

## **More young agropreneurs needed as agriculture industry evolves**

KUALA LUMPUR: The outlook for the food and agriculture industry will be more important over the next 10 to 20 years as Malaysia shifts further into a service-dominant economy, thus making the involvement of youths in the sector with a twist of modern technology more imminent.

Khazanah Research Institute deputy director of research Dr Sarena Che Omar said, in developed countries whereby the services sector dominate their gross domestic product (GDP), agriculture and food continue to expand and innovate along with the evolving consumer demands.

“In a higher-income country, food safety, on-farm labour rights, and sustainable agricultural methods are all important when purchasing food. This is less so in a poorer country where the focus is on food affordability and quantity, rather than quality.

“As Malaysia transitions into a high-income country, it will become even more important that the local food is produced sustainably such as according to the Malaysian Good Agricultural Practice (MyGAP) requirements, are safe to consume and conforms to fair labour conditions wherein the farmers and workers are fairly paid and there’s food traceability,” she told Bernama.

She said this is where Malaysia is heading and its agriculture and food sector must adapt to meet the changing demands.

Last September, the government tabled the 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP) in which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob said the country would emerge as a high-income nation in 2025 with a better quality of life alongside high technology following the implementation of reforms.

Under the 12MP, the Young Agropreneur Programme will be implemented to attract and retain youth participation in agriculture,

A dedicated strategy as well as initiatives on smart farming will also be introduced to help propel economic growth

Commenting on retaining youth participation, Sarena said it would require a whole-of-society approach as it takes the whole ecosystem to both attract and retain young farmers.

“The public, private sector, and the government will need to work together. For example, we can attract more young farmers to chilli farming via various government initiatives as per the best standards, by adopting MyGAP.

“But if there is no middle man to buy and transport the chillies to retailers, or when customers do not bother about the MyGAP certification, then it will discourage our young farmers from participating and conducting responsible agricultural practices.

Added value

“There is also the added value of our farm produce, which requires product research and development (R&D) efforts and marketing skills. We cannot expect our young farmers to address all these factors on their own,” she explained.

Sarena also expressed hope that the government would introduce and improve the strategies that would help young farmers to acquire, consolidate and work on larger land areas, which will require coordination between banks, land offices, and farm service providers.

“There is a positive correlation between a younger age, bigger farm size and improved farm productivity.

“For instance, we currently require 100 ageing farmers to produce a certain amount of food but we hope in the future we can have just 10 to 20 highly productive agropreneurs producing the same amount if not more for the nation.

“This is a strategy that we should aim for, given that Malaysia is moving towards an ageing population.

“We also wish to see further improvements in school co-curricular programmes like ‘Kelab Kebun’, whereby they can organise farm visits and establish government and non-governmental organisation as well as school programmes on farming and community gardening,” she said.

#### Changing agriculture narrative

Sarena opined that changing the narrative that the agriculture sector is a 3D (dirty, difficult and dangerous) industry is very important and it starts by exposing children to farming and gardening from a young age.

As farming shifts from 3D to high technology, the sector will begin to attract the younger generation, making a strong case for the country to invest in agricultural and food-related R&D, she stressed.

Efforts to encourage the participation of youths in the agriculture sector began in earnest in 2016 with the introduction of Young Agropreneur Programme under the 11th Malaysia Plan (11MP) 2016-2020, aimed at boosting the participation of youths aged from 18 to 40 in food production and services activities. The programme enables eligible youths known as young agropreneurs access to loans, grants and training over the course of the 11MP. A total of RM126mil worth of grants and loans were approved, benefitting 6,969 young agropreneurs to initiate and expand agricultural activities.

Despite the efforts and achievements, Malaysia’s agriculture sector is still dominated by smallholders with an average age of above 55 years.

Youths constitute 44% of Malaysia’s total population, out of which only about 15% are involved in the agriculture sector.

Ageing farmers are less likely to be open to the idea of adopting modern technology required in increasing productivity and cause lesser damage to the environment.

The adoption of agricultural technology and automation is still low and farming is largely labour-intensive with low-skilled foreign workers constituting 31% of the agricultural workforce.

### Ageing farmers

As ageing farmers gradually exit the workforce, there is an urgent need to capture the interest of youths in agriculture in order to secure the future.

Data from the **Statistics Department** showed that the share of the agriculture sector has declined from the 1970s to the 21st Century as other sectors such as manufacturing and services sectors performed better.

However, in terms of current prices, the value of the agriculture sector increased from RM16.2bil in 1987 to RM116.1bil in 2020.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2021/11/29/more-young-agropreneurs-needed-as-agriculture-industry-evolves>