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Farmers have a vital role in economy

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WHAT makes a successful farmer? Hard work, dedication, knowledge and love for the land are key factors, but these alone will not ensure that a farmer earns enough for his family.

He also needs the right technical support, advice and loans available under the Fund for Food scheme (3F) introduced by the Government.

Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud said this in Langkawi recently at the opening of the new Institut Pengurusan Peladang (IPP) or Farmers Management Institute in Langkawi by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It is crucial, therefore, that all the 269 farmers organisations, with membership totalling 650,000, play their part in helping farmers get this aid.

It is no small task but with assets of RM615.5 million, the farmers organisations can aid economic recovery while helping to develop the agricultural sector.

Over the past eight years, the Farmers Organisation Authority (FOA) has helped turn 839 farmers into entrepreneurs. But there is a need for more such entrepreneurs if the rural community is to develop into one that is knowledgeable and far-sighted.

Proper training in modern farming methods, marketing, financial management and auditing are also essential.

Otherwise, the farmers will not be able to handle bigger projects without such training.

The IPP was built for this purpose. Located on a 1.6ha plot, it will provide comprehensive training in all aspects of management and entrepreneurship for those related to the FOA.

It also conducts courses for individual entrepreneurs as well as those in the public and private sector, and has hostel facilities. The IPP also provides accommodation and holiday packages for those attending seminars and conventions or for walk-in tourists and visitors.

Built almost like a hotel, it has a fully-equipped seminar hall, 106 double rooms and three family rooms, besides two special VIP rooms. It also has two dormitories, two suraus, a canteen, a gymnasium and a computer room.

Kedah FOA public relations officer Shahizan Hassan feels the farmers still need guidance and support from the FOA to help organise their food production and marketing.

In the eyes of the farmers, the respective farmers organisations have almost become welfare organisations. But it is time for farmers to stand on their own, to learn new things, and thus they should not be afraid to embrace new challenges.

He also thinks farmers will benefit greatly from working together with bigger corporations which can provide the knowledge and technology and produce food on a commercial scale.

FOA director of farmers' entrepreneur development division Mariam Mas Yaacob, says there is a need to teach farmers how to better manage their farms.

At present, there is no particular agency to take care of farmers but the FOA helps in the marketing and processing.

The entrepreneur development division has various programmes, including those under the Project for the Hardcore Poor. Through its community-based

development programmes for farmers, the division ensures farmers are given help to improve their projects.

The projects are selected by the area organisations and provided loans of up to a maximum of RM25,000 to be repaid over five years at an interest rate of seven per cent.

The farmer must, however, be already involved in food production when applying for the loan, and the money used for expansion purposes.

The FOA provides guidance and marketing while the area organisations arrange the farmers into groups of five or 10, earning about RM500 to RM600 each.

The division has so far carried out community-based projects in 11 villages from 1991 to 1995.

Under phase II (1996-2000), 16 villages are given RM100,000 each per year. The plan is to have at least 2,500 entrepreneur farmers.

Currently, FOA food projects include fruit cultivation, caged culture, prawn breeding, hydroponically-grown vegetables, padi, poultry rearing and processing, cash crops, oil palm, onions, chillies, quail farming and cattle rearing.

At one farm in Sungai Merbok, Kedah, an aquaculture project, rearing catfish in 270 cages, has become so successful that the entrepreneur has built chalets to encourage visitors to his farm.

The farm produces an average of four metric tonnes of fish per month.

At another large scale project in Gurun, Kedah, the entrepreneur turned the humble ubi keledak (sweet potato) into a money spinner by cultivating it on 142 hectares, producing 1,562 metric tonnes per harvest. He then sells it to local vendors who sell it to other States.

In Perak, a large scale production of poultry - up to 70,000 birds per cycle - is being carried out at Kampung Changkat, Kinta Selatan under a contract with Ayamas, a subsidiary of Kentucky Fried Chicken Holdings, which earns the area farmers organisations about RM338,670 per cycle.

Still, not all projects succeed. There are failures too but farmers learnt from the experience.

In Langkawi, for instance, the farmers organisation suffered several setbacks when a cockle rearing project, an orchid project and a poultry project at Pulau Tuba failed due to various reasons.

However, Langkawi area organisation chairman Abdul Rahman Said says all that is behind them.

They plan to start a RM500,000 caged culture project rearing ikan siakap and kerapu at Tanjung Rhu next year.

There is also a plan to build a RM50,000 coldroom facility to store vegetables which are being grown by the farmers in Langkawi. The organisation, which represents 2,910 farmers, also wants to expand its vegetable project as well as increase its padi-growing to two cycles a year.

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