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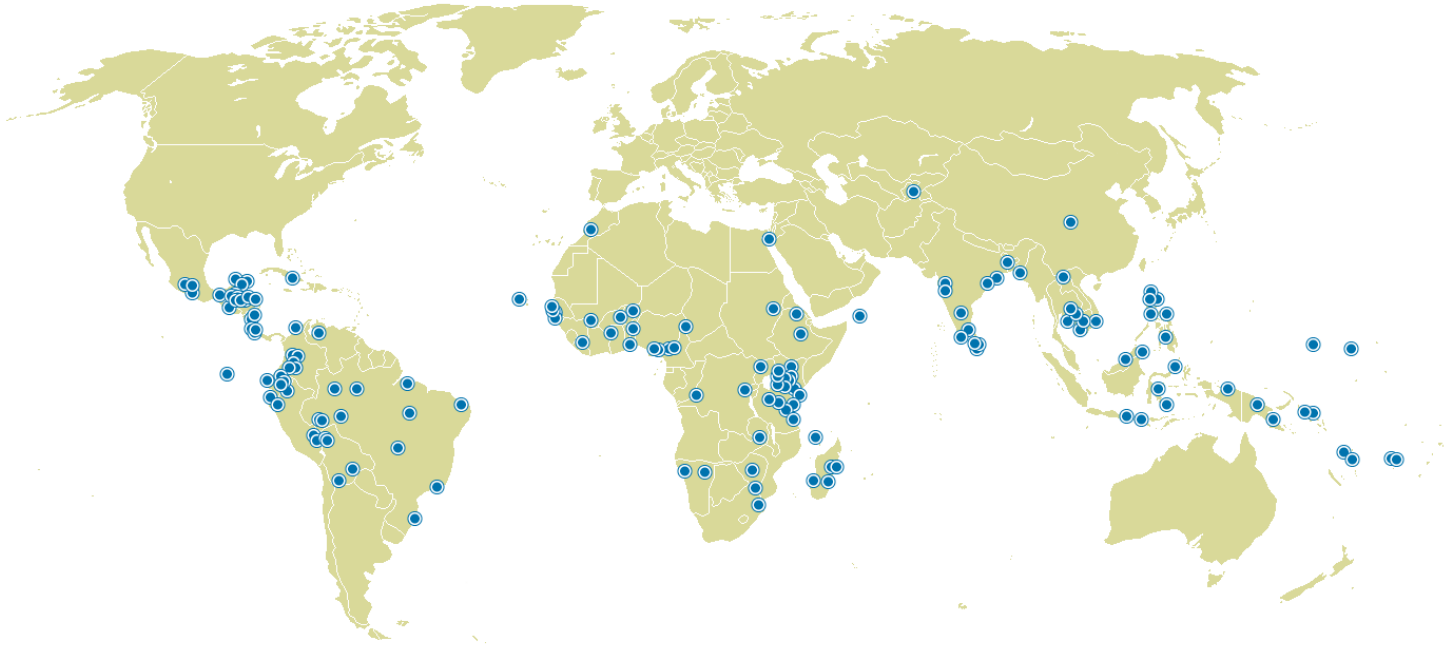
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to '*The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize*', a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.



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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CENTRE
Sri Lanka

PROJECT SUMMARY

Sri Lanka's Community Development Centre (CDC) has worked to improve rural livelihoods through conservation of indigenous tuber varieties using seed banks managed by women-led self-help groups. Local technologies are used for seed production, with training on in-situ conservation of native varieties on individual land parcels. These self-help cooperatives are organized into federations of around five or six groups, each of which maintains a revolving credit fund to stimulate livelihoods diversification.

CDC has provided more than 300 families with an alternative income source and a viable food security solution. Monthly net profits from yam sales are roughly 5,000 Sri Lankan rupees per family, an improvement from 3,000 Sri Lankan rupees before the project began. Many farmers have also expanded into value-added secondary processing, and the production and sale of yam chips, yam sweets, and roti.

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KEY FACTS

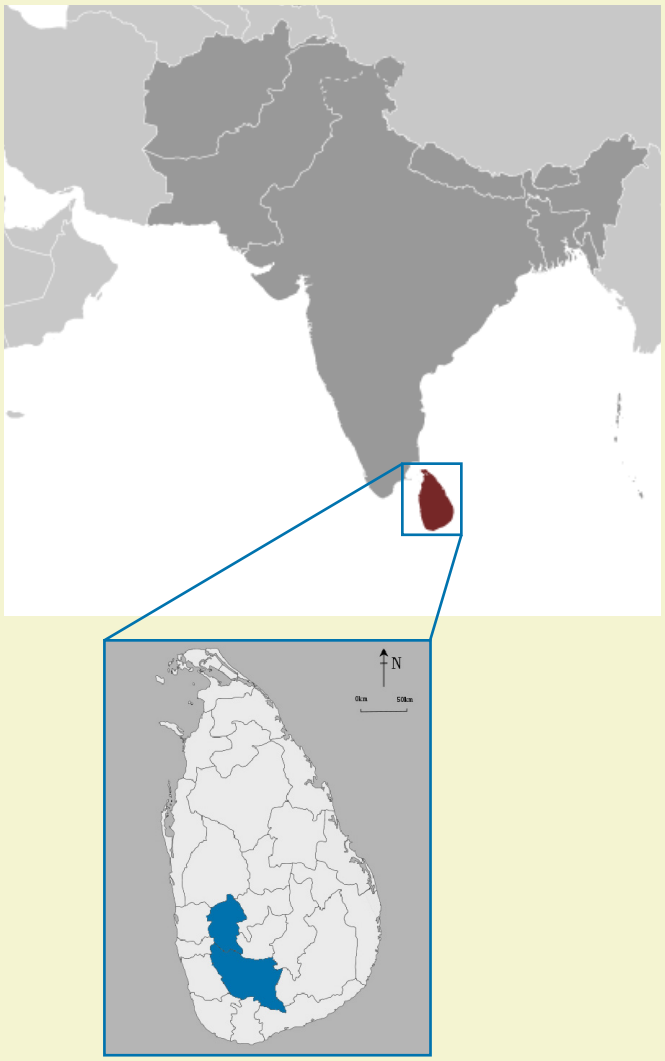
EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2008

FOUNDED: 1994

LOCATION: Sabaragamuwa province

BENEFICIARIES: Direct benefit for over 300 families

BIODIVERSITY: 60 indigenous varieties of roots and tubers



Background and Context

An endogenously evolved community-based organization, CDC maintains a focus on improving and diversifying local livelihoods, with an emphasis on seed banks as a fulcrum of knowledge exchange. The underlying vision of the organization is food security and biodiversity conservation through the reintroduction of traditional knowledge. Indigenous varieties of yam are promoted as a cornerstone crop of household-level organic farms.

Project catalysts

The region in which CDC operates is among the poorest and most economically marginalized in the country. It has also witnessed a drastic decline in biodiversity over recent decades. The initiative was formed in 1994 in response to the interrelated challenges of food insecurity and rural poverty, as well as the steady erosion of genetic crop diversity and traditional knowledge systems. Local architects of the project also observed a steady decline in soil fertility and in crop yields, which was putting a strain on local farmers. The latter were attributed to the modern agricultural preference of using chemical fertilizers, which exhaust soil productivity and pollute watersheds, which in turn affect local access to clean water. The initiative was equally a response to the observed trend in Sri Lanka development spending of focusing on urban problems and channeling funds to urban centres. This left economically marginalized populations in rural areas on the short end of the wealth distribution equation, and the CDC with a rural development assistance vacuum to fill.

Food security and livelihoods through yam farming

Indigenous root and tuber seeds are the basis of CDC activities and programming. Recognition of their wide application and the multiple benefits for food security, income diversification, and genetic diversity is credited to the women who started the program, and who remain the creative engine and energy behind the CDC today. Early in the program's development, one village farmer introduced the idea of focusing on traditional yam farming. The idea was picked up

by a small but far-sighted group of women who then undertook to identify the potential biodiversity benefits of traditional yam farming. What they found were benefits that included soil conservation and nutrient cycling, an avenue to diversify genetic resources, a platform to introduce and popularize organic farming, and a species of crop with exceptional dexterity and adaptive capacity to a variety of landscapes and soil types.

The Sri Lanka Community Development Centre has ushered in a household-level response to address food security challenges. Historically, the main food staples of the region have been rice and bread, both of which are prohibitively expensive for the local population. Yams have provided a nutritious and healthy food alternative, which can be cultivated at a fraction of the cost and which are not subject to the price fluctuations of external markets. The promotion of household yam farming has given the rural population a commercially viable product that has multiple values in local and regional markets, thereby contributing to income generation. The initiative has also been a platform for community empowerment and, more specifically, female empowerment. Women have been at the forefront of reintroducing knowledge that is proving environmentally and economically valuable.

Key Activities and Innovations

The Sri Lanka Community Development Centre organizes rural women into self-help groups, where they are given training in organic yam farming. Local technologies and knowledge are used as the basis of seed production and the development of seed banks. Training focuses on in-situ conservation, where individual farmers maintain seed banks on their own parcels of land. Peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and exchange is, however, an essential component of the project. CDC provides platforms for farmers to exchange seeds, and to exchange knowledge on which tuber and yam seeds are successful under which conditions. As such, CDC provides a successful model of community-based research and adaptation.

The self-help groups or 'village cooperatives' usually are comprised of between five and fifteen members. These groups are organized into federations of between five and six groups. CDC connects these federations through a knowledge sharing network, which has branches both locally and nationally. In addition to the self-help groups, the knowledge-sharing network includes cooperatives in other sectors, government ministries, and schools to amplify and disseminate lessons learned.

Training, seed banks and women's leadership

Training is usually provided at the federation level and is, wherever possible, tailored to the needs and capabilities of individual groups of farmers. CDC has constructed a training centre, which is the functional nucleus of the training and knowledge sharing activities. The organization also provides training at the household level, giving on-site demonstrations and offering new farmers a hands-on experience. Training modules attempt to balance theory and practice, to give both an environmental bearing for the work as well as practical guidance on the cultivation, preparation and marketing of yam-based products. Guidelines are provided to new farmers that include a basic introduction to food security, the foundation of effective soil conservation, identifying different varieties of yam and their different values, directions on how to make compost, and guidance on how to mobilize and establish a small cooperative.

CDC has created space for women farmers to share and develop their knowledge of tuber and yam cultivation and seed collection. From start to finish, CDC training and the process of reclaiming traditional knowledge has been done through active community participation and consultation. Local farmers have been engaged in identifying traditional yam varieties, giving guidance on in situ conservation, and providing peer-to-peer training for local women on producing yam-based products for sale in markets.

Governance and organizational structure

CDC is governed by a seven-member Board of Directors, five of whom are directly involved and active in village cooperatives. The Board of Directors, which meets on a monthly basis and ultimately holds responsibility for financial decisions, consists of a chairperson, secretary, treasurer and four other members. Annual general meetings are held to discuss the strategic direction of the CDC and to select new board members on a three year rotational basis. The Board of Directors oversees four different committees: youth and child development; environmental development; production and marketing; and women, gender and development.

"Respect traditional knowledge and protect traditional seed varieties – it is the basis of food security."

Ms.Damayanthi Godamulla, Executive Director

Impacts

BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

There have been a range of important biodiversity impacts and benefits from the work of the Sri Lanka Community Development Centre. Since it began, the organization has identified over sixty indigenous varieties of roots and tubers, which have subsequently been cultivated over 2,000 acres of land. Yam cultivation does not require the clearing or conversion of land, and offers an instructive model of ecoagriculture and integrated land management. Seed banks have contributed to genetic diversity and allowed for the reintroduction of traditional crops that are ecologically adapted to the region, but which had gradually been disappearing. Farmer networks have been critical in this regard, as they have provided a platform for the local mapping and recording of plant varieties across the region. As of now, the process of seed monitoring and registration is entirely community-based. (CDC has expressed some concern about a recent bill passed in Sri Lankan parliament that makes mandatory the registration of seed banks with the government's agricultural authority, a potentially limiting development that would remove an element of community ownership and control).

Before the project began, the local water supply was unreliable and often polluted. Chemical fertilizers were overused by many farmers, particularly in rubber plantations, a regional cash crop. This resulted in chemical run-off, damaging the delicate ecological balance in the region and contaminating watersheds. As a result of the initiative, more small-hold farmers (over 200) have converted to organic farming and handle pests through organic fertilizers and composting. Individual farmers have reported increased numbers of endemic birds, greater diversity in flowers and herbal plants, and the revitalization of butterfly, squirrel, and parrot populations.

The project has also been a vehicle for environmental education and awareness-raising on the centrality of biodiversity and genetic diversity to local wellbeing, health, food security and livelihoods. Environmental education activities have included publishing books on the environmental benefits of traditional yams, participation in national exhibitions on ecological farming, organizing 'exchange visits' between farmers, and partnering with local universities to conduct biodiversity research. Emphasis has been placed on instilling a conservation ethic amongst children and youth by providing trainings and demonstrations at local schools.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

Through self-help groups, CDC has provided over 300 families with an alternative income source and a viable food security solution. Monthly net profits from yam sales are roughly 5,000 Sri Lankan rupees per family, an improvement from 3,000 Sri Lankan rupees before the project began. Many farmers have also expanded into value-added secondary processing, and the production and sale of yam chips, yam sweets, and roti. The project has resulted in a host of secondary benefits, including investments in education and school fees, noted improvements in the quality and availability of water, improved food security, reduced rates of malnutrition, and the early foundation of a self-sufficient economy that is less dependent on external markets.

Each cooperative and federation maintains a 'revolving credit fund'. These savings and credit systems are governed by a three-person committee – secretary, treasurer and chairperson. Cooperative members may apply to village-level credit funds for small loans and to the federation-level credit funds for larger loans. Interest on the loans is saved and annually distributed amongst federation members. Village-level loans are most frequently provided for youth and child development, school fees, food security projects, and general social welfare needs.

Several indigenous yam varieties are known to hold commercially valuable medicinal properties. Research is currently underway with local partners on the commercial potential of such yam-based medicine products.

POLICY IMPACTS

CDC has received a significant amount of attention from the government for its holistic projects, and has been able to leverage this attention to influence policy. The group is currently advocating for a national policy on the conservation of indigenous tuber crops and yams, with particular emphasis on the conservation of biodiversity. CDC has also reached an agreement with the government to train over 500 federal agricultural extension officers in organic farming techniques and practices.

A partnership has been forged with the Food Technology Research Unit, a state-level institution in Gannoruwa, to facilitate seed and knowledge exchange. This group has also been enlisted to maintain a gene bank for CDC crops, to supervise CDC projects, and to mediate negotiations with the local government on land acquisition.

CDC has been a mouthpiece for making the argument at various levels of government (state, district and national) that community-based groups can manage land and resources sustainably, that government policies need to be responsive to local needs, and that the decentralization of decision-making is a viable option with multiple environmental benefits.

"We are mobilizing people to combat climate change through rainwater harvesting, yam production, and agricultural adaptation. We believe in traditional knowledge, understanding and respecting accumulated experience, and reflecting on what this can teach us about how to address challenges like climate change."

Ms.Damayanthi Godamulla, Executive Director

Sustainability and Replication

SUSTAINABILITY

The two key components that make CDC institutionally sustainable are community participation (local ownership over decision-making processes) and a multi-stakeholder partnership that includes government, universities, farmer networks, and local communities. Participatory processes that actively engage all segments of the local population were cited by CDC as being essential for long-term success.

Monitoring and evaluation is done through monthly and yearly reports, publications and books, a small cooperative weekly publication, a monthly federation newsletter, and a local development forum (chaired by a member of the government). Peer-to-peer knowledge networks ensure sustainability by connecting network members in an ongoing process of information dissemination and lessons learned uptake.

The CDC training centre – in addition to serving as a platform for capacity building and skills training – charges a fee for courses, which contributes to the organization's financial sustainability. The training centre is also a source of cultural sustainability, as trainings are based on indigenous knowledge systems.

"Water resources are disappearing. There are floods in some areas and droughts in others. In some villages, food varieties are disappearing. We must make decisions that consider future generations."

Ms.Damayanthi Godamulla, Executive Director

REPLICATION

The initiative has overseen significant growth in the number of farmers applying organic farming techniques. The project began with 200 individuals in 11 grama niladhari divisions and has since expanded to include 300 families in 15 grama niladhari divisions.

Through network meetings, learning exchanges, seed exchanges, public exhibitions, and training programs, the CDC has shared its model with more than 20 non-governmental organizations and more than 2,000 individual farmers. Its success with replication has been bolstered by support from state institutes and various levels of government who have demonstrated a commitment to transferring the project model to other regions of the country.

PARTNERS

CDC is based on a collaborative partnership model. The group remains interested in expanding its partnership to strengthen marketing and scientific data on traditional yam varieties.

- UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme (funding)
- The Sri Lanka Nature Forum (knowledge exchange)
- The Network of Organic Farmers (knowledge exchange)
- The Friends of Lanka (monitoring and evaluation)
- The Green Movement of Sri Lanka (material information)
- The Food Technology Research Unit in Gannoruwa (networking)
- Community-based organizations (practical work with farmers)

FURTHER REFERENCE

- Community Development Centre Photo Story (Vimeo) https://vimeo.com/15990847
- Article on CDC's participation at the Tenth Conference of the Parties (COP 10) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Nagoya, Japan, October 2010. http://window2nature.net/2010/10/19/back-to-roots-quest-for-our-local-ala-bathala/

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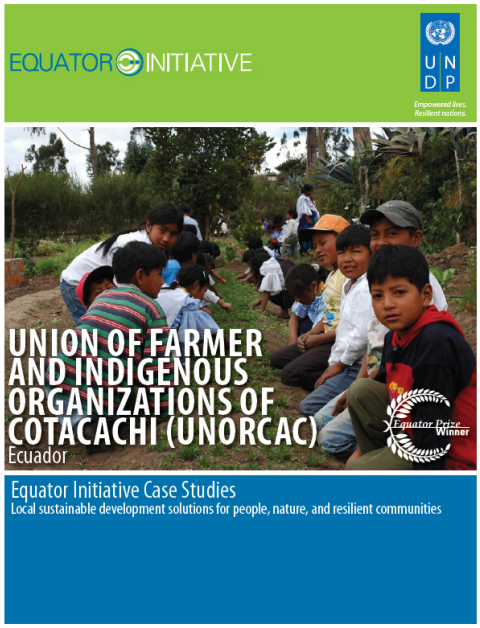

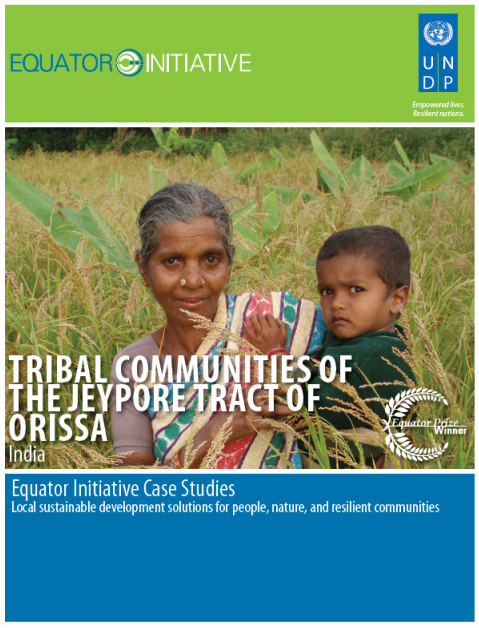

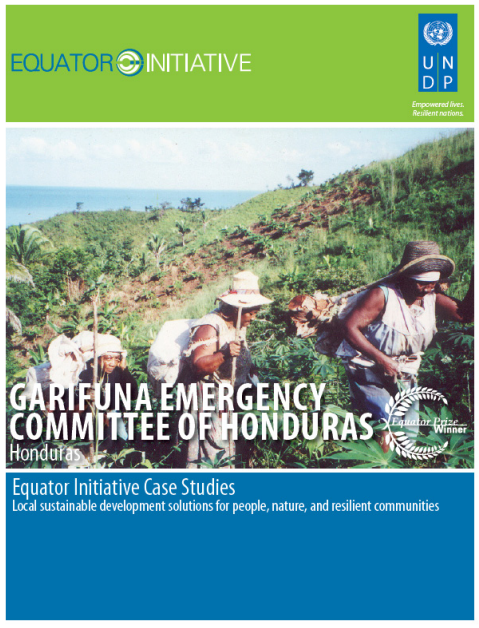

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