

Farming into the future

Rebranding agriculture for Malaysia's youth

THE RISE of the gig economy connotes a significant shift in employment preferences among today's youth, indicating a move away from traditional office jobs towards more dynamic and flexible work arrangements.

This trend highlights a growing desire for autonomy and diverse experiences among young individuals. In this evolving landscape, the modern agriculture industry holds a unique opportunity to appeal to this demographic by showcasing the autonomy, innovation, and sustainability inherent in modern farming practices.

Moreover, amidst economic uncertainties catalysed by crises like regional wars that disrupt supply chains, framing farming as a lucrative business opportunity can strike a chord with the youth.

WORLDWIDE CHALLENGES IN ATTRACTING YOUNG TALENT TO AGRICULTURE

The agriculture and farming sectors are a cornerstone of global economies, providing raw materials for various industries. The agriculture sector faces a pressing need for a growing workforce to meet rising demands.

Despite its central role, only 27 per cent of the global workforce engaged in agriculture in 2021 (FAO, 2023). In Malaysia, the agriculture sector has been an important part of its economy for decades.

Despite its crucial role in ensuring food security and creating employment opportunities, the agricultural sector accounted for only six per cent of the nation's GDP in the 4th quartile of 2023 (DOSM, 2024).

This sector encompasses vital activities such as crop farming, fisheries, and livestock production. However, it continues to face a persistent challenge: attracting talent.

Malaysia's agricultural workforce confronts a pressing demographic issue, which is evident in the findings of a recent Dana Impak study by Khazanah Nasional Bhd. The study reveals that over 67 per cent of smallholder farmers in Malaysia are aged 40 and above (Beatty, 2024).

This alarming statistic highlights a persistent trend of declining youth interest over the past decade. In 2015, data indicated that only 15 per cent of individuals engaged in agriculture were young. This reflects a stagnant situation in the sector's age distribution.

Moreover, a concerning lack of interest among tertiary graduates in agricultural careers, as evidenced by a mere 4.2 per cent in 2016, exacerbates the challenge. There is a clear challenge to grooming the next generation of farmers.

Despite efforts to address these issues, by 2021, only approximately 10.3 per cent of Malaysia's total workforce, equivalent to 1.5 million individuals, remained engaged in agricultural activities (Hussin & Peredaryenko, 2022).

ENERGISING AGRICULTURE WITH YOUNG TALENT

More incredible growth in agriculture is essential for the country's sustainable food security as demand for agricultural



Anis Najiha Ahmad
and



Nurhidayu Al-Saari

International Institute for Halal Research and Training
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)

products continues to rise. To meet these diverse demands, agriculture needs modernisation and diversification.

Young people, with their innovative thinking and openness to new ideas, can play a crucial role in this transformation. They could infuse the agriculture workforce with energy, vitality, and novel concepts to tackle national agricultural challenges.

In addition, young farmers are often more willing and competent to engage in high-tech, high-risk, and high-return agricultural ventures than the older generation. Encouraging change and taking risks can lead to significant advancements in agricultural practices and technologies.

Young people, known for their extraordinary resilience and adaptability in adverse and risky situations, are particularly suited to drive this change (Som et al., 2018).

Islamic teachings emphasise the need for individuals, including young people, to contribute positively and benefit society. The Quran states:

'And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.'
(Quran, Al-Maidah, 5:2)

This verse highlights the importance of working together for the betterment of society while avoiding actions that cause

harm or transgression. In fact, without youth engagement, countries, including Malaysia, risk missing the opportunity to modernise their agriculture sector (Som et al., 2018).

PROMOTING AGRICULTURE AS A VIABLE CAREER PATH

Attracting and retaining talent in the agricultural industry has become increasingly challenging due to several factors. These include competition from other sectors for skilled workers, a lack of interest, and widespread misconceptions leading to a negative perception of agriculture among young individuals.

“Young people, with their innovative thinking and openness to new ideas, can play a crucial role in this transformation. They could infuse the agriculture workforce with energy, vitality, and novel concepts to tackle national agricultural challenges.”



REBRANDING AGRICULTURE FOR Youth

HIGHLIGHT TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS



- Create campaigns or videos showcasing young farmers using technology like precision farming and drones to enhance efficiency and sustainability.
- Highlighting benefits such as flexibility and work-life balance.

LEVERAGE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS



- Use Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to share engaging content on agriculture
- Use visually appealing images, videos, and stories.

FEATURE SUCCESS STORIES



- Highlight successful young farmers in agriculture through events/webinars
- Showcase their entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and impact
- Showcase how modern farming practices enrich their lives on and off the farm

PRESENT AGRICULTURE AS DYNAMIC AND PROGRESSIVE



- Portray agriculture as a domain that aligns with contemporary values like sustainability, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurship, and communal involvement.

“Agriculture can be portrayed as an appealing career path for youth by highlighting modern farming practices’ modern, innovative, and dynamic aspects. This allows them to choose a career path that matches their preferences and values.”

level would instil the understanding that modern agriculture is far from being 3D (dirty, difficult, or dangerous), but rather fascinating and exciting.

This approach mirrors successful practices in countries like Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, where governments cultivate the desired societal change from early education through university curricula (Hussin & Peredaryenko, 2022). To promote mind shift, a few specific strategies can be implemented.

- **Innovative highlight of technological advancements:** Craft engaging campaigns or produce captivating videos spotlighting young farmers leveraging cutting-edge technology (e.g. precision farming and drone-assisted crop monitoring). These narratives should demonstrate how these technologies improve efficiency and sustainability and how modern farming allows for flexible schedules and a fulfilling personal life.
- **Leverage social media platforms:** Utilise platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to disseminate captivating content about agriculture. Share visually striking images, videos, and narratives that offer glimpses into the life of young farmers using cutting-edge technology.
- **Feature success stories:** Highlight narratives of youthful farmers who have succeeded in agriculture, emphasising their entrepreneurial zeal, creativity, and societal impact via events or webinars. Stories need to show how modern farming practices have helped modern farmers live fulfilling lives on and off the farm.
- **Position agriculture as vibrant and forward-thinking:** Portray agriculture as a domain that aligns with contemporary values like sustainability, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurship, and communal involvement.

Many still view agriculture as manual labour-intensive, overlooking its demand for specialised skill sets. However, the reality is that new technology has created a growing demand for specific skills within agriculture.

Automation has reduced the need for physical labour on-site, enabling remote management of tasks. Advanced processes leveraging technology have led to increased data collection, analysis, and action - creating new roles that require specialised skills.

As agriculture embraces technological advancements, it offers a viable career path for youth seeking to make a meaningful impact in a dynamic and growing field (Noble, 2021).

INITIATIVES TO ATTRACT MALAYSIAN YOUTH

Recognising this potential, Malaysia has implemented various strategies under the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS) to attract young individuals to pursue careers in agriculture. These initiatives encompass promoting modern technologies like smart farming and drones to improve productivity and efficiency.

Furthermore, MAFS provides educational opportunities and training programmes up to the diploma level, equipping young people with the sector’s essential skills.

The initiative also includes financial

support, such as the Young Agropreneur Grant that aids aspiring entrepreneurs (Malay Mail, 2024). While these endeavours are pivotal, a more nuanced approach tailored to the younger generation’s interests, values and aspirations can also be explored and used.

REBRANDING AGRICULTURE FOR YOUTH

Rebranding agriculture for youth is crucial to attracting the next generation of farmers, thus ensuring the industry’s future. Early awareness plays a pivotal role in this process.

Introducing the concept of 4IR (4th industrial revolution) agriculture to children at the school or kindergarten

CONCLUSION

Agriculture should leverage the shift in mindset away from traditional office jobs towards more dynamic, flexible work arrangements to attract and retain young talent in the agriculture sector.

Agriculture can be portrayed as an appealing career path for youth by highlighting modern farming practices’ modern, innovative, and dynamic aspects. This allows them to choose a career path that matches their preferences and values.

Through collective efforts to rebrand agriculture, Malaysia can harness the potential of its youth to drive agricultural growth, ensure food security, and foster sustainable development. - @AGROBiz