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Time to start concentrating on growing our own food

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A FRONT-PAGE news item last month grabbed my attention because it reminded me of the things I used to say several years before the recent economic crisis.

The nation was doing extremely well then, the property boom was the order of the day, and almost everybody was looking for agricultural land to convert for building and industrial purposes.

The question I brought up then was this: Is all this development really necessary and what price would we have to pay for it?

Evidently, the price would be somewhere in the region of RM12 billion, which equates to the amount of money we spent on importing food last year.

This is almost three times the nation's food import bill of RM4.6 billion in 1990.

It is indeed a lot of Malaysian ringgit flowing out of the country. Who is to blame? I would say it is the collective responsibility of all Malaysians.

In the news report I saw last month headlined Optimising farm land use, I read that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said that the Government would "employ the carrot-and-stick approach to ensure the optimum use of agricultural land".

The Prime Minister added that "if they (land owners) do not maximise land usage, maybe the Government will impose a higher tax so that we get some benefit".

On the other hand, if the land owners could maximise land usage, for example, by "rearing cattle in their palm oil plantations, we may give something to them", he said when asked how the Government could ensure the maximum utilisation of agricultural land.

Most Malaysians may not realise that as of 1999, we had a shortage of 145,000 hectares of land for agriculture. Imagine a tract of fertile land the size of Malacca. That is how much land we do not have for agriculture.

In December 1998, when the Cabinet formally announced the Third National Agricultural Policy, the then Minister of Agriculture explained in great detail what the Government had in mind as part of its long-term strategy up to 2010.

In June 1999, the Agriculture Ministry announced that it would set up "a land bank" to gather information on land suitable for farming.

The information collected would then be passed on to the investors in the agricultural sector, a move clearly in line with the Ministry's objective of encouraging private sector participation.

At that time, the Ministry was hopeful that the agricultural sector would grow at 2.1 per cent annually right through to 2010, although the sector's contribution to the gross domestic product was projected to drop to 10.5 per cent by the end of 1999.

In October of the same year, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Federal and the State Governments, under which the two parties agreed to implement several measures to develop the agricultural sector.

Among the steps undertaken was the setting up of a special fund to boost food production and the establishment of agricultural technology parks.

Acting with a common objective, the Federal Government would provide incentives, infrastructure outlay, basic facilities and support services (such as research and development, marketing, post-harvest handling and consultation), while the State Governments would provide land for the

private sector companies willing to venture into agricultural production.

On the drawing board, it looks great. Now, if only we can translate hopes into reality, billions of ringgit need no longer flow out of the country.

Can we stop thinking of building houses and factories and start thinking of growing our own food?