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Getting more to till the land

ONE of the biggest challenges facing the agricultural sector is making farming an attractive occupation to young people. As a profession, tilling the land has lost its appeal. The majority of the one million small farmers in Malaysia are over 50 years old and not many of their children appear to be interested in the land. Yet to meet Malaysia's food production goals as envisaged by the Third National Agricultural Policy (1998-2010), farming must be made more appealing. It is therefore necessary to craft programmes which can encourage young Malaysians to become farmers.

At the launching of this year's National Farmers' Day and the Asia Agricultural Exposition and Convention 1999 at Stadium Putra, Bukit Jalil, on Thursday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad repeated earlier calls for large-scale and high-technology farming to be initiated to ensure the sector's viability. But such farms would have to be run by those with expertise in all aspects of agri-business. Malaysia's food crop sector is now dominated by smallholders who only produce for their own consumption and for the immediate local markets. They are not commercial in their outlook and this is mainly due to lack of knowledge in modern agricultural practices.

But the globalisation of trade offers Malaysia opportunities to export its food surplus to new and non-traditional markets as these open up under the World Trade Organisation's more liberal agricultural trading arrangements. Agriculture has to be seen as a business rather than a way to make ends meet. Only those with professional qualifications in management and agro-industry will be able to take advantage of the vast openings available under the global agricultural regime.

The concern that few young people want to work on the land has been an issue for a long time. Years ago, a proposal was made by the then Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (now Universiti Putra Malaysia) to set up special institutions to train graduates who want to become farmers. These entities would be separate from the agricultural institutes under the Agriculture Ministry whose aim is to churn out agricultural technicians and extension workers. Perhaps, the concept should be re-examined and a college-level training programme worked out for those who want to be professional farmers.

During the recession of the mid-80s and at the height of graduate unemployment, the Government introduced a scheme - supervised by the Agriculture Ministry - to create a pool of graduate farmers. Groups of graduates were selected and taught to farm. They were also given assistance including land for rental and loans to start up enterprises. Several success stories have been reported and orchards, orchid and cash crop farms have grown to become commercial holdings. That experience shows that it is possible to nurture modern farmers.

Training professional farmers is but one of the many measures which should be taken to turn the farm sector into a vibrant component of the national economy. There are still some constraints discouraging investors from venturing into large-scale food production. Among these are accessibility to arable land, labour shortage and risks, such as crop failure due to diseases and natural disasters. Only when the environment is more conducive will more people take to farming.

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