

## Community/Livelihood Development

"I passionately believed that the wealth of a country depends more on the intelligence of its people than the abundance of its natural resources, more on its civic structure than the fertility of its soil, more on its freedom to invent and create than on the beauty of its landscape." – Ernesto Sirolli

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The John Keells Group reaches out to the communities surrounding its operations through constructive dialogue with stakeholders and staff volunteerism, translating in a range of community service initiatives. Fostering the spirit of entrepreneurship as a key to

sustainable development is the primary objective of the Foundation-driven community projects.

### **The Village Adoption Project**

This project is aimed at integrated village development through self-reliance. The pilot project under this initiative is the remote village of Halmillawe located in the Central Province of Sri Lanka with a total population of about 556, most of whom are dependent on agriculture and livestock farming for a living. Since its “adoption” in 2005, the village has made slow but steady progress in multiple spheres including irrigational infrastructure, agriculture, education, vocational training and entrepreneurship development.

In 2008/09, the primary focus has been women’s empowerment activities in the village. The women’s society, ‘*Diriyen Idiriyata*’ (literally, “moving forward with courage”) has made significant progress, the savings scheme (in which the Foundation initially matched the women’s savings one-for-one and continues to supplement the deposit base periodically), is flourishing, thereby helping the women to be more financially empowered. They not only make a monthly saving under this programme, but have even taken loans from the scheme to finance their projects.

The most recent initiative has been to empower these women to generate a more steady income of their own. To this end, the Foundation, with the help of the team at Cinnamon Lodge, Habarana (located about 20 km away), have trained a group of women to cultivate mushrooms. This project has been successful as these women now sell their mushroom harvest to other villagers as well as a few grocery stores in the area. An initiative is also underway to provide sewing classes to women possessing sewing machines towards enabling them to be self-sufficient in supplying the clothing of their children. Partnering the Foundation in implementing these projects are members of *Wilpotha Kantha Ithurum Parishramaya*, a women’s community based organisation in Wilpotha, Puttalam, who have achieved success in planning and implementing similar projects in their hometown and tsunami-affected areas of the Southern Province.

### **BPO operation at Mahavilachchiya**

OnTime Technologies (Pvt.) Ltd. at Mahavilachchiya in the North Central Province, Sri Lanka’s first recorded rural BPO, is flourishing, two years into its operations. The company works as a service provider to InfoMate Private Limited (a subsidiary of John Keells Holdings PLC) and carries out transaction processing, as an extension of InfoMate’s role of captive finance and accounting service provider for the John Keells Group.

This ground-breaking project in the local BPO industry was initiated by John Keells Social Responsibility Foundation together with the Foundation for Advancing Rural Opportunity (FARO) in March 2007. The immediate objective of the project was to create sustainable employment for talented rural youth, enabling them to work from the familiar environment of their own village. The long-term vision of the initiative is to create BPO capacity for Sri Lanka's future outsourcing growth.

The village of Mahavilachchiya was selected for this pilot as it had the highest density of computers of any village in the country together with a comparatively large number of youth possessing basic IT and English skills. Innovative technology was employed to facilitate this model as it was necessary to electronically transmit images of accounting documents and extend the systems of the John Keells Group to a remote location securely. Initial training was provided to OnTime staff by InfoMate in its premises in Colombo, whilst facilitating accommodation, meals and travelling.

In 2009, the Foundation assisted FARO in securing a RAP Grant amounting to Rs. 5 million from the ICT Agency of Sri Lanka. The Grant was utilised to upgrade the facility in line with international BPO requirements and also in training and mentoring the young management team of OnTime. The BPO currently engages 10 youth from the village who are making commendable progress and plans are underway to expand the operation in a sustainable manner. The project bears all the signs of a sustainable business model, creating economic benefits to the company whilst simultaneously generating sustainable employment opportunities for rural youth.

### **The Sustainable Sourcing Initiative**

This initiative of the Consumer Foods and Retail Group of John Keells Holdings PLC boosts agricultural activity in villages and raises the standard of living in diverse communities. It is one of our largest and most successful sustainable projects with many sub-projects such as the ginger and vanilla out-grower programmes, dairy production, the treacle project, purchase guarantees of pork, chicken and assistance in the expansion of local, mechanized, de-boned meat. The retail chain, Keells Super, sources a variety of high and low country vegetables from farming families in Thambuttegama, Nuwara Eliya and Embilipitiya. Meanwhile, in the Leisure Sector, resorts and hotels seek to purchase most of their fresh supplies such as fish, fruits, vegetables, flowers, etc. from their surrounding communities whilst local entrepreneurship is fostered through the patronage of local delicacies and sweet meats of acceptable quality.

### **Slave Island Railway Station**

Other community development initiatives of the Group include the maintenance of the Slave Island Railway Station in Colombo 2 under the patronage of John Keells Holdings in collaboration with the General Manager, Railways since 2003. This colonial-style fully functional railway station has since been fully refurbished by John Keells PLC, which also provides all routine maintenance of the building and service areas with the support of Trans Asia Hotel. Work carried out during 2008/09 include refurbishing and modernising of the level crossing bridge and other amenities within the station as well as routine maintenance of public areas towards ensuring a clean and user-friendly environment for the thousands of commuters who use the station on a daily basis. Approximately 9 staff volunteers of the Group are engaged in carrying out monthly inspections and the project is expected to have benefited 720,000 commuters during the year. Since the collaboration permits companies of the John Keells Group to advertise their products and services in the station premises, six companies which have made use of this facility could also be considered beneficiaries of the project.

**John Keells Group – An equal opportunity employer**

As an equal opportunity employer, the John Keells Group actively supports the gainful employment of differently abled members of the community. As a Steering Committee member of the Employers' Network on Disability of the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC), John Keells Holdings PLC (JKH) has been actively supporting the initiatives of the Network. In 2008/09, JKH hosted a job fair at its Head Office premises at Glennie Street, organised by the EFC to enable a pre-screening of differently abled jobseekers. The event drew a group of 41 individuals, with speech, auditory, visual and physical disabilities. Applicants were interviewed by HR personnel from JKH, I D Lanka Ltd and MAS Holdings Ltd with a view to enabling placement wherever possible within their organisations as well as circulating resumes among the other members of the Employers' Network on Disability. The John Keells Group had 12 differently abled employees in its cadre during 2008/09.