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# Across the globe

## Iowa company partners with organic farmers far afield

By Julie Barton

Nearly 9,000 miles away from the Midwest, in the mountains of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Karunaratna is tending to his family farm. In addition to a rice paddy and some chickens, his farm also grows pepper, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, ginger and other spices for Frontier Natural Products Co-op based in Norway, Iowa.

Although his farm and family life are enough to keep him busy, Karunaratna is a member of the Small Organic Farmers Association (SOFA), whose organization was the recipient of a \$25,000 donation from Frontier for an organic training center in his region. Completed in late 2010, the training center has already conducted more than a dozen training classes, educating more than 120 farmers on sustainable cropping techniques such as composting, erosion control, rain harvesting and natural pest management.

As a member of SOFA, Karunaratna shares his experience and expertise in sustainable farming methods with other local growers and helps with training at the facility. He is just one of the people Kai Stark, purchasing manager for Frontier, works with on his sourcing trips.

"By helping to provide training on organic and sustainable agriculture practices, we are enabling the farmers to more efficiently and effectively grow their crops and to increase their incomes," explains Stark.

During 2010, SOFA earned \$150,000 in fair trade social premiums, money paid in addition to the cost of fair trade goods to be invested in economic and social development. For communities where farmers typically earn \$900 to \$1,200 annually, these premiums have funded scholarships and education programs, as well as the construction of clean water sources and schools. And while the premiums made these programs financially viable, volunteers like Mahinda Karunaratna have ultimately made them work.

It's obvious why small farmers in countries with smaller economies would be interested in participating in these types of programs, but why is a company like Frontier interested? Looking at prices directly, it might not seem as though groups like SOFA impact the bottom line for a company in a beneficial way: Working with 2,000 small-scale farmers is more expensive than buying the same amount of material from 20 large scale farmers. However, Stark explains that working with smaller farmers allows Frontier to have the highest quality material, which translates into fewer rejections of shipments, competitive advantages and strong partnerships. It also guarantees first access to material during times of scarcity and good communication between the company and the grower.

"When a shipment hits our door, we run tests to guarantee the purity, quality and safety of the product to our customer. So, while we can guarantee that bad product never gets to our customers, testing the product cannot change the fact that we are out of product if a shipment gets rejected," explains Stark.



Prasad Rathnayake describes the tools and resources used at the organic training center in Sri Lanka. (Submitted)

"We cannot make the herb greener or put more oil or constituents into it. The only way to control those factors is at the farm level. To guarantee the highest quality, it's absolutely necessary to be involved at the grower level, understand what our farmers are doing, and make sure they have access to all the resources needed to produce the best plants possible," says Stark.

Sustainability is also a large factor in a company's involvement with groups like SOFA. If farmers aren't being paid a fair price for their crops or taking care of their land, the soil will become weak and may no longer support agriculture. A farmer practicing mono-culture cropping in India could create an imbalance in the soil, which could result in a devastating fungus taking over and killing his crop, leaving a company without product. Taking care of people and the land helps companies forge bonds with farmers that create longer, more successful partnerships.

"When I travel, I always ask farmers why they started practicing organic agriculture," says Stark. "So often the answer is 'because I could earn more for my product and provide a better life for my family.' However, nearly every time they follow it with 'but since I have switched to organics, I see the soil getting better. It used to be tired, but it is getting rich again and the yields are increasing. I'm making my land better for my children.' They start for the money, but it becomes something much deeper for them."