

PENANG, the Silicon Valley of the East - that's what it's known as. After all, the tiny island produces 5% of the world's semi-conductor exports.

Malaysia's first free trade zone, Bayan Lepas, is a sprawling township on the island with factories and more factories.

But it wasn't always like that.

As a young boy, I used to ride my bicycle past that township. No factories. Instead, there were miles and miles of padi fields there, with riverbanks teeming with mudskippers.

That was before Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu transformed the state, especially the island, into the electronics hub it now is. Factories sprouted and the oldest civilian airport in the country, which was built in 1938, was upgraded.

The padi fields slowly disappeared and a concrete jungle took its place. Economic progress came. There were jobs, people had money and could put food on the table.

But money is not food.

Economic progress and hard cash may be great, but what good are they when there is little food on the supermarket shelves? And if what little is there costs a fortune?

Chong Eu's Penang is now looking to change - again. The padi fields are coming back.

Months ago, there were reports of padi fields in mainland Penang being turned into illegal landfills and dumps.

Now, however, there are plans to develop 942ha of padi fields there. A total of 150,000ha are to be opened up around the country.

We are waking up to the fact that agriculture is the biggest and most important industry. And it should be a profitable one too - for the farmers, not the middlemen.

It's an ingrained problem and getting rid of the man in the middle may be difficult, but we are living in very difficult times.

A war being fought in another part of the world is affecting us, and everybody else. Both adversaries, Russia and Ukraine, are major agri-

Take a leaf out of Razak's Green Book

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**DORAIRAJ
NADASON**
newsdesk
@thestar.com

Why not?

culture producers.

Russia exports cereals, oil and fat products, meat, dairy, fish and other seafood.

Ukraine is the bread basket of Europe and exports corn, barley, sunflower and rapeseed oil.

Oh, it also exports animal fodder, the stuff that we feed to domesticated animals like cattle, goats and chicken.

Almost everything we eat, except maybe rice, is affected.

And we are shooting ourselves in the foot when it comes to rice. Our padi fields are under threat.

Politicians and greedy businessmen are eyeing the agricultural land, and planning to "develop" them. In some places, padi fields have become wasteland.

In 2016, the then Kedah menteri besar said the state needed more of the manufacturing industry. It needed factories, industrialisation.

The padi fields, he said, were causing the state to be poor. He was right about the farmers being poor, but it was a short-sighted vision.

Kedah, together with Perlis, pro-



Food for thought: 'Illegal' farms in Cameron Highlands need to be regulated and allowed to flourish. There's no need to destroy the crops.

duces 43% of the country's padi. And we only produce just over 70% of the country's needs. We still have to import rice from countries like China, Pakistan and India.

What will happen if the padi fields dwindle? Do we import more?

We already import a third of our fruit and almost two-thirds of our vegetables. Our food import bill was RM55.4bil in 2020 and is rising.

Many countries are waking up to food security. India, hit by a heatwave after five bumper seasons, has just banned the export of wheat despite sitting on a huge stockpile. It's not good news for the chapati and roti canai lovers.

But there is a lesson to be learnt there. In the 1960s, India was also

hit by a heatwave and drought and the wheat crops failed. The country had to practically beg the United States for wheat, and the Americans twisted its arms during the Cold War.

Then India set out on its Green Revolution. It started a mass movement towards agriculture, and is now the world's second largest wheat producer with plenty of surplus.

Yet, feeding its own is the country's priority. It should be ours, too.

Being an urban Penang island boy, I must confess I never really cared about agriculture and did not know a trowel from a towel (which is embarrassing as I did spend some time in Universiti

Pertanian Malaysia).

But if the years have taught me anything, it is that agriculture is important, very important.

Our durians can be exported for money, just like our palm oil. But it is food that matters. Durians are nice, but they are not going to be staple diet.

Finally, though, we have some good moves.

The decision to scrap approved permits (AP) for food imports is probably one of the best ones in recent times.

It will bring more competition and, hopefully, for all Malaysians, bring prices down.

But it's not a long-term answer. Flooding the market with cheap imported food is only going to impoverish our farmers further and turn them away from farming. That will be a vicious circle.

And with the ringgit slumping to record lows, imports are not exactly going to be much cheaper, either.

The real answer lies in self-sufficiency. And that means getting the agriculture sector going again.

We have land. Tenaga Nasional Bhd has land under its high-tension wires; there are temples, mosques and churches with vast areas of land that can be put to good use.

People should be encouraged to cultivate land that is idle, not be arrested and have their hard work torn down.

We need newer, more efficient farming methods that increase yield.

The "illegal" farms of Cameron Highlands need to be regulated and allowed to flourish. There is really no need to demolish the farms and destroy the crops.

Those who cultivate on idle land should not be punished.

It's what second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein had envisioned in his Green Book Plan of 1974 - that people plant and grow food crops in any available place.

We need to go the India way and become a net exporter of produce.

Then we can really earn money and put food on the table.