

Age not the only factor behind moribund farms

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PETALING JAYA: While ageing farmers are often blamed for the decline in food farming in Malaysia, experts argue that age alone is not the main issue, especially when countries like China, Japan, and India, which also have large populations of elderly farmers, remain major food producers.

What sets these countries apart, they say, is the presence of the right policies and incentives that make growing food crops, instead of industrial crops like oil palm, a viable and sustainable livelihood.

Their comments come in response to the recently released Agriculture Census 2024, which revealed that 45.4% of Malaysia's 1,008,829 individual farmers are aged over 60.

The agriculture and food security experts said the key lies in policies that promote food crop cultivation using technology that makes optimum use of water, fertiliser and pesticide while being environmentally sustainable.

They also stressed the need for federal support to incentivise state governments to allocate

land for food crops, especially staples like rice.

"We need something similar to the policy that compensates states for not cutting down their forests," said Prof Abd Shukor Juraimi of Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) Tropical Agriculture and Food Security Institute.

He was referring to the Federal government's Ecological Fiscal Transfer for Biodiversity Conservation programme, which allocated RM200mil last year for states to preserve key forest and marine areas.

A similar framework should be applied to agricultural land, he added, because land used for food crops currently generates less tax revenue than land designated for residential, commercial or industrial purposes.

Abd Shukor's remarks follow another key census finding: of the 7.5 million hectares of land used for agriculture nationwide, 6.5 million hectares are occupied by cash crops like oil palm and rubber.

Only about one million hectares are used for food crops, with rice farming occupying just 500,000ha.



The Statistics Department, which released the census, noted that the shrinking area for rice cultivation is affecting Malaysia's ability to produce enough of the staple grain.

According to the National Agro-Food Policy 2021-2030 report, rice cultivation land has declined from about 700,000 hectares in 2018.

The same report found that rice farmers operate on an average of just 3.48ha per person, far below the 10ha considered economically optimal.

Prof Datin Paduka Fatimah

Mohamed Arshad, another food security expert from UPM, said Malaysia could learn from India, which has emerged as one of the world's top rice exporters over the past decade, rivalling even Thailand and Vietnam.

India, she said, achieved this despite not having large-scale agricultural schemes like Malaysia's Muda Agricultural Development Authority or the Kemubu Agricultural Development Authority.

"The Indian government supported tech start-ups that developed apps for the entire supply

chain, from precision irrigation tools to sensors," said Fatimah.

"These tools also help minimise risks from floods and droughts by predicting adverse weather to help farmers make better decisions."

Just like in Malaysia, a large proportion of farmers in India are senior citizens, she said, but this has not prevented them from producing good yields.

"With the right support and technology, they are able to make a sustainable living and thrive. So, age is not really the problem," said Fatimah.

The right help:

With proper policies, incentives and technological help, local farmers will be able to produce bountiful crops to match major food producers like China, Japan and India, say agriculture and food security experts.