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Fuelling the fuel that fuels us

WHEN we talk about fuel, our thoughts revolve around energy sources for engines, power plants, or reactors. In everyday parlance, fuel is equated with petrol. We forget the greatest fuel of all: food. Even when we think of food as fuel, it is in a most cursory manner. Yet, fuel it is. And the importance of that fuel has come to haunt us now that the price of the other fuel has shot through the barrel, causing a ripple effect.

As individuals, we have been guilty of taking food for granted; we have wallowed in the belief that it will always be available, and at an affordable price. The government, post mid-1980s, has been guilty of neglecting the agricultural sector in the race to industrialise. It forgot that the availability of food for its people — at a reasonable price — translates into peace and security.

Universiti Putra Malaysia's Professor Dr Mad Nasir Shamsudin observes: "Only in broilers (chicken) are we self-sufficient. We're not self-sufficient (even) in rice though it is our staple. If our policies had paid more attention to agriculture, we could have been." To be fair, the current administration had, even before petrol prices shot up, been promoting agriculture. The 9th Malaysia Plan promotes agriculture and the economic corridors are aimed at addressing the shortfall in food sufficiency. For instance, the Northern Corridor Economic Region is slated to become a modern food zone while Sarawak is to become the country's ninth rice bowl.

Well and good. But the public should be excused if it is circumspect, even sceptical. For, far too many plans to increase food production have, in the past, fallen by the wayside. Speed and efficiency of implementation would certainly remove this wariness. There is also a need to make farming lucrative enough to attract more people, especially corporations. And the private sector must invest more in food production.

For the average Malaysian, the food price increase is an opportune moment for lifestyle adjustments. We should be fuel efficient by planning our meals, cutting wastage, eating at home more, and perhaps as some suggest, even turning vegetarian. A vegetarian diet, studies suggest, not only contributes to a longer life but also optimises land usage, as more people can be fed with a vegetarian-based diet than with a standard diet. We can survive a shortfall in the fuel that fuels our machines but not in the fuel that keeps us alive. This shouldn't be just food for thought but fuel for action.