

## Strategic approaches for agriculture

October 28, 2018, Sunday Sidi Munan



Brisk business for 'Made in Sarawak' products.

OF the several festivals held in Kuching for the past couple of months and the ones which I attended – from beer drinking orgies to planting of vegetables and melons using the hydroponics (a process of growing plants without soil) – I enjoyed the latter festival most.

This is the AgroFest 2018 held at the Penview Convention Centre somewhere in the direction of Sejingkat on the Manhattan Isthmus outside Kuching Proper.

Sponsored and organised by the Ministry of Modernisation of Agriculture, Native Land and Regional Development, the agricultural show and an International conference on topics related to agriculture and livestock have been going on since last Sunday. Today is its last.

Kuchingites and visitors to town should make sure that they and their children will not miss the fun; next year, the whole show may move elsewhere.

The Chief Minister, an ardent advocate of the use of digital technology in agriculture, dropped in on Thursday to officiate at the launch of the grand show and to join the company of exhibitors of various products; to talk to the local entrepreneurs (food processors, livestock breeders, promoters

and cultivators of chillies and other edible plants, mushrooms and fruits), to name just a few. There are many more products on sale or are being exhibited.

For those interested in cultural performances, there is good music to enjoy while you feast on a variety of delicacies from many stalls.

In his speech, the Chief Minister also dropped hints of the size of the state monetary budget that he would be presenting to the legislature next week. He would not, however, disclose details of the budget. Fair enough.

### **Music to the ear**

However, music to the ears of the agriculturalists was his announcement of an allocation of RM5.1 billion for the provision of water supply and electricity to accelerate the transformation of the agriculture sector in Sarawak for the next two years.

He also announced a further sum of RM200m from the State's coffers as a venture capital for the entrepreneurs who are serious about embarking on any agro based projects on a large scale in collaboration with the corporate community.

That is good news for the agriculturalists, the primary producers of food in this state as well as for the private sector investors in this sector. A piece of land has been earmarked for this purpose. Excellent.

For the acceleration of the transformation programme of the modern agro agenda, he stressed the importance of a shift in approaches, stressing the importance of another strategic approach: provision of collection centres throughout Sarawak to act as transits for Sarawak's produce (vegetables, pineapples, etc. before these are being air freighted to Singapore); from Singapore, these Sarawak products or some of them may find their way to other outlets in the world market. Singapore will be the middleman or middlemen in Singapore will also benefit.

Back to the good old days, are we? We used to export our antimony, birds' nests, sago flour, to and through Singapore; through the same port, during the colonial period, we exported our rubber and pepper and other products.

### **Challenges**

Given the clear policy direction in terms of the shift in agricultural development including the marketing strategy of the related products, the challenge is on the primary producers to take up,

provided that the government policy does not change suddenly due some political or economic reason. The players especially the private investors need the full guarantee of certainty, come hail or high water.

The provision of the venture capital of RM 200m does not seem sufficient but will do for a start.

Needless to say, that for a successful transformation of agriculture in Sarawak to succeed, many problems of policy implementation in the past have been taken into consideration as factors to avoid for the next 12 years. The chief minister hinted this as much in his speech on Thursday. Starting on a clean slate, the approaches as outlined by the chief minister should be practicable given the synergy between the private investors and the primary producers with the support of the ministry of concerned.

### **Bilun cap nanas**

However, it is up to the producers to produce goods in sufficient volumes to fill collection centres, then the containers and eventually on the Bilun Nanas Sarawak bound for Singapore.

We must produce enough for export within the next 12 years?

Promise the Ministry that.

Can we produce enough of pineapples, of coconuts, or papayas, or mangoes, or dabai, or mushrooms, or jering or terongs or figs or even chillies for export via Singapore? Each plane per flight must be fully loaded with Sarawak products to pay at least for the maintenance of the planes. Otherwise, it would not be a self-paying venture. Incidentally, how many planes are we going to buy?

This is a real challenge to the primary producers in Sarawak. They may have to buy some additional products from Kalimantan, if these are allowed to be exported through Sarawak? For that, working with the producers across the border and the Indonesian authorities is imperative.

If all goes according to plans, Sarawak should see improvement to its agricultural outputs and there will be extra income to the primary producers as well as a fair return to the private investors.