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Food for thought

THE question of boosting food production and reducing the country's food import bill has been bandied about for years but this does not seem to have been implemented seriously enough to show tangible results. The Third National Agriculture Policy (1998-2010) aims to reduce Malaysia's reliance on imported food, enhance food security and combat inflation by reducing the food bill but the RM12 billion food import bill tells a different story. The comparative figure for 1993 was RM5.8 billion.

When the going is good, some policymakers and entrepreneurs tend to go for a quick buck in housing and property. If memories are short, let it be a reminder that agriculture helped sustain the economy during the recent financial crisis. It was the twin pillars of tin and rubber that brought in revenue before commodity prices fluctuated and we switched to manufacturing in the late 1980s.

Now that we are veering towards a knowledge-based economy and information technology is a powerful tool that can contribute to development, we should all the more use technology to enhance agricultural practices to meet our policy objectives and to tap the potential. Indeed, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad provides food for thought when he exhorts Malaysians to go into food production as there is potential and it is a venture that can be done with intelligence.

The reminder is timely for we are endowed with the resources and we have scientists who are leaders in their field. And, of what use is research if it is not commercialised? Food is one of the necessities of life besides clothing and shelter, and food security is not something to be taken for granted. Granted, we do not have to queue up for our daily bread and neither do we wish to. But we have to be pragmatic enough to increase food output now and have enough for export as well.

Agriculture, including forestry, livestock and fishing, contributed 12.3 per cent to the country's Gross Domestic Product in 1998 compared with 13.6 per cent in 1995. The vista of opportunities in the sector is waiting to be tapped but pragmatism dictates that new methods and processes have to be adopted if we are to get the most from agriculture.

Certain areas in every State have been gazetted as permanent food production zones to help reduce the food import bill. The latest clones, seedlings and agricultural techniques are available from research institutes.

If agriculture is to be a successful practice, financial institutions will also have to play their role in making funds more accessible for agricultural projects. In essence, agriculture has to be seen as a business prospect and not as an insignificant venture.

For budding agropreneurs with the gumption and the zeal, they have to remember market-driven strategies and cost-effective methods to sell their produce. Which means, packaging and labelling are value-added measures that are no less important than the product itself. Many importers of food products often re-package retail goods before placing them on supermarket shelves to ensure better market value.

We are not re-inventing the wheel in wanting to go into food production in a big way, and it is not purely dictated by necessity. Agriculture, on its own, has immense business potential that is limited only by the imagination. But for it to be a success, all involved will have co-operate and co-ordinate well.

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