



DESIGN AND PILOTING OF AN INTEGRATED SOCIAL PROTECTION MODEL FOR THE NEW POOR



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PREAMBLE

In 2023, the Government of Luxembourg, through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Funding Windows on Poverty and Inequality, rolled out a 12-month cash-plus social protection pilot project, '**Design and Piloting of an Integrated Social Protection Model for the New Poor**'. The pilot project integrated cash transfers with longer-term livelihood support in Sri Lanka. The Pilot was an economic model designed to target women specifically through a series of cohesive interventions to support a farm-to-market model of empowerment, implemented in the districts of Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Kurunegala, Polonnaruwa, and Anuradhapura. The target was to support 1,000 beneficiaries, focusing mainly on women and vulnerable groups. These groups included women-headed households, families with elderly members, Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), and patients with Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) whose livelihoods were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis of 2022.

CONTEXT

The design of the pilot project was informed by recent UNDP studies taken from the Policy Report titled '**Understanding Multidimensional Vulnerabilities: Impact on People of Sri Lanka**', done in collaboration with the University of Oxford's Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI). The report put forth Sri Lanka's first-ever Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI), derived using the National Citizen Survey (NCS) 2022-23. It covered a representative sample of 25,000 households through a survey conducted between November 2022 and March 2023 to capture the impact of the cascading crises on the people.

The MVI measured the incidence and intensity of multidimensional vulnerability, including overlapping challenges such as climate-induced disasters. The Policy Report captured a snapshot of vulnerabilities experienced by communities across three dimensions: (i) education; (ii) health and disaster; and (iii) living standards. The report thus provided data on prevailing vulnerabilities and communities at risk of poverty.

Targeting people at risk of poverty (transient poor) enabled a graduation strategy to be piloted through interventions that sought to increase incomes and build resilience via a two-pronged approach: (i) cash transfers to meet immediate needs and (ii) longer-term

asset creation through building sustainable livelihoods.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The primary objective of the pilot project was to enable farming communities to take ownership and manage the entire farming process. By eliminating the middleman, the Farmer's Market sought to empower farmers and other stakeholders in the supply chain, such as small-scale entrepreneurs and vendors. Strengthening the farm-to-market linkage thus incorporated an empowerment component.

This linkage also facilitated the integration of the pilot project with three other projects: the Climate Resilient Integrated Water Management Project (CRIWMP) funded by the Green Climate Fund, Strengthening Smallholder Farmers and Micro/Home Based Agriculture Industries for Enhanced Food and Livelihood Security project funded by the Japan Supplement Budget (JSB), and The Crisis Facility components funded by the Embassy of Thailand.

It expanded the backyard poultry intervention of the JSB-funded project by providing poultry chicks and coops to beneficiaries selected for home garden improvement. This approach addressed nutritional deficits by allowing households to consume eggs as a protein source and to sell any surplus for additional income.

The pilot project also complemented climate-smart agricultural interventions carried out through CRIWMP by reestablishing farmers' markets as community-owned and managed sales points for both agricultural and non-agricultural products across five districts in the dry zone.

A UNIQUE MODEL

This pilot project enhanced existing project models promoting climate-resilient agriculture in Sri Lanka's dry zone by introducing district-level Farmers' Markets. These markets empowered local farmers, entrepreneurs, and vendors by eliminating the 'middleman' and ensuring direct sales of fresh and value-added ecological products. Farmers' Markets bridged gaps in supply and demand, fostering a sustainable farm-to-market linkage. While initially focused on the district level, it aligned with the long-term strategy of the 'Rural Women's Green Business Forum' to expand to provincial and national scales. This integrated approach aimed to develop robust supply chains and marketing mechanisms for green products, promoting community-led economic resilience.

The project model's design integrated insights from a Landscape Mapping Study of Sri Lanka's social protection programmes, which analysed legislative, institutional, and infrastructural frameworks. It strengthened social protection measures and agricultural practices, aiming for sustainable development by incorporating UNDP's prior collaborations with the Government, such as the National Welfare Benefits Assessment for the Welfare Benefits Board and the Department of Census and Statistics. Key components of the model leveraged these foundations to enhance resilience and community empowerment in Sri Lanka.

The key components of the model are as follows:

- Targeted communities that are vulnerable to poverty, i.e. '**transient poor**', who hover just above the poverty line but are at risk of falling into poverty very quickly due to lack of capacity to absorb shocks such as floods, droughts, death or sickness of income earners etc.
- Piloted a **graduation strategy** targeting the 'transient poor' rather than the very poor or severely poor. The model aimed to demonstrate that increasing the incomes and assets of this group could enable beneficiaries to 'graduate' from poverty reduction social protection programmes, such as *Aswesuma*, relatively quickly.
- The **empowerment model** created sustainable opportunities for income generation and asset creation as a means to build financial independence and reduce dependency on social safety nets.
- The project **coupled interventions** to address short-term deprivations, such as cash transfers and nutritional deficits, with longer-term livelihood support through climate-smart agricultural practices and links to markets.
- Additionally, the project employed **integrated approaches** by building on and integrating UNDP's work on climate-resilient agriculture in the dry zone, exemplified by the CRIWMP. It also integrated activities in the farm-to-market chain by developing value chains and reestablishing district-level Farmers Markets.
- The pilot project focused on **the community as the unit of support**. While the government's *Aswesuma* programme supports households and others target specific categories of vulnerable individuals (e.g., elders' allowance), the pilot project strengthened community enterprises and built the capacities of society members as agents of the community. This approach allowed community enterprises to negotiate

collectively on behalf of the community with external stakeholders, such as banks.

- The project built the **capacities of community enterprises** by tailoring interventions to meet community requirements, including technical training, marketing and entrepreneurial skills, financial and business management, managing revolving funds, product branding, packaging, and labelling.
- UNDP **built on existing subnational government structures and community-level organisations** to strengthen governance, ensuring that community enterprises were transparent, accountable, and inclusive.
- The project engaged **multiple stakeholders**, including community enterprises, lead government partners (e.g., Provincial Agriculture Department), and non-government actors (e.g., financial service providers).
- The project **promoted green practices coupled with social protection** by building on UNDP's project portfolio in the dry zone, promoting climate-resilient agricultural practices, and integrating global best practices in social protection systems to mitigate impacts on the livelihoods of vulnerable communities.
- Drawing on the experiences of CRIWMP, the model **developed value chains** based on the idea that every product in the market belongs to a value chain. To support this, five value chains were introduced into the production system, with champions identified from among farmers, entrepreneurs, and vendors in each community enterprise.
- The project **reestablished Farmers Markets** based on the idea that farmers should also be vendors. It also conceptualised Farmers Markets as an opportunity to raise awareness and shift consumers towards organic food consumption.

GENDER-RESPONSIVE INTEGRATION

Leaders of the community enterprises were mostly women, and society membership was predominantly female. The project was designed to economically empower women, not only to increase incomes and build assets but also to support their contributions to labor market activities in their communities. Project results provided evidence of this. For example, the President of the community enterprise in Kithuluthuwa in Polonnaruwa no longer relied on her husband to meet household financial and children's educational expenses, as the income from her roadside stall was sufficient to cover these costs.

MARKET MODELS

Anuradhapura

The Mobile Market



Local Context

Prior to the pandemic, Haritha Suwa Farmers Market planned to establish a permanent market near Anuradhapura town. However, the Municipal Council resisted allocating a space for permanent stalls. Instead, the Council permitted the Market to operate in two temporary public spaces adjacent to the children's park and tourism centre. During the pandemic, the Market adapted by delivering goods to public institutions and households. In a post-COVID context, the Market restarted with 20 vendors at the weekly Wednesday pola, but sales were poor since most consumers preferred the Saturday pola. Strong opposition from regular Saturday vendors prevented the Market from operating on that day. During the economic crisis, vendors returned to delivery services, hiring a lorry and using WhatsApp to communicate with regular customers.

Adapting the Model

Given local conditions and community needs, the Model was adapted based on:

- 1. Consumer Demand:** A customer survey assessed the demand for fresh local produce, which led to the development of six value chains: (i) vegetables, fruits, and greens; (ii) animal husbandry and related products; (iii) cereals such as rice and grains; (iv) local eco-friendly handicrafts; (v) value-added products; and (vi) non-cultivated products like bees' honey and lena hathu mushrooms (*Schizophyllum commune*).
- 2. Mobile Market:** A truck was purchased and customized due to location difficulties. A survey identified optimal locations and times for consumer purchases. A committee has been established to manage and disburse funds for maintaining the mobile

truck, bypassing lengthy bureaucratic processes. It is noteworthy that many women within the community enterprise, including the Society President, currently own and operate their own motorcycles. They are also capable and eager to learn how to drive the mobile truck.

Implementing the Model

- 1. Beneficiary Selection:** 200 beneficiaries were selected including those from the pre-COVID era, and new ones were selected by the respective group leaders based on their ability to produce goods in variety and quantity as per demand. Group members were selected as per Project criteria with the final selection made in collaboration with the Provincial Director of Agriculture. In addition, 25 mushroom growers, beneficiaries of another UNDP project, were selected for further support given the demand for the product. Groups were made of 10 members each with a leader who is also the vendor.
- 2. Farming:** Crops are grown in home gardens using climate-smart practices with guidance and monitoring from government officials. Farmers were encouraged to grow in-demand crops. A Technical Specialist assisted with land preparation, organic fertilizer production, and nursery management. Multi-cropping plans were tailored to water availability, plot size, and family labour. Special attention was given to crops suitable for CKD patients, the elderly, and PwD,
- 3. Product Range:** Interventions were required to develop products in variety, quantity and quality for commercial sales as products thus far were made only for sale at local village shops such as short eats. Entrepreneurs with the motivation to improve and scale up production were identified for capacity-building interventions. These interventions included conducting training

on organic crop production and site visits to observe land preparation, crop planning, and community enterprise functions. The Technical Specialist has helped build capacities to develop crop production.

- 4. Loan Disbursements:** Loans, mostly under LKR 5000, were provided to farmers to support crop development.

Experience and Learning

The shift from supply-driven crop production to a more consumer-demand-driven model required overcoming limitations such as small-land plots and access to water resources. Through community mobilised awareness raising, many new crops including traditional village items are now grown. These items are popular amongst the professional consumer market who are looking for healthy alternatives, i.e. organic produce void of chemicals. This target market is also willing to pay for healthy alternatives, for example, mint leaves which were sold earlier at LKR 30 per 100gm are now sold at LKR 100. Similarly, there is a demand for traditional value-added sweetmeats like Kurakkan Thalapa, Thalaguli, Asmi and Weli Thalapa, indicating substantial opportunities for growth of the Farmers Market as a model of livelihood development in the district.

Kurunegala

The Urban Farmers Market



Local Context

Prior to COVID-19, Kurunegala had a successful Farmers Market established with UNDP support in 2017. Held on Saturdays at the Provincial Department of Agriculture, it dwindled post-pandemic and during the 2022 economic crisis as participants dropped out. In the post-COVID context, the Wayamba Isuru Farmers Market aimed to restart the Saturday market but needed fresh capital and technical resources. Despite challenges, the community had strong support from the Provincial Department of Agriculture, a stable location, a loyal customer base, and a revamped supply chain. New and old farmers and entrepreneurs were identified to supply in-demand fresh and value-added products.

Implementing the Model

As the strategy focused on strengthening and upgrading interventions of an existing UNDP project, no particular aspects of the Model

required adaptation. Key features of the Model are provided below.

- 1. Group Development:** The Pilot maintained the 32 groups of 5-6, mostly women members, that existed in 2017, with leaders doubling up as vendors at the Saturday Market. New farmers were identified and crop plans were developed with the support of Agriculture Instructors (AI). Some effort was required to convince farmers to grow organic produce. Groups were allocated specific crops based on demand, for example, three members grow a single crop such as green beans, producing 10kg to meet the demand of 30kg for a market day.
- 2. Beneficiary Selection:** The Pilot targeted 300 beneficiaries consisting of farmers, entrepreneurs and vendors, many of whom had been part of the previous supply chain with additional beneficiaries identified in collaboration with the AI.

3. **Product Range:** The variety of vegetables and fruits was increased with several new, in-demand vegetables supplied such as leeks, red onions and pulses. Eggs and new, value-added products such as coconut oil, jams, cordials, chutneys, a variety of processed flour, and nuggets and sausages made from mushrooms, are also available.
4. **The Market:** The Farmers Market operates on two days weekly. On Saturdays, it hosts around 40 vendors and draws 600-700 visitors. Medical professionals also place WhatsApp orders for pick-up. Wednesdays feature 6-7 vendors, attracting approximately 200 visitors, mainly public servants and school community members. Vendors, including those from Kuliyaipitiya, contribute to a growing supply of goods. Future plans include an additional monthly market on the 25th at the Provincial Council premises, coinciding with public officials' payday.
5. **Vendor Forum:** Has been established and functions after each Market day. Errant vendors are named and shamed and not allowed in the Market after three warnings.
6. **Loan Disbursements:** Group members used loans to buy equipment, boosting production. One woman expanded her poultry rearing, increasing chicks from 38 to 70 and weekly egg sales to 340. Another uses a cutting machine for vegetables and fruits, covering loan repayments with sales income.
7. **Quality Control:** An Agricultural Instructor monitors crops at farming units to prevent chemical and pesticide use. On Market days, an Agriculture Department officer ensures organic compliance and checks produce quality as per crop plans. Department officials oversee market operations, setting prices, moderating the Vendor Forum, and verifying crop quantities against plans. They issue warnings and bans for rule violations, ensuring adherence to regulations and maintaining market integrity.
8. **Capacity Building and Government Engagement:** The Provincial Department of Agriculture monitors the quality of products and repayment of loans, and offers technical support through the training unit with the Agricultural Instructor tasked with building the capacity of the community enterprise.
9. **Private Sector Engagement:** Bank accounts have been opened for farmers and vendors at a private bank to facilitate loan disbursements and repayments as well as cashless payments for sales at the Market.
10. **Social Media Use:** The community enterprise has embraced technological advances in its marketing and sales activities. For example, WhatsApp groups have been created to keep vendors and farmers informed on subjects like the prices of goods in other markets. The Farmers Market Facebook Page has 500 (approx.) members.

Experience and Learning

The Model, built on UNDP's organic farming initiatives and supported by a health-conscious consumer base and stakeholder network, aims to expand the farm-to-market approach. Following a successful pilot, stakeholders plan to scale up with PGS certification, tailored crop plans, and a major farmers market in Puttalam, enhancing quality and meeting export demands, particularly targeting Sri Lankan diaspora markets. Led by the Provincial Department of Agriculture, these efforts leverage Kurunegala Farmers Market as a 'Model', offering insights into effective management and supply chain operations. Site visits to the market inspire other community enterprises, illustrating best practices in market operations and supply chain management for broader adoption.

Polonnaruwa

The Roadside Market



Local Context

Kithuluthuwa, a village on the Habarana-Kantale main road, was a former border village with resettled families from Sri Lanka's war. Located on the North Central-Eastern Provinces border, it lacked administrative oversight despite recent developments. Isolated from government services, it represents the challenge of ensuring inclusivity under the principle of "Leave no one behind." Since 2017, CRIWMP has supported the Pubudu Gramashakthi Association (a women-only CSO) with climate-smart agriculture, rainwater harvesting, and community water supply. They established a roadside market for selling organic produce on the A6 highway which connects Ambepussa to Trincomalee. The Pilot aimed to enhance farming and marketing, introducing value-added products in an upgraded Farmer's Market with permanent stalls.

Implementing the Model

As the strategy focused on strengthening and upgrading interventions of an existing UNDP project, no particular aspects of the Model required adaptation. It is important to note, however, that implementation was bolstered by the following factors:

- 1. Farming:** The community enterprise built on a UNDP project to expand small-scale farms and implement year-round land use plans in dry zones. Farmers adopted climate-smart practices, producing organic fertilizers and avoiding chemicals. Beekeeping was introduced for income and as an indicator of a chemical-free environment. Rainwater harvesting tanks support dry-season cultivation. Poultry rearing improves nutrition, with surplus eggs sold at the Roadside Market. Women actively engage in organic farming, showcasing diverse crops in home gardens and sharing knowledge, particularly on seasonal crop rotation.

- 2. The Roadside Market:** Permanent stalls were built for the Roadside Market, boosting sales from Rs. 200 to over Rs. 1000 per day. These stalls offer fresh vegetables, fruits, greens, and a few handcrafted items like bags. Shielded from direct sunlight, the produce lasts longer and can be sold the next day. Improved visibility has attracted more commuters, including regular clients like military officers. Sales have increased as more people stop to purchase fresh produce. Farmers/vendors now identify peak sales times and balance household chores with time at the stalls, leading to better management and increased sales.
- 3. Loan Disbursements:** Loans have been granted to farmers to diversify crops and improve the quality and quantity of produce. Leaders of the community enterprise are also knowledgeable about managing the revolving fund with most loans being repaid in a timely manner.
- 4. Capacity Development:** The community has benefited from sustained capacity-building activities with beneficiaries stating that they have improved their knowledge and skills in organic production. For example, prior to the Pilot, they had no experience in growing mushrooms but are now growing them in their small plots of land. Further, as stated by a group leader, management of the community enterprise has improved significantly from a year back, especially in managing finances.
- 5. Community Leadership:** Leadership of the community enterprise is dynamic. A few young women are leading by example, proudly showcasing their organic agricultural endeavours. Importantly, they are happy to share their experiences with women in other project locations which is important for the sustainability of Project interventions.

Experience and Learning

Support from multiple UNDP projects has empowered women in Kithuluthuwa, enabling them to achieve economic independence and cover household and educational expenses. However, livelihood sustainability faces challenges, particularly the human-elephant conflict, as the village is on an elephant corridor. Frequent elephant crop raids threaten the agriculture-dependent community. Income from the Roadside Market is volatile; sales peaked when vegetable prices were high, attracting consumers from Kantale. However, as local prices dropped, sales declined, with consumers preferring lower prices at Kantale. This trend indicates that sales are driven by price, as there is no distinction between organic and non-organic products.

Kithuluthuwa exemplifies resilient women engaging in climate-smart agriculture in a marginalized, war-impacted border village, showcasing community-driven economic and social progress.

Trincomalee

The Hybrid Market



Local Context

Established in 2018 by the Government, the Saubagya Production Village Society provided infrastructure and working capital for crop and value-added goods production. A revolving fund supported crop and business development. The government built a facility in Rotawewa with machines for grinding curry powder, grains, and poultry feed. Production halted due to COVID-19 and the 2022 economic crisis. The community enterprise includes Rotawewa's Muslim entrepreneurs and Ethabediwewa's Sinhala farmers. Post-pandemic, Ethabediwewa farmers stopped corn cultivation due to rising costs, relying on paddy and home gardens, and falling into debt to local Mudalalis (traders). Pre-2018, some women produced spice mixes, which ceased during COVID-19 due to raw material shortages.

Adapting the Model

The Model adaptation focuses on three key interventions: providing households with chicks to enhance food security and income through egg production, injecting capital to repair machinery in three production centres and support crop cultivation for raw materials and establishing a marketing centre to sell eggs and value-added products, linking with the Trincomalee market.

Implementing the Model

- 1. Group Formation:** The Pilot selected 200 beneficiaries as per the Project criteria from members of the community enterprise. The women in the three production groups self-selected with the cereal-based food group consisting of Muslim women, and the poultry feed and spice groups consisting of Sinhala women.

2. **Farming:** Project interventions targeted for both the Maha and Yala seasons. Interventions aimed to supply as many raw materials as required for the production centres. Crop plans were developed for commercial corn farming, with water sprinklers also provided to farmers. While raw materials for the production of cereal and poultry feed are mostly sourced locally, many items for spice production are purchased at village shops.
3. **Poultry Rearing:** 100 families were targeted to receive chicks to complement backyard poultry provision initiated by another UNDP project. Monthly income from sales of eggs is Rs. 20,000 approx., exceeding pre-pandemic sales and contributing to supplementing incomes.
4. **Production Groups:** The cereal-based food group targets pregnant and lactating mothers, selling locally sourced products in various pack sizes at the marketing centre and village shops. The poultry feed group uses raw materials like rice and soya, sourced from farmers and local shops, with a local substitute for soya under consideration. It is marketed to households raising poultry, supported by the community enterprise President's shop for chick sales and feed distribution. The spice products group operates an active processing centre, with products available at local shops and the Pola on Mondays and Wednesdays.
5. **Vendor Group:** This has been formed with representatives from the three production groups.
6. **The Market:** A marketing centre, located at the Rotawewa production centre, sells produce from the three production centres, and organic eggs. Sales also occur at village shops, though local demand is limited due to remote location, posing transport cost challenges. A site near Hela Bojun in Trincomalee town is under consideration.

Experience and Learning

The Model was adapted considering government facilities and the need to address community debt and food insecurity. Infrastructure improvements were on schedule, but other interventions faced delays due to the community enterprise's informal governance and management capacity. Formal structures like registration, bank accounts, and enterprise management processes are needed for establishment. Procedures for purchasing, monitoring, and reporting were also required. Selecting 200 beneficiaries was challenging due to community poverty, highlighting the difficulty of reaching the most vulnerable and the extra time and effort needed to meet basic governance requirements before implementing interventions.

Vavuniya

The Multi-Ethnic Urban Market



Local Context

Vavuniya, a multicultural district, endured prolonged hardship during the war. Post-2009, war-displaced and inexperienced settlers struggled with dry zone conditions and water scarcity. Through the Government of Sri Lanka and UNDP's Green Climate Fund (GCF) supported 'Climate Resilient Integrated Water Management Project (CRIWMP)' selected villages were provided with assistance to enhance agricultural productivity and resilience. The Vavuniya District Entrepreneurs Society, established in 2014 with the Small Enterprises Development Unit (SEDU), includes small-scale entrepreneurs and farmers practising climate-smart agriculture. Since the 2022 economic crisis, rising raw material costs posed challenges. The society sought SEDU's help to form sub-groups for products like textiles, processed fruits, and handicrafts, and to secure a permanent sales location. Entrepreneurs operated informally in Vavuniya town, risking eviction by the

Municipality, underscoring the need for a stable sales site.

Adapting the Model

Given the local context, religious and cultural practices and the structure of the community enterprise, the Model required considerable adaptation. Factors included the enterprise's partnership with SEDU, Tamil women members selling goods to middlemen, and the lack of a permanent location and working capital. Local markets resemble trade fairs, focusing on textiles and homeware, not fresh produce. Unlike other areas, there's no mid-week or Saturday 'pola'. Fresh produce is sold to shops for resale, with peak buying on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Hindu customs drive high vegetable sales on Thursdays, as Fridays are reserved for temple visits and avoiding vegetables.

Implementing the Model

- 1. Beneficiary Selection:** 150 beneficiaries were selected based on the Project criteria, 70 of whom are entrepreneurs while the balance are farmers. The farming and entrepreneur groups operate independently and are thus not part of a value chain per se as in other districts.
- 2. Farming:** Farmers were selected based on publicly disclosed criteria, ensuring ethnic balance (25% Sinhala, 75% Tamil). Given that most farmer-beneficiaries are post-war settlers, they are seasonal cultivators holding farming lands elsewhere. Following the beneficiary selection, land use mapping was undertaken as per the land use plans.
- 3. The Market:** Operates daily on a bustling road frequented by professionals and officials. It offers fresh items throughout the day, including breakfast cereals (Kurakkan Kenda, Kola Kande) and cooked foods like Hoppers and Vadai after 5 p.m. A juice bar and seating are available. Vendors have seen sales surge, with some earning up to Rs. 10,000 daily.
- 4. Loan Disbursement:** A substantial part of the Pilot funds supports a revolving fund offering beneficiaries loans up to Rs. 50,000 for 12 months. Loans require business plans reviewed and approved by SEDU, with disbursements and repayments overseen by a dedicated sub-committee.
- 5. Capacity Building:** Capacity deficits were identified in (i) managing the revolving fund; (ii) streamlining activities by removing overlaps and duplications; (iii) costing raw materials and establishing prices, and; (iv) record and bookkeeping. A site visit was also conducted to the Wayamba Isuru Farmers Market to observe the market's functioning and the community enterprise's management. Simultaneously, training was conducted on organic farming methods and crop and land use planning for short and

long-term crops. Other activities include creating awareness of and identifying farmers for PGS and SL-GAP certification.

- 6. Vendor Forum:** This has been formed and consists of 20 vendors and 10 farmers.
- 7. Government Engagement:** The link with SEDU is important given the focus of the community enterprise on promoting entrepreneurship.
- 8. Social Media:** WhatsApp groups have been established to share market prices before market days. Separate WhatsApp groups have been created with different stakeholders to share information such as crop plans, crop prices etc.

Experience and Learning

Implementing the Model in Vavuniya highlighted challenges for resettled and newly settled communities, especially isolated farmers lacking government support. Exacerbated by the 2022 drought, climate-related losses have deepened their debt and socio-economic hardships, including unpaid bills and reduced nutrition. Challenges like crop losses in transit, low prices, and high transport costs compound their financial struggles. The Vavuniya Model stresses adapting strategies to local socio-cultural conditions and aligning product supply with consumer demand. Direct market access through initiatives like the 'Vanni Green' market empowers entrepreneurs and farmers, addressing debts through sales. Tamil women vendors, breaking traditional norms, significantly contribute to economic empowerment and labour market participation.

KEY FINDINGS

The cash plus livelihood development project was needed to promote a more comprehensive approach to poverty reduction and social protection, more inclusively and holistically. During the short span of one year, the project outcomes provided evidence of the following:

- Cash plus interventions supported communities in meeting immediate deprivations, including nutritional deficits (e.g., egg production and consumption), while also aiding in increasing incomes and building assets through sustainable livelihood activities (e.g., climate-resilient agricultural practices).
 - Integration of projects of similar nature allowed for building on and complementing existing interventions and networks, while also enabling the identification of gaps for greater cohesiveness in responses and outcomes.
 - The project strategy was used as a graduation strategy, as it helped women increase their incomes and move out of poverty.
 - It economically empowered women by making them financially independent.
 - It helped women move out of debt traps by supporting the production of goods and providing a market to retail them. Evidence was available from beneficiaries in Kurunegala who were repaying their monthly debt instalments on time from the income generated by selling their value-added products at the weekly farmers' market.
- enhance financial independence, and move towards a more self-reliant future. The successful outcomes and lessons learned serve as a model for future initiatives, demonstrating the value of a holistic and integrated approach that leaves meaningful and lasting impacts.

By integrating direct financial assistance with comprehensive livelihood support, UNDP and its stakeholders addressed both immediate needs and long-term self-sufficiency. This approach not only tackled urgent deprivations but also fostered sustainable development and economic empowerment. Through these efforts, the project helped communities build resilience,

SUCCESS STORIES

SETTING THE SCENE

Implemented in existing UNDP project sites, the Pilot utilised established mechanisms and evidence-informed interventions tailored to local needs. It aimed to empower low-income communities by enabling them to own and manage the entire farm-to-market cycle, thereby fostering economic self-sufficiency and breaking the cycle of poverty. Aligned with project goals, the strategy emphasised livelihood development and asset generation to enhance long-term resilience, aiming to reduce dependency on social safety nets and facilitate graduation from assistance programs. By empowering women through economic participation, the project supported sustainable livelihoods, poverty reduction, and asset accumulation, while fostering financial independence and gender parity, contributing to the economic growth of their communities.

A key component in sustainability is working with community enterprises through partner agreements. These entities are the project's implementing partners at the district level whose capacities were developed to continue the livelihood interventions beyond the project timeline, thereby ensuring the long-term sustainability of outcomes. The Pilot encompassed two outputs:

Output 1: Enhance the social protection system to accurately identify and register those left behind through improved quality of disaggregated data by (i) designing and delivering training modules on gender-disaggregated data collection and entry for enumerators from Divisional Secretariats in all 25 districts, and (ii) conducting a Digital Readiness Assessment of Sri Lanka's social protection landscape to identify entry points to improve capacities and infrastructure of government institutions on beneficiary registration, management and administration.

Output 2: Disburse cash transfers and develop inclusive livelihoods that promote graduation. Under this, two key activities were conducted (i) a National Citizen Survey which supports beneficiary identification through data disaggregated by vulnerability category, and (ii) disbursement of cash transfers and livelihood development activities for 1000 beneficiaries. Interventions include:

- (Re) establishing Farmers' Markets to sell fresh fruits, vegetables and greens, as well as value-added products (food and non-food items)
- Supporting small-scale ecological farmers in each district and building their capacity to produce ecological products with the required volume, diversity, quality, and supply for the Farmers' Market
- Supporting entrepreneurs in each district in scaling up their value additions, processing, and quality control systems to increase the number of vendors participating in the Farmers' Market
- Supporting vendors in each district to increase the number of consumers visiting the Farmers' Market
- Building capacities of community enterprises in each district as producers, entrepreneurs and vendors and developing a sustainable market operational system

The overall objective of the intervention is to increase the incomes of 1,000 farmers, entrepreneurs, and vendors to supply ecological products to the Farmers' Markets in the five districts through developing green supply chains, integrating with value chains and connecting to sustainable Farmers' Markets. Ensuring food security for target beneficiaries and building capacities of community enterprises are cross-cutting themes to address both immediate deprivation and longer-term sustainability of interventions.

From Barren Fields to Fertile Farms

Lakmali's Path to Financial Independence



Persevering through challenges

Born in the lush landscapes of Dambulla, Lakmali, now 37, grew up amidst rich heritage and agricultural traditions. She was nurtured by the warmth of her family and the rhythms of farming life. Yet, life took a harsh turn as her parents, diligent onion farmers, faced crippling debts that led to the loss of their cherished home. Despite completing her Ordinary Level education, she chose not to pursue further studies, partly due to her family's financial struggles.

"To ease our financial struggles, I went to Lebanon and worked as a housemaid. I was only 19 at the time, and for three years, I worked tirelessly to achieve my goal: to rescue my family from financial despair. And it paid off-I managed to reclaim our home and change my parents' lives for the better," Lakmali says with a lingering smile on her face.

In 2010, at 23, Lakmali embraced a new chapter in her life. She married and moved to Kithuluthuwa, Polonnaruwa.

Seeds of hope

Kithuluthuwa's barren fields relied solely on rainwater, offering little prosperity. Sparse paddy fields were surrounded by shrubs and Kathurumurunga (*Sesbania grandiflora*) plants on her in-laws' plot. Her husband's family had resettled in Polonnaruwa through a government land program during the war, sustaining themselves with income from paddy farming and low-paying jobs.

Initially, Lakmali and her husband lived with his parents. Her husband, earning Rs. 12,000 monthly as a home guard without a permanent job, faced ongoing financial challenges. Her in-laws tended the paddy fields during the Maha season, and her father-in-law worked as a truck cleaner at a prominent flour mill in Trincomalee. Despite their efforts, the family struggled with a meagre income, frequently ending each month

in debt. Lakmali longed for independence, but her husband's salary wasn't enough, prompting her to return to Lebanon for four more years to save for a better future.

Rising above debt

In 2015, Lakmali returned from Lebanon with savings, securing half an acre from her in-laws to build their own home. The future seemed brighter as her husband received confirmation in his home guard job, with his basic salary and additional earnings reaching Rs. 32,000.

"By the time I returned, a new irrigation tank was constructed by the villagers - brightening our farming prospects," Lakmali recounts, recalling the community effort. *"Together with my in-laws, we tilled 3.5 acres of paddy fields, sharing our income and strengthening our family bonds."* She was able to transform her barren plot into a thriving garden - initially for her family's consumption, but she soon began selling the surplus by the roadside.

Following the example of other women in the village, Lakmali set up a simple roadside stand, selling vegetables for Rs. 50 per 500 grams to travellers. This small venture blossomed into a steady livelihood. For the next two to three years, her income from selling vegetables was sufficient to meet her family's needs, freeing them from debt.

Empowering transformation

In 2019, Lakmali received a beacon of support from the Government of Sri Lanka and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Sri Lanka, through the Green Climate Fund's (GCF) 'Climate Resilient Integrated Water Management Project (CRIWMP)'. This assistance came in the form of various plants such as pomegranate, bananas, mangoes, and coconut. Beyond the tangible plants, UNDP provided invaluable technical advice on water-efficient cropping, producing organic fertiliser, identifying crop diseases, and safeguarding against pests.

The most transformative aspect of this support was the shift in mindset it fostered among farmers like Lakmali. *"We learnt how to cultivate crops year-round by relying on efficient water use. The tools provided by UNDP - buckets, organic fertilizer-making tools, and drip irrigation systems - were invaluable. They transformed our fields into flourishing gardens,"* she said, highlighting how the support provided has reshaped her journey.

In 2022/23, innovation transformed the farming community as small-scale farmers embraced multi-cropping. Seeds and grow bags were provided for home gardens, while commercial farmers received plants like corn, cowpeas, and peanuts. Despite her limited half-acre garden, Lakmali utilized the technical advice and resources. In 2023, she received paddy seedlings, resulting in a bountiful Maha season. This harvest brought in substantial income - about Rs. 45,000 per kilogram, with a total yield of around 60 kilograms from her 3 acres, significantly better than previous years.

Nurturing growth

Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and economic turmoil in Sri Lanka, vulnerable communities found themselves grappling with unprecedented difficulties. In response, in 2023, UNDP through its Funding Windows, supported by the Government of Luxembourg launched a project aimed to empower women and vulnerable groups by promoting economic self-sufficiency.

As a recipient of the project, Lakmali has experienced significant improvements to her livelihood. She received crucial support including a drip irrigation system and various fruit plants like pomegranates, oranges, and bananas. Additionally, through the Funding Windows project, she was introduced to backyard poultry farming, providing her with 20 chicks and a coop. These initiatives have not only enhanced her agricultural capabilities, but also contributed to her family's economic stability in challenging times.

“Starting with just 20 chicks, my poultry venture has been a blessing. Each day, I gather about ten eggs, which has been a great source of nutrition for my children,” Lakmali shares warmly. “Now, I receive orders several times a week for 30-40 eggs, which I sell at 50 rupees each. It’s heartening that our eggs are even making their way to Colombo through a school bus driver who buys 100 eggs every other day from our village.”

The income from egg sales and her fruit and vegetable stall was sufficient to cover Lakmali’s household expenditures. With her earnings, she purchased a tractor, enhancing her agricultural capabilities. She plans to expand her poultry production by buying 50 more chicks to increase egg sales and secure a stable financial future for her family.

Strengthening community bonds

The roadside market transformed into a bustling hub with permanent stalls, boosting daily sales to approximately Rs. 2,000 from Rs. 500. Lakmali sells mangoes, pomegranates, soursop, papaya, lime, and seasonal vegetables. With high sales days on Fridays, Saturdays, public holidays, and school breaks, attracting local officials and the military, she is also able to shield produce from the harsh sun thanks to the roadside stall, allowing them to be sold the next day. Leftover produce is distributed within the village or consumed by her family, ensuring nothing goes to waste.

The market motivates Lakmali to grow crops year-round, no longer limited to the rainy season. Besides fresh produce, she sells value-added products like curry powders, flour, ulundu (black gram), cowpea beans, and various rice varieties sourced from other districts. She earns extra income from the markup on these items, selling them on commission.

The support provided through the project, also fosters greater collaboration among communities, with the market stalls, shared among two or three farmers. Lakmali sells fresh

produce and encourages paddy farmers to offer rice, occasionally featuring commercially grown items, though not always organic.

Envisioning a prosperous future

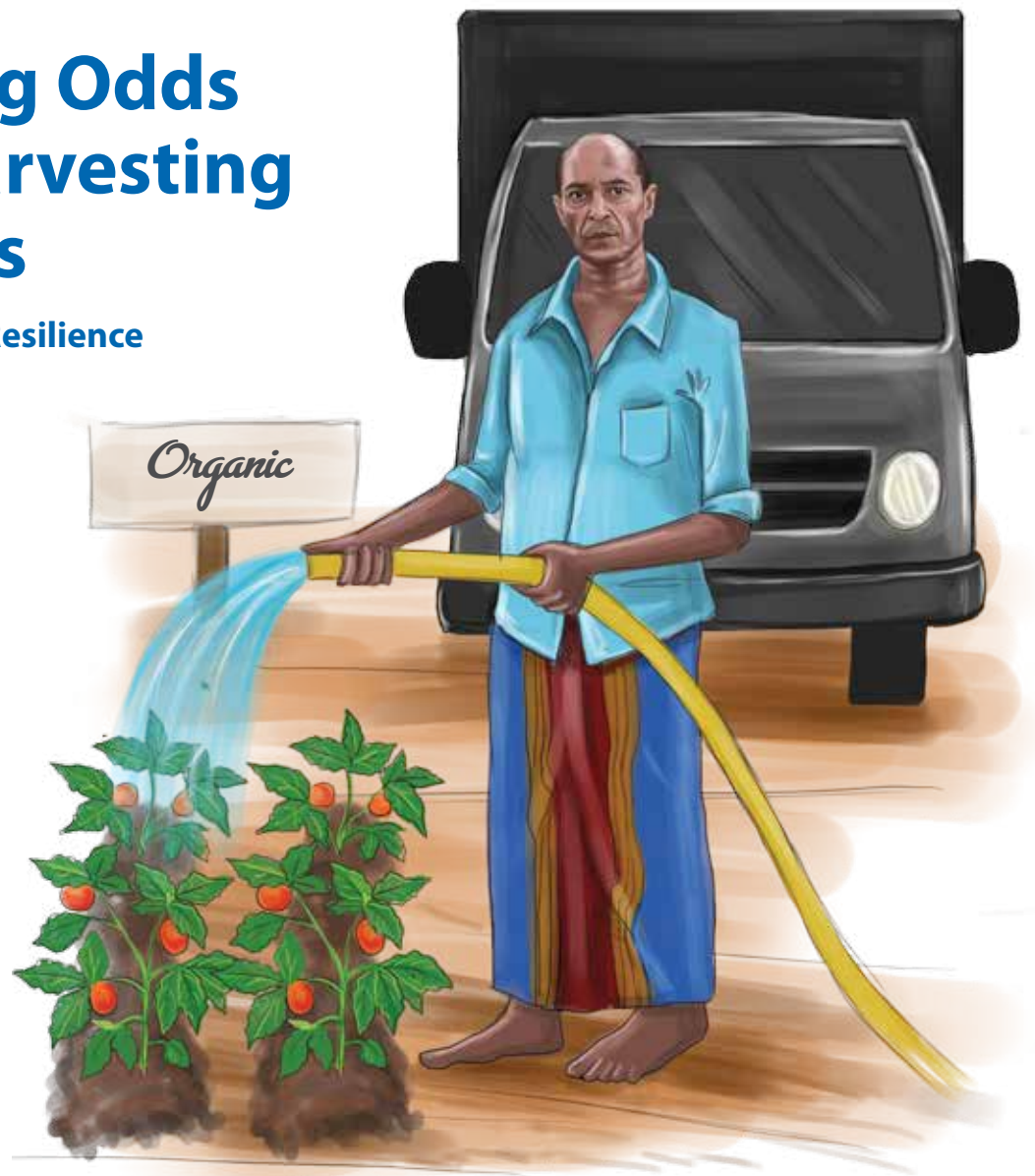
Her vision includes promoting good health practices through organic food, and expanding to include local bee honey and mung beans. She plans to increase vegetable production with makaral (string beans), aiming for 20 kilograms weekly for her stall and local shops. Limited land poses challenges, but she plans to add cool drinks during dry seasons. Lakmali also aims to secure paddy land and additional highlands for her children’s future livelihoods.

Driven by her commitment to quality and sustainability, Lakmali notes, “I hope to have my produce certified under Good Agricultural Practices (GAP).” She plays a pivotal role as President of the Pubudu Gram Shakthi Society, which has grown to 40 members, predominantly women. These members benefit from the project’s support and contribute Rs. 5 daily to the society fund, pooling resources for collective growth and development initiatives. She continues, “Thanks to UNDP Funding Windows’ support, the society has received crucial promotional materials for the roadside market. This has helped us attract more customers.” Lakmali also leads efforts in organizing awareness campaigns and training programs within the community focusing on promoting organic farming practices.

Her journey from the barren fields of Kithuluthuwa to a thriving agricultural enterprise showcases the profound impact of empowering women farmers. The interventions that lifted Lakmali have not only improved her life, but also enriched her community, fostering resilience and hope for a sustainable future.

Battling Odds and Harvesting Dreams

Ajith's Tale of Resilience



Humble beginnings

Born in 1967 in the picturesque village of Madahapola, nestled close to Melsiripura, Ajith's early years were framed by the rustic charm and hard realities of rural life. As one of four children, with an older sister and two younger sisters, he learned the values of family and resilience from a young age.

In 1971, Ajith's father claimed land to produce Kithul treacle and tobacco, but conflicts with elephants led to abandonment. By 1987, turmoil from the insurgency forced Ajith to seek refuge in Irudeniyyaya's untamed beauty, facing forested, mosquito-infested challenges without legal ownership.

New life in the wilderness

Irudeniyyaya became Ajith's sanctuary and a canvas for his dreams, though claimed by the Wildlife Department. His fortunes changed with the arrival of a team from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura studying mosquitoes. His support and dedication to the team earned him an opportunity that offered financial stability and a sense of belonging. For nine years, he immersed himself in this work, honing skills and broadening his horizons.

After this academic chapter and his marriage, Ajith returned to Irudeniyyaya with his wife. Embracing his farming roots despite pressure to take a state job, he invested in a water sprinkler

machine with support from his in-laws, marking the beginning of his agricultural journey.

Ajith started with one acre, later expanding to two and a half acres over 25 years. "I cultivated coconut, guava, and various fruits and vegetables without chemicals. The more successful crops, like beets and green chillies, were also sold locally in the Melsiripura markets," Ajith shared on his roots of success. Regular visits from Mudalalis (shop owners) ensured prompt payment for produce, supporting his sustainable farming practices and steady income.

A transformative turn

In 2017, Ajith's dedication to organic farming caught the attention of the Agricultural Instructor, who connected him with the 'Climate Resilient Integrated Water Management Project (CRIWMP)', supported by the Government of Sri Lanka and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Sri Lanka through the Green Climate Fund (GCF). This partnership transformed Ajith's farming practices, enabling him to diversify from beets and chillies to include tomatoes and brinjals. The high quality of his chemical-free produce impressed evaluators, establishing Ajith as a prominent organic farmer known for flavourful crops in the region.

Under the guidance of UNDP and the Agricultural Instructor, Ajith formed a group of ten farmers, fostering shared costs and collective bargaining. The project supported the transportation needs of the Isuru Farmers Market, with them soon having access to a mini lorry, trishaw, and motorbike. Funds later bolstered a society fund, enhancing communal benefits and growth among members.

Ajith quickly recognized new opportunities, cultivating relationships with customers who preferred ordering over the phone. "Each Saturday, I loaded my lorry with fresh produce, selling at the weekly market while any surplus went

to Melsiripura," he explained noting that this method proved to be very lucrative, earning his Rs. 35,000 in weekly sales.

His thriving stall not only boosted income but also enhanced community ties, cementing Ajith's reputation as a dependable and respected local farmer committed to delivering quality produce.

CRIWMP's interventions were invaluable, providing technical advice, market support, and resources to enhance organic farming practices. Workshops and expert consultations from places as far as India equipped Ajith and his group with the knowledge to use water efficiently and diversify their crops.

Given the water scarcity, Ajith and his fellow farmers received guidance on efficient usage. With this knowledge, Ajith expanded his produce, growing around 15 types of vegetables and fruits like radish, knol khol (wild cabbage), ladies' fingers, tomatoes, pomegranates, and papayas. He supplied 15-25 kg weekly. However, despite selling to the Dambulla market, without proper distinction between organic and non-organic produce, Ajith was unable to receive higher prices for his chemical-free crops.

Leading the way

As the group leader, Ajith ensured their produce reached the Saturday Market, starting his journey at 2 a.m. for the one-and-a-half-hour drive to Kurunegala. Encountering wild animals along the isolated roads was common, yet he persisted in his role, navigating challenges to support his fellow farmers and sustain their livelihoods.

"Every Saturday, I arrive at the market by 4:30 a.m. to prepare for the 5 a.m. opening by conducting a product inspection and setting up my stall," Ajith shared. "Despite the challenges, I am glad that it has paid off, and after covering costs like fuel and sundries, I manage to earn a 10,000 rupee profit

each week." This ritual sustains his livelihood and strengthens community bonds among his fellow farmers, fostering a shared purpose and sense of community.

The COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions posed significant challenges, but Ajith's resilience shone through. He adapted quickly, obtaining permits to deliver produce directly to homes and offices, often travelling long distances to ensure his customers received fresh vegetables.

Growth and guidance

In 2023, in the aftermath of the pandemic and growing economic crisis, UNDP's support continued through its Funding Windows, supported by the Government of Luxembourg, revitalizing the Farmers Market with permanent structures, baskets, and racks. Ajith benefited from technical advice from the Provincial Agriculture Department, allowing him to cultivate high-demand crops such as cabbage, carrots, lemon, and a new guava variety. His pioneering efforts included growing upcountry vegetables like carrots locally for the first time, significantly increasing his Saturday market profits from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000.

Reflecting on the support given, Ajith said, *"I used the Society's project-funded revolving fund to secure a 98,000 rupee interest-free loan for seedlings, which is crucial for my farming. This support has been invaluable in managing costs and expanding my crop variety. I repay 1,000 rupees weekly, immediately after Saturday's market, to make sure that I stay on top of my finances while continuing to grow."* This financial support not only expanded Ajith's agricultural pursuits but also ensured a stable repayment process, showing his commitment to sustainable farming and financial responsibility.

A shared vision of family farming

Despite monthly electricity bills of nearly Rs. 35,000 for running water sprinklers, Ajith

remains hopeful for the future. He plans to invest in solar panels to reduce costs and enhance sustainability on his expanded 5.5-acre farm. His elder son has built a house on a separate 3.5-acre plot, while Ajith, his younger son, and daughter-in-law all contribute to the family's farming efforts, ensuring productivity and prosperity for generations to come.

Ajith and his sons travel weekly to the Isuru Market, sharing profits from sales. During the Maha season, he tends to his paddy fields for rice. In the Yala season, Ajith focuses on growing fruits and vegetables, ensuring year-round sustainability. His coconut trees yield 900-1000 nuts bi-monthly, supplementing income when sold locally. Ajith's dedication to diverse agriculture secures livelihood and prosperity for his family in Irudeniya's lush surroundings.

A legacy of labour

"I took a loan of 500,000 rupee from the Regional Development Bank to build a second house and sold the first one, but I still have 110,000 rupees left to repay. As I work towards clearing this debt, I plan to build two rooms in the shack by the cultivation plot for my wife and me, and give the new house to my younger son," Ajith explained, his vision for the future clear and resolute.

After three decades of farming, Ajith acknowledges he hasn't saved much. Approaching 60, he plans to reduce farming efforts, sustaining himself with income from coconut and produce sales. This transition promises a more relaxed lifestyle while keeping him rooted in the land that's shaped his livelihood.

Ajith's life story reflects relentless dedication, from early challenges to organic farming success. His journey, marked by resilience and a deep connection to the land, inspires rural Sri Lanka. As he envisions a sustainable future, Ajith dreams of continuing his family's farming legacy in Irudeniya's verdant landscapes.

Mastering Mushrooms of Success

Chandrika's Path to Harnessing Nature's Bounty



Cultivating a vision

Born and raised in Kudawewa, Madawachchiya, Chandrika, now 36 years old, relocated to her current home after her marriage 17 years ago. Her husband's work involves managing a school drop service and taking on local hires in Medawachchiya, which constitutes their primary income, sufficient to cover their household expenses. Chandrika supported their diet by growing vegetables such as green chillies and makaral (long beans) in her backyard. Before she began cultivating mushrooms, she did not have an independent income.

In 2021, Chandrika's journey into mushroom cultivation began unexpectedly. *"It all started when my husband saw a YouTube video and became interested in growing mushrooms. We wanted to learn more, so we turned to Facebook and found a grower in Mawanella. He helped us get the raw materials and gave us some great advice. That's how we got started with mushroom cultivation as a business,"* said Chandrika. Seeing

a good opportunity in this new venture, they eagerly embraced the challenge, laying the foundation for what they hoped would become a success.

Armed with a video tutorial provided by their newfound mentor, they embarked on their entrepreneurial path with just 500 pots. Sourcing materials from Mawanella and a supportive neighbour, they diligently nurtured their crop, mixing timber dust, rice dust, soy flour, gypsum, magnesium sulfate, and hunu (quicklime-calcium oxide) to create the ideal growing environment. The pots required a minimum of three months to mature before daily harvesting could commence. They constructed a small hut to house their pots, celebrating their first successful harvest and quickly scaling up to 800 pots for subsequent cycles, which they sold at local village markets.

Investing in expansion

As the mushrooms bloomed daily, the couple harvested and sold them continuously for about three months until production started to decline. The lifespan of the pots was approximately five months, necessitating regular replacement. They gradually increased the number of pots, eventually housing extra pots inside their home and constructing a second hut capable of holding 2,500 pots. Their total number of pots soon reached 4,000, with Chandrika's income steadily increasing.

They consistently reinvested their earnings into acquiring more pots. Although both Chandrika and her husband were equally involved in the business, the income was considered hers. They shared the workload, with her husband handling the labour-intensive task of mixing raw materials into a pulp with his feet. After adding water and remixing, the pulp was manually placed into polythene bags. This method allowed them to produce 300 bags a day.

By 2022, about a year and a half after starting their venture, they decided to expand further by advertising their mushroom pots on Facebook. Priced at Rs. 65 each, the pots received positive responses from Kurunegala and surrounding areas. Curious individuals reached out, eager to learn about mushroom cultivation. Chandrika and her husband welcomed them to their setup, offering hands-on training on how to grow mushrooms using the pots. *"People saw our Facebook ad and wanted to know how to grow mushrooms,"* Chandrika explained. *"We invited them over to see the process and gave them training on how to use the pots."* Inspired by what they saw, many visitors bought the pots and set off to start their own mushroom cultivation journeys.

During this period, Chandrika stood as the sole pioneer of mushroom cultivation in her village. As their business grew, they managed to procure certain raw materials locally - the timber dust, for

example, was sourced from a local timber mill. However, materials unavailable locally were still sourced from Mawanella. They streamlined their procurement process by sending product lists to suppliers, who packaged and dispatched items by train or bus upon receiving payment. Utilizing Facebook, they also secured other essential materials at wholesale rates. Over the past two and a half years, they have cultivated a reliable network of suppliers to sustain their operations.

Facing challenges head-on

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic turmoil in Sri Lanka, vulnerable communities faced significant hardships. In response, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Sri Lanka, supported by the Government of Luxembourg through its Funding Windows kickstarted a project in 2023 to address these challenges. This initiative aimed to break the cycle of poverty by empowering low-income communities to achieve economic self-sufficiency through the ownership and management of the entire farm-to-market cycle of activities.

In March 2023, a Provincial Agri Department official visited Chandrika's premises and recognized her potential. The mushroom growers in Madawachchiya then formed a society comprising about 12 women. Among them, only Chandrika and another woman named Sitara were producing mushroom pots, with Sitara's operation being much smaller and independent compared to Chandrika's.

From hands to bags

In September 2023, the Provincial Agri Department selected Chandrika as a candidate for support from the Funding Windows project. During a meeting at the AG's office, an awareness-raising session conducted by Janathakshan - the local Community Service Organisation connected with the project - highlighted the society's needs, including

bagging machines and huts to store the pots. Chandrika was selected to receive a pot bagging machine, which she received in February 2024.

"This machine revolutionized my business," Chandrika noted gratefully. *"Before, my husband and I could only make 300 pots in 10 hours. Now, with the machine, I can produce 500-600 pots in just 8 hours. It saves so much time and energy, giving me more time to spend with my children and take care of household tasks."* Additionally, her husband, who used to get skin rashes from trampling the raw materials, no longer needed to be involved. Chandrika hired a daily wage worker to assist her, enabling her husband to pursue other work.

Growing a path to success

The income from their mushroom business increased significantly. They sold 1,500 pots every three months at Rs. 65 each, with plans to raise the price to Rs. 70 soon. Chandrika also began making mushroom packets from the harvested flowers, producing about 3,000 packets every three months. Each 180-gram packet sold at Rs. 110 wholesale, with some sold at the Haritha Suwe Farmers Market for Rs. 140.

Chandrika plans to expand her business further. She is working on constructing a new pot house to accommodate 400 pots and aims to sell mushroom packets at the Vanni Green Market and local shops in Rambawe and other nearby towns. Her ambition is to sell more commercially while other women in the society primarily sell locally.

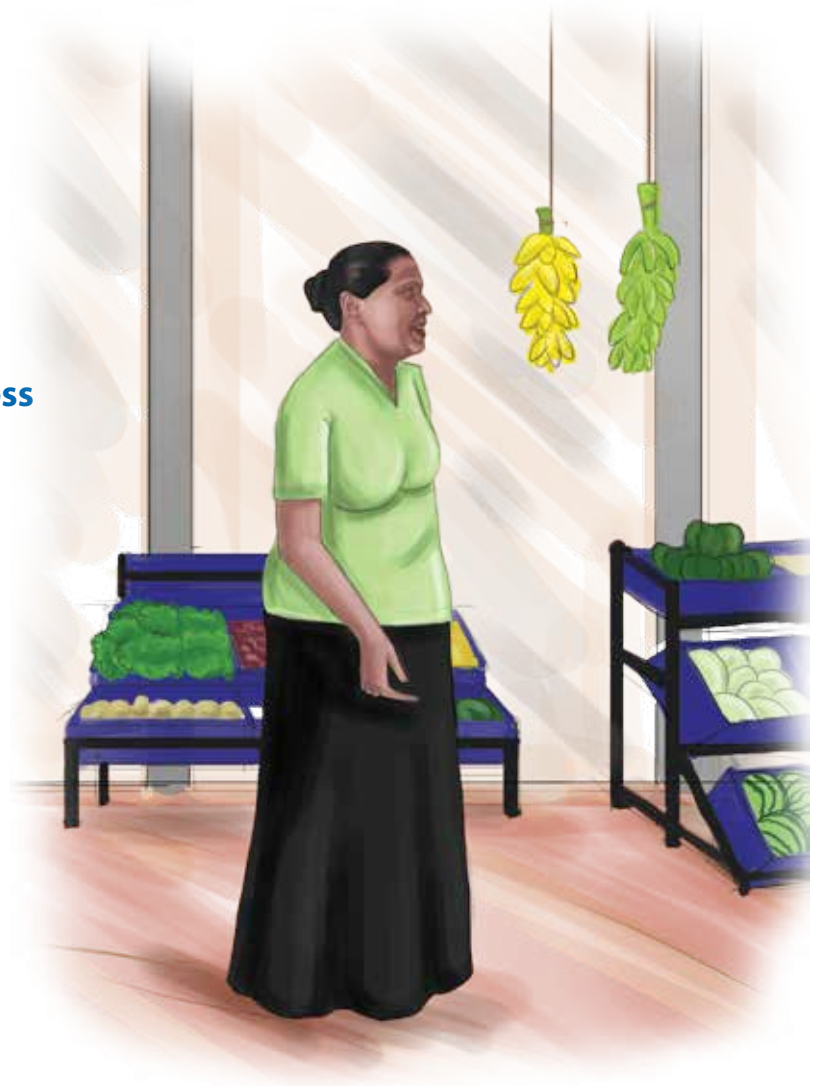
"I'm also looking to purchase a boiler that will significantly enhance our production process. It can boil 600 pots in just 2.5 hours, compared to our current method, which can only manage 300 pots a day using five barrels," Chandrika added. The boiler will not only double the number of pots boiled daily but also reduce contamination and wastage. The cost of the boiler is Rs. 300,000, and

she is determined to invest in it to streamline her operations.

Chandrika's journey from a homemaker to a successful mushroom cultivator is a testament to her resilience and determination. With support from her husband, fellow mushroom growers, the Funding Windows project, and the Provincial Agri Department, she transformed a simple idea into a thriving business. Her story is an inspiration to many women in her community, showcasing the power of innovation, hard work, and support in achieving success.

A Challenge Worth Embracing

Chintani's Struggle to Success



Early days of settlement

Having lived in Kebbetigollawe since her birth, Chintani - now 40 years old, was content to have found her husband from the same locality. However, married life found them residing in his family's ancestral home while he tirelessly worked as a sales representative for a leasing company. They dreamt of a place to call their own, yearning for stability. Their fortunes shifted when news of government-allocated land in Vanni reached them. With hopeful hearts, they applied and were granted half an acre of land in 2014 for building a house and home garden. They joined a diverse community of settlers, among Tamil and Sinhala families, finding promise and opportunity in their new start.

In their early days as settlers in Vanni, Chintani and her husband faced significant challenges. By 2016, after years of perseverance, they received vital government assistance in the form of raw materials and financial aid, enabling them to

construct a modest home with two rooms, a kitchen, and a sitting area. *"We were allocated half an acre for paddy cultivation, but it was thick with forest initially,"* Chintani shared, recalling their early days in Vanni. *"The division among settlers took much longer than expected."* With a hint of concern, she continued, *"Despite owning our home on paper, the unclear land title remained a constant worry, overshadowing our efforts to build a stable life here."*

Ploughing through life

Life in Vanni brought challenges, including severe droughts that strained their water supply despite building a well in 2020, which often dried up during dry spells, posing ongoing water security issues. Wild animals, especially marauding monkeys, threatened their home garden's produce. Chintani's husband sustained

their livelihood with his job at a leasing company. Their third child's birth brought joy amidst the toil, while Chintani supported her husband in this unfamiliar terrain, navigating without a secure income of her own.

Amidst COVID-19 and economic uncertainties in 2022, Chintani's husband faced health setbacks while working in Colombo. Working tirelessly away from the family, he juggled local jobs and vehicle rentals until debilitating headaches and a sudden heart attack altered their course. With surgery pending and his ability to work diminished, their future seemed uncertain. Before his illness, they had cleared their lorry's lease, a beacon of past financial success. Remembering prospects in Vavuniya, he proposed a transformative idea: using their lorry to launch a food business. With Chintani's culinary skills, they aimed to overcome adversity.

Eager to expand their horizons, 2023 saw them embarking on a new venture in Vavuniya, where they set up shop selling homemade delicacies from their beloved lorry. Rising at midnight, they prepared a feast of traditional food including string hoppers, thosai, vadai, lavariya, well before the world stirred, and began sales at 4 a.m. Despite the predawn hours and the weight of their challenges, their resilience shone through, yielding daily earnings ranging from Rs. 5,000 to 6,000, providing a lifeline during their most trying times.

Yet, their journey was fraught with hardship: *"We faced disputes over parking, lacked an Urban Council permit, and were pressured by the Public Health Inspectors and the Urban Development Authority to switch from our lorry to a stall,"* Chintani recounted, reflecting on their challenges amidst ethnic tensions. *"We operated for only half-day due to these setbacks and daily diesel cost around 1,000 rupees, so profitability was a constant struggle,"* she added. Despite this, they persevered for a year, supplementing income with Chintani's kavili (traditional sweetmeats) supplied to village shops, yielding modest returns of Rs. 300-400 daily.

New beginnings

The couple connected with the Small Enterprises Development Division and sought help with their UDA challenges. With their assistance, they secured a spot at Vanni Green Market, which was established with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Sri Lanka through the Japan Supplementary Budget-funded project during Sri Lanka's economic crisis. Here, Chintani set up her stall serving kole kenda and kurakkan kenda (traditional herbal juices) in the mornings. With the backing of UNDP's Funding Windows, supported by the Government of Luxembourg, she was able to expand to include traditional food like string hoppers, vadai, lavariya, and kiri bath. Responding to demand, they added thosai, idli, and rice to their breakfast menu, establishing a bustling presence in the market since its inception.

To accommodate their schedule, they rented two rooms in a building opposite the market, where they stay during the week while their children attend school nearby. They return to their village on weekends, preparing anew for the bustling market days starting early Monday morning. Chintani manages the food preparation, beginning as early as 1 a.m., with her husband assisting in the meticulous preparation of their expanding menu - nearing 10 varieties now - crafted partly at home and directly at their stall.

Community-building

Chintani's daily routine thrives on cooperation and camaraderie at the bustling Vanni Green Market. *"I've learned to adapt to the demands,"* she shared. *"I now get most vegetables and raw materials from fellow vendors, while outsourcing items like pittu, string hoppers, thosai, vadai, and idli to manage my work."* Despite this, she takes pride in preparing all curries herself - canned fish, dried fish, soya, and a variety of vegetable curries that enhance her offerings. Their hard work pays off with daily earnings averaging Rs.

15,000 to 18,000, peaking on busy market days like Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday. By midday, the stall evolves, offering hot rotis and lunch packs at Rs. 200, catering to diverse tastes and cementing their place as a cornerstone of the market community.

Their meticulous cost management keeps daily expenses at Rs. 8,000, securing a minimum daily profit of Rs. 6,000. This stability underscores lessons from their Field Officer, who guided them in cost estimation and meticulous record-keeping.

Recognizing the need for efficient hygiene practices, Chintani and her husband recently installed a dedicated sink in their stall, enhancing their ability to maintain cleanliness and streamline food preparation. This thoughtful addition has fostered a sense of unity among the vendors showing their community spirit.

Sustaining stability

In their journey at the Vanni Green Market, Chintani and her husband have built a thriving livelihood marked by resilience and resourcefulness. Starting with just Rs. 3,000, Chintani wisely invested in utensils and essentials for their stall—plastic bowls, plates, glasses, and more. Support from their parents, who provided rice from their fields, helped overcome initial challenges, laying the foundation for their successful venture.

“In those early days, we budgeted every rupee wisely,” she reflected, “buying essentials daily as we built our reputation through hard work and dedication. Our loyal customers became our backbone, helping us grow and attract orders from government offices and other organizations too. Now, our earnings support our children easily meeting their needs”. Fulfilling these requests boosted their confidence, turning their market stall into a symbol of hope and success.

Preparing for the future

Despite ongoing challenges, including costly repairs for their essential lorry, Chintani and her husband persevered, reinvesting market earnings to restore it gradually. Chintani’s financial foresight saw her opening a daily savings account, setting aside Rs. 2,000—a symbol of their newfound stability. Their market stall, more than a business, became a transformative lifeline. By avoiding a costly monthly rental that could exceed Rs. 20,000, they sustained and expanded their business. Amidst vendor solidarity, they fostered a supportive environment where mutual success thrived, showcasing resilience and forward-thinking in their approach.

In this inspiring tale of resilience, Chintani and her husband have not only found a livelihood but have also cultivated a community around their stall. Through determination, adaptability, and unwavering perseverance, they’ve turned adversity into opportunity, demonstrating that with courage and collaboration, dreams can indeed take root and flourish against all odds.

