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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BASIC FOOD AID: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE BETWEEN MALAYSIA'S FOOD BANK AND IMARET DURING THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic that first emerged at the end of 2019 has had a huge impact on the world economy and social life. In Malaysia, innumerable people faced unemployment problems and this led to an increase in the number of poverty-stricken individuals, especially in urban areas. Hence, through the initiative of several individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), food banks were established in numerous locations to help communities in need of food aid and basic necessities. According to Islamic history, such forms of food aid had existed throughout the Ottoman era in efforts to deal with the problem of food shortage caused by poverty, natural disasters or war. Therefore, this study aimed to examine and discuss the comparison of food banks created based on the concept and implementation of waqf institutions, which is akin to imaret (or darüzziyafe) initiated during the Ottoman empire in times of pandemics, natural disasters or any kind of dire situation affecting the population. This qualitative study analysed literature from previous studies. Findings indicated that there are several similarities in the general concept between contemporary food banks established in Malaysia and the imaret that existed during the Ottoman empire. Both these initiatives involve an allocation of funds for purchasing food which is then given away free to the need in the community. The financial assistance is provided by individual funds intended solely for the purpose of charity. However, there are differences in terms of implementation by these two institutions, such as the period of existence, method of assistance, distribution of aid, method of distribution and different allocation of funds. In conclusion, the establishment of food banks and imaret have an important role in times of an urgency, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as in other catastrophic situations. The role of this current institution should be expanded so that the affordable sections of the community can implement the food bank concept to help those in need.

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Introduction:-

The need for human sustenance is crucial, and it is given prominence in charity work (Singer, 2005). This is also in concordance with every individual's need to have a place to shelter and proper clothing, as the basic necessities of life. In the middle of 2021, a United Nations' report revealed that 41 million people worldwide were facing starvation (Berita Harian, 2021). This situation became even more critical with the onset of the relentless Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, rise in fuel prices, and the Ukraine war, which raised the number of hungry to an astonishing 345 million (Berita Harian, 2022). In fact, the latest World Food Security and Nutrition (SOFI) report estimates that 600 million people will face malnutrition by the year 2030 (Utusan Malaysia, 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic had affected the global economy, and unemployment increased to staggering levels, including in Malaysia. The social media in 2021 had reported of a campaign to raise, display and wave a white flag by any Malaysian facing a dire economic situation, especially caused by a lack of food supplies and household needs. This was an initiative in response to increasing suicide cases resulting from the pressures of living without a source of income (Syairah, 2021). Many Malaysians took it upon themselves to assist these unfortunate individuals by establishing food banks specific locations such as in mosques, petrol stations and other strategic locations to distribute free food. The aid was also extended to students in institutions of higher learning who were residing in campuses.

Apparently, the food bank's role is almost similar to an institution established during the Ottoman Islamic era, which has been studied by numerous scholars in the past. The function of this institution was to distribute free food at public kitchens (imaret) to the people, especially the poor, desolate and needy. It was established by individuals, including the ruling elite, to help those who required food. All the disbursement and waqf funds were a manifestation of the injunctions mentioned in the Holy Quran. Allah SWT exhorted in Surah al-Insan, verses 8 and 9, which bear the meaning:

“And they give food in spite of love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive” (76:8).

“Saying to themselves, “We feed you only for the sake of Allah, seeking neither reward nor thanks from you” (76:9).

This generous act is also inspired by the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (al-Bukhari, 2002), meaning:

“Feed those who hunger, visit those who are afflicted, and free the captives” (Hadith al-Bukhari, Vol. 7, Book 70, No. 553).

Therefore, this study discussed the food bank and imaret concepts, both of which have similar underpinnings for their establishment. This study also compared the implementation of both institutions, by considering their similarities and differences in several aspects, such as food, funds and distribution of other items.

The Concept and Role of the Food Bank in Malaysia

A food bank is defined as a registered centre under a non-profit organisation and serves the purpose of sourcing and distributing excess food (both donated or shared) for free to those who are in need of it, or to social aid agencies that prepare and distribute such food (Riches, 2002). Besides that, food banks also refer to a service involving the distribution of both cooked or raw foodstuff to people facing a food shortage crisis or the provision of groceries to customers.

Nations that actively implement impact studies on food banks and have long established such facilities are the United States, South Korea and Canada. Bazerghi, McKay and Dunn (2016) found that developed nations, where the general relief or aid has failed to fulfil the needs of the people, services such as food banks, community kitchens, soup vans, and community markets selling subsidised goods have emerged to mitigate this deficiency. The emergence of such institutions has become the benchmark of investigations on the failure of nations to manage their people's living condition, especially in relation to food sufficiency issues. The situation is not caused by natural disasters or plagues, but rather, a product of deteriorating economic circumstances faced by the people that has led to other social ills, such as thefts, drug addiction etc.

Establishment of the food bank is still a novelty among the local community in Malaysia, and it only began to flourish during the Covid-19 pandemic, which struck at the end of 2019. In reality, the nation already had the Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia (YFBM), established on 7th January, 2019 under the supervision of the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDNHEP). The YFBM aimed to provide food for the B40 group to lessen their financial burden. For example, one of its initiatives was the creation of the emergency Covid-19 Fund, which was used to supply food boxes/baskets containing a one-week worth of ration for each family (Anon, n.d.).

Other than the emergency Covid-19 supplies, YFBM also focused on distributing grocery aid sourced from participating supermarkets, like Tesco, Econsave, The Store, NSK and SEGI, to over 418,000 households living in poverty throughout the nation. This initiative was termed the Community Food Bank Programme and it commenced in December 2018. The programme had established seven Food Bank centres in Lumut and Gopeng (Perak), Simpang Renggam (Johore), Kota Damansara (Selangor), Kuala Tahan (Pahang), Lembah Pantai (Kuala Lumpur) and Baling (Kedah) as of September 2021 (Anon, 2021).

As the Covid-19 pandemic worsened, more food banks were set up in Malaysia by more non-governmental organisations or individuals, or parliamentary members (Syed Sadiq and others) (Dorall, 2021), celebrities (Naim Daniel and others) (Sudirman, 2021) and small groups comprising members of the public or university alumni groups (Dayana, 2021). The choice locations for these smaller food banks included petrol stations, surau, mosques and pharmacies, which proved to be strategic locations as anyone needing foodstuff can easily access these kiosks to obtain food and daily necessities. Items in these food banks were not limited only to foodstuff, but also disposable diapers and milk powder for babies, as well as sanitary pads for women etc.

The Public Kitchen (Imaret ordarüzziyafe) as A Waqf Practice During the Ottoman Era

The Muslim community in the Ottoman empire had practiced charity through the contribution of foodstuff by setting up public kitchens since the 14th century, which is still maintained to this day. This was substantiated by the implementation of the waqf institution for distributing food that had begun as early as during the Sultan Orhan (1323-1362) era, who was the second monarch of the Ottoman empire in 1324 before he replaced his father. He distributed free food by building the zawiye (a meeting place for the sufi) for the sufi, the poor, and travellers who were in Makaja. In 1331, he established an imaret in Yenişehir, Bursa, and helped distribute food and light candles on the first day of its opening (Maksudoğlu, 2006).

Among the more renowned imarets, as recorded in the annals of the Ottoman empire, are the ones in waqf complexes categorised as the imperial waqfs. Most of these complexes were founded by the rulers, such as the sultan, or some other authoritative figure in the government, or their families. It was usual for these imarets to be constructed together with other facilities, such as hospitals or mosques, within the complexes. Deligöz (2014) stated that during the era of Sultan Mehmet II (1444-1446, 1451-1481), he built his waqf complexes together with other infrastructure, such as mosques, public kitchens, hospitals, medrese, libraries and public bath houses (hammam). The focal point of these complexes were the public kitchens, as they operated twice a day for distributing food to the public. The items purchased for the public kitchens included mutton, salt, wheat, flour, parsley, onions, chillies, rice, oil, grapes, congee, cinnamon, saffron, yoghurt, honey, almond and others (Boyar & Fleet, 2010). Meanwhile, Inalçik (2012) stated that 3,300 loaves of bread were distributed every day to the workers at these complexes, and to the poor. Patients in hospitals, and students at the medrese were also recipients of food at these imarets.

Singer (2005) had studied the imarets and explained that these units were not built within the waqf complexes, but they existed along with hospitals or next to mosques. They even provided food to other waqf institutions, such as the karavansarai, zawiye and medrese. Hence, the recipients of food each day were thousands at any one time, consisting of various groups of students, educators, travellers, those on the hajj pilgrimage, as well as the sick and poor.

There were also imarets built outside of Turkey by the families of the sultan, authoritative figures, or based on the initiative of the local community. One of these imarets was built by Hürrem Sultan in Jerusalem in the middle of the 16th century. Menus, such as soup and bread were distributed to 500 people, twice a day. The recipients included workers, sufi, travellers who visited the karavansarai, as well as the poor and feeble. Besides daily distributions, food was also distributed on auspicious days in the Islamic calendar, such as the night before Friday, breaking fast during Ramadhan, both Eids, birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and on the day of 'Ashura'. The menu served on these auspicious days was different and special, such as rice, mutton and sweets (Singer, 2005).

Singer (2005) added that the usual food served at all public kitchens was soup and bread. It was considered to be an easily prepared nutritious meal that could be prepared and served in large quantities. Yet, there were several different types of food distributed based on the various seasons and conditions. It was unique that all aspects of the imaret, be it the menu, portion, list of recipients and unqualified or qualified groups, were all documented in reports and registered accounts. However, allocation for the development of the imaret depended on its founders. This was mostly obtained from various sources of revenue, mainly rent from buildings such as the public bath houses, markets, and shops. Funds were also derived from agricultural sales, taxes, and industrial revenues from factories.

As for members of the public who wished to offer food waqf, they could do so at a smaller scale by purchasing food items such as bread, and leave them at shelves provided by shopkeepers, so that those in need can help themselves to these hand-outs. According to Baer (1997), there were small groups of waqf donors who provided food for the poor through allocations included in their waqf zhurri (family waqf), which ensured a continuous food supply for the community (Sri Wahyu Sakina, Salmy Edawati & Mohd Fairuz, 2021). Besides preparing and distributing food for the people, there were also food waqf meant for animals, such as birds and stray dogs.

A Comparison between Contemporary Food Banks and the Imaret System of the Ottoman Era

This study found that the food banks implemented around the world, especially in Malaysia, has similarities with the imaret system adopted during the Ottoman era in its basic concept. This is because the purpose of establishing both institutions is to solve the issue of food insufficiency faced by individuals who are unable to fend for themselves and their families as well as to reduce wastage of food ensuing from an event (wedding, celebration etc.) which could lead to environmental pollution (Kobayashi et al., 2017). The large-scale establishment of the food bank and imaret does not target only one faction of the society but it is inclusive of various groups of individuals, though it focuses mainly on the poor and the disadvantaged.

Although the food bank and imaret have similarities in their efforts in distributing food to those in need, this study found some differences between the two. One marked difference is the period of existence of both institutions. The imaret has been in existence and has sustained itself for a longer period, especially when it was established mainly by individuals. Bazerghi, McKay and Dunn (2016) stated that the reasoning behind the situation was that the roles of food banks have always been a short-term solution to overcome current pressing issues, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The imaret, on the other hand, was an institution sponsored by waqf funds, and it was established solely for the purpose of providing food for a longer period to benefit the disadvantaged public.

From another perspective, food banks are easier to set up as anyone can offer assistance by opening small kiosks, and distributing food and other necessities to those in need. Relevant authorities can facilitate in storing food and helping to distribute this food to students in institutions of higher learning (Zanariah, 2020). One example is the Student Food Bank Programme organised by Sekretariat Food Bank Malaysia and the Ministry of Domestic Trade And Consumer Affairs (KPDNHEP) aided by the management of various institutions of higher learning that aim to provide food aid to 17,954 students throughout their term of study (Mohd Rafi, 2021). Besides that, Arif Zikri (2021) said that public initiatives, such as Tempatan Food Bank had established nine different centres in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang, Pahang and Melaka to provide food for those affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the imaret of the Ottoman era cannot be easily constructed as it requires a large infrastructure to accommodate the kitchen area for cooking food, and dining areas where the food would be served. This would incur a larger funding for an imaret to be built in a particular location. This is not easily accomplished without assistance from rulers or affluent individuals of that time.

The next comparison is regarding the distribution of foodstuff at both these institutions. At the imaret, raw food was cooked based on daily menus, and distributed to deserving recipients. The practice was to consume the food at a specifically designated area in the imaret except in cases where people, like the Sufi, who would take their food back to their place to be consumed (Singer, 2005). Some of the individuals who dine at the imaret may not have cooking facilities at their homes due to extreme poverty. This differs with food banks that supply both raw and dry food for those in need. This method is easier to manage compared to distributing cooked food, and the food ration would last longer when kept for some time. Food banks also provide other basic needs besides food items, such as soap, sanitary pads, disposable diapers, baby milk powder etc.

From the distribution perspective, this study found that some food banks set up by individuals in small kiosks faced the issue of uncontrolled grabbing of foodstuff by unscrupulous people if the situation was not monitored (Zulkifli,

2021). This could deprive other deserving individuals from enjoying the full benefit of a food bank. However, some food banks are well managed and supervised as the food boxes or baskets are already in specified quantities. Singer (2005) observed that the situation in the imaret was different as it employed people to monitor the distribution based on a list of recipients, while the food portion was predetermined. This is to avoid wastage or wrongful distribution to those undeserving of the benefit or depriving others who deserve this hand-out from receiving the food aid.

Conclusion:-

Therefore, both these initiatives are noble acts that aim to tackle the issue of insufficient food supply faced by the poor or disadvantaged. The lack of basic necessities, such as food and clothing, cannot be taken lightly, as it could lead to greater ills, such as nutrient deficiency or starvation as well as social issues such as theft or shop-lifting. In efforts to mould a society responsible for building a nation, two elements must be considered by the rulers, namely the basic need for food and the people's good health. In doing this, it could encourage and mould the society to be more compassionate towards those in need. This study advocates that the establishment of imarets and food banks using waqf funds should be implemented earnestly. In Malaysia, for example, various education, health and religious institutions were built using waqf funds. It is therefore beneficial if the practice of waqf can be extended to include food offerings that is systematically managed. This is because the practice of waqf provides continuous and consistent benefits to eligible recipients, who would find relief for lengthy periods of time. This is also in line with the practice of offering ceaseless charity (sedekah jariah) after a person's death, as mentioned in a hadith of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Therefore, this study implores upon the relevant parties managing waqf in Malaysia, such as the State Religious Councils, the Waqf, Zakat and Hajj Department (JAWHAR) and Yayasan Wakaf Malaysia (YWM), to study the need for creating another role for waqf in order to benefit the disadvantaged in Malaysia.

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