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Buck up, Dr M tells farmers

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today farmers should carry out their duty to feed the nation as entrusted to them.

Besides alleviating their own poverty, fulfilling this trust would give farmers a sense of duty towards the country's overall development.

Their vision would not be limited to planting crops for their own consumption, but they would view themselves as stakeholders in the nation's progress.

"When we are given something to do, we do it wholeheartedly and to the best of our ability so it will be successful," Dr Mahathir said when launching the Gerakan Daya Wawasan (Vision and Empowerment Movement), a programme for rural communities, at Putra Stadium in Bukit Jalil here.

Citing the farmers in the United States as an example, he said even though a small percentage of America's population worked in agriculture, they were able to produce enough food to feed the rest of the country and for exports.

"Five per cent of their population live in rural areas while 95 per cent live in cities. Yet the five per cent can produce food for the majority. Why can't we do this?"

Dr Mahathir said Malaysian farmers could achieve the same success if they were willing to use modern technology, more efficient methods and if they worked harder.

He said if farmers were willing to change, the Government would show them how to increase their crop yield and income.

Other countries were successful in increasing their food production, but Malaysian farmers still complained that they were poor, he noted.

Gently chiding the 10,000 rural folk who were present, Dr Mahathir said farmers should ask themselves whether they worked as long and as hard as they could.

"If you work in a factory, you work according to a timetable, eight-hour shifts daily for six days a week, for the whole year.

"If you compare this with planting padi, do you work as hard and as long? I don't think so. You plant according to seasons and on certain days only. Macam mana nak dapat duit? (How to earn money?)"

Farmers should instead use the time in between planting and harvesting to develop cottage industries, as was the aim of the one-village-one-product programme.

However, Malaysian villages had little success in adopting this programme whereas the concept was thriving in Thailand's rural areas.

Dr Mahathir said failure in the one-village-one-product concept was due to the people's reluctance.

"If the Thais can be successful, then why can't we? Why are our farmers always so poor and dependant on government assistance? There must be at least one industry we can develop.

"We don't want to create million-aire, we just want to raise the income of rural folk."

Reminding them to be trustworthy, Dr Mahathir said rural folk must instil this value along with hard work and honesty.

"You must hold on to these values for in the end, you will get the returns."

He said Gerakan Daya Wawasan was aimed at instilling these values by

changing the mindset of rural folk, who would be empowered to undertake their own income-boosting projects.

The programme is an extension of Gerakan Desa Wawasan (Rural Vision Movement), which was launched in 1996, and was aimed at developing village infrastructure.

Dr Mahathir said it would be easier for the Government to continue giving subsidies to the poor, but this method would be of no use to the country and would hinder progress.

Also present were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Rural Development Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid.