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MEMORANDUM TO FAST FORWARD ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IN MALAYSIA

CETDEM organized a 2 day National Seminar on Fast Forwarding Organic Agriculture in Malaysia on 2 and 3 July 2012 in Petaling Jaya. The event was opened by the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry, YB Dato' Wira Mohd Johari bin Baharum, and attended by about 50 participants and speakers from the government, farmers, retailers, academia and NGOs. Arising from the papers and the panel discussion, the following issues need to be acted on:-

MAINSTREAMING OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IS OVERDUE:

Despite a CETDEM organized Seminar in 1998 which recommended strongly mainstreaming Organic Agriculture in Malaysia and its subsequent seminars, such mainstreaming has hardly occurred. The National Agricultural Policy or Food Policy must make specific provisions for this environmental friendly form of agriculture and spell out strategies to implement it, with clear milestones. Even the Rio + 20 documents push for such positive moves. We must not be left behind by the efforts of many of our ASEAN neighbours. Our organic area is only 0.01% of the total cultivated agricultural land and we should not be targeting only food crops to be organic, but also the palm oil and other commodity crops.

THE FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS CAN PROVIDE VITAL LEADERSHIP:

Political support is essential from the national to the local level and this leadership should be translated into specific funds and allocations on an annual basis. Land needs to be made available for organic farming and bridging finance/soft loans should be easily accessible for those converting from conventional to organic. More research needs to be focused, research funds increased and the results disseminated systematically to farmers through government extension workers. Regular training and information updating of farmers should become the norm and the concept of Organic communities or villages should be implemented throughout the states. Where possible, some areas could be gazetted as organic and a more structured communal organic farming with government cooperation can be achieved.

Awareness of the positive impacts of organic agriculture on the environment should be increased via media and education. Organic agriculture should be available as a subject in educational institutions.

SKIM ORGANIC MALAYSIA NEEDS WIDER ACCEPTANCE AND SUPERVISION:

Skim Organic Malaysia should be reviewed and more widely promoted by relevant government agencies as well as the media. Parallel certification schemes for animal meat and fish products must be set up to address the needs of organic consumers. Farmers should have easy accessibility to get certification and the National Steering Committee on Organic Farming that operated at the MOABI Ministry level should be re-activated to supervise both SOM and SALM. Extension

workers should also be continually trained and updated on certification aspects in order to guide and inspect farms at a level so that the SOM can be recognized internationally. The Food Quality and Safety Division of the Ministry of Health as well as implementing agencies [DOA, DVS and DOF] should also reach out to retail outlets so that they are aware of the legal implications of selling uncertified organic produce to the general public. An enforcement unit needs to be established to overcome fraudulent cases.

FARMERS NEED MORE SUPPORT AND TRAINING TO STAY VIABLE:

Almost all organic farmers, except for a handful of well-established ones, need more support from government agencies, financial institutions, corporations, extension staff, researchers, NGOs, and ordinary consumers. Marketing is the biggest problem, especially for farmers with small acreages, and help is needed for them. For many of them, periodic training would be beneficial BUT they have to get organized and support each other. Past attempts to organize have frittered away. The farmers should be encouraged to expand beyond serving a niche market as the global trend is to go organic!

INNOVATIONS IN MARKETING ORGANIC PRODUCE ARE ESSENTIAL:

While retailers and supermarkets play an important role in the marketing of organic produce, innovative ideas in marketing need to be assessed and implemented, especially if they help get better returns to the farmer. Community supported schemes and peer-reviewed farm verification can also be explored. But at the end of the day there have to be ethical practices in the entire farm-to-table chain to ensure that healthy and safe food reaches Malaysian tables. Profit should not be the sole consideration – environmental quality and personal integrity do matter!

WHO WILL CHAMPION ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IN MALAYSIA?

Malaysia needs a champion for organic agriculture – but who can best perform this task? Should it be left to the bureaucrats at the Federal level? Politicians may not see too much electoral gain doing this. But are Malaysian consumers ready, with their limited environmental commitment and cost-consciousness? NGOs may advocate but do not have the clout to get things done at the ground level. Perhaps a coalition of stakeholders may be ideal – but how do we assemble and sustain it? Can the EPU [Agriculture Section] take the lead?

CETDEM IS WILLING TO SUSTAIN ITS CURRENT EFFORTS:

As the last 25 years have proven, CETDEM has built up its efforts to demonstrate the viability of organic agriculture and from there promoting it across many areas. It has faced many challenges, ranging from lack of financial support to attempts at belittling its efforts, but has still sustained its commitment. It is seeking fresh blood and the support of other organic agriculture players to sustain its efforts into the future. It is willing to re-join the Steering Committee under the Ministry and participate in other ventures to fast forward organic agriculture in the country.

GURMIT SINGH,
CETDEM Chairman, on behalf of the Organising Committee
10 August 2012.