Rice research body names S'porean chief

IRRI Fund's new exec director has molecular biology training and philanthropic history

By Fang Zengliu

Mr Leo's job is to raise money and awareness for rice research and farmers. -- ST FILE PHOTO

At 18, he canoed 140km around Singapore and raised $50,000 for the Spastic Children's Association, despite being born with cerebral palsy.

Today, Singaporean Leo Chen Ian is tasked with raising millions of dollars to make sure there is enough rice to go around in the world.

The 37-year-old is the new executive director of the global IRRI Fund Singapore, which campaigns to raise money and awareness for rice research and farmers.

Set up in 2009, it is based here and part of a larger organisation, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), a non-profit organisation headquartered in the Philippines. The fund was previously managed by IRRI member Duncan Macintosh.

Mr Leo said each Singaporean eats more than 60kg of the staple every year but few know the challenges of getting it from field to table.

In an interview at IRRI Fund Singapore's headquarters near the National University of Singapore (NUS), Mr Leo rattled off a list of problems: Climate change, the rising number of natural disasters, gender bias against women farmers and outdated practices and technology.

He said: 'In Cambodia, farmers still dry their harvests by putting the rice in large baskets and waiting for the sun to dry the grains. But what happens when it rains and dust and dirt get into the rice?'

New seeds, new methods and even new thinking are the order of the day, he said.

The seeds of the future have to be able to deal with increasingly salty water due to rising sea levels, freak droughts, and even seemingly innocuous problems such as warmer nights.

Mr Leo explained: 'Most rice plants flower at night when the temperatures are cooler. It's not good for them if the nights are suddenly not as cool.'

The discrimination against women farmers is also starving the world of extra sources of rice, he said.

'Men go into the cities to look for jobs, they leave the women behind in the villages but no one teaches them how to use the land and machines.'

Mr Leo pointed to Africa as an example. The United Nations recently noted that eight out of 10 farmers there who grow staples are women, but a study showed 90 per cent of the women had not been taught to use the land properly.

'It's such a waste,' he said.

He added that the fund would take on all of its challenges at the same time. It is in talks with NUS and non-profit organisation Temasek Life Sciences Laboratory to create a new range of 'super seeds'.

These would be more efficient in turning sunlight into energy, use less water and pesticides, and be better at fighting weeds.

Mr Leo said Singapore's strong science industry and closeness to major Asian rice producers are a boon to these projects.

'The goal is to get the research from the labs to the fields in China, India, all of the countries nearby, in under a year. That would make a revolution possible.'

The fund is also ramping up its drive to highlight the journey of the rice grain from seed to bowl. It recently worked with Science Centre Singapore to set up a permanent rice exhibition at the centre. It also gave away 10,000 packets of rice seeds to students here to encourage them to grow their own rice, a project it plans to carry out every year.

The ambition of the fund and its parent organisation is evident in the costs: US$65 million ($81 million) a year for its projects worldwide, and US$75 million to improve its science infrastructure.
Mr Leo believes he can contribute to the fund-raising efforts. 'In fact, I think that's why I got the job.'

He has headed the Centre for Asian Philanthropy, raised money for the Society for Aid to the Paralysed, and set up a programme for physically disabled children under the Asian Women's Welfare Association.

He is also president of the Disabled People's Association here, a post he has held since 2005. 'I'm used to asking people for money,' quipped the bachelor of science graduate from NUS. 'That, and I was trained in molecular biology so I can actually read the research papers.'

His hope is that Singaporeans will recognise the labour that goes into each grain of rice. 'We import all of our rice so it's easy to take it for granted. We don't see the process. But rice doesn't come from a packet in the supermarket.'

Source: zengkun@sph.com.sg