

Sunstar and how fair trade is helping farmers

Written by Administrator

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Sunstar Overseas, apart from being a leading rice exporter, is also providing incentive for small farmers under the fair trade label.

Sunstar Overseas occupies a major share of India's rice exports. Our growth over the years showcases our consistency, market acceptability and consumer centric approach. A quest for perfection coupled with consistent growth and perseverance is the key to our success in every market.

We aspire to win the hearts of millions of Indians while maintaining the same quality standards. With a well knit marketing network and a long term expansion plan that is backed with a sound strategy, our brands such as Hello family, Gateway of India and Neel Kamal are all set to satiate the taste buds of people across India.

Sunstar is the world's first rice milling company to be accredited with the fair trade label for organic basmati rice and the first company in India to multiply basmati seeds organically, through a bio-dynamic program under Demeter Bio-dynamic Certification. Our organic production is only 5-7 per cent by volume and 9-10 per cent by turnover of total business, which underscores the importance we place in our fair trade and organic products.

With the help of Fair trade Labeling Organisations International (FLO), we created the Sunstar's Fair trade Federation in 2001. Fair trade provided an incentive for small farmers.

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We have established two very big organic and fair trade rice projects which are Certified Organic by Ecocert, France as well as Certified Fair trade by FLO-Cert, Germany. The projects are located in the Khaddar area of Haridwar, Uttarakhand. The area is a large flood plain at the base of the Shivalik hills in the western Himalayas where the river Ganges comes down from the mountains and meets the plains before continuing its journey to the Bay of Bengal. It is famous for the production of high quality traditional basmati rice.

We started the project in 2001 in partnership with the Khaddar Farmers' Federation. Sunstar oversaw conversion of the land to certified organic production and supports the farmers with technical assistance including, agriculture best practices. It reduces farmers' costs and the need to borrow expensive loans by providing good quality seeds and inputs (e.g., organic manures and bio-pesticides) at reduced rates and with interest-free credit.

We assist local rice growers to convert to organic production and then help them set up a farmers' federation so that the group becomes eligible for fair trade certification. Sunstar has a long term contract with each farmer in the federation.

Under the fair trade label this is world's first and the largest certified organic basmati rice project.

Fair trade offers many benefits to the farmers including, the opportunity to develop a direct relationship with the miller or exporter, and a fair price to cover their costs of production with a premium to invest in improving their agricultural practices as well as in meeting social needs of the community - such as improved educational opportunities, establishment of financing facilities and improved sanitation in the villages.

We also focuses on fair practices with our employees and have created a corporate social responsibility policy emphasising good employment practices.

Sunstar's success could be replicated by any firm smart enough to identify a clear market opportunity to create a strong product with excellent quality control, and to carefully cultivate relationship with farmers. For us the real key has been group certification, whether organic or fair trade – or both, as in the case of Sunstar. It's an alternative to the cumbersome certification of individual farmers that they never will be able to afford themselves.

Sunstar stands as a model for how the social bottom line can boost the economic bottom line.

---Rohit Aggarwal is the Joint Managing Director of Sunstar Overseas Limited, a leading rice miller and exporter of Basmati Rice and other agri-commodities including organic business

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based out of India.