

# EXPLORING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACTS ON MALAYSIAN RURAL SMALLHOLDER FARMERS IN KUCHING, SARAWAK

**Cheah WL<sup>1</sup>, Myat SB<sup>1</sup>, Wong AYW<sup>1</sup>, Mohd Fauzi NFA<sup>1</sup>, Hatity MS<sup>1</sup>, Aseri AH<sup>1</sup>, and Yeo ZS<sup>1</sup>.**

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak.

## **Correspondence:**

Cheah Whye Lian,  
Department of Community Medicine and Public Health,  
Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences,  
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,  
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak.  
E-mail: wlcheah@unimas.my

## **Abstract**

The current study aims to explore the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic impacts on Malaysian rural smallholder farmers in Kuching, Sarawak. Purposive sampling was employed and a qualitative descriptive approach was adopted. This study centred on a group of rural smallholder farmers actively participating in a food assistance programme for impoverished urban communities in Kuching. The farmers played a pivotal role in supplying vegetables and crops for the food assistance programme. The data were collected through semi-structured individual in-depth interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted, which revealed several major themes, namely the challenges encountered by smallholder farmers during the pandemic, the responses to the crisis, the recovery strategies, and subsequent plans. The current study not only enriched the understanding of the challenges encountered by rural smallholder farmers but also determined the underlying issues. The insights could serve as a foundation for developing specific solutions by relevant authorities to address rural smallholder farmers' respective needs.

**Keywords:** Smallholder Farmers, Challenges, Response, Recovery, Strategies

## **Introduction**

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan City (1). The first outbreak was declared on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019, followed by the Public Health Emergency of the International Concern Declaration on 11th March (2). The first COVID-19 wave in Malaysia was imported cases from Chinese tourists. Various Movement Control Orders (MCOs) were announced throughout 2020 to control the spread. The strategies included wearing face masks, restricting movements, and halting non-essential economic sectors, which significantly impacted the economy when the MCO also prohibited travelling. Neither domestic nor international travel was allowed, which significantly restricted food supplies within Malaysia (3). Various economic sectors were also compelled to close, especially smallholder farmers who worked in the agricultural industry on small land and harvested a limited variety of food crops (4, 5). The farmers' income sources were negatively impacted, which elicited physical and psychological responses. Smallholder farmers responded by disposing of food stocks due to the inability to sell harvested crops as crops would wilt after being harvested (6). Moreover, certain farmers developed higher anxiety owing to losing significant crops, high uncertainty from multiple fake news, high loneliness levels, and insufficient

survival methods (7). Several farmers also resorted to suicide (8).

A total of 1,875,800 Malaysian agricultural farmers, including both commercial and smallholders (9), contributed 7.1% (RM 101.5 billion) to the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019 (10). Previous studies revealed that the measures employed to control the pandemic, especially the MCO, negatively impacted farmers' lives directly and indirectly in terms of financial, physical, and mental health. The MCO engendered farmers different challenges, and farmers were required to develop corresponding strategies to ensure personal livelihood and survival. The Malaysian government allocated subsidies of a maximum of RM 4.4 billion in 2019 and increased to RM4.9 billion in 2020 to aid agricultural and agro-based farmers (11). Nonetheless, the subsidies could not be sustained and declined in 2021, wherein only RM 1.7 billion was allocated for farmers (12). Numerous smallholder farmers encountered various challenges, including issues related to control and exploitation, while endeavouring to maintain a steady income from product sales. The support to smallholder farmers is crucial due to the pivotal role in ensuring a consistent food supply for local communities. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of smallholder farmers' needs and