

SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY

A conversation with M R Chandran, Director of ISP, recently unveiled profound and compelling insights on the dynamics of the agriculture industry since the colonial days. He concurs that the time has come to re-energise the agriculture industry and re-instate its leadership in the sector, calling for education on the whole, adoption of high-end technology, sustainable practices and more.

The Colonial Planters

What happens to soldiers when the war is over? To the boys who couldn't have been more than 18 or 19 when they enlisted in the army to fight for their country. Who fought and survived. Now men, with no other skills than their military experience in hand, where do they go?

Back in the colonial days, one of the only opportunities for them was employment in the tropics like Malaysia, in plantation agriculture. Many of the colonies were poverty-stricken but it had three perks – abundant land, favourable climate and ample labour, which were ideal for tree crop cultivation. The British, French, Belgian and Dutch companies seized the opportunity to establish business in

agriculture and engaged former soldiers to manage the estates.

“Those soldiers were the colonial planters. They had no qualifications, no skills in agriculture, except for one thing, man-management. Because of their military background, they understood the order of command and obedience to their leader. And they brought this management system to the estates,” shared M R Chandran, Director of the Incorporated Society of Planters (ISP) and a veteran of the agro-commodity industry.

Under their stewardship, Malaya's plantation industry thrived with the production of cocoa, coffee, rubber and oil palms. In 1919, the country's rubber production exceeded the rest of the world, combined.

Fighting for their rights

While life as a planter has always been an isolating experience, being in the middle of nowhere, miles away from the nearest town, the colonial planters felt it more so, having to be away from home for years. They only got a passage home once every four years. Though the companies they worked for provided them with everything they needed - a nice home in the plantation that came with help i.e. driver, cook and servants plus a clubhouse to enjoy their evenings, they also handed out rules and a strict code of conduct to adhere to. For one, they were not allowed to marry while they served their first contract and also, they were forbidden to have a relationship with local women. To top it all off, they were paid pittance.

All this and the fact that the planters felt they weren't progressing professionally drove a group of colonial planters to join together and form ISP in 1919. The idea was to safeguard their interests - the terms and conditions of their employment - and also, to enhance their skills and to train future planters in plantation agriculture management, which resulted in ISP's internationally recognised Technical Education Scheme. With this came the first series of conferences on various crops and the introduction of professional qualifications in plantation management and practice equivalent to a diploma (LISP), advanced diploma or degree (AISP) and postgraduate diploma (FISP).

These highly technical professional courses, which exposed planters to the entire operations of plantation management from soil science, botany, best agricultural practices in planting, languages, estate surveying, labour management to bookkeeping became unofficially mandatory for planters to undertake. For decades after, employers would encourage their managers and

assistant managers to acquire their Licentiate-ship (LISP) or Associate-ship (AISP) by offering them financial incentives for every module they passed and immediate promotion and salary hike upon completion.

"The incentive for the employers to have their planters with the AISP Diploma is the guarantee that the person is adequately skilled, having gone through every single operational aspects of estate management. They acquired skills that can only be learned from practical experience, such as the power of observation and man management. These include being able to pick up on the subtle clues of what is going on in the fields like the early signs of pest and disease attack, a nutritionally deficient tree or palm or any genetic disorder," explained Chandran.

Educating the whole

Besides providing education, ISP has always been an unofficial custodian of the plantation industry, safeguarding its interests and promoting its development in the country and beyond. Currently, ISP is advocating for the 'Planters Act' which, when approved by the Government, will result in improvements to the plantation industry standards and practices because it will become mandatory for every planter to be a member of the Society. It will necessitate all planters to be professionally qualified, thus enhancing their status and becoming better-qualified planters.

There is also a need for ISP to engage various stakeholders to reinvigorate interest in agriculture, says Chandran. One of the primary problems he observes is the tendency for short-term thinking that seems to permeate all levels of the system from politicians, educators to employers. "We need to re-engage

employers and emphasise the importance of talent management and skills development. If there is a lack of skilled and energetic professional planters in the future, it could well be the end of our plantation industry," Chandran added. Decision makers also need to understand that while agriculture is not a quick profit-making venture compared to say manufacturing, it no doubt pays off in the long-term for the world will continue to need primary commodities and the distinct advantage is that the economic lifespan of a rubber tree and an oil palm is about 25 years.

"One thing people have forgotten is that it was the plantation industry that created towns like Teluk Intan, Sandakan, Tawau, Kulim, Kluang, Kota Tinggi, Sibu, Segamat and many others. Only after the establishment of estates in these rural areas, that the townships developed around it," shared Chandran.

If the agriculture sector is to compete with other sectors, we cannot just remain as commodity producers. For one, we need to address further downstream value creation. In the case of palm oil, there are umpteen opportunities in the field of pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, cosmeceuticals and so on. These industries are among the fastest growing in terms of volume and value due to rising disposable income in the emerging economies.

"But we must also look into diversification of crops for we are currently paying an annual food import bill of nearly RM50 billion when we have enough land bank to grow our own food. We should aim to be self-sufficient in the production of natural rubber, rice, coconuts, meat, vegetables and fruits," urged Chandran.

Toward high-end agriculture

After its centenary celebrations, one of the important agendas that ISP needs to pursue is to embrace and adopt technology to satisfy the requirements of the new breed of planters, says Chandran. Not only in the way they run the Society like going paperless, delivering their courses and curriculum online and so on, but also in providing the necessary training in subject areas like sustainability certification, further improvements in estate management practices to boost productivity and the application of recent wave of technological advances associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Countries with far smaller agricultural sector than Malaysia are more advanced, profitable and diversified because of innovation and technology, which manifest their potential. “In Netherlands for example, exciting developments have taken place in the area of precision agriculture with the aid of driverless tractors, sensors, drones and internet of things. Hence this tiny country has become an agricultural giant by showing what the future of farming could look like. It is said that Netherlands feeds the world.”

“In the US, less than 2% are farm and ranch families and yet the country is one of the largest exporters of wheat, barley, oats, oranges, soybean, meat and corn. Similarly, in EU-28, less than 5% of the working population is employed in farming. They are all small-scale farms compared to our large estates. Yet, most of the food products we

see on the shelves at the local grocers and supermarkets are from these countries. How are they doing it? There is much we can learn on how to exploit the current wave of technological advances and innovative approaches to transform the plantation sector.” By adopting new technologies and working with Artificial Intelligence, Chandran says it would also solve another acute problem the industry is facing and that is the lack of interest in plantation agriculture among the younger generation. “The plantation industry has to change, the idea of farming and doing things manually is over. We need to make innovation and sustainability our twin goals.”

Ideally, the importance of agriculture, in particular tree crops, should be included in the school curriculum, says Chandran. There isn't much awareness about career opportunities in our plantation sector among the young Malaysians. “We must ask how did Netherlands (which in size is only slightly bigger than the state of Pahang), once a starving nation under the Nazis, has transformed to become the world leader in farming techniques and the second largest global exporter of food? It is their explorative and innovative spirit coupled with their pride in agriculture,” said Chandran.

“We have to change the perceptions among students regarding the image of plantation life and remove the barriers to enrolling in agricultural courses in universities. This is an area where ISP can step in and collaborate with tertiary institutions to provide the practical components of the course programme and also, to assist in providing employment opportunities to graduates,” added Chandran.

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