



Women and liveability – Best practices of empowerment from Sri Lanka

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Abstract

How to survive and make ends meet and how to improve the quality of life are daily and persistent livelihood issues and liveability challenges preoccupying disadvantaged communities in underdeveloped and developing countries. In politically volatile and environmentally hazardous Sri Lanka life struggles could be complex and challenging for womenfolk who more often than not are left on their own to cope with daily liveability problems. Through examining the findings from secondary information sources this paper illustrates three cases of how women helped make the best of empowerment projects geared to make the livelihood and liveability of themselves, their family and community better and more meaningful. It also highlights the institutional and organizational traits that were the success factors of the empowerment projects.

Keywords: empowerment projects, liveability, livelihood, Sri Lanka, success factors, womenfolk

Introduction

The first Sinhalese arrived in Sri Lanka late in the 6th century B.C., probably from northern India. Buddhism was introduced in about the mid-third century B.C., and a great civilization developed at the cities of Anuradhapura (kingdom from circa 200 B.C. to circa A.D. 1000) and Polonnaruwa (from about 1070 to 1200). In the 14th century, a south Indian dynasty established a Tamil kingdom in northern Sri Lanka (Codrington, 1926; De Silva, 1981).

The Portuguese controlled the coastal areas of the island in the 16th century and the Dutch in the 17th century. The island was ceded to the British in 1796, became a crown colony in 1802, and was formally united under British rule by 1815. There was a long-established Tamil minority in the north and east, and Britain also brought in Tamil labourers to work the coffee and tea plantations in the central highlands. This made the island, then called Ceylon, a major tea producer. As Ceylon, it became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists erupted into war in 1983. The majority Buddhist Sinhalese resented what they saw as British favouritism towards the mainly-Hindu Tamils. The growth of assertive Sinhala nationalism after independence fanned the flames of ethnic division, and civil war erupted in the 1980s against Tamils pressing for self-rule (Dharmadasa, 1992). Most of the fighting took place in the north. But the conflict also penetrated the heart of Sri Lankan society, with Tamil Tiger rebels carrying out devastating suicide bombings in the capital Colombo in the 1990s. The violence killed more than 70,000 people, damaged the economy and harmed tourism in one of South Asia's potentially most prosperous societies (Gunaratna,

1998; Hoole, 2001). Violence between the LTTE and government forces intensified in 2006, but the government regained control of the Eastern Province in 2007 and by May 2009, the remnants of the LTTE had been defeated. After more than 25 years of violence the conflict ended in May 2009, when government forces seized the last area controlled by Tamil Tiger rebels. But recriminations over abuses by both sides continue (Nubin, 2002; Stokke & Ryntveit, 2000).

Since the end of the conflict, the government has enacted an ambitious program of economic development projects, many of which are financed by loans from the Government of China. In addition to efforts at reconstructing its economy, the government has resettled more than 95% of those civilians displaced during the final phase of the conflict and released the vast majority of former LTTE combatants captured by Government Security Forces. At the same time, there has been little progress on more contentious and politically difficult issues such as reaching a political settlement with Tamil elected representatives and holding accountable those alleged to have been involved in human rights violations and other abuses during the conflict (BBC, 2015).

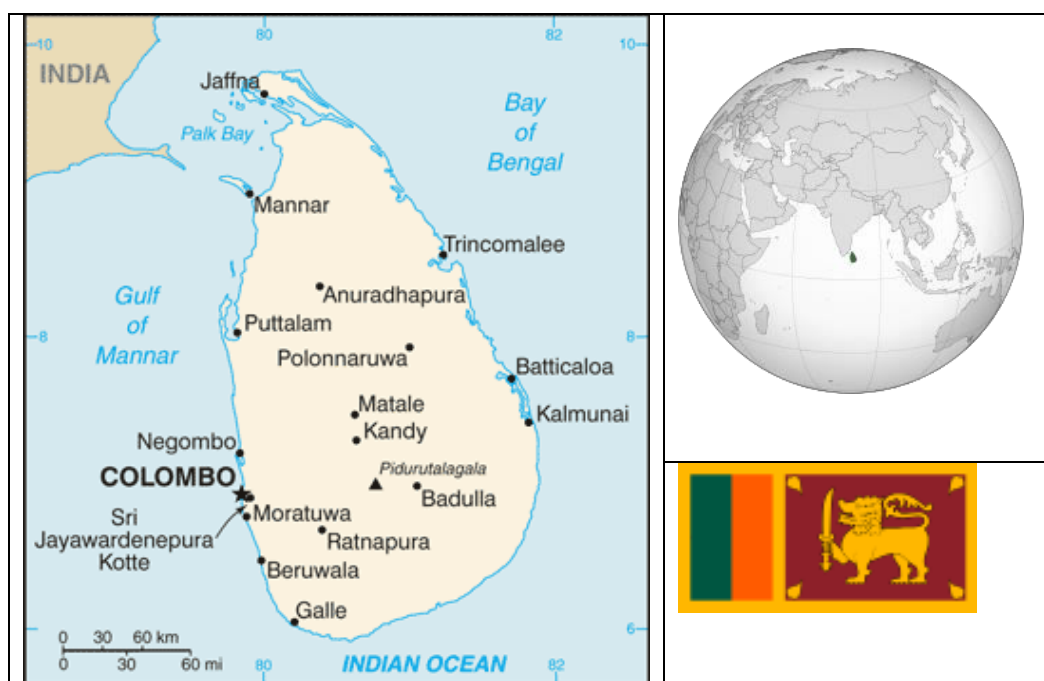


Fig. 1. Location of study

Economic profile

In late December 2004, a major tsunami took about 31,000 lives, left more than 6,300 missing and 443,000 displaced, and destroyed an estimated \$1.5 billion worth of property. Government spending on development and fighting the LTTE drove GDP growth to about 7% per year in 2006-07 before the global recession slowed growth in 2008, but high government spending and high oil and commodity prices also raised inflation to around 15% in 2008. Sri Lanka's most dynamic sectors now are food processing, textiles and apparel, food and beverages, port construction, telecommunications, and insurance and banking. In 2008, plantation crops made up only about 20% of exports (compared with more than 90% in 1970), while textiles and garments accounted for more than 40%. About 1.5 million Sri Lankans work abroad, 90% of them in the Middle East. They send home more than \$2.5 billion a year. The 25-year civil conflict between LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka has been a serious impediment to economic activities. By mid February 2009, the LTTE remained in control of small and shrinking area in the North.

Sri Lanka continues to experience strong economic growth following the end of the government's 26-year conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The government has been pursuing large-scale reconstruction and development projects in its efforts to spur growth in war-torn and disadvantaged areas, develop small and medium enterprises and increase agricultural productivity. Sri Lanka continues to experience strong economic growth following the end of the government's 26-year conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The government has been pursuing large-scale reconstruction and development projects in its efforts to spur growth in war-torn and disadvantaged areas, develop small and medium enterprises and increase agricultural productivity.

However, the government's high debt payments and bloated civil service have contributed to historically high budget deficits, but fiscal consolidation efforts and strong GDP growth in recent years have helped bring down the government's fiscal deficit, but low tax revenues remain a concern. The 2008-09 global financial crisis and recession exposed Sri Lanka's economic vulnerabilities and nearly caused a balance of payments crisis. Agriculture slowed due to a drought and weak global demand affected exports and trade. In early 2012, Sri Lanka floated the rupee, resulting in a sharp depreciation, and took steps to curb imports. A large trade deficit remains a concern, but strong remittances from Sri Lankan workers abroad help offset the trade deficit. Government debt of about 80% of GDP remains among the highest in emerging markets.

- GDP (purchasing power parity): \$92.09 billion (2008 est.); \$217.4 billion (2014 est)
- GDP - per capita (PPP): \$4,400 (2008 est.); \$10,400 (2014 est.)
- Labor force - by occupation: agriculture: 31.8%; industry: 25.8%; services: 42.4% (2012 est.)
- Population below poverty line: 22% (2002); 8.9% (2010 est.)

Social profile

Ethnically, Sri Lanka is inhabited by Sinhalese 74.9%, Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2%, Sri Lankan Moors 9.2%, Indian Tamil 4.2%, other 0.5% (2012 est.). Sri Lanka's population has increased from 21,324,791 in 2009 to 22,053,488 in 2015 making Sri Lanka the 57th most populous nation in the world although the rate of population growth has decreased from 0.904% to 0.84 respectively (CIA, 2015). The national sex ratio is 0.96 male for every female in 2015 with males experiencing some lessening of life expectancy at birth from 73.08 years in 2009 to 73.06 years in 2015 while females' improving from 77.28 years to 80.19 years in the respective years. The national life expectancy was moderately high at 76.56 years placing Sri Lanka at 84 in world comparison (2015). Infant mortality stood at 41.81 deaths per 100,000 live births (2015), the 50th highest in the world.

With an improved health expenditure at 3.2% of GDP (2013) there is 0.68 physician (2010) and 3.6 beds (2012) for every 1,000 population. Drinking water source has improved for 97.1 of the urban population and only for 95.6% of the rural population (2015). Similarly, improved sanitation facility access has benefited 95.1 per cent of urban and rural population with only 11.9% of urban and 3.3 % of rural population still having their sanitation facility unimproved (2015). However, the degree of risk of major infectious diseases is still very high ranging from food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever, vector borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, and water contact disease of leptospirosis (CIA, 2015). Undernourishment has seen 26.3% (2012) of Sri Lankan children under the age of 5 years underweight, the 23rd highest in the world. One bright aspect is that the adult prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS in Sri Lanka was only 0.03 % (2014) the 119th highest in the world. A total of 3,300 people (2013) lived with this disease, the 113rd in the world, and only 100 deaths in the country were due to HIV/AIDS in 2014 in contrast to Nigeria's 239,700 deaths, the highest in the world in 2012.

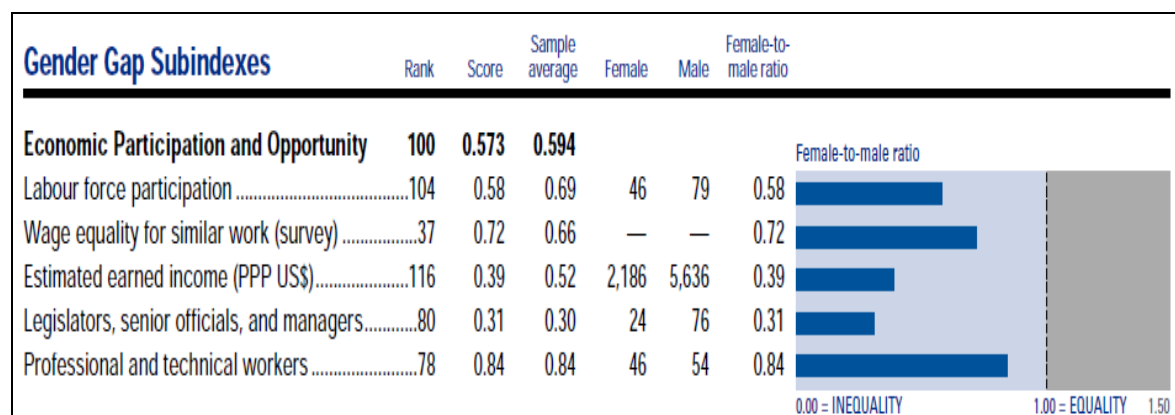
Urbanization increases from 15% of total population in 2008 to 18.4% in 2015. Education expenditure which comprised 1.7% of GDP (2012) managed to produce an impressive national literacy rate of 92.6%

(2015) for the population aged 15 and over with females lagging behind males at 91.7% and 93.6% respectively in 2015. Nevertheless, the females' 91.7% is an improvement of the 89.1% achieved in 2001. Uniquely, females enjoyed a higher school life expectancy of 14 years than the males' 13 years (2012). Given a more adequate time span of proper education, child labour—the employment of children ages 5-14 - is veritably non-existent in Sri Lanka (CIA, 2015).

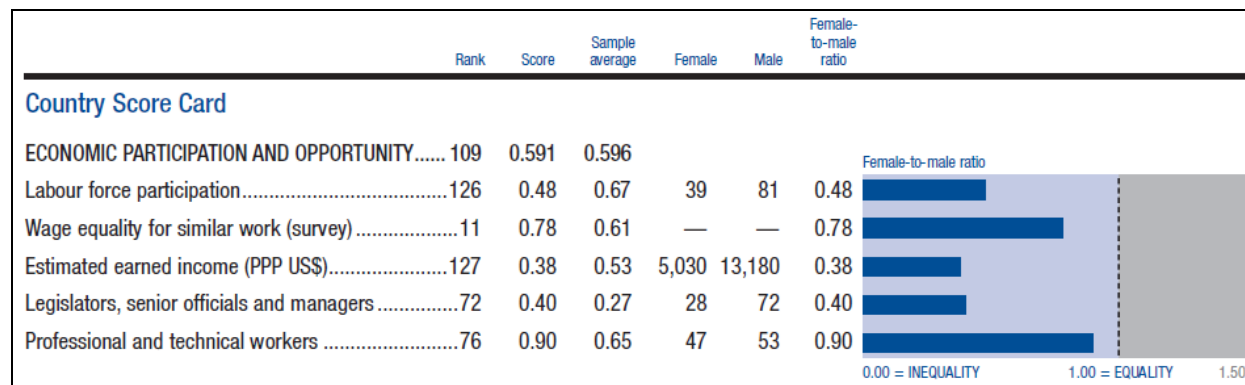
State of socio- economic participation of women in the country

Despite improvement in literacy, Sri Lankan women have not achieved much improvement in the way of consistent empowerment. The overall score for economic participation and opportunity for women in the labour force improves only marginally from 0.573 in 2009 to 0.591 in 2014. With these figures Sri Lanka's global ranking falls from 100 in 2009 to 109 in 2014 . Nevertheless, the women's estimated earned income has more than doubled from USD 2,186 to USD 5,030 respectively (Table 1).

Table 1. Gender inequality in economic activity



Source: <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap2009/Sri Lanka.pdf>



Source: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR14/GGGR_CountryProfiles.pdf (p.332)

Best practice project 1: Project direct for post tsunami women empowerment

Project initiators: Oxfam house and the People's Development Foundation and the Sri Lanka Development Foundation (www.oxfam.org.uk/direct).

Project design: Oxfam has been working with women coir workers in Sri Lanka since the Tsunami in 2004, which devastated the coir (coconut fibre) pits and industry on which thousands of people depend for a living. Oxfam helped communities to repair the damage and earn a secure income from coir again. The aim is to develop and strengthen small to medium-scale enterprises, which are owned and managed by women and which, by the end of three years, will be economically viable without support from Oxfam or its partners. This project will enable 2,200 women involved in coir production in the Matara district of southern Sri Lanka to gain power in the market place. Oxfam will give women the knowledge, skills and confidence to work at higher levels in the coir industry: as entrepreneurs, business leaders, decision-makers and managers (Figure 2).

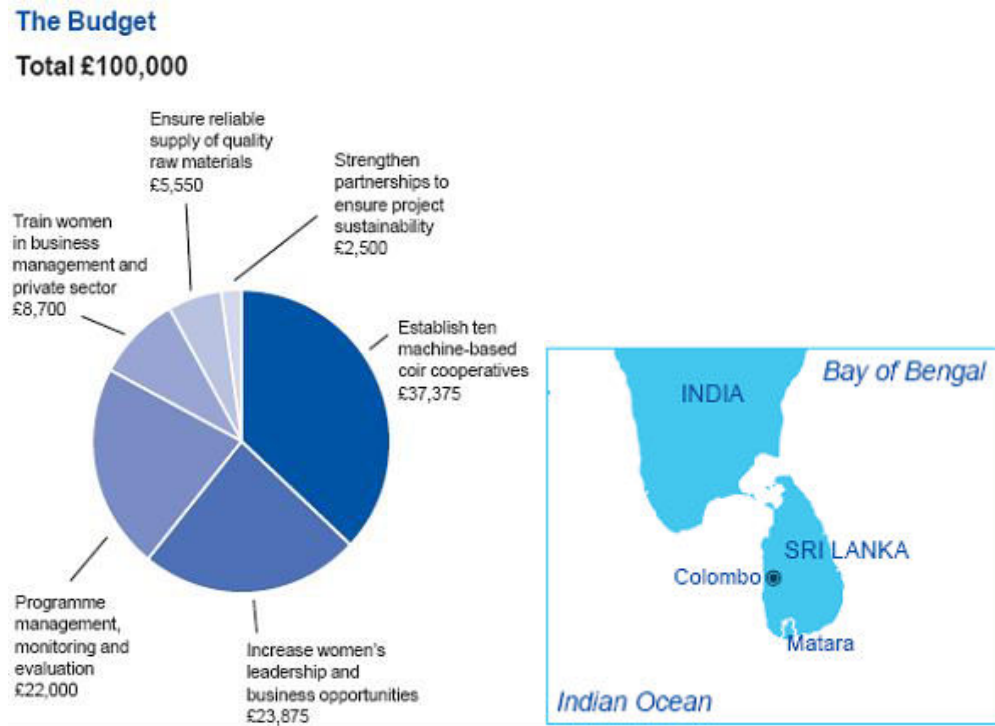


Fig. 2. Budget distribution of the Matara project

Besides strengthening community organisations and the Women's Coir Federation activities includes training 60 women to manage 10 coir production groups, training a further 60 women in gender analysis, organising 50 events across the region each month to raise awareness about domestic violence, providing training for 30 women leaders through the local Women's Chamber, and training for 50 women leaders on finance and book-keeping. The objectives are to ensure a reliable supply of high quality raw materials by building strong relationships with husk suppliers and fibre production mills, strengthen partnerships to ensure project sustainability, work with financial institutions, government bodies and national non-government organisations to improve access to markets, build a reliable source of capital for the coir collectives, and replicate the model nationwide.

Every three months, Oxfam's Gender Team in Sri Lanka monitors all aspects of the programme with its partners: the People's Development Foundation and the Sri Lanka Development Foundation. A 'Learning and Advisory Forum' meets frequently to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by the project.

Project impact

Sri Lanka’s women face discrimination and exploitation in every aspect of their lives. On average they earn 70 per cent less than men, they have little status in the family and community, and gender-based violence is prevalent. The Tsunami disaster in 2004 increased women’s poverty and vulnerability. The Oxfam project benefits 2,200 members of women’s coir production groups in terms of training and increased profits. Of these, 200 community leaders benefit from training on gender and social change. Indirectly, at least 1,000 families across the Matara district benefit from women’s economic growth (Fig. 3).


<p>H.B. Chandralatha - Coir group leader : “With Oxfam’s support we have prepared a Community Action Plan to improve our income and status. Many of us are able to increase our monthly income and can help to pay for food, our children’s education and health. This has helped increase our voice and recognition within the family.”</p>	<p>Loku Violet - Coir group leader: “Before, many women coir workers depended on local moneylenders, who charged high interest rates, to get the money to buy raw materials. Since forming our organisation, we have set up our own fund with the assistance of Oxfam. We now have our own credit and loan system.”</p>
<p>Vasugi - Member of women’s coir production group “We used to be dependent on agriculture. Because the lands were impossible to cultivate after the Tsunami, we were all unhappy. Now, this group has given us a way to earn our living.”</p>	 <p><i>Women learning how to make doormats from coir.</i></p>

Fig. 3. *Some feedback from project participants*

Best practice project 2: SEEDS micro-finance projects

Project initiators: SEEDS (Sarvodaya Economic Enterprise Development Services (Guarantee) Limited

Founded in 1958 by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne with the aim of envisioning people and communities in the country, the Lanka Jathika Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya has today emerged as the largest and the oldest indigenous NGO in Sri Lanka with linkages at a global level.

A voluntary, non-governmental, non-sectarian organization, Sarvodaya was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1972, and has the distinction of being a national movement of people, sharing a common vision and a common purpose.

During the last four decades Sarvodaya has created a visionary, transformative paradigm of a new social order that is as much influenced by the Gandhian ethos of non-violence as by the teachings of the Buddha Dharma. Consistent with this vision, Sarvodaya focuses on bringing about changes within concrete communities through a process of social awareness, welfare and community development. This is

achieved through an island-wide network of Shramadana Societies, the bedrock of collective social action. Fundamental to the success of this process is the participation of the people—the foundation of all Sarvodaya programs. No other effort to eradicate poverty in Sri Lanka has the community building depth of the Sarvodaya Movement.

Sarvodaya's rural outreach involves over 11,000 village communities and an integrated economic program covering over 3,000 villages. The social infrastructure in a typical Sarvodaya Village creates its own dynamics and comprises many cohesive social groups - children, youth, elders, women, farmers, artisans, wage-earners etc. It is through these societies that Sarvodaya is able to initiate a wide range of economic and social services to the communities concerned. One of the key entry points to a village is the formation of pre-schools and Sarvodaya fosters early childhood development through 3,000 pre-schools in the Island (www.Sarvodaya.org)

Sarvodaya Economic Enterprises Development Services Ltd (SEEDS) is the rural banking section of Sarvodaya, which aims to assist and empower people economically in rural villages.

SEEDS works through 2,260 Sarvodaya Shramadana Societies in the rural villages of Sri Lanka. It has 258 village banks, with total savings (from small investors) of Rs 358.5 million, and has distributed loans to small enterprises.

Since its establishment in 1988, SEEDS has significantly improved the opportunities for economic growth in thousands of villages across the country.

SEEDS targets the rural poor - members of Sarvodaya Village Societies - providing them with opportunities for entrepreneurial training, savings and credit services, business development, agricultural extension services and business information. SEEDS claims to be the first grassroots development bank of its kind in Sri Lanka.

Project design

Credit loans are given to men and women, so long as they meet the requirements and agree to repay the loan at a particular rate. The programme has several distinctive features, including savings as a prerequisite to the granting of credit, and an innovative loan guarantee mechanism. Loan applicants must save for at least six months and deposit 10 per cent of the total project capital towards a refundable loan security fund. Recipients also do not require conventional collateral, but are required to organise themselves into peer groups as a means to ensure repayment through peer pressure. During the tenure of loans, recipients also receive regular counselling, business advice and technical support (SEEDS 1999a:13).

Project impact

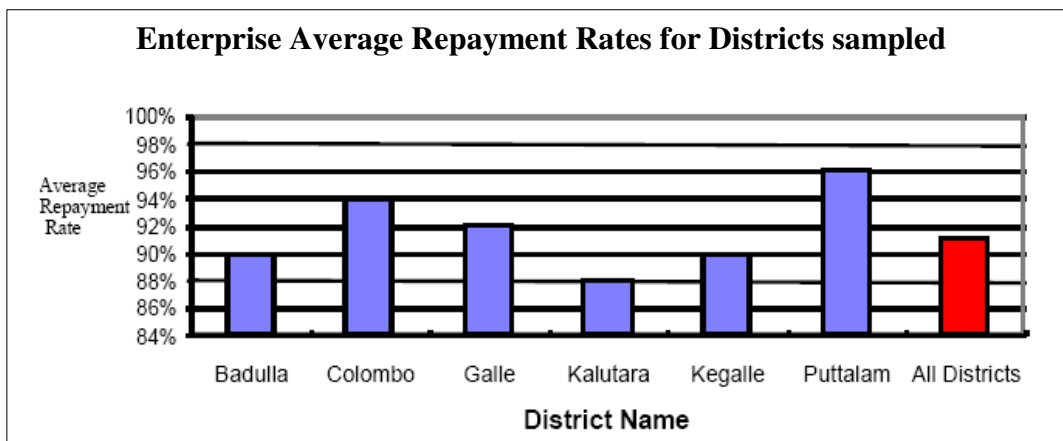
Almost 60 per cent of loan recipients in 1998 were women (SEEDS, 1999b: 3). Women tend to be heavily involved in local *Sarvodaya* activities (such as child care and healthcare provision), established in the village prior to the arrival of SEEDS village banks. Women hear about SEEDS and opportunities for credit through Sarvodaya because SEEDS is part of the same organisation.

In recent years, an average of 10,000 new enterprises have been established annually through SEEDS loans. Loan recipients engage in variety of enterprises which differ from district to district and from village to village (Table 2).

Table 2. Popular agri-business and non-farm enterprises

Agri-business	Non-farm enterprise
Tea bush cultivation	Two-wheel tractor repair
Banana and pineapple cultivation	<i>Bajaj</i> three-wheeler operation
Dairy management for milk production	<i>Bajaj</i> three-wheeler repair
Ornamental flower cultivation	Motorbike and bicycle repair
Ornamental fish cultivation	Bee-keeping for honey production
	Food technology (processing and sale of foods such as yoghurt, cake and ice-cream)
	Coir yarn production for rope making and mat-production
	Spinning and weaving
	Sewing and tailoring (especially ready-made garments)
	Batik/fabric painting
	Mosquito net making

The majority of SEEDS loan recipient enterprises make enough income to continue their existence (Fig.4). The loan recipient is responsible for repayment (including interest) according to the loan agreement, and the appropriate expenses (rent, wages and material costs) must be met.



Source: Sear and Simon (c,1999)

Fig. 4. Enterprise average repayment rates for districts sampled

Many SEEDS loan recipients have grown substantially since the establishment or expansion of their enterprise from a SEEDS loan. The majority of the enterprises sampled in this research were successful in generating profits. Some enterprises have been extremely profitable, enabling the entrepreneurs to buy themselves a variety of goods for the home. In households where enterprises had been profitable, the home was often newly built, extended or improved. New and better furniture was purchased; children frequently attended school and wore better clothes (Fig. 5).



W.A. Sandya Kumari

The generation of new wealth for the entrepreneurial household.



Mrs. C established this profitable enterprise after previous employment as a chief supervisor in four garment-producing factories from 1981 to 1996. Since its establishment the enterprise has been successful in producing profits, and Mrs. C employs four local workers full time. In April (the Sinhalese New Year) and December (Christmas) the demand for her garments increases. Cloth is supplied locally (which assists local businesses), and garments are transported to retail fashion shops throughout Sri Lanka. Since the establishment of her enterprise, Rs 350,000 credit has been obtained from SEEDS. The loan has already been repaid from profits generated, and Mrs. C has commissioned the construction of a new house, and has afforded new goods such as a television set and furniture. Her children attend school on a regular basis and have their needs of food and clothing, and so forth well met.

Garment Manufacturer, Kalutara District

W.A. Sandya Kumari lives in Kalawana, Rathnapura. She passed her Advanced level exam in science stream. After leaving school, she worked in bag production factory in Rathnapura as a quality controller. There she faced a lot of maltreatments from her immediate supervisors and gave up her job. Thanks to her experience gained in bag manufacturing, she could obtain some contracts from her previous employer. Sandya started stitching bag in her business lonely and, after sometime she hired two female assistants to increase her production level. During that period she got her membership of Kodippilikanda Sarvodaya Sramadana Society (SSS). In 2003, she started a new bag production unit by herself with five workers. Then, Sandya Kumari expanded her sales to shops in Rathnapura district. Presently, she has five year experience in bag manufacturing. She employees 15 workers who are from very poor families. Also her sales expanded to Colombo and other districts.

In her entrepreneurial journey, she got lot of help from SEEDS (Gte) Ltd. Initially, she took Rs.10,000.00 loan from SEEDS and repaid that loan on time. Thereafter, she applied for a loan of Rs.100,000.00 from SEEDS. In addition, she had taken technical trainings and CEFE trainings organized by SEEDS. It improved her technical and managerial skills. Also, she participated to SEEDS trade fairs and developed her marketing linkages. According to her experience, now she has a monthly sales volume of Rs.400,000.00 and she repays loan on time. In addition to bags, she expanded her business venture to manufacture rain jackets, vehicle tents, sheet covers, hats, mosquito nets, flags and ladies garments

Along with the above production activities, she manages two acre of tea plantation as well. She owns Rs. 250,000.00 fixed assets in bag manufacturing unit and she hopes to start a medium scale garment factory soon. She was grateful to SEEDS for the exposure she gained through exhibitions, training and business counseling to improve the quality and sale contacts. Also, she thanked to District Manager, Enterprise Promotion Officer and District Training Officer of SEEDS Rathnapura District for their valuable service and support given to her.

Source: Sear and Simon (c.1999)

Fig. 5. *Two success stories of the SEEDS project*

Best practice project 3: ICEIDA Sri Lanka empowerment projects

Project initiators: The Icelandic International Development Agency (ICEIDA) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). The Icelandic International Development Agency (ICEIDA) is an autonomous agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was founded by law in 1981 to promote co-operation between Iceland and developing countries in improving their economy and thus participate in strengthening social progress and political independence within the framework of United Nations.

Following the tsunami disaster in december 2004 where 30,000 people in Sri Lanka lost their lives and constructions in a vast area along the coast were demolished, the Icelandic government decided to increase its donations to Sri Lanka for the year 2005 by 50 million ISK, upon the 25 million ISK already allocated before the tsunami disaster. ICEIDA's approach in Sri Lanka was to focus mainly on development of the fishing industry, at the local government's request. An agreement for development co-operation between the two nations was signed the 23rd of June, 2005. Due to the economic crisis in Iceland, development cooperation with Sri Lanka was terminated in June 2009. All signed agreements on support were honoured.

Project design

(i) Infrastructure development at Landing Centres in Sri Lanka

The project on landing centres is the largest project ICEIDA has undertaken in Sri Lanka and is part of the implementation of a comprehensive GoSL programme on post-tsunami reconstruction and development of the marine fisheries sector. The project started in 2006 and various facilities were built at seven landing centres along the west coast of Sri Lanka in 2007 and 2008, including auction halls, radio rooms and fishers' facility complexes, which are two storied buildings, with 5-6 rooms on the upper floor and a hall, showers and toilets on the ground floor. In 2007, a decision was taken to expand the project to include fishers' facility complexes at 18 landing centres in the three districts in the Eastern Province. By the end of 2008, most of the construction work had been completed, but final touches were still required in many places, including the supply of water and electricity and rectifying small defects. The facilities are handed over to local registered community based organisations (CBOs), which in most cases are fisheries cooperative societies. In a few cases such organisations had to be established and many existing ones were very weak.

To address this problem, ICEIDA engaged Sewalanka, a reputable and experienced local NGO, to assist in developing the capacity of the CBOs. This is, however, a slow process and it must be kept in mind that members of many of these communities have been displaced, often more than once, because of the tsunami and the armed conflict in the country. Originally, Sewalanka was engaged for nine months at each site, but in mid-2008 the board of ICEIDA approved an extension to the project, which secured continued involvement of Sewalanka until the end of June 2009. The extension also included the provision of training of CBO members and Sewalanka mobilisers in fish handling and processing, project management and other areas depending on identified needs and wishes. The training served as a precursor to the identification and planning of livelihood projects to be implemented in all communities. The additional cost of the project extension was roughly US\$ 500,000. By the end of the year, the implementation was on schedule, most CBOs had received training, a number of projects had been identified and formulated and implementation had started in some communities.

(ii) Satellite Based Fish Forecasting

Another project has focused on fish forecasting. Chlorophyll concentration, sea surface temperature and temperature gradient in the waters around Sri Lanka are all monitored by satellite and the National Aquatic Research and Development Agency (NARA) has access to these data free of charge. These data can be used to predict the distribution pattern of pelagic fish like tuna. The advantage of such predictions is that it can save time spent searching for fish, thus reducing costs and increasing catches. In this project, which started in mid-2007, ICEIDA has provided the equipment needed, technical support and training for staff at NARA. In August 2008, NARA started to provide forecasts for the fleet. The forecasts were originally limited to areas inside the EEZ, but were extended to international waters towards the end of the year as tuna long-lining mainly took place outside the EEZ. During the year, data collection was

intensified, and maps and log-books were produced and distributed to vessels taking part in the project. This way it is hoped that enough catch data will be collected to validate and improve the predictions.

(iii) Fishing Vessel Registry

The collection, analysis and dissemination of fisheries statistics was identified during the exploratory missions to be an area needing urgent attention and support. Apart from having administrative and management functions, a vessel registry is also an integral part of a fisheries data collection system, and with that in mind, ICEIDA agreed to support a project to establish a vessel registry for marine fishing vessels in Sri Lanka. The project started in September 2007 when a central database was established based on census data of marine fishing vessels. Although the registry was fully functional by mid-2008, it was clear that it was not being updated fast enough, mainly because of lack of commitment by district offices. An extension was therefore proposed to provide district databases and equipment and training for staff in the district offices. The extension, which is until April 2009, was approved by the board of ICEIDA in July 2008 at an estimated cost of US\$ 96,000, with US\$ 74,000 being provided by ICEIDA. The vessel registry has already proven to be very useful to the Department of Fisheries and is a vast improvement over the stacks of record books it replaced. The more it is used, the more new uses are discovered, which in turn necessitate changes and additions. During the visit of the ICEIDA director in December 2008, it was decided that ICEIDA would provide one more consultancy in 2009 and a local firm would be hired to work alongside the Icelandic consultant who designed the vessel registry, so that future development could be done using local expertise. In addition, practical training is to be provided for one staff member of the vessel registry under the UNU-FTP in Iceland.

(iv) Strategies for Development of Asian Reservoir and Lake Fisheries

Man-made lakes have a long history in Sri Lanka as natural lakes are rare. Large reservoirs and irrigation systems were one of the foundations of ancient kingdoms, dating back more than 2500 years. In many of these reservoirs, fisheries are dependent on the release of hatchery produced juveniles, so-called 'culture based fisheries'. Reservoir fisheries are important in Sri Lanka, but there is still potential for further development. Fisheries and aquaculture in fresh waters is of importance regionally and Sri Lanka benefits from regional cooperation through membership of an intergovernmental organisation, NACA, Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific. At the request of the Government of Sri Lanka and NACA, ICEIDA has supported a regional project with the participation of Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan. The main objectives of the project are to identify research and development needs for the effective utilisation of reservoirs and lakes for fish production and develop capacity for the management of such fisheries. Ten sub-projects are being carried out, some are already completed and others are near completion (http://www.enaca.org/modules/inlandprojects/index.php?content_id=4).

Project impact: Gender mainstreaming is most evident in the fish landing centre programme. Sewalanka worked with the 25 fishing community CBOs to consider the implications of different interventions for men and women. Poverty and low levels of education are characteristics of most communities relying on coastal fisheries. The men do the fishing. During the fishing season(s), they spend much of their time at sea; during the off-season, they stay at home or seek daily wage labour. Women are more likely to be involved in post-harvest processing, such as drying, small-scale marketing of fresh and dried fish, and other income generating activities. While men tend to have higher income levels, they are more likely to use it for personal consumption, whereas women tend to use all of their earnings for household needs. Female-headed households are common, often as the result of the armed conflict or the tsunami. Most communities recognize these households as being particularly vulnerable and some have used the ICEIDA livelihood programme to support income generating activities for widows.

Most Sri Lankan villages have multiple registered CBOs (Community Based Organisation). Since fishing is seen as 'men's work' women's participation in Fisheries Cooperative Societies is generally

lower than their participation in other CBOs, but there is significant cultural and regional variation. In the Sinhala communities of the south and west, the majority of active members are women. Women tend to be strong and vocal leaders and they represent the household when the men are at sea. Women tend to be over 50% of the membership and in two communities, the CBOs entrusted with the facilities have 100% female membership. In the Eastern Province, 16 of the 18 communities are predominantly Muslim or Tamil. In these areas, women are still able to participate in the Fisheries Cooperative Societies as general members or leaders, but their participation tends to be lower (10-20%). These villages tend to be more patriarchal. Women may be active in separate CBOs (e.g. Women's Rural Development Societies), but fishing is seen as men's domain.

Regardless of women's participation and leadership, 15 of the 25 sites have developed livelihood initiatives that specifically benefit women: food processing, revolving loan funds for income generating activities, seaweed cultivation, and a fishing gear retail shop run by women.

Other sites have developed initiatives that provide more general fisheries services: fuel and fishing supply centres, wholesale fish trading, radio rooms and outboard motor repair. In those cases, ICEIDA has often expressed a willingness to fund further livelihood activities, as long as they are specifically aimed at female-headed households.

Conclusion

Socio-economic empowerment projects have enabled disadvantaged Sri Lankans, in particular, vulnerable women, to cope better with their livelihood and liveability challenges. Physical and mental health is prerequisite of economic empowerment and health education enhances personal, family and community wellbeing.

Women are particularly instrumental in the empowerment projects not only because they are the inheritors of the issues and challenges but also because they have proven to be capable of making the projects doable. The Sri Lankan cases point to the fact that respect for the women's existential right makes the difference, and that faith in women as effective leaders for change in their families and communities secures success of projects. A special emphasis on remotely located and chronically neglected women adds value to the projects.

The Sri Lankan experience also underlines the vital role of enlightened policy makers, prudent management and organization of liveability empowerment initiatives. Here, when a collectively felt need justifies the efforts ready funds pave the way for their implementation, often with the help of a global-local network. Then an efficient on the ground mechanism guarantees implementation by inventing and utilizing creative but pragmatic techniques to ensure women's accessibility to the empowerment projects, and by training them to make the projects work.

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