshooting.

The third activity in this program is called "Financial Education and Budgeting Resources." It provides various resources like workshops, online modules, and tools such as printable worksheets or a mobile app to track expenses. The program partners with financial experts and nutritionists to make it more effective. The main goal is to empower individuals with financial skills so they can make home cooking a budget-friendly and sustainable choice. Based on a previous study conducted by the University of Washington and published in the journal "Public Health Nutrition" in 2017 examined the relationship between cooking skills, meal planning, and dietary habits (James, 2017). The study found that individuals with better cooking skills and financial management tend to plan their meals more effectively, shop for ingredients strategically, and ultimately prepare healthier meals at home (Reicks et al., 2014). These individuals were more likely to choose cost-effective ingredients, minimize food waste, and optimize the use of resources. This not only supports the idea that cooking at home can be budget-friendly

but also indicates that having financial management skills plays a significant role in making choices while preparing meals.

Additionally, a report by the International Journal of Consumer Studies in 2016 highlighted that individuals with better financial literacy tend to have a better grasp of budgeting and resource allocation, leading to wiser spending decisions, including grocery shopping and meal preparation (Jing & O'Neill, 2016). Both studies emphasize that possessing financial skills enables individuals to make smarter choices while shopping for ingredients. This, in turn, directly relates to the effort to manage the high cost of living by minimizing unnecessary expenses associated with dining out or expensive convenience foods. Some examples of the programs proposed under this activity are workshops called "Jom Bajet!", online modules, a mobile application named "MyJB," and a seminar called "Celik Rahmah" aims to improve and ease financial management of the people in choosing food.

Task Specific Expertise

Task specific expertise strategy is the alternative strategy derived from weaknesses and opportunities. This is due to rather than depending primarily on a small number of in-house employees, the Ministry can hire freelancers or consultants with specific experience in areas such as data analysis, research, or policy formulation. This compensates for a lack of internal staff by allowing access to external talent as needed.

Under this task-specific approach, five initiatives or activities are scheduled to be put into action. The five initiatives or activities are collaboration with financial institutions and experts, customized content development, "Plan Your Budget Well" workshop, targeted subsidy programs and social welfare database. Having task-specific knowledge to assist the ministry in ways like presenting critical ideas, proposals, and jointly implementing the measures truly helps a lot in addressing Malaysia's high cost of living. Based on Jiang et al. (2023), effective coordination of expertise within teams can result in a synergistic innovation effect, allowing interactive teams to overcome major hurdles and achieve in-depth cooperation. Good coordination of expertise will have a favourable impact on performance.

First and foremost, under this task specific expertise strategy, KPDM can conduct programs with relation to financial literacy and consumer education. According to the

findings of the Financial Capability and Inclusion Demand Side (FCI) Survey 2021, the level of financial digital literacy among Malaysians remains poor (Bernama, 2023). Financial literacy and consumer education are critical in addressing high cost of living. This can be done by working together with Economic Analysis and Strategic Data Division of Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living. Putting in place thorough financial literacy programmes is a crucial first step in giving people the knowledge and abilities they need to intelligently negotiate the complex world of personal money. These initiatives serve as a beacon of financial enlightenment, illuminating routes to increased financial resilience in the face of the persistent difficulties brought on by the high cost of living, by conscientiously educating consumers about the prudent art of budgeting, encouraging the virtues of disciplined savings, and inculcating the tenets of responsible borrowing. Consumer education and financial literacy are strongly related to task-specific competence since they require specialized knowledge and abilities for creating and delivering successful training programmes on financial subjects. In this context, task-specific competence refers to the specialized expertise of professionals who are knowledgeable about financial issues, consumer behaviour, and successful educational approaches. These programmes can effectively equip people with the financial know-how to make informed decisions, manage their finances responsibly, and confidently face the challenges of the high cost of living by utilizing the specialized knowledge and skills of financial experts and educators.

From the plan of action (POA) this strategic blueprint aims to tackle the high cost of living in Malaysia through a focus on financial literacy and consumer education. The key thrust is leveraging task-specific expertise to implement strategic programs and projects. The initiatives include collaborations with financial institutions and experts, customized content development, and organizing "Plan Your Budget Well" workshops. The success of these initiatives will be measured through specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such as curriculum completion rate, content relevance measured through biannual surveys, and conducting two workshops per year. The strategic blueprint places emphasis on leveraging specialized knowledge and skills of task-specific experts, such as financial advisors, economists, and educators, to effectively address the challenges of the high cost of living. The focus is on financial literacy and consumer education initiatives, aiming to empower individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to manage their finances wisely and make informed decisions. To ensure the effectiveness of financial literacy programs, this blueprint emphasizes collaborations with financial institutions, experts, NGOs, and relevant stakeholders. These partnerships will

aid in the development of comprehensive financial literacy curricula and materials. This KPI measures the percentage of participants who successfully complete the financial literacy curriculum. A higher completion rate indicates that the curriculum is engaging, relevant, and meeting the needs of learners.

The blueprint advocates for tailored financial literacy content that caters to the specific financial needs and challenges of different demographic groups. The use of interactive online platforms and mobile applications will enhance accessibility and engagement. This KPI assesses the perceived relevance of the customized financial literacy content among the target audience. Conducting surveys biannually gathers feedback and insights for continuous improvement. Organizing workshops focused on budgeting, savings, and responsible borrowing will equip participants with practical skills to navigate their finances effectively. This KPI tracks the frequency of the workshops conducted within a year, reflecting the program's outreach and accessibility to the public. By combining task-specific expertise with financial literacy and consumer education initiatives, Malaysia seeks to empower its citizens to manage their finances responsibly and make informed choices amidst the challenges posed by the high cost of living. The measurable KPIs will help monitor the progress and success of the initiatives, enabling continuous improvements and ensuring alignment with the strategic blueprint's objectives.

Next, this strategic programs in this blueprint centre around subsidy rationalization and targeting, aiming to optimize the allocation of subsidies to benefit those who need them the most. This is in line with the government of the day goals in which to have subsidy reforms in Malaysia. According to Deputy Finance Minister 1 Datuk Seri Ahmad Maslan, Malaysia is moving forward with targeted subsidy reforms that are expected to save billions of ringgit per year (Kaur, 2023). The first approach entails putting in place specific subsidy programmes. These programmes are intended to offer financial help targeted to low-income and vulnerable populations, rather than blanket subsidies to all people. The government may more effectively allocate resources and make sure that aid is given to those who need it most by focusing subsidies on specific groups of people. Task-specific experts have specialized understanding of subsidy systems, social welfare programmes, and economic trends, such as economists, financial analysts, and policy professionals. They can create personalized assistance plans that are perfectly suited to the unique requirements of low-income and vulnerable groups. Through their experience, they can determine the most efficient and effective ways to

distribute subsidies, ensuring that funds are allocated where they are most required to address the problems caused by the high cost of living. The Key Performance Indicator for this initiative is to achieve a 100% beneficiary reach within the intended population. This means that all eligible individuals and households within the target groups should receive the subsidies they are entitled to. Tracking this KPI ensures that the targeted subsidy programs are effectively reaching the intended beneficiaries and are fulfilling their purpose of alleviating financial hardship for those facing the high cost of living.

The second endeavour is creating a comprehensive social welfare database to support the targeted subsidy programmes. This database will act as a trustworthy and current list of eligible recipients, assisting in the identification and verification of people and households who qualify for the subsidies. The distribution of subsidies is streamlined, and the proper people are given the necessary financial support thanks in large part to the social welfare database. Task-specific experts can develop and oversee the creation of a comprehensive social welfare database. They understand the complexities of data management and have the skills to design systems that accurately identify and verify eligible beneficiaries. Their expertise ensures that the database includes all relevant individuals and households, leaving no deserving candidates excluded from receiving the targeted subsidies. The social welfare database's key performance indicator is to reach 100% completion, which denotes that all pertinent and qualified individuals have been added to the database. To guarantee that no eligible beneficiaries are denied access to the targeted subsidies, a full database is necessary. The government can allocate subsidies wisely and improve the effectiveness of the targeted subsidy programmes by having accurate and complete data at its disposal

The purpose of the targeted subsidy programmes is to effectively offer financial aid to low-income and vulnerable groups, and the social welfare database makes sure that all eligible recipients are correctly identified and verified. The KPIs, such as achieving 100% beneficiary reach and finishing the social welfare database, serve as quantifiable objectives to evaluate the success of these initiatives and make sure that the financial support reaches those who genuinely need it, helping those in need cope with the high cost of living.

Collaboration with various stakeholders

The engagement of various stakeholders has paramount importance in addressing complex issues, such as rising costs of living (Pereno & Eriksson, 2020). The integration of many stakeholders, such as government entities, companies, community organisations, and individuals, enables the development of comprehensive solutions that address every element of the problem at concern. Governments wield significant influence in the development of economic policies and regulations that have the capacity to directly impact the cost of living (Sabstu, 2014). The importance of actively participating in partnership with local, regional, and national governments cannot be emphasised enough, as it is essential for identifying areas where policy adjustments or interventions may be used to alleviate the high cost of living. This may involve implementing a range of methods with the objective of promoting the accessibility of inexpensive housing, mitigating inflation, and providing financial aid or tax benefits to persons with limited income.

The collaboration with stakeholders such as FAMA and others related stakeholder can enhance in tackling the high cost of living in Malaysia. The programs that can be execute is Skim Harga Maksimum Keluarga Malaysia (SHMKM). This programme had been implemented during 2021. But the program reception is not satisfied. Therefore, with 'SHMKM 2.0' it can enhance in stabilizing the price of basic needs in response with the objective of the program which is as a measure to stabilize the price of essential goods at this time in addition to ensuring the presence of supply in the market. The essential goods such as chicken, eggs, and other types of vegetables have been implemented during 2021, but in 2023 the many items of essential goods will be implemented such as cooking oils, flour and sugar will be sell with an affordable price in and ensure the stocks each of the item will enough supply to the citizens. Besides that, it can help stabilize the price of goods in the market

Next, the enhancement of Farm Direct Sales Programme would be rebranded to 'Jualan Runtuh Rahmah' which is the objectives is to sell all the fresh essentials direct from farm and essentials for household. It is including all essential items such as vegetables, fishes, fruits, and others related with affordable price. Direct sales programmes have the potential to address the issue of the high cost of living in Malaysia by offering individuals chances to generate money and facilitating consumer access to critical items at more economical costs. Direct sales programmes frequently provide a

diverse array of goods, encompassing vital commodities and consumable items. Affordable necessary commodities can mitigate the financial burden on households, facilitating the management of costs amidst the prevailing high cost of living. Direct sales programmes frequently entail the engagement of salespeople who function within their respective local communities (Chong, 2022). Therefore, direct sales programmes have the potential to enhance individuals' comprehension of their financial circumstances, so enabling them to handle the challenges posed by the high cost of living more proficiently.

CONCLUSION AND MOVE FORWARD ACTIONS

In conclusion, the challenges of limited resources, lack of staff, income inequality, extremely low wages, and rising prices and inflation collectively contribute to the high cost of living in Malaysia. These challenges impact the ability of KPND to effectively address the issue and provide targeted support to vulnerable populations. Limited funding and personnel constraints hinder KPND's ability to implement comprehensive programs and monitor price controls effectively, especially during unexpected crises.

Besides, the income inequality and extremely low wages in Malaysia exacerbate the challenges of high living costs, making it difficult for lower-income groups to afford necessities and break free from the cycle of poverty. The stagnant wages and limited upward mobility for the younger generation further compound this issue. In addition, rising prices and inflation put additional pressure on households, as the cost of essential goods and services outpaces wage growth. The cumulative costs of eating out, driven by busy lifestyles, and changing family dynamics, strain household budgets and contribute to the high cost of living.

To address these challenges, the proposed strategy “Launch public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about the benefits and accessibility of existing initiative from KPND” aim to not only empowers communities but also strengthens the local economy. With the program “Digital Transformation and Public Awareness Campaign”, includes the development of a comprehensive mobile app, the organization of online webinars, as well as community fundraising events, these activities create a transparent, community-driven approach to addressing the high cost of living. Public awareness and active participation result in prudent fund utilization and increased allocations from the government. As a result, communities benefit directly, experiencing reduced living costs and improved financial stability. By fostering a sense of solidarity and shared purpose,

this initiative alleviates the burden on citizens and contributes positively to the nation's economy, promoting sustainable growth and prosperity for all.

Next, the proposed strategy, "Optimize specialized division's capabilities to raise awareness on customer preferences to eat outside," aims to encourage people to cook at home more often by raising awareness of the benefits of home-cooked meals. By providing practical cooking skills, online recipe resources, and financial education, this program can empower individuals to make cost-effective and healthier food choices. Additionally, it fosters collaboration with other ministries, agencies, and citizens to collectively address the issue.

The task-specific expertise strategy was chosen, and it entails developing a plan of action that includes financial literacy and consumer education, and subsidy rationalization and targeting. This method tries to combat excessive living expenses by utilising specialised knowledge and skills in adopting effective rules and regulations, empowering financial literacy among the public and empowering consumers through education and protection. The strategy entails undertaking collaboration with financial institutions and experts, customized content development, budgeting workshops, targeted subsidy program and social welfare database. This data will inform policy decisions and interventions. Proactive policy and regulatory measures will be implemented, considering emerging market trends and consumer needs. These initiatives try to make the market more competitive and transparent, while also maintaining justice and affordability.

And lastly, stakeholders have the capacity to formulate sustainable and enduring strategies aimed at addressing the issue of the high cost of living in Malaysia. The collaboration facilitates accessibility to inexpensive commodities for all individuals, while also addressing additional problems that contribute to the elevated cost of living. In conclusion, adopting a collaborative approach contributes to the cultivation of a society that is both inclusive and affluent. This strategy ensures that individuals can get inexpensive vital resources, even amid economic difficulties.

In the future, it is crucial for KPDM to continue advocating for increased resources and personnel to strengthen its capacity in addressing the high cost of living. A comprehensive approach that combines policy changes, public education, and support for low-income groups will be essential to make a lasting impact on the challenges of the high cost of living in Malaysia. Besides that, it is vital that the KPDM continues to fight

for greater resources and staff to meet the ongoing challenge presented by Malaysia's high cost of living. The multidimensional nature of this issue necessitates the implementation of a comprehensive response that integrates policy modifications, public awareness initiatives, and tailored assistance for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups of society. By increasing resource allocation, the KPDN can effectively formulate and execute policies aimed at managing inflationary pressures, overseeing the pricing of important commodities and services, and strengthening legislation pertaining to consumer protection.

In addition, it is worth noting that public education efforts have the potential to equip consumers with valuable information regarding their rights and strategies for effectively managing the challenges posed by escalating prices. Sufficient human resources are vital for the purpose of effectively monitoring and enforcing the market, thereby assuring enterprises' adherence to regulatory frameworks, and deterring the occurrence of unethical practises. The implementation of subsidies and cash transfer programmes can effectively mitigate the financial strain experienced by low-income populations due to elevated living expenses. By employing data analytic techniques, engaging in collaborative efforts with other ministries, and implementing continuous monitoring and evaluation processes, KPDN can effectively address the persistent issue of high cost of living in Malaysia. This approach not only contributes to the promotion of economic stability but also enhances the overall well-being of Malaysian citizens. Promoting the prioritisation of long-term sustainability in the allocation of resources is crucial to guarantee the sustained efficacy of these initiatives.

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