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PM: Exploit Mardi's R&D

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SERDANG, Mon. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today expressed regret over the lack of interest by the private sector to commercialise the Malaysian Agriculture Research and Development Institute's findings.

The Prime Minister said although the Government had announced that the agriculture sector would be one of the country's engines of growth, the private sector showed very little interest in exploiting these findings for mutual benefit.

"We are giving a lot of attention to agriculture but people are more keen to buy and sell shares and all that because that is the easy way out.

"Unless people are serious in agriculture, you cannot make it a real engine of growth for the country," he said.

Dr Mahathir was asked whether he was satisfied with Mardi's research and development work.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir was given a briefing by Mardi director-general Dr Saharan Anang. He was also taken on a tour of the institute and shown some of its findings and R&D work.

Asked whether the Government would increase Mardi's budget to enable it to focus more into R&D, Dr Mahathir said increasing it was not a solution to the problem.

"It is not about increasing budget for agriculture but exploiting what we have found.

"If we increase budget (for R&D) but people still do not use it, it will be pointless."

Asked what role the private sector could play, Dr Mahathir said they could exploit Mardi's R&D work by making investments for large scale production.

"They can also use a more effective approach to market, pack and promote these products," he said, adding that Mardi would also benefit from such ventures.

Dr Mahathir said Mardi, which had sufficient expertise in R&D, would be able to do more if it received returns from its earlier findings.

"If they (the private sector) exploit Mardi's findings, the institute will get higher returns and this will allow it to do more work such as contract research.

"This means any party which wants to do some research of a product for commercial purposes can request Mardi to do it for them. Mardi can in return guide them on how this can be done," he said.

Dr Mahathir said as long as Malaysians were unable to see agriculture as a business, they would not benefit from research done by Mardi.

On Mardi's achievements so far, Dr Mahathir, who was visiting the institute after 10 years, was satisfied.

"Like I said, there has been plenty of work done. What we need to do is to increase our ability to conduct more feasibility studies on the cost (of production) to make their findings more attractive," he said.

Citing an example, Dr Mahathir said the kenaf (*hibiscus cannabinus*) plant which had multiple uses had big potential to be commercialised.

However, he said, the authorities should be able to determine the processing cost of the kenaf - which among others could be used to produce paper, chipboard and livestock feed - to determine its viability.

"Similarly, oil palm fronds also have big potential. We have three million hectares planted with oil palm trees. Just imagine the potential

if the product was exploited," he said.

Asked whether Mardi encountered any problems in its endeavours, Dr Mahathir said its scientists had fewer career development opportunities compared to their counterparts in universities and in the private sector.

"If we do not have more opportunities for them, they will not remain long here," he said, adding that the Government was prepared to review their remuneration to prevent a brain-drain.

Agriculture Minister Datuk Effendi Norwawi, who was also present, said several proposals to amend the Mardi Act 1969 have been made to attract the private sector to participate in R&D with the institute.

Among these are allowing the private sector to get a share of the findings.

He said Mardi would be holding an Open Day from April 6 to 8 to enable the private sector to see the R&D work done by the institute and investment opportunities that were available.

Later, Dr Mahathir also witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Mardi and Glowing Hill Sdn Bhd to produce low cholesterol eggs.