Country First



Ranjit Page, CEO, Cargills Ceylon talks about his passion for Sri Lanka and his hope for a positive future for all of Sri Lanka’s youth.

“When you look at the business environment in Sri Lanka there is a lot of mixed feelings and views today and its sometimes very concerning and saddening thing to note that people in places who can make the difference through their actions are not using the limited time we have on this earth!

Life is too short and it is up-to every one of us to realise this and help in the building process. Cargills understands Sri Lanka and the needs of rural Sri Lankans.

To me Colombo is one little country by itself and the people here hardly know anything about what happens beyond Colombo. Probably some of us get to know these things when we leave for a long weekend and then we enjoy that weekend and then come back with pleasant memories of rural Sri Lanka.

Or sometimes if sad occasions take place or some need or disaster arises like tsunami, we get together and go to help them and we unite temporarily.

But as a whole we tend to ignore the different needs of the people of the country. Cargills is a very old company and what Cargills set out to do and what Cargills is doing today is totally different. I believe that change is a continuous process. It does not mean that you change and sit back and say ‘ I changed.’ You keep changing for the betterment of the country. We are driving a business on understanding what Sri Lanka needs and we work together in delivering the same.

You get the Colombo based people who shop in supermarkets and who may be go to some of the top restaurants and star class hotels.

Then you have the remote or the rural people who due to poverty, are forced to go overseas and if you take the recent case of this 17 year old girl in Saudi Arabia, poverty has driven her to this situation. And there are so many out there who give us one third of Sri Lanka’s foreign exchange earnings. And what do we do about them?

Can we help them earn a better income? Do we have organisations that support these people? They bring back every cent and when they bring it back they lose a few percent because they are in need of the money to get to the people who are depending on them.

I believe that all of us have the strength in terms of convincing and getting people to do good in their life time on this earth. Like I say, life is very short, let us not have any regrets.

If you look at it from a religious point of view, we talk about the same thing, we are taught to do good to mankind ‘love people as you would love your mother or your brothers and sisters and family.’ And it goes on to say don’t cheat, don’t rob, don’t murder and so on. So can’t we bring back all these values into our day-to-day life?

Do we have to go to the temple just once a month on that poya day? Should we not practice that everyday? I'm not saying go and spend your time in places of religious worship but practice throughout your life and become a better citizen.

I'm talking of building the youth of this country; I'm not talking of building the business here. I think hope is what we need to bring back and we can bring back hope, provided we bring back love.

Love is not something that you can just read in a text. When I was dating my wife, I did not look at a text book and say 'I love you.' It came from within. So it's bringing back that love.

If you just take Cargills alone we are operational in 19 districts of this country. And we have a work force that is very young. We have girls and boys that form 80% of our work force below 25 years of age. We also have only 5% who have gone to Colombo district schools.

Now we need to understand them and communicate on the same platform and I had to take that initiative. So I changed myself, in the way I communicate and switched to a language they would understand. I chose words they would like to hear not in firm manner, but with love and care.

If we look at some of the things that happen around us, we are responsible for them. We say 'discipline is vital.' But before I get other people to be disciplined, I must be disciplined.

We must respect the law even as small a thing as crossing the street or stopping for a person to cross at the crossing. Do we break this law in other countries!

I must respect the norm and if I don't do it I don't expect anyone else to do it. So it starts from me, starts from us.

weLike I said change is a continuous process. Last year, we never thought our business impact is of national importance. If you take agriculture and if you take fruits and vegetables, Cargills contributes 1.8% of national production of fruits and vegetables.

I never thought about this, until someone who was doing a study on us came and told me ‘you know this is what you guys do.’ And then he went on to say ‘you do 1% of paddy’ and I thought wow! This sounds great, now we are touching national production.

If we did not have that love or if the people at Cargills did not believe in what we were trying to do, in caring for those who need to be cared for, none of these would have happened.

This came about because of our love for our country not a written strategy.

I ask questions in public when I’m called to speak at public forums, ‘is it wrong to love Sri Lanka?’ So why don’t we just follow love?

What happens to us is that we get very excited just before a cricket match and we get our national flag and have a few drinks, there is nothing wrong with that but then the flag is forgotten after the match.

And the same time we are the very people who enjoy dancing to music that mocks Sri Lanka. Imagine this happening in our neighbouring countries, what would the people do to us?

We are seated here and telling other people to change. This change has to start from me, from you, from us. We could have continued to run Cargills the same way as it has always been, I could have said ‘I don’t need to come to work at 8 in the morning. Why should I come? I’m the Chief Executive Officer in the company.’ If I did that where is the discipline I talk about?

This is not a sacrifice; it’s what you need to do for others to follow. No two sets of rules! If you take cricket, look at this boy Malinga, he has his hairstyle and you know younger kids also want to be Malinga. Not only in Sri Lanka but around the world.

Each one of us is a role model. We have a responsibility. If you take some of the things corporates are now getting into like CSR, is it CSR or guilt!

Let’s be honest. Are we doing it sincerely? Or feel good? Write a cheque, go and declare a ward open or paint a school. You know for us at Cargills, CSR is our business.

It’s an integrated part of our business. But we never wrote it that way, no one told us to do it that way. So it happened.

If you don’t practice what your faith or beliefs teaches you or practice occasionally and expect rewards to come it’s never going to happen.

You got to continuously do it and work towards it. But it doesn’t say the day you going to get it. The reward is not to say ‘you do it for 30 days and you will win.’ This is not a scratch card.

Happiness is not having a party. I can’t explain why I’m happy. I don’t feel under stress or pressure, there are low days, but it doesn’t matter to me.

I drive pure love. I believe that in loving those people who need to be loved makes the difference. Cargills changed its vision. We change it from what we set out to do ten years ago, to what we do today.

We looked at the needs of the country. We looked at how much of foreign exchange comes through unskilled labour, how we can make a difference there.

Our colleagues at Cargills have gone to other parts of the world to establish similar industries.

If we can develop more of these people they can secure better jobs rather than an unskilled job. I'm not saying there is anything wrong in doing an unskilled job. Just that we can empower them with skills to earn a better living. At least these people remit every cent back to the country but do we in the corporate world follow same?

If the remittances from unskilled workers the two fifty billion or so is not remitted what would happen to us? So we looked at this and decided to develop our youth and give them better skills and better opportunities by sharing the learning's of our business.

We developed programmes using our experiences and then we went to the next stage. We built an institute and a non profit at that! It has a board that certifies programmes internationally and it's not something that you can go and say 'ok read the text book.'

It's a textbook taken into practical and related into a programme. It's a unique thing, when you look at South Asia the industry that Cargills is involved in, we are proud to say we are the head of it.

Supply chain management is not present in South Asia. The big groups in South Asia have now started to invest in getting produce from the farm to the market place.

But we have continuously invested for the last three years and that is why our volumes keep increasing. We are ensuring that the people at the farm gate get a better income than what they used to get.

Research has shown us that they get 20% more income from us, than what they would get when dealing with somebody else.

On the other side we understand that the consumer needs to invest some money on education and looking after their children and they need savings. Now we can keep the prices as it is and say ‘world market prices have gone up,’ and none of you would come and challenge it.

But because of our love we understand and we rather have this consumer put their money into a savings account, so that they can invest in education or pay a mortgage.

We feel this is also a responsibility of the corporate world. So we drive the business understanding, what the producer goes through and what the consumer needs to or can afford to pay.

We developed a new range of products for washing purpose of clothes, toilet disinfectants and so on. And against international brands we are in some products 20% cheaper.

Now don’t tell me if you use Cargills Home products, your clothes are going to be dirty. Don’t tell me your toilet or kitchen is not going to be clean.

Now at the same time we could have kept a price difference of Rs 2 or 3. But we have kept a very thin margin because we understand the consumer and this is not the Colombo consumer.

The Colombo consumer to me is happy. Whatever happens they will manage. How would the rest of the country manage? Are we going to sit back and say ‘ok what can we do about it?’

We Are Blessed To Be Born In This Country. We Have Got A Role To Play For This Country. We Have Got The Freedom Not Just To Say Things But To Also Do It. Leave it to the government. Or leave it to the opposition. Or leave it to someone else. That’s not what we were taught?

We are blessed to be born in this country. We have got a role to play for this country. We have got the freedom not just to say things but to also do it.

I will always speak positive. Not because I get a kick out of it, but because I believe that we are all role models and if anyone of us would say something negative it can be multiplied when it goes to a hundred people.

At Cargills we have close to five thousand people working across 19 districts. We bring them once a year to Colombo and we do a programme not a party, but to build hope and build strength.

And we are talking to youth who hardly have the concentration to listen to what you are speaking of and also believe in what you are speaking.

So we got to walk the talk. I'm not saying we don't have problems, we have problems. Problems are man created. It's you and I who create the problem. So it's easy for us to solve them.

But the youth of today who were born in the 80's and the 90's, what do they know about Sri Lanka? Do they know that when we were young the little things we enjoyed. What do they hear see disaster, no hope and no love! What they know is what they see on television in the media. They are poisoned. I tell these youth who work with us 'just like a person chews betel spit it out.' Remember what is good and spit out what is negative.

This is our role as corporate citizens. But it is not a CSR programme. It is a continuous programme of developing youth and hope. If we don't build hope among youth we leave them no choice but to become radical.

So we have to build hope and we must invest in our youth. We must continuously invest in our youth. Not just do it for the sake of being recognised. Do it sincerely, because you love Sri Lanka and loving Sri Lanka is not wrong.

If we can speak together as Sri Lankans what a country this will be. Why do you want to differentiate who we are and where we come from, be it south, east, north or west, we speak as Sri Lankans?

We get into a bus because we want to go to a particular destination. We don't question who the bus driver is, neither do we question who the co passengers are?

I believe we can get to the destination provided we work for betterment of Sri Lanka not self. But it's not going to come easy. What I am talking about is a long and hard journey that will take Sri Lanka forward.

Our team believes in this strategy and their hearts are in it. It is the positives of people that make the difference.

If you take a team what does the coach do? He looks at the strength of each of the player and he uses the strength to achieve and prepare the strategy to win. He doesn't prepare a strategy to lose. So we use the strength of our people, the strength of their positives, to win not to lose.

Winning is not self-interest. Winning is country first. Love your country, when you start loving your country, the rest will flow.

If you don't love your country and you love your brand and say 'passion of my brand,' I'm sorry there is no passion, that's lust.

The brand should be first Sri Lanka and if you understand Sri Lanka and then you deliver your brand to win Sri Lankan hearts then yes you have won.

We talk of marketing in terms of a passion and vision for brands, where is this passion for Sri Lanka?

Somebody from across the seas comes over and we will listen to him talk. But how much do they love Sri Lanka? There are great Sri Lankans, and wherever I go, I stop and talk with those people because I want to understand their feelings and views of what they think.

Love, It’s About Love. Bring Back The Love And Bringing Love Is Not Easy. Some People Can Misunderstand You.
Love, it’s about love. Bring back the love and bringing love is not easy. Some people can misunderstand you.

In Sri Lanka it’s really very vulgar that we sit down and laugh about sweet things in life and make jokes about others, make jokes about our own countrymen and then sing and dance. You try to do that in India, it would never be tolerated. In Sri Lanka the people will say it’s all right it’s just a song.’ Is this what you want to leave for your children?

We are running on borrowed time. Time we have borrowed from our children. We have to earn that back for them. They have invested in us. Not that we invested in them. Now we who think we will live-forever need to change.

As an organisation we have some great strategies and models that other parts of the world want to learn from and study. I’m very honoured and tell you that there is a foundation in the USA, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation whose representatives were here last month, in June.

They have programmes in India and Africa pertaining to looking at the agriculture and the food sector. They didn’t have a plan to come to Sri Lanka, they were going to India, but somebody told them why don’t you go to Sri Lanka and the name Cargills was mentioned to them.

So they came here and they saw for themselves what we do in rural Sri Lanka and now they want us to share this as a global initiative.

This is something Sri Lankans build through love. It’s not built through any other source it is built through love and built through your faith through spiritual learnings.

Your spiritual learnings don’t say ‘do this tomorrow you will win.’ What you win is happiness. It’s not rupees and cents. Our people take their financial problems to their faiths. I don’t know whether those are sorted out. But one thing I know is that your happiness you get through your faith.

I have learnt many things in the last couple of years. And I believe that if we can drive a positive mind change at Cargills specially to the youth in 19 districts and guide them with love, and care for them the same as we would do for our own children I believe the love will just multiply and keep adding up.

I tell my colleagues, ‘when you go back to your village or you go back to your home, your friend’s parents should say I want my daughter or my son to be like you.’

We have got somewhere because we work on three simple principles. We work on understanding the difficulties of the Sri Lankan consumer. I’m not talking about Colombo but what the average household spends on food and related expenses. That figure is close to 50 or 60% of one’s income.

So how best can we bring this down, so that they spend more money on education, health and housing?

On the other side we understand that 1/3 of Sri Lanka’s foreign exchange comes from unskilled labour. How we can help in that?

How we can help develop skilled people, so that they can get a better income. And thirdly we understand that there is total disparity between the difference provinces in this country, and how we can be a part of bridging this?

This whole thing philosophy has worked out from pure love of Sri Lanka. That's what the vision is all about. This year on July 4th, we took a day off, shut all our businesses and transported all the youth from the different parts of the country to Colombo.

They had to leave just after work and we brought them to place where we built a dynamic atmosphere to bring them in line with our vision for Sri Lanka. It was a huge investment but we believe in investing in our own people.

We get results and we have seen the results, we feel the results, we smell the results and we keep the results also.

This is the sixth year we are holding this programme and at the end of the programme we gave out 107 people who have never got a passport in there life or have even thought of getting a passport, a trip to Thailand.

That's the final announcement for the day and they go there to see for themselves what they can learn, we don't put them through a learning programme, we organise some tours for them and help with spending money.

It's a big investment but we believe in long-term return not short-term returns. Just Rs 2, in a kilo of what ever you buy, we can make enough money. Is money what life is all about or is it about helping those who need to be helped as you would help your brothers and sisters? This is what life is all about. This is what we drive and it's hard love.

WorldAgInfo 21st Century Agricultural Education and Information system project

Visit of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – June 2007

The WorldAgInfo project is an attempt to explore the potential for new technologies to democratise agricultural education and information systems in Africa and Asia,

giving “voice” and access to smallholders. A series of two workshops will bring together scholars and practitioners with information/educational technology experts to explore a new frontier in agricultural education and extension. The focus of the workshops is the smallholder- rethinking systems of training, access to information, and knowledge sharing to facilitate improved decision-making among small-scale farmers in South East Asia and Africa. Within this context, participants will examine knowledge, education, and information needs all along the education/information chain, including the policy-makers, faculty, students, extension workers, private input suppliers, large and small producers.

Advances in information and communication technology in developed countries have created new participatory models of knowledge sharing and content generation in educational systems. This workshop will encourage consideration of the impact and feasibility of similar models adapted to the institutional and social contexts of Agriculture in Africa and Asia.

The project has the following four goals:

* Identify agricultural information needs of key stakeholders all along the education/information chain. (e.g., smallholder farmers, researchers, policy-makers, agriculture university faculties and students, extension personnel, private sector, and public media representatives.)

*I dentify promising new information technologies that can be leveraged into activities to improve the livelihood of smallholder farmers.

* Explore the feasibility of using collaborative community-based knowledge mechanisms to increase access to agricultural information and to provide the feedback mechanisms necessary to assess the relative values of that information.

* Explore the socioeconomic context of smallholders with special attention to ways to empower women as contributors and end users of collaborative agricultural information systems. Appearing below are blog entries from the project’s visit to Sri Lanka & India:

High-level round table in Sri Lanka

Our first day in Sri Lanka was a long one. Most of our days are 12-14 hours but we also have many days that go 16 hours – this was one of them. We awoke in Kerala at 4:30 am, flew to Sri Lanka and put in a long day.

The first event was a high-level round table in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. Government heads, academics and major agricultural-related firms were well represented. The most interesting difference we found at this round table in comparison with those in India was the role of commercial firms. In India there is a major move of commercial firms into all elements of agriculture. Supermarkets and the like are finding that the only way to get the quality and quantity of produce they need is to control the entire production chain. However, there was a great deal of fear of this move. In Sri Lanka, however, everyone was excited and welcoming of commercial participation. We later found out that the main reason is because the primary commercial firm, Cargills, was being very socially responsible in how it worked with the farmers they worked with. The farmers are not employees of Cargills but work in a partnership with it. Cargills supplies information about international product quality standards and the methods required to reach them.

Before and After and still walking the line

One of the farmers we visited had moved to his land some ten years ago. It's clear that the farmer's life had improved but he was far from satisfied. While he sold most of his produce to Cargills, he also mentioned having too much to sell on certain days. This farmer, like many others we met had the problem of being too good. He started with five acres and expanded to ten acres. In many places, expanding allows for some efficiencies of scale, but not here. Because everything is done through manual labour and because transportation limitations restrict access to markets, he pays more for extra labour (i.e. not his family members) and may have to toss out the day's harvest because he cannot get it to a market that is able to accept it.

Local farmers look for international markets

Our team met with somewhere around 50 farmers from all over Sri Lanka. This photo is of me and my translator/guide, Adrian, talking with local farmers. As with all the farmers we met in India, these farmers were surprisingly sophisticated. Because these farmers worked for Cargills – the event was sponsored by Cargills – their produce was designed to meet international standards. This required more work and some changes to their farming methods, but in return they had produce that Cargills was willing to pay 20% more for. The main problem they had was that

Cargills could not use all the produce on any given day. While the farmers could still get a higher than normal price in the regular market, they wanted more. What they really wanted was access to international markets. They know their products of international quality but they don't know how to get the produce to those markets. One of the farmers had a computer in his house and wanted Internet access so that he could learn more about foreign markets and the use of agricultural technology.

I suggested to Cargills that they might want to serve as a middleman or broker between farmers and exporters for produce that was above and beyond the needs of their stores. I hope they will give it a try, it's sad to see farmers doing top quality work only to have it backfire. This is a theme we have seen played out with many farmers. It's actually not too surprising that many farmers don't want to change when the model farmers are having difficulties.

Small tractors pull their weight

One of the most valuable farming tools is the small tractor. For many reasons, the typical farm in India and Sri Lanka is very small compared to those in North America. In fact, many Americans live on more land than many farmers use to provide for their extended family. Making mechanisation even more difficult is the organisation of a typical farm. Frequently there are ridges and walls every few dozen yards. A large tractor would simply not fit.

We found small tractors, such as displayed here, configured in many innovated ways. Sometimes they were plowing and in other cases they were pulling wagons or cabs for people. We expect to see small tractors used far more in the future as labour costs continue to increase. As surprising as it may seem, farm labour cost are increasing rapidly. Labour used to cost a dollar or two a day and now it is four or five dollars a day. Some of the increase is due to inflation – around 20% in Sri Lanka – and there is also a real problem of children leaving for the cities to learn how to use computers. We did not meet one child on our farm visits who wanted to grow up to be a farmer! Just who is going to be making the food we eat is something we could not determine. One thing is for sure: the profession of farming needs more respect and support so that farmers are rewarded for what they do.

The secret is in the box

Cargills was the most successful example of private enterprise helping farmers that we had the opportunity to observe. This photo shows one of their nine processing

centres in Sri Lanka. These processing centres are located in areas near farmers and overnight the produce is shipped to its chain of supermarkets all over Sri Lanka.

The clean and organised environment of the centre impressed us. The workers seem happy and the pay of five dollars a day is equal the best farm labour rates that we heard of and their work was certainly not as difficult as many of jobs we saw on our visits to the farms.

The most important aspect of the processing centre was the use of shipping boxes – as seen in the photo. These boxes are nothing special for us but the normal way of taking fruits and vegetables to market is in a big truck. As you would expect, the produce on the bottom does not do so well. Both India and Sri Lanka lose somewhere between 25 and 40% of produce to waste. In addition to transport damage and spoilage due to a lack of refrigeration, farmers will sometimes dump their goods if the market price does not justify the cost of shipping. Clearly one of the fast ways to increase production is to stop losing so much. Because of Cargill's use of boxes, they only lose about 5% to shipping damage. What a big change using a small box can make.

The above excerpts are courtesy of the WorldAgInfo project blog at www.worldaginfo.org