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Revival of Traditional Farming to Improve Quality of Life

Project Title : Reviving Traditional Knowledge and Practices for Sustainable Livelihoods
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Partner Organization : Biodiversity Research Information and Training Centre
Project Contact : Mr. A.M.S. Attanayake
Address : No.4, Jala Tankiya Rd., Hidagoda, Badulla, Sri Lanka.
Contact No : +94 55 2223667 / +94 77 9435495
Email : attanayake_brit@yahoo.com



Background

The villagers of Sirimalgoda, Madurukolatenna and Illuktenne in Badulla district in the central highlands, with approximately 600 households, had little incentive to cultivate their sloping lands. The men as skilled masons and carpenters or unskilled labourers migrated to the cities to earn a livelihood while the women cultivated small plots of paddy on temple lands. A tradition practiced from ancient times, they donated a portion of the harvest to the temple as payment for the use of the land. Sirimalgoda is a village of new settlers of 125 families where small plots of land have been allotted to them for housing. They have limited space to cultivate and limited or no access to paddy lands. The other two villages have home plots of about ¼ ha in extent in which pepper was grown. They had little confidence in growing any other crops in the hilly lands and relied on buying vegetables and other needs from the nearby town.

Initiative

Biodiversity Research, Information and Training Centre (BRIT), proposed to bring back the traditional farming practices of the area and to preserve the traditional knowledge which was fast disappearing from the villages. Around 300 beneficiaries in the three villages were involved in the activities of the project. In an effort to encourage self sufficiency they selected 50 farmers and trained them to restore their lands using agro-forestry methods, growing multiple crops to bring back the former diversity of the land. One of the main efforts was to bring together the 'knowledge holders' of traditional farming, rituals, customs and food preparation to give due recognition and empower them. Providing incentives for in situ seed conservation, introduction of sustainable farming methods, establishing a savings and credit scheme, training in financial management and marketing of organic produce were also designed.



Implementation

The selected farmer groups in the three villages were trained in practices of soil conservation methods such as SALT fencing, stone hedges and lock and spill drains and multi cropping in home gardens, use of organic fertilizer, natural pesticides and traditional crop protection methods. 50 farmers participated in workshops designed to develop knowledge, skills and attitudinal change. Raising awareness of school children was an important activity. 10 home gardens were developed as demonstrations while others including those with minimum land, developed their home gardens with organically grown vegetables and herbs. Cattle raising, Bee keeping, food preservation and seed conservation were promoted. Regular advice and assistance was made available on agricultural and soil conservation techniques.



50 seed varieties were distributed to the selected farming families who were trained to conserve the seeds from their harvest for the next season in an effort to be self sufficient on seeds. They kept the seeds in clay pots and the grains in wooden boxes stored above the hearth. 10 model seed conservation kitchens and a medicinal garden was established in the temple premises of one village, were established. Marketing of products was promoted through a weekly mobile collection unit. With the participation of mainly women, a savings and credit scheme was initiated.

Traditional 'knowledge holders' in the three villages were formed into a society to recognize their knowledge in farming practices, crop protection methods, the understanding of animal behavior and through practicing rituals and religious rites, astronomy and traditional food preparations. A field excursion to share experiences with over 200 farmers in other districts was undertaken. Workshops to encourage food security, food fairs and seed exhibitions were organized. Display boards, a news paper, almanac for agricultural activities and a documentary video of activities were completed.

BRIT

“Our ancients possessed vast knowledge and skills in many fields; even today the glory of those past centuries is evident. But with the colonization of the country most of that knowledge mainly those maintained through the oral tradition was lost. Later generations were subjected to forces like the 'Green Revolution' and 'Open Economy' which further devalued our knowledge systems especially in areas like farming. Today what is left is a fraction of that knowledge. Our attempt is to launch an investigative attempt to conserve the knowledge that is left even though it may be marginal and fractured so that the next generations can make use of it. Our wish is that this knowledge will help the country in its development efforts and re-build its earlier image of a prosperous, wise and harmonious society”.

Sustainability

Ensuring food security, protecting biodiversity in home gardens and the wild crop varieties and changing livelihoods to being more eco-friendly has far reaching effects. Experiential learning i.e. finding the cost benefits, health and other advantages of these practices ensure continued practice. Traditional varieties of paddy grown successfully, organic farming and traditional pest control methods have created an interest in others to try these practices. Seed conservation at household level where more varieties are found, cultivated and preserved is unique example of sustainability.



S. Attanayaka

Results

64 knowledge holders on farming, medicine, astronomy, food preparation who were isolated and ineffective were brought together to value, share and popularize their knowledge.

96 beneficiaries were trained by 6 knowledge holders on traditional food preparation methods. They have participated in district events and popularized traditional recipes.

50 families are conserving their own vegetable seeds and 12 traditional seed paddy varieties successfully, using traditional methods of storage such as urns, clay pots, wooden boxes stored above the fireplace or preserved with herbal leaves or oils. They have been successful in selling seeds externally and earning an income.

Through the development of home gardens, the beneficiaries have been able to produce vegetables, fruits, yams, spices, leafy vegetables, grains and herbs for home consumption and sale. This has resulted in the reduction of household expenses and increased their income from LKR 2000 to 2500 per month.

Promotion of organic farming and conserving over 150 plant varieties and 12 traditional paddy varieties through this participatory 'in situ conservation' process, the biodiversity in the area has improved. Traditional pest control methods of aiming at 'prevention not elimination' have also ensured faunal biodiversity.

The several soil conservation methods implemented on steep sloping lands including water retention ponds have successfully demonstrated to the villagers that their lands are cultivable, able to produce a good yield as well being aesthetically pleasing.

Cattle raising has provided the much needed fertilizer and milk for consumption and sale.

The farm lands of the villagers are selected as field study sites for the Uva-Wellassa University's agriculture students as well as for the schools in the area.

The weekly mobile door to door collection of produce for sale has provided a welcome additional income at the doorstep and is an incentive to continue the practices. In the past 18 months a collective income of over LKR 600,000 is recorded for the families.

The publishing of a newsletter with on-farm news, monthly village level and collective meetings and producing of a documentary of activities have strengthened confidence and community ties.

Financial security is enhanced as the 3 village credit schemes have an amount exceeding LKR 400,000 at present which has enabled them to obtain loans for businesses and for emergencies.