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## Agriculture: The next vision

ONCE again, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad succeeded in kindling public imagination when he revealed that the nation's next Wawasan or vision is in agriculture.

We trust he is not only alluding to the pragmatic and technological-embracing Third National Agricultural Policy, which puts Malaysia firmly on the course of modern agricultural planning and management. But knowing the kind of novel and far-reaching ideas that emanate from Dr Mahathir, it is likely that his input in the country's agricultural vision will encompass the politics of sustainable and ecologically-balanced agriculture, aimed at striking a more optimal balance between the economics of large-scale agricultural production and ecology.

Secondly, it is likely that his input will place the vision as an agenda that keeps abreast with international agricultural developments and counterblasts the imperialistic tactics therein such as the current politics of biotechnology and biodiversity which are tantamount to the "legalised theft" of the tropical countries' bio-wealth by transnational corporations of the West.

This is indeed important. Just as Malaysia has assumed leadership in challenging the myriads of injustices in the new global order and the international financial system, which is done out of moral obligation, it must also speak against the Western monopolistic control over crop varieties and genetic enslavement of the greater part of the world's population in Asia and Africa to Western corporations such as Texrice and Monsanto.

Befitting the technological advancement in the 21st century, we would like to see an agricultural vision which goes beyond the detailed practicalities and pragmatics of the NAP. It must be one that goes beyond the making of Malaysia as an adequate food producer, resolving for once and all the protracted problem of increased food imports that had contributed to the current account deficit in the balance of payments and inflation, and a major food exporter.

True, the NAP seems adequate enough in dealing with the problems of dwindling acreage, labour shortage and high labour costs, low productivity, the need for modernisation of farming techniques, insufficient infrastructure in terms of technical support, production technology, storage, distribution network and marketing expertise.

But there must be a vision that will put the country on the forefront as an ethical major food producer that does not undermine the renewable base of agricultural wealth, diminish the biological potency of the land and displace genetic diversity through the mindless and non-sustainable use of chemicals.

As experienced by some countries, some technological techniques have resulted in the narrowing of the the base of food security both in terms of the number of species constituting the food basket and the number of genetic strains cultivated.

Plant-breeding concepts such as high-yield varieties are the means in increasing the marketable output of a plant. But they must not be done at the cost of decreasing the bio-mass for animals and soil. This is the crux of sustainable agriculture which Malaysia must be a proponent of.

Pragmatic policy devoid of political will will not work. Yet without a far-reaching vision, both political will and policy framework will not be

enough.

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