

Sri Lanka Gender and Resilience Project



The Project at a glance

The Gender and Resilience project was created as a response to Diakonia's ambition to strengthen its work on disaster risk reduction and to bridge the humanitarian and development work. The vision of the project was to contribute to gender equality and resilient communities through disaster risk reduction innovation projects.

Sri Lanka developed an innovative project working with women's empowerment and community based disaster risk reduction with the possibility to replicate it across the region. Experiences and best practices were shared between the countries.

Anuradhapura district in Sri Lanka is affected by climate change causing floods or the slow onset of droughts leading to changes in traditional cultivation patterns.

Despite the change in weather patterns during recent years, farming, methods remain the same. Not every farmer has access to irrigated water, a licensed permit, or deeds to paddy lands; only men have titles in their own names.

Due to the high cost the government has not invested in the rehabilitation of the ancient irrigation systems that can provide water during droughts, leaving these man-made lakes forgotten and underutilized.



The Gender and resilience project in Sri Lanka

The aim of the project was to increase understanding of and capacities to address disaster risk and its gendered dimensions. It also aimed at improving gender equality in communities by recognizing women as agents in disaster resilience.

Through the regular roundtable discussions, led by women from the village who were also part of the village disaster management committee, women were linked to relevant decision makers.



Chandrathilaka Liyanarachchi,
Program Manager, WDC.

“Through this project we learned a lot about climate change and how it impacts women, and how to identify issues and draw out solutions from the community.

We learned to empower communities so that they take ownership and resolve issues that affect them using the resources they have.”

Villagers understanding risks

During initial discussions communities requested a post office or a bus route but when analysing major risks and their root causes, real needs of women, children, and men could be identified. Restoring access to their fields, drinking water and revitalizing the dam for irrigation were areas that needed to be addressed as they were considered major risks for the livelihoods and food security of the village as they caused debt and illness. The women are now part of a banking system and after receiving training in money managing. Thus, they are not dependent on lending from money sharks any longer. Addressing these needs meant that the community as a whole benefited.





Women taking the lead

Women took the lead in mobilizing the community. Together they united in revitalizing the water dam and irrigation system. By entering the deep water and cleaning the dam of weeds women broke gender norms and gained the respect of the entire village. From the dam water they can now irrigate their fields and prepare compost fertilizers with debris from the dam. The home gardens are booming with different organic crops. Households can harvest twice a year, and as a result the family incomes have improved and always have food on the table.

Transforming gender norms

As a result of the empowerment women now have the confidence to approach government officials for support even for personal matters. Thanks to the improved working relationship and gained respect, authorities come to the meetings and listen to their concerns.

The project shows that community ownership and empowerment of women is crucial; women are now recognized as farmers in their own rights. Women have built and improved home gardens, traditional food storage mechanisms, and started or improved their businesses.



In a few more years this lake would have been filled up and be of no use. Because of this timely intervention, generations after will be able to continue using this lake.



Thushari's story

Thushari Nayanakanthe, is a housewife and mother of two children. The main source of income for her family is through short-term crop cultivation, which is an industry that is challenging due to the lack of proper water supplies and encroaching of wild elephants who destroy the fields.

In the center of the village is a dam, which in the past had the capacity to supply water to all the fields. Unfortunately, with the deforestation of natural reserves and the dam not being cleaned and maintained by the state, its water capacity was minimized. Due to this, most of the cultivated land depended solely on rainwater, which occurred seasonally. Thushari's husband who is a paddy cultivator had trouble earning a sufficient income.

As the leader of the women's group Thushari was able to play an active role in supporting the organizing and cleaning up of the dam together with the village residents. She also actively gained the support of officers from the Agriculture department.

It took 14 days to clean up the dam and going forward will require regular maintenance. The group has agreed to this as well as to monitor and promote environmental sustainability within their village. As the waste collected through the cleanup was utilized to make eco-friendly compost, Thushari began to make her own. She also started a home garden as an additional source of income.

The initiative has empowered Thushari who is now an active contributor towards her family income and is recognized as a leader within her community. This is due to her current involvement in development initiatives as well as responsibilities within the disaster management committee. Thushari is able to utilize the skills she learnt about disaster management and risk reduction in her day-to-day life. She has become an educator in her community and is now training others how to reduce vulnerabilities and build capacities to prevent disaster situations.

