

Mansholt Business Award for Sustainable Entrepreneurship 2015

Judicium

Based on the advice of the jury, the board of the University Fund Wageningen is honoured to hand out the award to Mr. Simon Groot, owner of East-West Seed.

Simon Groot, the owner of East-West Seed

Simon Groot originates from a West Friesian breed of farmers and horticulturists who in the 19th century specialised into the production and local trade of vegetable seeds. It is in this business that Simon Groot started his career and he worked here until the family company was sold to Sandoz in 1980. Simon then took the unorthodox if not courageous decision to put his capital, knowledge and experience to work for the benefit of small farmers in South East Asia. In his philosophy, the local need for good vegetable seed and a solid local vegetable cultivation in the 'East' should be connected to the knowledge and experience available in the 'West', whereby 'the West' not only meant the knowledge of the 'Sluis en Groot' company, but also of Wageningen University with whom he has cooperated frequently. Based on this strategy 'East and West' was launched. The choice for vegetable breeding was an obvious one as vegetables generate much more value than agricultural crops, and thus have a better potential of raising the income of small farmers.

The mission of Wageningen University "to explore the potential of nature to improve the quality of life" is also a highly appropriate description of Simon Groot's mission to enhance the quality of life for small farmers in Asia through the amelioration of the seeds they have available.

He paired the sale of improved seeds to education on better breeding methods via the involvement of his own employees. In recent years, this led to a substantial increase in these farmers' productivity. Simon Groot has greatly committed to mobilizing Dutch knowledge and experience to raise the output of cultivation as well. Long before 'public-private cooperation' was a buzz-word and long before it was fashionable to discuss international trade and development aid as interrelated concepts, Simon Groot showed how to do these things in real life. This makes him an excellent example of how this country and private corporations can make sustainable and commercially viable contributions to global development.

Throughout his career, Simon Groot has collaborated with Wageningen in different capacities. Wageningen cultivation specialists were appointed at breeding stations in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. Gradually, more and more local breeders were hired and trained, and today we regularly see locals recruited after graduating in Wageningen; some of these were able to finance their education here thanks to the Anne van den Ban Fund, of which Simon Groot is a benefactor. Since 2000, East-West Seed has participated in 6 PPP or public-private partnership projects.

Simon Groot is a great proponent of sharing knowledge, and he has done so in many ways – something, ladies and gentlemen that you will agree is quite uncommon not just in this sector, but in many industries. ‘Open innovation’ may be a ‘trending topic’, it is anything but self-evident to share your knowledge with Asian farmers and to educate your local employees to do the same in the way Simon Groot has done. Moreover, he shared his wide experience and in-depth knowledge with the ‘International Seed Federation’; he was also the driving force behind the establishment of the Asia and Pacific Seed Association (APSA). APSA is today the largest association of national, regional and international seed companies, of which he has been an Executive Committee member for many years, and its President for part of that time.

Under Simon Groot’s inspiring leadership, East-West Seed has become the leading breeding company of tropical vegetables in South East Asia. The company is financially healthy and largely reinvests its profits to extend into new crops, into new countries in Asia and recently also in East Africa and Latin America. East-West Seed employs 4,000 staff, and operates 12 R&D stations in 7 countries. Its returns are largely utilized to support the company’s mission. Simon Groot has led East-West Seed on its development path to becoming a sustainably successful corporation aimed at improving the income of small farmers, in Asia and now also in Africa and elsewhere. The jury feels this is a showcase example to the business world of how to grow a company in a sustainable manner while at the same time creating lasting impact within the local economies of developing countries. We hope you share our view that this prize is an apt recognition of Simon Groot’s work – or rather his working life as it has been wholly dedicated to sustainable entrepreneurship.