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States can do well to emulate Johor's success in agriculture

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JOHOR has done it again. This time in the agricultural sector. Having carved a niche as one of the best managed, progressive and industrialised States with outstanding infrastructure projects, Johor is now fast emerging as the nation's number one food producer.

The figures are impressive.

Johor is the top producer of vegetables and fruits with exports totalling RM193.3 million in 1998. This year, exports are poised to rise by six per cent for vegetables and 1.5 per cent for fruits.

As for commodities, Johor also has the largest acreage under oil palm, with 600,000 hectares, with crude palm oil production of 1.8 million tonnes per annum, representing 24 per cent of the national output.

State agencies such as the Johor Corporation, Johor Islamic Economic Development Corporation, Johor Education Foundation and Johor Farmers' Organisation jointly also own an additional 11,260ha of oil palm land in Indonesia.

Johor has taken a leading role in the creation of exclusive food production zones, with some 97,200ha under active cultivation, with exports totalling RM5.7 billion in 1998. Since 1996, another 13,365ha of land earmarked for this purpose were alienated to various groups keen on large-scale food production.

They include 60,000 farmers under 28 district farmers' organisations (2,835ha), vegetables growers' associations (2,025ha), State Government agencies such as Permodalan Darul Takzim and Johor Education Foundation and private companies. Johor has also organised farmers' and agriculture-based groups into successful co-operatives, which now own some 12,150ha of oil palm and other crops.

The State has also made impressive forays into crop diversification. Pineapples are just one of them. Johor is now the country's largest producer with exciting new market prospects with the introduction of new clones such as 'Josapine'.

Bananas, especially 'pisang montel' and more recently, the new 'pisang emas' variety called 'cinta manis' are also making waves in Europe and other markets.

Maize grain (as animal feed) is also big business, with a 810ha farm by Leong Hup Holdings Bhd near Mersing engaged exclusively in its cultivation.

Johor also plans to exploit the potential for commercial padi farming with YPJ Holdings Sdn Bhd (a State-owned company) investing in a 4,050ha project in Labong, Mersing.

Spices are another exciting new venture. A 891ha pilot project in Pagoh, Muar, had yielded positive results and the State Government plans to expand this to Batu Pahat with the opening of another 121.5ha.

As for animal husbandry, Johor has also made impressive inroads. This includes not just the commercial production of dairy milk, but also goat's milk and ostrich meat for niche markets both locally and abroad. The State is also going big with integrated farming by encouraging oil palm estate owners to rear cattle in their plantations to boost beef exports.

Other new initiatives include the commercial development of forest plantations for timber, orchids, tea, aquaculture and aquarium fish for export - all of which hold tremendous export potential.

Agro-tourism is yet another top item on the Johor Government's agenda,

with 27 locations identified for this purpose to date. Some 85,000 tourists are expected to patronise them this year.

Plans are also afoot to develop Air Hitam, located smack in the centre of Johor, into a major agriculture produce distribution and food processing base.

Similarly, Muar has also been earmarked as a base for furniture industries with eight areas, including Pagoh, Sri Menanti and Tangkak, set to become the hub of furniture manufacturing.

With all these and more, Johor is positioning itself as not only the country's leading producer of food but also as a model for the development of agriculture.

Small wonder then that Agriculture Minister Datuk Mohd Effendi Norwawi announced in Johor Baru last Thursday that Johor had been chosen for the launch of the country's first modernisation of agriculture pilot project.

Describing the project as "an exciting new beginning" in the development of agriculture in Malaysia, he said Johor was chosen because of its innovative and proactive agriculture programmes.

The modernisation programme will be based on a masterplan to be drawn up by experts from the Royal Agriculture College in the United Kingdom. It will be launched this year and will take three years to be fully developed.

The brainchild of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the programme is an integrated plan designed to increase all-round food production. It involves not only smart farming and mechanisation but also the application of high-technology to boost production and woo investments into large-scale commercial farming.

Johor, as Effendi remarked, is fast becoming a model for other States for its agriculture policy.

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