

## Good reasons to be self-sufficient

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The Star Says, Sunday, 2 December 2007

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Currently, up to nearly a third of foodstuffs consumed by Malaysians is still imported. This amounts to some RM14bil a year, covering the entire range of diets including meat, rice and vegetables.

However, the reasons for becoming fully self-sufficient in food are more than just economic. They are also strategic and commonsensical, such as to avoid difficulties and hardship arising from international conflict, disruptions in shipments or fluctuating currency exchange rates.

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Malaysia is traditionally an agricultural country with sufficient land, warm weather and rainfall year-round to afford regularly bountiful harvests. With these attributes, the prospect of enlarging agricultural output should never be a problem, but instead suggests more should always be done.

Within the next three years, the ministry plans to produce 10,000 new agricultural entrepreneurs. This is in addition to the 4,000 entrepreneurs already reaping the fruits of their labours.

Agricultural yield is also an objective, so improved farming, harvesting and packing techniques should always be accessible to farmers. With rice for example, the current yield, which averages 5.4 tonnes per hectare, is due to double by 2010.

In enlarging output, however, it is always well to remember the importance of improving quality. This is especially important in foreign export markets where agricultural produce, no less than for industrial goods, needs to be competitive.

Fruits now enjoy top priority in Malaysia&rsquo;s food export drive because foreign demand is high. Impeccable standards of health and safety in cultivation and handling will help satisfy that demand competently, and ensure that

international demand remains high for Malaysian produce.

One growing sector of the food market is organic produce, which is set to become larger than just a niche market. This area is worth developing, especially in cooperation with Sirim, as organic food assures increasingly health-conscious consumers of certain standards for their well-being.

Malaysians should not starve when the country produces surpluses sufficient for export. Purely cash crops should never crowd out food crops for the health of the nation.

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