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## Action plan needed to give impetus to current food drive

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THE opportunity to use land is more important than owning it.

This was the message which the National Action Council secretariat of the Green Book Plan imparted to Malaysians 24 years ago, and it is still as relevant today as it was then.

That its meaning seems to have escaped many land owners is borne out by the existence of tracts of land which have been left idle for various reasons.

The concern in the past, and also today, has hinged on why we are importing food when there is so much land lying vacant which can be devoted to food production.

Now that Malaysia is about to implement its latest food drive, the idle land issue has returned.

In recent weeks it has been widely reported in the Press that vacant plots suitable for agriculture would be utilised for food production.

Perak announced its intention to develop inactive plots for vegetable and cash crop farming.

Negri Sembilan called on owners of underutilised land and aquaculture ponds in the State to contact the Agriculture Department or Land Office to put these to productive use.

Other States voiced similar commitments.

However, Universiti Malaya's land economist Dr Pazim Othman remains unimpressed.

"The measures put forward by the State governments sound good but why now, and not 15 years earlier?" he queries.

He doubts the idle land issue would grab this much attention if Malaysia had continued to enjoy sound economic health.

Food production today has a lot to do with actions that promoted industrialisation, thereby sidelining agriculture.

Farms are left unattended because of a labour shortage, ageing farming population, high costs of land rental and low agricultural prices.

At the same time people are buying up agricultural land especially around urban areas for speculation and leaving them idle.

Until today, nobody knows exactly how much land throughout the country has been neglected or left barren.

The latest figures (1996) released by the Agriculture Department indicate there are some 633,753 hectares of land in the peninsula alienated for agriculture but which have not been fully utilised or are left barren.

The figure often quoted by the Press is one million hectares throughout the country.

What these comprise is not immediately clear but in all probability these might be State land including plots under temporary occupation licences.

To avoid confusion, there must be a national data collected on idle plots.

Many concede this can be a laborious and costly exercise given the large number of fragmented plots and a still greater number of joint owners.

The endeavour would be hampered by difficulty in tracing owners who have migrated to places far from their plots.

Land abandonment began to surface in Malaysia in the early Sixties with the advent of manufacturing.

The problem became so apparent that the Ministry of Agriculture ordered a special study to be conducted in 1980.

A Task Force on Idle Land was set up to detect vacant plots and provide possible remedial actions.

Since then, rehabilitation measures have been taken by the ministries of Agriculture, Rural Development, and Regional Development, the Department of Agriculture and private agencies but these are said to be insufficient.

The Seventh Malaysia Plan has outlined several approaches to tackle the idle land problem during the plan period.

From the plan's onset in 1996, the administration of idle lands has been transferred from the Agriculture Ministry to the Rural Development Ministry.

Now, the Agriculture Ministry only handles cases of idle rice farms outside the granary areas which account for about 10 per cent of total

idle land in Malaysia.

Steps to address the idle land problem include improving the database on idle land, intensifying the landlord-in-trust concept to help revive inactive plots and urging State governments to enforce existing provisions of the National Land Code 1965.

But all these measures mean nothing without an action plan.

Many State Governments have threatened to invoke Section 127 of the Code which empowers them to forfeit agricultural land from owners if they breach certain conditions, including leaving their land idle for long periods.

But in reality, State Governments are reluctant to do so because of possible social and political consequences.

Agriculture Department director of planning Abdul Kadir Abdul Hadi says "we need to zone permanent areas for food production to prevent speculation and land conversion".

We know the magnitude of the problem and what must be done, so, as Pazim puts it, let us get on with the job.

(END) Source : New Straits Times