MORE THAN JUST A GRANTMAKER

25 years of partnering for justice and peace

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We cannot glorify death whether in the battlefield or otherwise. We, on the other hand, must celebrate life, and are fiercely committed to protecting and securing the sanctity of life, which is the most fundamental value without which all other rights and freedoms become meaningless.

Dr Neelan Tiruchelvam

Emergency Debate in the Parliament of Sri Lanka (1999)

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Published by the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust
31 January 2025

25 stories of change:

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The Women's Fellowship Program, an apt example of NTT's vision:

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Lessons learnt on a journey towards equitable change:

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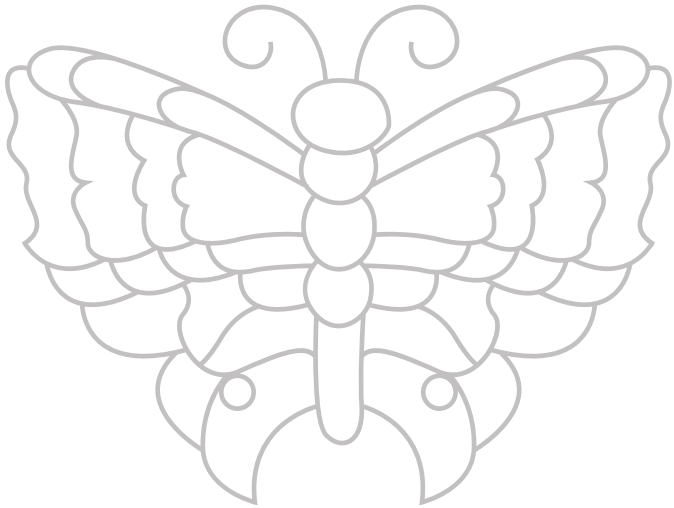

Dedication

We fondly and with gratitude remember Sithie Subahniya Tiruchelvam (1945 - 2014), whose vision laid the foundation for the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust.

This milestone marking 25 years of the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust is dedicated to the communities we serve.

Acknowledgements

The Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust (NTT) is grateful to all our partners–current and former–and community members, who gave us their time generously to be interviewed for this book.

The Trust expresses its deep appreciation to the team that helped produce this book. Miriam Alphonsus and Pamodi Waravita, journalists and writers, for travelling across the country visiting our partners and community members, interviewing them and writing the 25 stories of change. Kumanan Kanapathippillai, journalist, photographer and human rights defender, for his evocative photographs that capture the essence of the significant changes our partners and communities have experienced. This book would not have been published if not for the insightful, meticulous and detail-oriented editing of Namini Wijedasa, journalist and writer. For this, we owe her a debt of gratitude.

Thanks are due to Yaseen Djor for the exquisite layout, cover page and for always responding swiftly to our design requests. The Trust acknowledges the contribution of Renu Warnasuriya whose artwork for the Trust's 2020 publication "Remembering Neelan", based on Professor Chandragupta Thenuwara's concept for the road painting "The Sanctity of Life" in honour of the late Dr Neelan Tiruchelvam in 2000, continues to be used in NTT's publications.

Alan Dairus of Softwave Printing and Tharanga Madushanka Perera of Nethmi Tours deserve special thanks for their unwavering logistical support to the Trust.

Responsibility for any errors or omissions lies solely with the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust.

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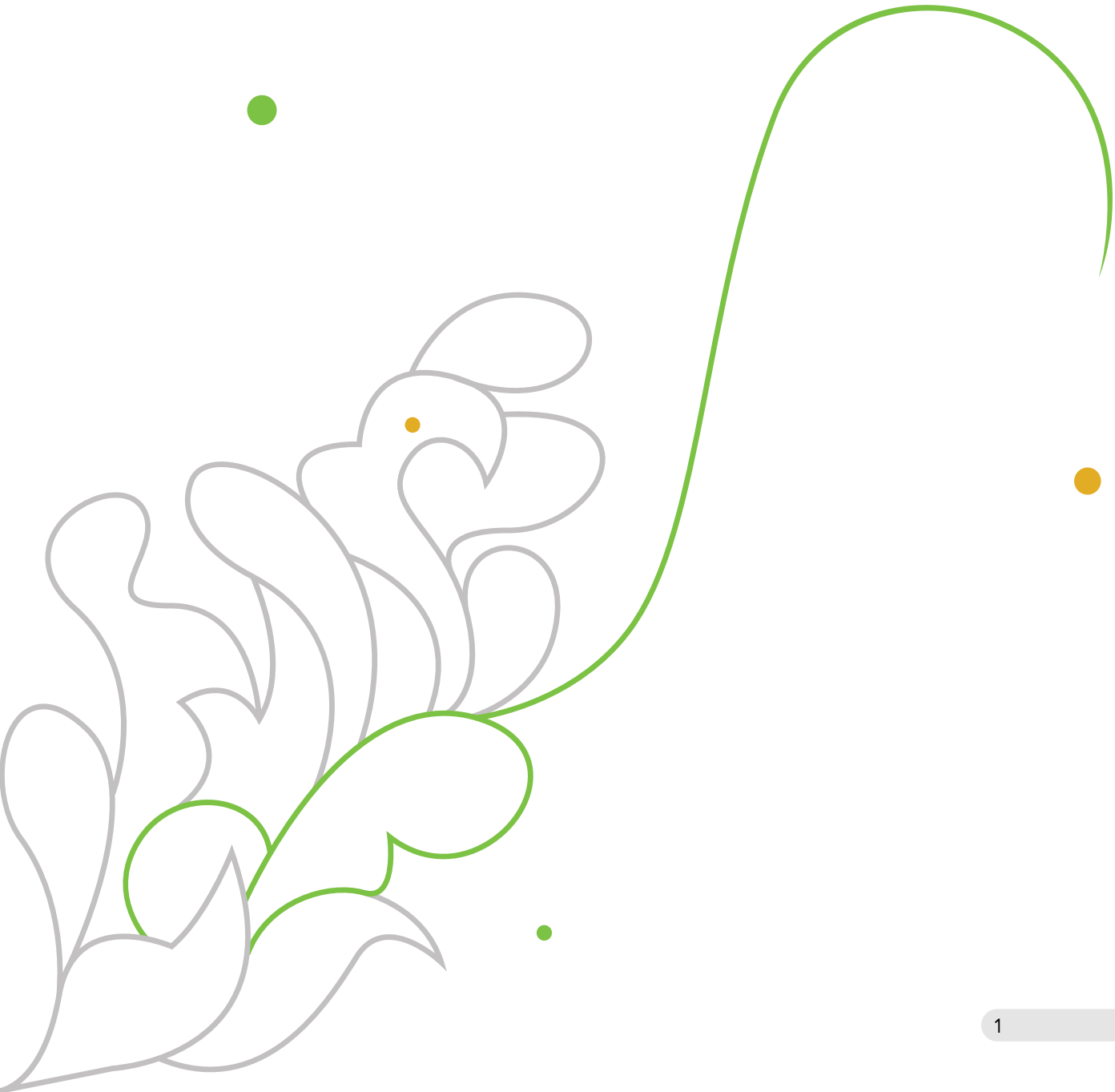

INTRODUCTION

A journey, a milestone and a lesson

In November 2024, DEVEX–the global development community's leading media platform–named the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust (NTT) as one of their 19 "local organisations to watch in the world". Having been in existence for so long, receiving such recognition so close to our 25th anniversary might not be deemed a milestone. Yet this acknowledgment signifies the Trust coming into its own, domestically and internationally.

The Trust occupies a unique position in Sri Lanka and in the global grantmaking sphere, as it is a local organisation that supports the furtherance of democracy and the achievement of social justice. Being different comes with its own challenges, particularly when opting to formulate rules that align with one's context rather than with hegemonic systems and processes, thereby disrupting–sometimes purposefully, sometimes unwittingly–dominant power structures and dynamics.

The Trust's road to a quarter-century has been bumpy. We traversed instability and insecurity, national, international and institutional. In late 2013, a lack of financial resources compelled the Trust to consider closing operations and disbursing its endowment fund as smaller grants to community-based organisations. This idea stemmed from the belief that institutions should exist only as long as they fulfill their purpose. The period following our decision to continue operations for another year–during which we would engage in concerted fundraising and close only if unsuccessful–was the most difficult in the Trust's short history. Staff had to cut costs and devise creative ways of being impactful with limited resources.

Amidst this turbulence and insecurity, there were those, such as Vanita Mukherjee, Srinivasan Iyer and Jon Edwards, who believed in the Trust's potential to do things differently and be "more than just a grantmaker". Their faith drove them to advocate for the Trust within their institutions and to provide financial support, enabling us to build what we have today.

Doing things differently often meant not adhering to inequitable and/or repressive policies of the state against a backdrop where civic space was under threat, and where civil society functioned in a hostile environment in which successive governments formally and informally restricted grantmaking.

For instance, during the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime, all civil society organisations (CSOs) working in the war-affected North had to register with the ad-hoc, extra-legal Presidential Task Force (PTF) for the Northern Province which decided not only whether they could function there, but also what activities they could implement. Consequently, grantmakers only funded CSOs with PTF permission to function in those areas. This meant that work related to human rights protection could not be implemented since the PTF denied approval for it.

NTT however did not mandate CSOs to obtain PTF permission as a prerequisite to funding them. While this was the ethical and legal path—not compelling CSOs to adhere to an arbitrary, extra-legal and discriminatory entity—our stance could have been perceived as a challenge to a repressive government and resulted in reprisals against the Trust. Yet we adhered to a principled position, thereby supporting critical work such as the provision of psychosocial assistance to a population traumatised by war.

Although checking our privilege is an unwritten rule at the Trust, we acknowledge that it does not guarantee meaningful inclusion or ensure equity in our grantmaking, both of which require taking into account structural and systemic discrimination that undermine even proactive measures to achieve social justice. But structural and systemic factors could be entrenched in our grantmaking systems and processes to the extent that we do not realise they exist, exacerbated by our unconscious biases. Hence, we make a conscious effort to use a structural and systemic analytical framework to review these systems and processes.

The "Lessons Learnt" chapter in this book traces NTT's evolution based on learning from our successes and viewing our failures as opportunities to course correct. These experiences taught us that, although we may hold the resources, we are not all-knowing and have no magic formula for impactful grantmaking. It is only by acknowledging our mistakes and missteps and effecting

change within the institution that we have learned how to identify potential problems at the outset and adopt corrective measures.

As we celebrate our 25th anniversary, we are aware our growth is in large part due to building relationships of trust with the communities we serve and being welcomed into them. We view this as an integral component of achieving successful localisation. The time, energy and resources our team has expended in answering questions, providing advice and information and being available to partners whenever they encounter problems—not only with implementation but also governance and administrative issues and with countering the state's repressive attempts to curtail civil society—are critical contributions to trust-building.

When institutions are founded in the memory of an individual, they can often become entities that focus solely on the deification and glorification of that person over dedicating resources to furthering his or her values. We hope the Trust has achieved the latter in line with what Dr Neelan Tiruchelvam would have desired.

NTT is cognisant of having grown by moving beyond existing frameworks and practices of grantmaking and charting its own path in honour of its values. It is for this very reason that the Trust spent the last couple of years reviewing and strengthening its systems and processes. This resulted in internal changes that we hope will make our grantmaking more empathetic, responsive and impactful.

As we look to the future, my desire is for the Trust to stay on its toes by regularly asking itself whether it is fulfilling its purpose and enabling change as opposed to merely existing.

I always say that those engaged in human rights activism and social justice initiatives must work themselves out of a job. While that may not happen in our lifetime, I hope the Trust contributes to collective efforts to get closer to our common goal.

With gratitude,

Ambika Satkunanathan
Chairperson
31st January 2025

Chamari works in her small bakery

1 NURTURING DREAMS INTO REALITY

Institute of Rural and Social Development

Chamari Leela* hadn't planned to leave her abusive husband. But when he cut off food to her and their three children, it was the last straw. She summoned the courage to move 300km from his village to hers, seeking refuge in a small village church.

Getting a job was not an option because childcare for her toddler was too costly. So the 43-year-old Chamari relied on previous baking experience to launch a small bakery in April 2024. She considered it her last shot at building a future for her family.

But her hopeful first day in the tiny rented corner shop quickly went stale when she pulled the bread out of her hot oven. It hadn't risen. A sackful of expensive flour went to waste. She had nowhere to turn.

Chamari calls this the "lowest point" of her life. As she worried about what to do next, however, she came across the Institute of Rural and Social Development (IRSD) which guided her to achieving financial independence as a single mother.

After marriage, Chamari had relocated to her husband's village. Twenty-seven when she first met him, she was the cashier at the bakery where he was the baker. Her family pressured her to marry because of her "old age" and she quickly assented.

Her husband managed a small tea plantation in addition to baking. And Chamari took a loan from the Samurdhi Bank and pawned her gold jewellery to open a bakery. She was reluctant to work outside her home as she was pregnant.

“Since my husband was trained in baking and handling the equipment, I enlisted his help for production,” she narrated. “We were successful but he was wasteful with money.” It was the start of their marital issues.

He threw parties and spent lavishly, causing their first bankruptcy. Chamari agreed to rebuild the business on one condition: she would manage the finances. This made her in-laws unhappy which, in turn, led to abuse from her husband. He stopped operating the baking equipment and would not teach her how to do it.

When Chamari relates how he destroyed her scooter, her eyes fill with tears. She had planned to run a *choon paan*[1] service in the village with that little two-wheeler. Afterwards, she felt trapped, confined to the house, unable to run the business and forced to cohabit with an increasingly violent husband. “He withheld food from us so we relied on the church to feed us,“ she said. “I eventually packed up the equipment and returned to my village.”

While Chamari was intent on restarting her bakery, she had neither the capital, knowledge nor skills to do it alone. She says it was her good fortune that IRSD stepped in, providing her with flour, butter, oilpaper and even parchment paper. She participated in their workshops and capacity-building programmes. She learned entrepreneurship and waste minimisation. In eight months, Chamari slashed her debt down to Rs 300,000 from Rs 750,000.[2]

With NTT support, IRSD in 2022 devised a project to support female livelihood development. In two years, IRSD have helped 100 women establish businesses. Their impact is felt in more ways than just the promotion of financial independence.

“They call once a week to check up on me,” Chamari says. “And I can telephone them anytime I have a problem. They make me feel less alone in this new life.”

Lakmali Nisansala*, a 43-year-old seamstress, has a similar story. IRSD helped her after she separated from her ex-soldier husband who had abused her. More than once, she had attempted to flee with her four children. The first time, she found work as a quality checker in a

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[1] A mobile bread vendor that sells his wares in a vehicle, usually a tuk tuk or scooter, while playing a tune (hence, *choon*), usually Beethoven's "Für Elise", to attract customers.

[2] LKR300,000 is equivalent to USD1,012.68; LKR750,000 is equivalent to USD2,531.69 (conversion date Jan 13, 2025).

local garment factory, combining her passion for clothes and her eye for detail to earn a decent wage. But her husband soon cornered her in her rented home and abused her again, resulting in her hospitalisation.

She recovered from surgery and underwent counselling. A safe house provided her refuge for just three months. Confronted with death threats from her husband, she faced the horrifying reality that she could be in danger again. That is when she was introduced to IRSD.

Lakmali still lives in hiding from her ex-husband. “I took nothing when I left him,” she says. The separation forced her to abandon tailoring. But her life changed rapidly within one year. IRSD donated two sewing machines and Rs 40,000[3] worth of raw materials to restart her business. They brought her food when, after she left the safe house, finding even one meal a day was a struggle.

It is with IRSD’s backing that Lakmali rose again. “I received money, training and advice on how to run a business,” she said. “It was difficult after I left the safe house. Since connecting with them I felt I wasn’t alone. I felt supported.”

Kind words and encouragement from IRSD even helped her daughter pass the O/Levels[4], having had to leave the safe house (which provides only short-term relief) just 17 days before exams started. This, for Lakmali, is a significant win.

“I don’t run a big business,” she admits. “But the fact that I can feed myself and my family means I have won. I didn’t even have a scissor when I started.”

Through IRSD, Lakmali has attended workshops and discussions on entrepreneurship and self-development. She has written her vision and mission statements and structured her business. The documents are neatly filed on her desk inside the single bedroom she shares with the younger three of her children. She has also registered her business.

Lakmali identified a niche market in her village for women’s nightwear. She sells her products through government offices as she still cannot be seen too often in public owing to continued threats from her former spouse.

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[3] LKR40,000 is equivalent to USD135.02 (conversion date Jan 13, 2025).

[4] General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) examination (GCE O/L) which is taken at the end of a student’s secondary education.

IRSD identifies women like Chamari and Lakmali through an extensive grassroots network built over 25 years of community work in Anuradhapura. H M Nimal Padmasiri, the 51-year-old executive director, says the NTT project was a blessing as it commenced in 2022, at the start of an unprecedented economic crisis in Sri Lanka.[4] The women they assist were "even more vulnerable" at the time.

"They still are," he continued. "But each step we take is important in helping them develop their lives. We focus on identifying women who truly need this additional support."

This is how they met 50-year-old K H Nirosha Sanjeewani. When "Nimal sir" first visited, she didn't have the means to offer him a cup of tea. Her husband, incapacitated by illness, lay in bed in one corner of their small home. When he was diagnosed with chronic kidney disease of unknown etiology[5] (CKDu) in 2016, she had been selling dried fish.

CKDu haunts Sri Lanka's dry-zone farming villages, afflicting mainly middle-aged males. While they undergo dialysis, their wives carry the burden of caring for their spouses, raising children and earning enough to run their households. Nirosha escorts her husband to dialysis in Anuradhapura town twice a week. When she first met the IRSD team, she was spoon-feeding him lunch.

"Let alone him, I didn't think my children and I would survive this long," she says. "We didn't have food as I couldn't find work while caring for him. Nimal sir brought me some *karawala* [dried fish] and advised me to restart my business from home. Since then, I've built a grocery in our garden, facing the road."

Under her care, her husband improved enough to walk and help her with the business a few hours daily. So Nirosha takes orders to sew clothes by night. Sometimes, she works at a nearby weaving factory for additional income. Having lived through the worst, she feels ready to face anything. She is planning the next steps in her dried fish enterprise, such as bottling the produce for sale outside of Anuradhapura.

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[4] Sri Lanka experienced a severe financial and economic downturn that began in 2021 and peaked in 2022, marking the worst economic crisis in the country since its independence in 1948. The crisis was characterized by high inflation, a collapsing currency, rising debt, fuel and food shortages, and widespread public unrest.

[5] A progressive kidney disease that affects people in rural agricultural communities worldwide.

Nimal is part of a small team dedicated to helping women in the Anuradhapura district achieve self-sufficiency. Their biggest challenge, he says, is to identify those affected by high levels of poverty accurately and to uplift them.

“Some organisations choose beneficiaries that do not require much help because it is easy to work with them and to assist them in developing their lives,” he reflected. “We choose women who do not receive any help, who everyone, state and non-state, has failed. We step in where the system fails.”

NTT, as a donor, has recognised this need in the Anuradhapura district, Nimal says. Many women often don’t have the strength to speak at the start–so overwhelming are their problems. While progress is slow, it is also steady.

IRSD is supporting 40 women in the next phase of their livelihood development project with NTT. Fifteen of them are sex workers and 10 are street vendors who juggle their livelihood activities with raising children amidst minimum protection. Nimal is optimistic their lives will improve once provided with the tools to secure a safer, more independent future.

*Names changed.

Nirosha who rebuilt her life after her husband's CKDu diagnosis

64 year old Soundari returns by boat after feeding the fish she breeds

2 A COMMUNITY TO LEAN ON

Suriya Women's Development Centre

After two-and-a-half years as a domestic aide in Saudi Arabia, Veerapaththiran Vijayalakshmi is elated to be home: "I am so happy to be back," she enthuses. "I will never go abroad again. I don't want that life."

Today, Vijayalakshmi takes her five-year-old grandson everywhere she goes. When we meet her at a women's self-help group in Narippulthodam, Batticaloa, started by Suriya Women's Development Centre, her face is wreathed in smiles. Her children are married and lead separate lives. Her husband was forcibly disappeared during the war. But Vijayalakshmi feels anything but alone.

This contented 53-year-old grandmother has a strong support system of over a hundred. Her village of Narippulthodam has not one but two self-help groups, with one especially for female fisher folk. With NTT funding, Suriya set up these communities in 2017-2019. Today, they thrive and grow. In Ollikulam, a Muslim village, and Fatimapuram, a Tamil village, a joint self-help group called Venpura Pengal Kulu (which translates to "White Dove Women's Group", in Tamil) focuses on traditional mat weavers. From 20- to 70-year-olds, everyone eagerly shares their activities for the year.

Women save money together, obtain low-interest loans for self-employment and use their pooled funds to help each other through difficulties. The building where the Narippulthodam self-help groups meet is a Young Men's Christian Association premises damaged during

the war but renovated through Suriya. It is a place to dry fish, work collaboratively or simply hang out. With their own finances, they invested in a water connection and even an electric fence to keep the elephants out.

Vijayalakshmi's eyes well up as she contrasts her horrible experiences in Saudi Arabia with the joy of being embraced by a women's group. She had worked for a family that was not wealthy in the Middle East, and often went hungry. "They made me eat leftovers and I was starving," she recounted. "I was paid Rs 1,100[1] per day and I returned with nothing." She wasn't allowed leave or time for phone calls. "Only those who go there know what hell it is," she said.

To address rising costs and fewer local employment opportunities, many rural women are compelled to work abroad. Foreign job agents prey on their vulnerability, recruiting desperate women to often low-paying, dangerous jobs. While abroad, they are separated from their families (including, sometimes, young children) in Sri Lanka. The self-help groups, through self-employment support and access to credit, try to make it easier for people like Vijayalakshmi to stay and earn a living at home.

Narippulthodam is a small village on the coast of the Eravur Lagoon with 385 families that rely largely on fishing and agriculture. For women, too, these are the only employment options. So Vijayalakshmi borrowed money from her group to buy cowpea and mung bean (green gram) seeds to start her own cultivation. Others have taken loans for fishing equipment or salt for drying fish.

Panneerselvam Soundari received credit for nets and barrels to do aquaculture. The 64-year-old feeds the fish for a few hours a day and harvests them once a week. Not having to rely on wild catch, which is seasonal and increasingly unpredictable, she and her husband sustain themselves this way. Combined with a little home gardening, they manage their expenses despite their advanced age.

About 30km away, a house adorned with posters, baskets, mats and woven decorations is the meeting place for the Venpura Pengal Kulu. Here, women have practised mat-weaving for generations, working from home to supplement their family incomes. And one of the credit beneficiaries is Maryam Pillai.

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[1] LKR1,100 is equivalent to USD3.72 (conversion date Jan 21, 2025).

Faiza Ummah Ismail Lebbe, another beneficiary, shows the land on which she grows cane

At 72, Maryam has woven mats for over 50 years. Like Vijayalakshmi, she worked a stint in Saudi Arabia to earn enough to build a house that was later destroyed in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Her husband has since left her. So Maryam now relies on mat-weaving, a skill learned from her mother, to make a living.

Before this, she had borrowed at high interest rates to buy the raw materials. Now, her 40-member self-help group finances her whenever she needs a new bundle of cane reeds.

Venpura Pengal Kulu prioritises children in fund disbursement. “First, we release money for school expenses, then to women whose electricity could get cut,” they explained. “Finally, we give for livelihood needs. This way, we don’t need to trust or depend on men to raise our children.”

Whenever self-help groups need new equipment, the Batticaloa-headquartered Suriya Women’s Development Centre try to find the resources. Comprising women activists and feminists working towards gender justice, economic empowerment and collective and cultural activism in the Batticaloa district, Suriya began when activists came together to support war-displaced women in camps.

With NTT’s help they provided a fish drying machine for the Narippulthodam self-help groups, for when the rains cobble sun-drying. In Ollikulam and Fatimapuram, with other donor funding, they gifted an electric cane-flattening machine so that mat-weavers no longer had to use strenuous hand-operated devices.

Suriya also endeavour to secure the best prices for these women. They help them understand costing and the value of their goods. They have held exhibitions and artisanal markets where products can be sold to buyers, bypassing exploitative middlemen. They now organise themselves into communities to take their wares directly to the marketplace. For the mat-weavers, Suriya ran a workshop on how to make newer items that are in demand, like baskets.

The self-help groups are also taught how to manage their home enterprises: including the importance of bookkeeping, organising meetings and rotating leadership to ensure accountability and sustainability. A Suriya adviser is always available for when a problem arises or they have new plans to implement.

For women like Vijayalakshmi, the self-help groups aren't just a material resource. They are a joyful, supportive community for the many widows in her village while providing strength to the vulnerable, such as sufferers of domestic violence.

In Ollikulam and Fatimapuram, Venpura Pengal Kulu are the backbone of women abandoned by their families over their Tamil-Muslim mixed-race marriages. It provides a space for friendship and reconciliation in otherwise fraught "border" villages.

In small villages, everyone knows everyone. But the opportunity to meet, bond and share problems in the common setting these groups offer does not go to waste. The women who greeted us at Narippulthodamare planning their next event. The mood is jovial. Amidst jokes about each other's *pukkai* (a kind of porridge), they make arrangements for a *shramadana* (village clean-up) ahead of the next kovil festival.

Women at the Ollikulam self-help group weave colourful mats from cane

Shamila in her mushroom shed

3 A WOMAN AGAINST THE WORLD

Nawayugam Social Development Forum

Aanandha Dayash Shamila, a 42-year-old mother, came back from nine years of domestic labour in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon to three children who didn't know her. Her husband had abandoned her. She was on her own.

Shamila is a Malaiyaha Tamil[1] whose home is on a tea plantation in Hatton, Nuwara Eliya district. Upon her return from the Middle East, she left her children again with her mother to work as a domestic aide in Colombo. She later shifted to bringing fish from the city to sell on the estate. When COVID-19 hit, she lost her source of income and became a moneylender's agent.

Shamila was already ostracised because of her marriage breakdown and spouse's "bad reputation". Her children were bullied about their missing father. After she turned to money-lending, her community further distanced itself and spread rumours about her. Isolated and bitter, Shamila sank into depression. She stopped caring for herself, did little and neglected the children.

When Navayugam Social Development Forum (NSDF) stepped in, Shamila's life started to turn around. While the government grants subsidies and benefits to farmers in villages, estate-dwellers are rarely deemed eligible–not even for their small-scale home gardens. So NGOs in and around Shamila's estate help fill the gap.

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[1] Also known as Indian Tamils or Hill Country Tamils, Malaiyaha Tamils are a distinct ethnic group in Sri Lanka, primarily of Indian origin, who have historically worked in the tea, rubber and coffee plantations of the country's hill country. Many still continue to live and work on the tea estates. They face discrimination not only in the estates but also socio-politically and face many forms of deprivation.

But none of them, Shamila says, wanted to assist her because of her "reputation". In 2022, NSDF absorbed her into their programme despite objections from existing beneficiaries. They have worked among the Malaiyaha Tamil community since 1992, improving access to education, raising awareness of child rights and advocating for gender justice through training programmes, street dramas and educational events. In recent years, NSDF have also pivoted to livelihood support for women.

With NTT's financial backing, NSDF trained Shamila in organic farming and gave her hoses, water tanks and other essentials to start her own farm. In the seven-perch plot adjoining her estate home, she grows chillies, tomatoes and vegetables for personal use and sale. Some aspects of organic farming—particularly fertiliser production from animal waste and rotting fruit—are considered unsuitable for women, but Shamila persisted. "They said women can't do it so they didn't help me," said Shamila, referring to local agriculture officials. "It was like a challenge for me to succeed."

With guidance from NSDF, Shamila produced fertiliser from fish heads and fruit scraps, among other things; and organic pesticide from goat urine and grains. This way, she cut costs and enhanced crop quality. She leaned on Margaret Anthony, NSDF project officer, calling her for advice on additional businesses. Soon she was growing mushrooms and caring for goats, bought from her savings, and using the income to provide a better education and life for her children.

Most importantly, Shamila's livelihood schemes earned her respect and improved her mental health. As she phases out of money lending, her community becomes more accepting of her. We walk through the estate. She points out her mother's house where she raises goats. As she passes the line rooms, the cramped quarters in which tea plantation workers have lived for generations, she cracks jokes with the residents and they wave at her.

"These are the same people who never spoke to us," she mused. "At least now they respect me enough to acknowledge me."

All isn't completely well yet for Shamila. People have not come around completely and the impact of that is evident. Inside the privacy of her home, she cannot hold back tears. Nobody visits her, she chokes out, and some of them even tried to sabotage her work. When Shamila saved up to buy a Scooty Pep to take her mushrooms to the market, someone set it on fire.

Her local *grama niladhari*[2] is unsupportive, she adds. There is an ongoing court case that she is able to pursue owing to the economic power that comes from her work.

Shamila is the breadwinner for her 22-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son (who also help in the home garden), her aged mother (whose relationship with her is mended) and her brother who suffers from a disability. Having diversified into small-scale agriculture, fruit and mushroom cultivation, goat-rearing and *dodol*[3] production, they are thriving. “The public health inspector checks all the kids in school for malnutrition,” said Shamila, beaming with pride. “My son has no problems at all.”

Now a resource person for NSDF, Shamila instructs the organisation's new beneficiaries on organic farming and mushroom cultivation. With NTT funding, Margaret has taken the lead in training still more estate workers in organic farming, mushroom production and goat-herding. NSDF has added tailoring and snack preparations to the programme. Since 2022, they have empowered 250 women on estates to become financially independent.

As Shamila reiterated, knowledge is NSDF’s most important contribution towards her. Workshops, demonstrations and field trips to successful farms are part of their programme. The women witness firsthand how strong enterprises are created and run while also receiving cash management skills and advice on women’s health and nutrition.

Margaret said they’ve made progress because women care about organic farming. “We found that men had little interest in it but women were highly motivated about what food they put into their children’s bodies,” she said. “Since their family is usually their priority, they do it well.”

NSDF started their activities on estates by focusing on reproductive, gender and labour rights and education before graduating to livelihood support. “Non-working women are the worst affected by gender issues,” Margaret pointed out. “Working women have more of a voice as they bring money to the household.”

Particularly for women without husbands, steady earnings bring with them social respect. Shamila was ostracised for turning to money-lending. Finding alternative sources of income brought her some sense of inclusion in her community.

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[2] A village-level public official appointed by the central government, essentially serving as the administrative head of a *grama niladhari* division.

[3] Sweetmeat made from rice and coconut.

Shamila with her livestock

Selvarani with her three cows, Komali, Letchumi and Kayali

4 SURVIVING THE ESTATE'S COLLAPSE

Uva Farmers Development Foundation

Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka have, for generations, been among the country's poorest. While life on the estates has changed over the last decade, it hasn't always been for the better.

Chasing higher returns, private-sector regional plantation companies (RPCs)–which have leased the lands from the state–have been modifying their employment policies. And because employees not only toil on these estates but are also born, live and even die there, these shifts have hit them hard. The Uva Farmers Development Foundation (UFDF) are helping them navigate these transitions with alternative sources of income: rearing cattle and growing mushrooms.

There aren't many registered employees–those who receive retirement, healthcare and education benefits, compensation and a minimum guaranteed income[1]–on estates now. They have been terminated and some re-hired for cheaper daily wages. Karuppiah Mahendran, too, fell victim to this practice after 22 years of service.

We meet Mahendran as he returns from cutting grass for his cattle. From the doorway of his house, he explains the changes he has witnessed. "They earn more profit if they reduce the number of registered workers," he said. "I initially challenged my termination through legal means. I gave up after a while and acceded to daily work."

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[1] Wages and benefits for permanent employees are granted under the Estate Labour (Indian) Ordinance (No. 13 of 1889) that still governs the estates and how the estates should treat their employees.

Paid less, unrepresented by a union and without retirement benefits, unregistered estate workers find themselves rudderless. This phenomenon of coercing permanent employees to become hired hands has spread across the Badulla district and the broader tea country.

Estate managers are also stricter about applying the kilogramme quota (the base quantity of tea leaves that must be picked to qualify for a complete day's pay). If they return even one less than the stipulated daily minimum of 22 kilos, pluckers do not receive the full daily wage of Rs 1,350.[2]

As real incomes dropped and safety nets vanished, UFDF stepped in. Chairperson Nagamuthu Naguleshwary has been with them since 1999. Their hilltop office in Hali-Ela, Badulla, is scattered with memorabilia from their projects: advertisements for a yoghurt production project, books on child rights, election monitoring IDs and a spice grinding mill.

Set up for farmers of a Sinhala village, UFDF expanded to the tea plantation sector to address income reductions. They now support people who provide labour on estates part-time and those who no longer work but still occupy line houses[3]. NTT funding has strengthened the livelihood support project since 2017, aiding 65 families on five estates across Badulla.

Mahendran and his wife Selvarani live on St. James's Estate and are assisted through this programme. Selvarani, a registered worker, brings home just Rs 15-16,000[4] monthly, after deductions. When it's busy on the plantation, Mahendran, too, gleans a few days of labour at a daily wage of Rs 1,000.[5] They do manage to scrape a living–but the estate income is not enough for their 21-year-old daughter's university education, including hostel fees.

With UFDF's help and their savings, Selvarani and Mahendran have grown vegetables and raised cattle since 2009. In 2018, when their milk yield reduced, their son quit his O/Level class to work at a shop in Colombo.

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[2] LKR1,350 is equivalent to USD4.56 (conversion date Jan 22, 2025).

[3] Rows of small, connected houses built to accommodate workers on estates, particularly Malaiyaha Tamils brought to Sri Lanka by British colonialists to work on the tea plantations. Often referred to as "line rooms", they are still a common form of accommodation offered by the plantation companies.

[4] LKR15,000 is equivalent to USD50.75; LKR16,000 is equivalent to USD54.13 (conversion date Jan 21, 2025).

[5] LKR1000 is equivalent to USD3.38 (conversion date Jan 21, 2025).

Selvaras, another beneficiary, with his milk can

With veterinary treatment and UFDF's advice, production improved. But the death of their milcher in 2023, just as their daughter entered university, left Selvarani devastated. She worried that this child too would have to drop out.

NTT funds allowed UFDF to donate a milcher to Selvarani "in the nick of time". So with the Rs 25,000[7], they earn from milk each month, they meet their daughter's hostel and food expenses of around Rs 15,000. Without the cattle, their lives would be so much worse.

By distributing livestock, potted mushrooms, shed materials, training and advice exclusively to women, UFDF have strengthened their status within families.

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[7] LKR25,000 is equivalent to USD84.58 (conversion date Jan 21, 2025).

"There is more respect for women when they bring in income and are not reliant on their husbands," Naguleshwary said, explaining why they have only female beneficiaries. "Men are also more likely to squander their earnings on alcohol so it's better to give women financial control as they generally prioritise the children and family."

Of all their work in livelihood improvement, dairy farming has proven the most successful. In addition to its economic benefits, the milk is also consumed by producer households. "The estate sector has multiple nutritional issues including underweight children and pregnant mothers, reduced brain growth, and low immunity," Naguleshwary points out.

The most common diet is roti or rice, a curry of one vegetable and coconut *sambol*[8], with no protein and insufficient essential minerals. Children often go to school without breakfast. Eating is purely to satiate hunger, not to nourish the body. Since COVID-19 and the national economic crisis, malnutrition has skyrocketed. So it had been vital to choose projects that would tackle these issues.

Launching these initiatives had been difficult. The estate management was initially uncooperative, fearing that work on the estates would stop if other avenues of income were realised, Naguleshwary said. The organisation still sometimes carries out their activities "in secret". Negotiating various permissions also causes delays. Selecting suitable beneficiaries with access to enough land and water to raise cattle is a struggle and could exclude many eager families. "So we try to facilitate them with other programmes, like nutrition," Naguleshwary rued.

Along with other initiatives–such as COVID-19 dry ration distributions and empowerment projects–NTT support has benefited 669 people (up to 2023) while future initiatives include a school meals programme for 130 primary school children and 45 children in daycare centres; nutrition packs for 40 pregnant and breastfeeding mothers; and meals for 15 children with special needs.

Despite the difficulties, the livelihood project is gradually becoming self-sustaining. Dairy farming continues to this day and cattle have reproduced. Naguleshwary hopes that the intervention will set these families up for a strong future–not just now, as estate structures collapse around them, but also for life.

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[8] Dish made from coconut, chilies, lime juice, and salt.

Thavalakshmi with their cows

5

WOMEN LEAD GREEN FARMING

Y GRO

In female-headed households, women break tradition by being the breadwinners, caregivers and decision-makers. Life isn't easy. They struggle to succeed in male-dominated fields where they are paid less and are sometimes ostracised by society.

Y gro, an NGO, supports such households–largely led by widows, women separated from their partners or single women–through modern dairy farming. By training them in scientific methods, assisting them with paperwork and giving them livestock, Y gro help them break into a profitable occupation.

Since 1975, Y gro have empowered poor communities through relief programmes and livelihood support. They run home-gardening initiatives, strengthen fisheries cooperative societies, and operate scientifically advanced coconut farms as models, among other activities.

With NTT's backing, Y gro's Jaffna branch have trained a total of 53 women across that district and provided them with azolla[1] (a high-protein moss used to supplement cows' diets) tanks, grass cutters and pressure pumps. Three out of the 28 participants of the 2022-23 batch had no experience raising cattle, having worked as day labourers before being absorbed into the programme. Now they run modest dairy farms. The other women previously owned cattle but had raised them inefficiently, using traditional methods and local breeds that generated less profit.

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[1] Azolla replaced *punnaku* (oil cake) which became expensive post-COVID and owing to Sri Lanka's economic crisis.

Shanmugalingam Thavalakshmi is one beneficiary. She and her husband reared cattle for nearly a decade, using that money to supplement their income from vegetable farming. But after her husband died, Thavalakshmi, now 63, went for the Y gro training and later also sent her 24-year-old daughter, Sharaniya. Y gro assisted them in expanding to five cows and a calf and modernised their farm.

Their cowshed now has a drainage system so wastewater runs directly into the field to irrigate a high-yield, perennial fodder grass called CO-3 . They also artificially inseminate their cows with a more productive Jersey breed from Kundasale. Each cow supplies around seven litres of milk per day.[2] Thavalakshmi cleans the shed with ease using a pressure pump from Y gro. In the past, her husband would spend nights near the building to keep guard. They now have dogs to deter cattle thieves.

With Y gro's input, Thavalakshmi has an azolla tank to supplement the cows' diet. Lately, the moss is dying and she blames recent unpredictable weather patterns. Fortunately, she has Y gro and their other recipients to brainstorm with. The organisation created four groups from the 28 women and they meet occasionally to prop each other up through difficult patches while sharing common problems.

Unlike when her husband was alive, Thavalakshmi's family no longer does agriculture and relies entirely on their livestock. Cultivation requires them to hire farm hands and that costs more. They now grow grass on those lands to feed the small herd. Mother and daughter work fewer than four hours daily and earn over Rs 100,000[3] monthly. Sharaniya will be starting nursing school soon, so having an occupation that gives her adequate study time is crucial.

When 43-year-old Jasinthan Valarmathi's husband abandoned her, she was left with a four-year-old daughter and an elderly mother in her care. She had to figure out how to manage alone. She tried working at a mixture[4] factory but the hours were not conducive to raising a child. She quit in favour of cattle rearing.

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[2] The average in Jaffna is only about 3.4 litres per day from local (Jaffna) breeds.

[3] LKR100,000 is equivalent to USD338.32 (conversion date Jan 21, 2025).

[4] A savoury snack mix, similar to the Indian "Bombay mix," consisting of various fried or roasted ingredients like peanuts, chickpeas, lentils and other crunchy elements

Valarmathi is energetic and always looking for ways to advance in life. So when–after a few years of dairy farming–she heard about a new high-yield breed, she pawned her gold jewellery to buy "Sarasamma", a cow that kept her family fed and her daughter in school for the next five years. In 2023, however, Sarasamma got sick. Valarmathi, who attended Y gro's training, knew how to identify the warning signs of illness. But the veterinarian couldn't heal her and a few days after initial symptoms began to show, Sarasamma was dead. Valarmathi was shattered.

"I raised her like my own child," she recounted. "I was sad because I had done everything right with Sarasamma, like getting her registrations and bringing the doctor." The timing could not have been worse. Valarmathi's daughter was studying for her A/Levels[5] and aspiring to become a lawyer, for which good exam results were essential. But since school expenses were rising beyond what she could manage, all that was in peril.

Y gro–who were already in touch with her, having trained her on grass breeds, azolla and silage (nutrient-rich feed) to increase milk yield–offered to buy her a cow. Valarmathi spent a month studying and inspecting her options before settling on a new one. "I was stressing about how to educate my daughter," Valarmathi said, "but then god sent us Y gro."

Y gro also monitor that their beneficiaries follow the correct procedures when buying and raising cattle. "People do not understand the importance of registration," explained Yogarajah Premaruban, Y gro's dairy development coordinator. "Without it, the government veterinarian cannot treat a sickly animal or assist with artificial insemination." Additionally, Y gro guide women with insuring their cows, something Valarmathi is particularly happy about, given her experience with Sarasamma.

While traditional methods of rearing cattle have given many of their recipients some welcome experience, these can also impede progress, Yogarajah points out. "There are unhelpful traditions of giving *kanji*[6] to cows after delivery," he explained, "and feeding more mash than grass, which is not good for yield." Breaking these beliefs takes time and the profit from modern interventions is not instant. But when Y gro's women beneficiaries implement their training and with time see clear signs of success, other dairy farmers begin to follow suit.

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[5] General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) (GCE A/L), a national examination that serves as a gateway to higher education and university admission.

[6] Tamil word (which in English is referred to as congee) for a rice-based porridge.

This approach has made women dairy farmers pioneers in Jaffna district. According to Yogarajah, 90% of dairy farmers don't know about CO-3; Y gro's women beneficiaries who cultivate it are spreading the word.

They also know how to identify "good" cows. They understand the importance of artificial insemination with the more productive Jersey bulls; and how to use silage, azolla moss and grass to optimum benefit.

Valarmathi and Thavalakshmi have taught their daughters their livelihood. They now know nearly as much as their mothers do. More than distributing cows, tanks and equipment, Y gro focus on the mandatory training segment of the project–because, Yogarajah enthuses, "passing knowledge onwards" is the most valuable component as it benefits future generations of dairy farmers.

Sharaniya harvests a special breed of grass to feed their cows

Students eagerly volunteer to write answers on the smartboard

6

BRIDGING THE GAP WITH SMARTBOARDS

Organisation of People for Engagement and Enterprise

Chandrasekaran Praveenkumar's first interaction with a smart device was at 11 years old. His parents did not have smartphones and, afraid that the children might break it, his school's computer was locked away in the principal's office.

When the Organisation of People for Engagement and Enterprise (OPEnE) donated a smartboard in 2021 to his school, Kaddayadampan Roman Catholic Tamil Mixed School in Madhu, Mannar district, Praveenkumar experienced his first smart touch.

The "Madhu zone", as it is called, is one of Sri Lanka's most remote. Students here are for the most part destitute, from families that have studied only up to the primary level. Parents are often uninvolved in their offspring's studies and do not always compel their younger children, particularly girls, to attend school regularly.

Praveenkumar's parents were no different. Long out of formal employment, his father was a daily wage labourer and his mother was a domestic worker in Kuwait. She studied up to grade 10, his father only till grade four. With a younger brother to care for, a mother abroad and a father who wasn't always present, there was nobody to supervise his studies.

For students like Praveenkumar, now 14, OPEnE's interventions have been transformative. Using funding from several donors including NTT (which sponsored ten devices), the organisation helped procure 49 smartboards–one for every school in the zone. They instructed teachers on usage and still provide technical support for maintenance and repairs.

The smartboard allows teachers to play videos, repeat audio, scroll through PDF copies of textbooks, write on the board and instantly erase the writing. The students take turns doing textbook activities directly on the smartboard.

The 278 students at Thanpanaikulam GTMS primary school, a 10-minute drive from Praveenkumar's school, are fans of OPEnE's smartboard, which is housed in a separate classroom alongside a timetable that dictates whose turn it is to use the technology. Thilakshan Menuka, a 26-year-old teacher who joined as a substitute and was later hired by OPEnE to help with the programme, is in charge.

In large classrooms, smartboards save time and promote interactive learning, Menuka said. Teachers expend much effort transferring lessons onto a blackboard, erasing and writing them again. Or they hold up a textbook and provide verbal explanations while students write notes.

"With the smartboard, the whole textbook and even other programmes, like YouTube videos, are up instantly," Menuka pointed out. And because the activities are already on the screen–and time isn't wasted on a blackboard–teachers have sufficient time to make every student work out answers on the smartboard. And the kids love it. They dash into the classroom when Menuka calls them for a demonstration, and all hands shoot to the ceiling as they clamour to answer questions, even when they aren't sure of the answer.

"When asked to answer in chalk on the blackboard, students aren't that interested," explained Menuka. "Now if we tell them to memorise words for dictation, they will all do it simply out of eagerness to write on the smartboard." The technology, she explains, incentivises them to pay attention to schoolwork and is an effective reward system.

The smartboards have also launched children into the basics of technology. The few computers the state distributes are strictly "protected"–for fear they will be damaged–and usually inaccessible to them. By contrast, students are encouraged to use the donated smartboards, albeit with close teacher supervision, because OPEnE provide maintenance support. This simple step has made students from low-income families tech savvy at a young age, something that wealthier peers, through smartphones, tabs, laptops, and smart TVs, have been steeped in since birth.

Praveenkumar deftly pivots between documents on the smartboard, opens new folders, plays audio, scrolls through pages and changes display settings. It could be years before most students in the Madhu zone learn IT on a computer. At the very least, Praveenkumar and his mates won't be starting from scratch.

Schools here are consistently among the country's poorest performing in national examinations. At Thanpanaikulam, nobody passed the Grade 5 scholarship exam in 2024 and just a handful have done so in the past. But 51-year-old Navareththinam Venisco, its recently appointed principal who has worked in the Madhu zone for over eight years, opined that scholarship exam pass rates aren't good indicators. "Nobody passed the exam but nobody fared very poorly either," he said. "The enthusiasm to learn and the commitment to attend school have visibly increased."

Venisco claims the smartboard programme had a ripple effect on parents' interest in their children's education. We visited Thanpanaikulam during Teachers' Day celebrations. In big pots, mothers cooked lunch over a firewood stove for the entire school. It hadn't always been this way, Venisco said.

It was an uphill battle getting parents interested in their children's education, sighed Jesuthashan Anexly, OPEnE's consultant for the education project. "We intentionally did not meet the full cost of the smartboard but helped parents fundraise for some of it," he explained. "We wanted to instil in them a sense of ownership and investment in the project and the school."

This was part of a broader strategy to strengthen school development societies (SDS) and to get parents more involved. Seeing the success of the smartboard programme, some SDSs–mostly in larger schools with classes up to A/Levels–have even raised funds to procure additional smartboards. "In bigger schools exam-sitting students are often given preference when allocating the smartboard for use," says Anexly. "So their goal is to install a smartboard in every classroom."

OPEnE, with NTT support, distributed pen drives across schools in the zone during COVID-19. Intended to prevent disruptions to education during the epidemic, they contained comprehensive, interactive English language programming made specifically for the Sri Lankan context. In addition to "listening and reading" videos, phonics lessons and songs, the pen drive had page-by-page coverage of the entire Grades 1-5 English syllabus. Teachers still use it on the smartboards years after COVID to supplement their teaching.

During the pandemic, Menuka distributed the pen drives to students and for those without a smart TV-like Praveenkumar-she grouped them with households that had one. She even cycled from house to house to check on their progress and, using a WhatsApp group, enforced a strict regimen of lessons. With children unable to gather in classrooms and not having access to the internet and online teaching options (unlike their city-dwelling peers), Menuka and those precious pen drives stopped them from lagging too much.

The pen drive and smartboard opened up a new world of learning for Praveenkumar. “I loved the pen drive because there would be stories in English about Sri Lanka and songs that I could memorise and sing along to,” he smiled. “It’s important that I study English well because it is a common language and I can get opportunities through it, even to go abroad.” He loves mathematics and aspires to become a doctor.

If he succeeds, Praveenkumar will be the first in his family, not only to be a doctor and to receive a university education but also to have made it through high school. And the stage is set for it.

Students at the Thanpanaikulam GTMS School

7

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

T E A Project

Cocooned by the Hantana mountain range and reached through a narrow lane, the T E A Project's "Cloud" learning centre in Kithulmulla is a cacophony of colour inside. The walls are pasted with bright paintings and its three rooms–hall, classroom and small library–are brimming with childhood joys.

The playground offers a breathtaking view, green as far as the eye can see. In the nearby kitchen, the children's breakfast is being cooked. A sense of safety and relaxation prevails. It is an idyllic location to play and study in, and the roomful of preschoolers loudly singing their "good morning" song seems to feel it.

With its cool climate, Hantana was one of the first areas to be planted with tea by British colonisers. The cash crop has long boosted Sri Lanka's economy through robust export incomes. But this feel-good tale masks generations of abuse, neglect and exploitative labour practices borne by tea pickers in those sprawling, verdant upcountry estates: the Indian-origin Malaiyaha Tamils.

Even 200 years after they were forcibly migrated, they remain marginalised. The T E A (which stands for Training, Empowerment and Awareness) Project's learning centre serves the children of Malaiyaha Tamils in four Hantana villages through a morning preschool and afternoon lessons for young people over 11 called "Youth Empowerment Service" (YES). The organisation envisions a future wherein disadvantaged children can realise their rights and achieve their full potential.

“The parents of the 31 preschoolers are mostly day wage labourers, tea pickers, migrant workers or garment factory workers,” said 30-year-old Tharindu Kasunpriya, manager of centre operations. Both preschool and after-school programmes are community-led. Parents who work five hours monthly for the T E A Project earn free English language preschool education for their children.

Their two assistant teachers and volunteers are also from the Hantana community while the head teacher is from Kandy, a 45-minute to hour’s drive away. A “youth board” involves the after-school participants in decision-making, such as interviewing prospective trainers. There is also a “Saturday service” for unemployed youth and adult community members.

They have understood that children cannot be empowered solely by working with children, Tharindu says: “It takes a village to raise a child.” Induja Selvarathnam is the 24-year-old daughter of two tea pickers from a Hantana village who first joined the T E A Project as an after-school programme volunteer.

“I was hunting for work after my A/L exam and chose to volunteer here,” she said. “I like it because the centre is good and the team is kind. I want to work in this field. I was initially scared to speak to people but they taught me how to work in the office, develop my English and teach children. Now I am in the office as an administration official.”

For Induja, the learning centre’s value lies in its assistance to parents who don’t have the means to invest extensively in their children’s education. “This community is poor and they struggle to send their children to tuition,” she explained. “Many students drop out after O/Levels to start working.”

Induja is wistful that the centre wasn’t around when she was growing up. But she is grateful it exists now, “so that future generations can learn English and get help for their education”.

L P Sivachuthi, whose daughter will soon graduate from preschool, says she is greeted by a loud “Good morning, *amma*” from her every morning. “After studying for two years, she uses English with ease in everyday conversation,” the 35-year-old says, proudly. “She loves coming here so much that she gets ready on weekends too!”

The T E A Project's "Cloud" learning centre

Sivachuthi wishes her 11-year-old son had had the same opportunity at that age. She will send him to the after-school programme, she vows, after seeing how joyfully the others arrive for classes and activities in the afternoon.

“They come from the bus straight to lunch here,” she recounted. “They do their classes and go home. It’s difficult for families on the mountain to find tuition for their children due to the high cost and because they must travel to Kandy when there is minimal transport in the afternoon. This school is near our villages and helps with our children’s development.”

NTT has sponsored breakfast and lunch since 2020 when the T E A Project launched the learning centre following extensive consultations with the area’s state-run schools–including students, teachers and principals–to identify needs.

“We listened to what they wanted,” said Tharindu. “Consequently, the afterschool segment runs awareness sessions on sexual health, leadership, first aid, suicide prevention, creative arts and math. The children also play sports and use our library. This is a safe space where they can forget everything else.”

Things weren’t always smooth sailing. Securing attendance was the biggest challenge at the start, especially as parents would quickly send their children to work if they seemed reluctant to go to school.

Having analysed this, they took steps. “We have parents’ meetings nearly every two months where we highlight the importance of attendance,” Tharindu said. “This has improved attendance significantly. It might be a small thing but it’s a big win for us.”

A mere four years since they began, the T E A Project are looking to expand under a ten-year plan. One of their goals is to develop a comprehensive strategy to be adopted across the country for children from different walks of life. Till then, they will focus on nurturing their eager community on top of Hantana.


COLOURES
English Alphabet
ඉංග්‍රීසි හෝඩිය
ஆங்கில அரிச்சுவடி
Aa Apple
Bb Ball
Cc Car
Dd Doll
Ee Elephant
Ff Fruits
Gg Grapes
Hh Hat
Ii
Jj Jeep
Kk Kite
Ll Lion
Oo Orange
NUMBERS
1 One
2 Two
3 Three
4 Four
5 Five
Strawberry
Cherry
Grapes
Mango
Banana
Avocado
Papaya
TINY T.E.A. PRESCHOOL

Children greet the day with the 'Good morning' song

The children love 'fried rice' day of the week

8 HIDDEN STRUGGLES IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Baithul Khair Foundation

The two-bedroomed house was in a stunning location, across the road from a lush paddy field flanked by mountains. A clear stream wound slowly past it, reflecting the sky like a mirror. In this home, tucked away in scenic Yalkumbura, Bibile, the lights come on at 3am each weekday morning.

Sarika Madushani wakes up in the dark and walks through her sparsely furnished hall into the kitchen where she deftly cooks nutritious breakfasts for 83 students of the Yalkumbura Maha Vidyalaya as part of a state-funded school programme. At 8am, she starts on lunch, which is supported by the Baithul Khair Foundation (BKF) and NTT.

Health authorities monitor the meals to ensure they are of the required standard. Sarika enjoys crafting menus that the students will relish whilst getting the necessary nutrients. The day we visit, there is a power outage and she is cooking on a wood stove in the back veranda. It's fried rice, a student favourite.

"We served fried rice every Friday," the 33-year-old Sarika smiled. "The children loved it so much that attendance rose on those days. So we started rotating the meals. Now they don't know when it will come, so they go to school in anticipation of it."

Sarika sees this as a personal win–like the trick she devised to get students to drink fresh milk. To mask the raw taste, she added a dash of plain tea and sugar. It is now a staple they look forward to.

With two school-age children of her own, Sarika also cares for her ageing parents. After serving lunch, she returns home to wash the dishes and prepare for the next day. The hours are long and she yearns for an extra pair of hands. But the challenges don't seem as daunting when she sees how happy the students are eating her food.

The fruits of her labour can be seen in the students' improved physical appearance, said T M Sudarshani Dissanayake, the 54-year-old principal. Their skin has acquired a healthy colour and they've all gained weight.

Sudharshani joined the school the previous year but believes they've advanced as much as a decade in the 12 months since. The BKF-NTT meal programme is a contributory factor.

"A child once told me he was hungry as his drunken father had eaten the little rice they'd saved for the next morning," she narrated. "Many children come to school missing breakfast for similar reasons. We struggled to retain attention during afternoon classes."

The principal is from Bibile and had attended Uva Wellassa Maha Vidyalaya, a popular school in town. With close community ties, she is acutely attuned to the hurdles of growing up in rural poverty, including the impact of poor nutrition and insufficient food on children.

There were just 70 students at the Yalkumbura Maha Vidyalaya when Sudharshani took over. The A/Level classes weren't even functioning. "The school was on the verge of shutting down, mainly because a new national school opened up nearby," she said. "Poor children can get lost in national schools because they're relegated to the back rows without the attention and opportunities provided by smaller village schools, like ours." For instance, her teachers are aware of the family details and personal travails of each of their students.

Sudharshani is a firm believer in daily attendance. Children, she says, are safer in school. The risk of them falling victim to child labour or being exposed to domestic violence is lower. The meal programmes have gone a long way in slashing absenteeism and even spurring new enrolments. The school now has 83 students.

The principal has a five-year plan to stabilise her institution and meet its structural needs. She hopes also to renovate the abysmal toilets and recommence A/Level classes but funds are a challenge. "I have no personal debt," she said, "but I'm in debt to every hardware shop in this area, for things I've bought to try and keep this school functioning."

Sarika prepares lunch for the children

Public funding for schools such as these—located nearly 250km away from Colombo, the commercial capital—is poor and further reduced during the recent national economic crisis. This was common to the three schools we visited in Bibile, Moneragala district. They all benefit from the BKF-NTT school meal programme.

His institution doesn't even have the wherewithal to clean and maintain the school grounds, says J A Wimalasena, the 50-year-old principal of Serava Kanishta Vidyalaya, a primary school. Their students are mostly children of farmers or daily wage earners who faced the full blow of the economic crisis. So the school meals came at the right time.

"Food is a basic need," Wimalasena asserts. "We are poor schools with poor parents and poor children. Children love this lunch so attendance has increased, as has enrollment." He praised the variety of food served, including soup, *kola kenda*[1], dates, chicken and fruit salad.

NTT also donated two computers to Serava but they need a router. Technology is difficult to acquire on the fringes of Moneragala, Wimalasena sighs. They don't have phone signals near the school which teaches 72 children from grades one to five. Some schools in adjoining villages are worse off, he admits. The meal programme added value to his institution and he recently accepted two transfers from less privileged schools. "The parents asked for their children to be sent here," he said. "From what I understood, it was for the food."

Kotagama Kanishta Vidyalaya (an hour's drive from Serava) is another primary with just 51 students whose parents are predominantly daily wage labourers. N C B Gunawardena, the 47-year-old principal, says many children miss school during the rainy season as work is scarce and there isn't enough money to buy food.

"That's why we value these meals," Gunawardena says, describing the joy they bring the children. Initially, they had been suspicious of soup as neither they nor their parents had seen it before. "They are used to eating rice with another carbohydrate and rarely have proteins," he explained.

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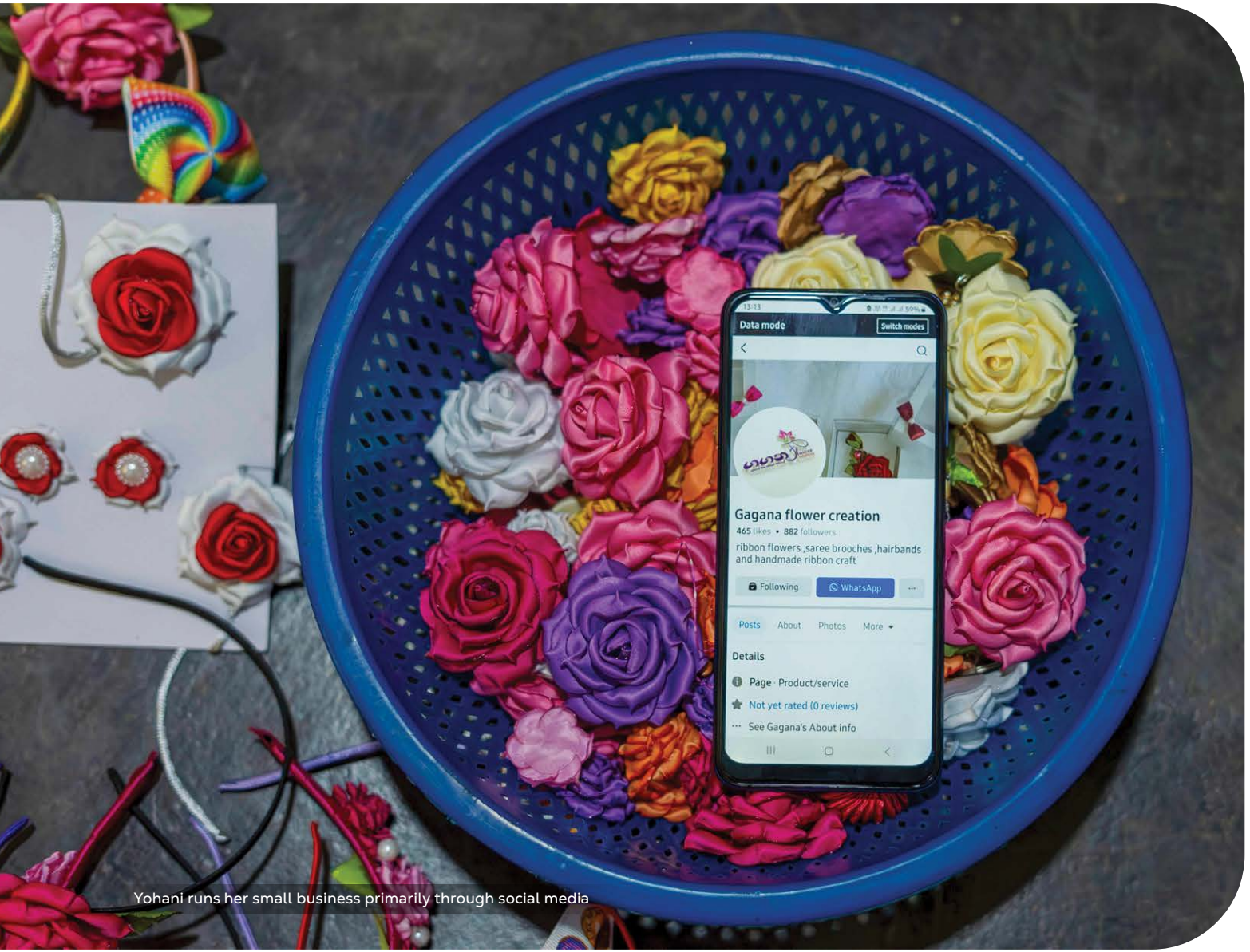
[1] A traditional herbal congee or gruel made from rice, coconut milk and the juice of leafy greens.

BKF President Mohamed Abubakar Mohamed Seeras has seen the happiness in those little faces. Fried rice might not be a “big thing” for someone from Colombo but it was a delicacy for children here.

At 38, Seeras has volunteered with BKF since 2010, becoming its president eight years later. They are a non-profit that coordinates projects for international charities and donors. They aim to meet the education needs of children and young people in Moneragala where decent facilities remain elusive.

BKF also run a free Montessori school that provides daily free meals. And they grant scholarships to fatherless children and young people who qualify for university from their area. “Without nutrition, there is no learning and this leads to dropouts,” Seeras says, echoing the words of Sudharshani who, with tear-filled eyes, said that for her children to learn their hunger must first be assuaged.

The three schools BKF-NTT assist with meals are in picturesque locations that illustrate the natural beauty of rural Sri Lanka. But their buildings house many stories of poverty-driven hardship. We arrived at the school in Yalkumbura to see the children form a line as soon as the interval bell rang. They pay us no attention. Their eyes are trained on Sarika who serves them delicious fried rice with a smile on her face.



Yohani runs her small business primarily through social media

9 AMPLIFYING RURAL VOICES

Prathiba Media Network

At 35, Yohani was the oldest at the Prathiba Media Network's (PMN) social media and video-editing training for small business owners in June 2024. But not having known how to make even a Facebook reel, she believes she was the student who gained the most from it.

The coaching, funded by NTT, was invaluable—and essential—as Yohani Thakshila Jayakody runs her small business primarily through social media. She started making brooches, hairbands, hair clips and ribbon flowers shortly after her child was born seven years ago. Her husband's income from the Special Task Force no longer sufficed and she looked to ease their burden.

Inspired by her mother who sold handmade clothes and bags in their remote village of Maduraketiya in Moneragala, a few doors from their home, Yohani decided to put her creative skills to use. Her first order was from a Montessori school: ribbon flowers to pin on children's costumes for an event. She enthusiastically delivered a basketful.

On a whim, Yohani shared photos on her social media and in online groups where other handcrafted wares were advertised. The orders flowed in. She shows us some of her work—vibrant, colour-coordinated hairbands and clips. Her artistry is evident in her products but, with social media algorithms constantly shifting, Yohani struggles to keep up with the competition.

"The algorithms now favour videos and many others are selling similar products online," says Yohani, explaining why the PMN training was timely. She chose social media as her platform because it allowed her to integrate the value of her labour into her prices.

When she offered her products to shops in town, they quoted low prices without, she felt, valuing them correctly.

Online customers from around the country were eager to pay for her handiwork. “My items have gone to every district except Jaffna,” Yohani says, proudly. From her humble beginnings, Gagana Flower Creation, named after her son, now does bulk orders.

Moneragala is one of Sri Lanka’s most rural districts. Yohani updates herself on the latest design trends through Pinterest, a visual content-sharing platform, and YouTube. However, singlehandedly running an online business is not as easy as it looks on Facebook.

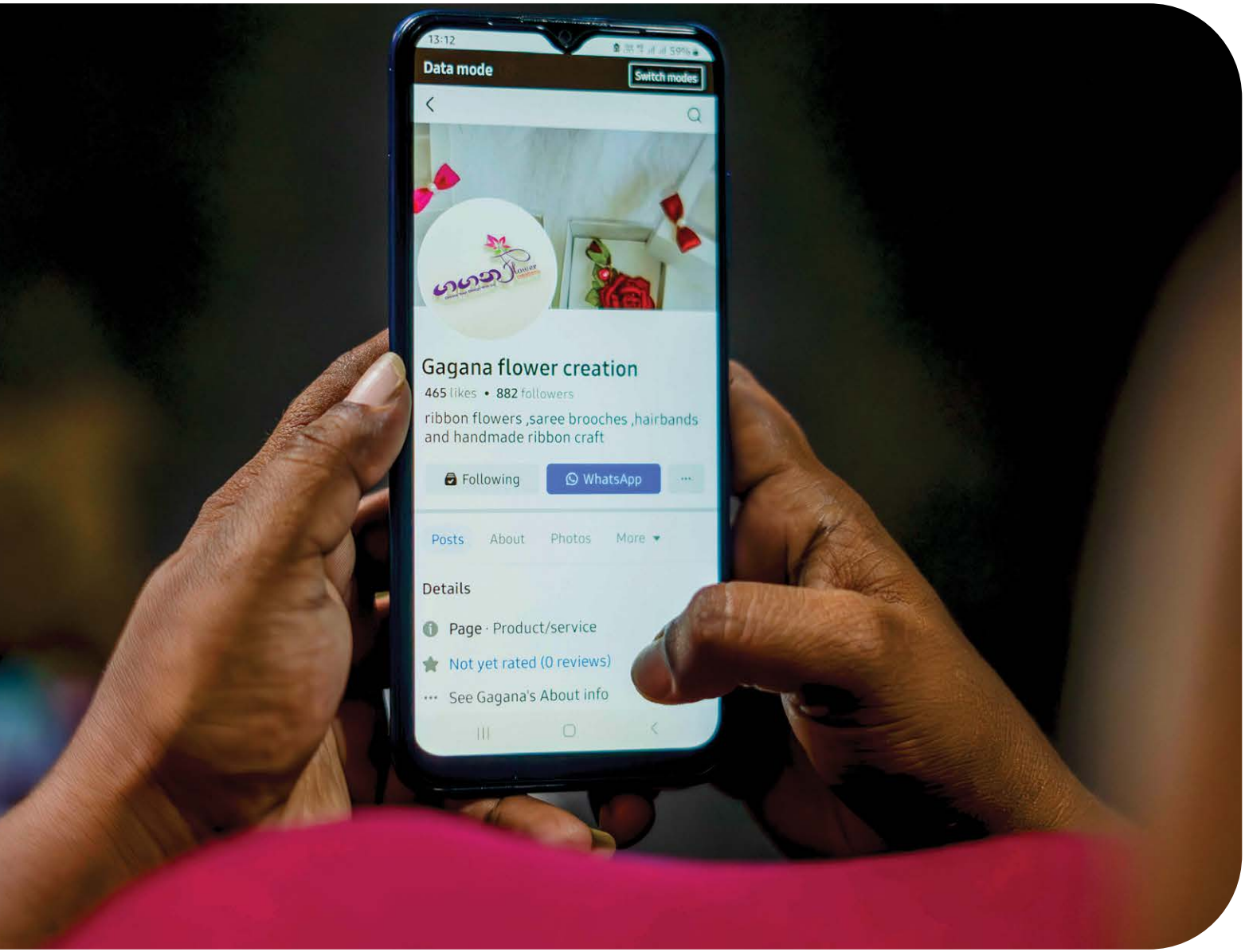
“A lack of sleep gives me high blood pressure,” she sighs. “When I receive a big order, I must work through the night to ensure I can finish it on time.” Her husband is stationed outside Moneragala and comes home once a month. Yohani both runs the business and raises their child. On days when she has a parents’ meeting or school function, she catches up by working into the late hours.

From a corner in their small living room, Yohani’s mother watches silently. Despite the heavy workload, her daughter also takes care of her parents, she cuts in. And as a child, she was always making little things and embroidering.

Yohani now wants to beat the competition online. The PMN training is crucial to that journey. She’s starting a YouTube channel which, in addition to promoting her products, will feature tutorials.

Her vision reflects the goals PMN set for themselves when they were formed in 2008 by 26 men and women from Matara who aspired to create space for those from rural areas to raise their voices, after observing that mainstream media routinely neglected local stories. The founders were aged between 18 and 25.

“We aim to let people from our areas independently talk about their problems through media and to find solutions for them,” says Nuwan Pushpakumara, its 32-year-old programme coordinator. Media, therefore, is at the core of their activities, all of which are targeted at granting young people in rural areas opportunities to develop.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Gagana flower creation
465 likes • 882 followers
ribbon flowers ,saree brooches ,hairbands and handmade ribbon craft
Following
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Posts
About
Photos
More
Details
Page · Product/service
Not yet rated (0 reviews)
See Gagana's About info

They have hosted four shows through local radio channels, primarily the Southern Province's Ruhuna Sevaya and the Uva Province's Uva Praja Guwanviduliya.[1] They featured locals highlighting grassroots-level issues. For instance, a series called *Praja Handa* ("community voice" in Sinhala) engaged with local civil society activists and organisations. Another, *Sebae Handa* ("real voice"), focused on peace and reconciliation. And their latest, called *Mawatha* ("path") is about human trafficking.

With NTT support, they produced the fourth: *Manusath Handa* ("voice of humanity"), centering on female entrepreneurs in the Southern and Uva provinces. It was done on the heels of their community journalism training for 29 rural entrepreneurs in the Uva, Central, and Southern provinces that Yohani had attended.

Response to the four-day training was overwhelmingly positive, says Nuwan, pointing out that social media has facilitated the creation of small businesses in rural areas: "But the competitiveness online has made it essential for them to learn marketing, especially how to make promotional videos."

The programme nurtured the big dreams of many members of small communities struggling for a foothold in the fast-paced online marketplace. It is an apt illustration of the spirit of PMN's efforts to create opportunities for rural communities neglected by the mainstream.

[1] Translates to "Uva Community Radio", in Sinhala.

Puvaneshwaran with his sturdy peddle-powered sewing machine

10

NEW TOOLS FOR A NEW LIFE

Centre for Handicapped

After Thiyagarasa Kantharuban lost his right leg to shelling in 2009, working for someone else became unsustainable. A mechanic since he was a teenager in India–to where his family had fled the war when he was just three–he continued with the profession upon returning to Sri Lanka in 2005. But they were constantly displaced by war and, at 22, an explosion shattered his leg.

Kantharuban was determined to persist. Fixing motorcycles and three-wheelers is a passion that kept his family alive for decades. Although he is talented, opportunities were limited owing to his injury. While working in garages, he encountered insensitivity towards his condition. “No one will help you,” he explained. “You can’t take leave on days you are unwell or take breaks easily.”

Now 37, Kantharuban owns a garage in Vishwamadu, Mullaitivu, thanks to an NTT-supported initiative by Centre for Handicapped (CFH). Perched on a stool with his prosthetic leg off, he attends to a broken motorcycle. “The socks needed for prosthetics get sweaty so it is difficult to work with them constantly on in this sweltering heat,” he described. “When I worked in other garages, I had to wear it at all times because no one would help to pass any equipment. You were on your own.”

Kantharuban also developed wounds on his stump from long hours of toiling in the prosthetic. But he can now work prosthetic-free in his shop alongside his one employee, as a team.

“Self-employment is an important option for persons with disabilities,” observed Balakrishnan Vijayaluxmi, a field officer for the CFH branch in Kilinochchi.

Kantharuban tends to a motorbike at his new garage in Vishwamadu

With a disability herself, she has been organising and uniting her community to advocate for the unique problems they face. Opportunities are scarce as employers doubt their capabilities or that they can serve in customer-facing jobs.

Operating in Sri Lanka since 1992, CFH provide free prosthetics and livelihood support for persons with disabilities. In war-torn Vanni[1], disability rates are consistently among the country's highest. Inhabitants were injured and disabled during the conflict. Many others lost their limbs even after the fighting ended from stepping on landmines.

The 30-year-old armed conflict between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) came to an end in 2009 when the LTTE was militarily defeated. Although the war is over, its root causes–discrimination, marginalisation and demands for devolution of power–remain unaddressed.

As part of their NTT-funded project, CFH have assisted 155 people since 2020. Beneficiaries have purchased tools and raw materials like sewing machines, water sprinklers, irrigation pipes, stone/marble cutters and plywood. Women with disabilities, often widowed, have also benefited from livelihood assistance. Having received water sprinklers and large pots and pans, they grow vegetables and do food catering from the safety and convenience of their homes, said Vijayalakshmi.

Persons with disabilities are often compelled to shift career paths, even several times. Thirty-eight-year-old Arulappa Bertrand has trained as a plumber, a counsellor and a fence builder but has now settled on farming. Due to injury-related complications and new difficulties as he ages, he hopes to open a shop soon.

The inability to acquire equipment can be an obstacle to becoming self-employed. Many project beneficiaries previously hired equipment and machinery or depended on the generosity of others. They now hold sway over their livelihoods and can save money on equipment rental.

When CFH approached Kantharuban, he was working in his brother's shop, frequently sharing tools with him. This eroded his capacity to make money as they had to take turns assisting clients. The garage system is such that you only earn from the clients you serve.

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[1] "Vanni" refers to a large mainland area in the Northern Province, encompassing the districts of Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya and Kilinochchi. These areas, which were in the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, were subjected to bombardment and shelling during the last stages of the war and hence were the most affected.

"Ruban Auto Garage", the exterior of Kantharuban's new work place

With his decades of experience and NTT's financial support, Kantharuban bought new tools, renovated a premises and set up his own garage business. Now he makes between Rs.1000 and Rs.10,000 daily. Some days are profitable–and others not. But every month, he makes enough to maintain himself, his wife and three young children.

More importantly, having his own business means Kantharuban doesn't depend on charity. "I earn and I eat," he said, "I have no need to go to others for help and that makes me happy." CFH have flipped traditional narratives about disability, enabling people like Kantharuban to sustain not only their own lives but also those of their employees.

Rasenthiram Puvaneshwaran lost his leg in 1987 during the war. The 60-year-old now employs able-bodied staff of his own. With over thirty years of experience as a tailor, he has started a sewing business, mostly making clothes and vehicle seat covers. He was a farmer before his injury and realised he would have to pivot professions to survive in his new circumstances. He taught himself to sew by dismantling old fabrics and putting them back together. This way, he sustained his five-member family with a single, pedal-powered, "Singer" sewing machine in a small shop in Kilinochchi.

In 2023, with CFH support and his savings, Puvaneshwaran purchased an electronic sewing machine, expanded to a larger shop in the main junction and hired two employees. He is now running a "serious" business. "On my old machine, I had to pedal and could only do so with one leg," he said. "The electric one is better. It allows me to work and produce much more."

Sitting at his old machine–his prosthetic leg resting on the treadle and his other leg operating it–he chuckles: "Because I learned sewing on the pedalling one, if I am being honest, I like it more."

Puvaneshwaran feels he has had an impact through his hard work. With experience in building an enterprise from scratch and a helping hand from CFH, he trained and employed two women whose husbands died in the war and who are sole providers for their young families. With his children now grown, it is these spillover effects in a war-torn economy that give him joy and fulfillment.

Puvaneshwaran's work keeps him happy and healthy, he says: "I don't even think of myself as disabled…because I work. If you stay at home saying you are not able, only then do you overthink and get depressed. When you have the time to wallow, your mental health takes a hit."

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[1] LKR1000 is equivalent to USD3.38; LKR10,000 is equivalent to USD33.76 (conversion date Jan 13, 2025).

Sajeetha signs "communication"

11

A PUBLIC SECTOR FOR ALL

Organisation for Rehabilitation of the Handicapped

The Northern Province has only one official sign language interpreter: Sivarasa Sajeetha. Before she joined in 2020, the deaf had no free interpretation to rely on anywhere–the police station, the courthouse or even the local village headman's (*grama niladhari*) office.

Originally from Mullaitivu, 33-year-old Sajeetha began her career post-A/Levels as a caregiver in a home for children with disabilities. The deaf kids there taught her basic sign language when they spent time together in the dormitories. The Organisation for Rehabilitation of the Handicapped (ORHAN) then chose her for an NTT-funded project to introduce interpreters to all District Secretariats in the Northern province.

Established in 1999 to advocate for people with disabilities, ORHAN have built communities of the differently-abled and consistently pushed for their land, gender and legal rights. They are also involved in education and livelihood support, running a school for children with disabilities and a vocational training center.

Sajeetha and four others did a 15-day training with ORHAN before she was posted to the Mullaitivu District Secretariat in October 2015. For a year, the position was paid for with ORHAN funds. Under a partnership with them, the government had undertaken to absorb the cohort–but failed. Sajeetha persisted, volunteering at the district secretariat and enlisted in the sign language course at the National Institute of Education in Colombo. Focused on entering the official cadre, she graduated in the Tamil stream at the top of her class.

ORHAN continued to lobby the government to recruit sign language interpreters and funding was finally allocated in 2020 for one officer. Sajeetha easily cleared the exam and was posted to the Northern Province Department of Social Services where she still serves–doing direct interpretations for deaf people, managing training, research and publications on sign language and administering a WhatsApp hotline for sign language interpretation.

Although there are private interpreters, state employees who know sign language are essential because trust is built with the community through communication, Sajeetha stressed. Public officials understand government processes better and therefore are better geared to convey their intricacies in sign language. “Firstly, deaf people have to trust us (interpreters),” she said. “Otherwise, we cannot work together.”

Despite her efforts, Sajeetha explained that deaf people still have to wait hours to receive government services as most public sector staff, including field officers who work directly with them, do not know basic sign language. To address this, she runs a training programme for government employees and has helped formulate a sign directory and sign language guidebook with support from the International Labour Organisation and UNICEF, respectively. Among those who benefited are the National Child Protection Authority, the Department of Probation and Childcare and midwives.

Karuppiah Sivakumar, the 46-year-old head of the Jaffna Public Library’s braille unit, is another recipient of ORHAN’s services. He sits at his desk, earphones on, speedily touch-typing on the keyboard (which he knows by heart). His computer simultaneously synthesises his words into speech. When interrupted by a call, Sivakumar listens closely as his phone spells out the caller’s name before deciding whether to answer or call back.

Sivakumar lost his sight at 17 as the result of a war injury. Originally from Kandy in the central hills, his family fled to the North during the 1983 anti-Tamil riots and was displaced again during the fighting there. His two siblings went missing. He now lives and works in Jaffna, helping fellow blind people adapt to accessibility tools and technology and use library resources.

In 2015, Sivakumar took a four-month course by ORHAN on using computers for the blind. But “Jaws”, the screen reader software, was only in English. ORHAN helped Sivakumar travel to Chennai, India, where he learned how to operate Tamil software for the blind and about advances in blind people’s education.

The Yaazhl Association for the Visually Handicapped (Yaazhl Association) and ORHAN, with NTT funding, then established the braille unit at the public library and recruited Sivakumar to manage it. He taught computer classes for blind students, helped them with administrative tasks and encouraged them to use the library's audio and braille resources.

As with Sajeetha, the government didn't recruit Sivakumar. For nearly a decade, he worked informally while receiving a small stipend from the Yaazhl Association. In 2024, however, he received a permanent position at the library.

"Back in the day, 45 people would come every month to learn to use the computer," said Sivakumar. "The large numbers have reduced now but I always say this is a good thing because many people became blind in the war. Now there are fewer blind people." Armed conflict ended in 2009.

Sivakumar has run computer courses for 80 visually impaired students. Many others, both children and adults, learned skills from him "informally"–such as when they visit the library to use a public computer or to borrow an audiobook. Some of them have graduated from universities and even entered the public sector.

A 63-year-old man recently came to the unit, narrates Sivakumar. He was blinded in an accident as an adult and was looking for audiobooks. He encountered Sivakumar who installed blind-friendly audio settings on his phone and showed him how to use the computer, helping him become independent. The unit head shared his experiences with the Yaazhl Association and encouraged him to join the community.

"That man came only for an audiobook, but when I showed him how my phone works [it has accessibility settings and announces caller names] he got so excited," explained Sivakumar. "And when I demonstrated the computer software he was beyond thrilled." Throughout his stint at the library, Sivakumar has unlocked opportunities for many who only know of the availability of free reading material.

Sivakumar's blind wife works in the government sector as a development officer. They have a toddler and a happy family life. "When you work and feel you can be independent, you become happy and peaceful," he said, "and with a little bit of help–because we do still need help–blind people can achieve that."


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Sivakumar types on his keyboard at the blind unit in Jaffna Public Library

Seema, caring for her crops

12 STEPPING UP WHEN SYSTEMS FAIL

AIDS Foundation Lanka

The antibiotics are not helping. It is 2009 and Seema* is battling a persistent phlegm and cough. Her husband's job on a long-distance lorry keeps him from home for days. She runs the household and raises their two sons, who have also been coughing for the past few weeks.

Is it something worse than the flu? She can't even bend over without her joints screaming in pain. And she is always tired. Seema sees several doctors before one of them suggests she take an HIV test at the STD Clinic-Ragama.

Positive. The results terrified Seema. She only knew of the disease through rumours. It was not discussed openly in society. But the doctors at the National STD/AIDs Control Programme (NSACP) were kind. They explained patiently about the illness and available treatment options while gently prodding her to get her sons screened. At just five and six, they also tested positive.

After treatment began and Seema experienced the level of care extended by the doctors, her anxieties eased. While medicines were free in the state-funded health sector, other costs became a burden for their single-income household. She worried about the bus fare to the clinic, an hour away; and fretted about savings, especially for her old age. That is when NSACP gave her the contact details of AIDS Foundation Lanka (AFL), a non-profit organisation run by volunteers.

AFL breathed new life into her, Seema attests. They paid for the bus so she and the boys didn't miss their monthly check-ups, gave her food rations every month and provided livelihood support for her to start farming.

We met her on a sunny day in November 2024. It was an exceptionally wet year but the worst of the deluges were over. Seema's modest home is hundreds of kilometres from Sri Lanka's commercial capital, Colombo. She earns through farming. Her garden smelled of fresh rain that day. Seema excitedly showed us her life's work, starting at one edge of her plot of land. Over the next two hours, she introduced me to more plant species than I had ever known. Her primary cash crop is corn but she also grows various yams, lemons unique to the tropics and edible green leaves not usually seen in the marketplace.

"In 2009, when I was 34 and had just learnt about this disease, I was so weak I couldn't bend down," the 49-year-old said, proud of the strength she has gained over time. "Now I have grown this farm by myself and spend most of my days outdoors."

Throughout her decades of service, Dr Sujatha Samarakoon, the 73-year-old president of AFL, has met many others like Seema. With her background–she is a consultant venereologist and a public health expert–she joined the NSACP as a medical officer. Their role quickly broadened, with the discovery of HIV in Sri Lanka.

"When the first patient from Sri Lanka, a foreigner, was detected in 1986, I went to see them with Dr Gamini Jayakuru (my boss) at the time," Dr Samarakoon said, of the early days. "In 1987, a Sri Lankan was diagnosed at Sri Jayewardenepura Hospital and we visited him, as well."

As information about HIV became more widespread, doctors at NSACP campaigned to destigmatise the disease and to support people living with HIV (PLHIVs). There was stigma related to using the healthcare facilities while both media and non-medical opinions on HIV were damaging, Dr Samarakoon recalled. Yet the doctors steadily enhanced their clinical knowledge and public health approaches to HIV.

In 2007, Sri Lanka hosted the "International Conference of Asia Pacific on Aids" for which Dr Samarakoon was a volunteer organiser. They discussed how best to serve the community with some money they saved from the event's budget. That is how they–Dr Samarakoon, Deshmanya Professor A H Sherifdeen, eminent surgeon and academic, and one of the country's most respected civil servants, Bradman Weerakoon–formed the AIDS Foundation Lanka the following year, to support the NSACP.

Seema's shed, where she rests while tending to her crops

Seema's cash crop is corn, but her garden is filled with fruit trees

From the outset, they adopted a holistic approach to public health, providing livelihood, counselling and financial aid to PLHIVs to encourage them to continue treatment. “We built confidence among PLHIVs, supported antiretroviral therapy and elevated their nutrition,” Dr Samarakoon said. “We communicated to them that they could come to us for anything.”

Assistance included nutrition packs and help with medical tests; school van hires, tuition fees, school bags, books and stationery for children; computer courses for HIV-positive students and even community bonding events like parties on special occasions. AFL also sponsored computer courses for HIV-positive students.

After the national economy collapsed in 2022, however, AFL struggled with funds[1]. Their nutrition package shrank and monthly donations to affected families dropped. Dr Samarakoon fretted that all those years of work would go to waste if the PLHIVs now fell off their radar and they couldn’t monitor if they kept up with treatment.

NTT stepped in, allowing the AFL to continue with their work. And their link with PLHIVs remains strong. Even today, a patient who seeks treatment at any state-run STD clinic is briefed about the Foundation with a note on the services they provide.

Not everything is “fine and rosy” for PLHIVs now, Dr Samarakoon admits. But there has been significant progress in destigmatising HIV. Consequently, public health has also improved. It was vital, however, to ensure uninterrupted help.

*Name changed.

[1] AFL runs on interest payments from an endowment fund and some routine donations. When Sri Lanka’s economy collapsed, the Central Bank slashed interest rates to stimulate economic activity and encourage borrowing. This meant AFL earned insufficient income from their endowment fund to meet demand.

Sumaga Ruhunu's team

13

SILENT LULLABIES

Sumaga Ruhunu Circle of the Deaf

He couldn't hear the lullabies his mother sang to him as a child. But Kasun does remember the small toys his parents hung above his playpen and sensed their deep love as they endeavoured to comprehend his silent world.

Growing up as the youngest of a middle-class family near the shores of sun-kissed Weligama in Sri Lanka's South, Kasun's hearing disability left him struggling to communicate. It felt like he was confined to a dark, lonely space but the care and patience of his parents, both teachers, gave him the courage to search for meaning.

Step by step, he explored the world. In 2018, he qualified for a one-year leadership programme in Japan. "That," says 41-year-old Kasun Chandana Jayathunga, "was the turning point in my life." Kasun is the project manager at the Sumaga Ruhunu Circle of the Deaf. Located on a hillock just 10 minutes from the surfers' paradise of Weligama Beach, this is the gathering place for nearly 12,500 members of the Southern Province's hearing-impaired community. It has two sections—a road-facing shop, built with funding from NTT, and, higher up, an office and a livelihood centre where new products are dreamt up and brought to life for sale.

It had been remarkably easy for Kasun to communicate in Japan, where sign language was commonly used. "Education wasn't a challenge for me, there," he says, contrasting it with the obstacles Sri Lankan children with hearing disabilities face.

Sri Lanka is slow to grasp that the world is configured differently for the deaf. The education gap is vast, mostly because teachers—including in schools for the hearing-impaired—don't know sign language. Instruction, therefore, does not accommodate the disability, leaving an entire community with lifelong difficulties in securing work, connecting with their parents, and even raising their own children.

Exams all the way to A/Levels see abled and differently-abled children tackle the same questionnaires. Not only is Sinhala inherently different in its written form–compared with how it is delivered in sign language–but it is also not adequately taught in deaf schools, Kasun says. This places hearing-impaired and deaf children at a disadvantage when asked to read and write in Sinhala as it is their second language (sign, being the first).

Kasun searches for answers to these common problems. It is because he is "solution-oriented" that he chose to work at Sumaga Ruhunu after returning from Japan, he said. The institution started developing an e-sign reader, a technology that translates written text or visual content into sign language, to help deaf children with education. The feedback was overwhelming. Children were excited to use graphic and visual language to express themselves and, for the first time, to learn without relying on anyone else.

His aspirations didn't end there. In 2019, Kasun and his team devised the *Sanvada* (which translates to "conversations," in Sinhala) app with NTT support, a sign language interpreter for over 3,500 Sinhala and Tamil words (he is especially thrilled that funding from NTT allowed them to incorporate Tamil into it).

"In addition to helping the wider society interact with us, this app is a bridge between the Sinhala and Tamil deaf communities," Kasun enthuses, explaining that, before this, the two could not unite as they spoke different sign languages and were stymied by lip-reading and cultural differences. The e-sign reader, too, was later expanded to Tamil.

Sanvada eases many of the deaf community's difficulties in communicating with public institutions and others, especially as Sri Lanka has just around 15 sign language interpreters for an estimated 500,000 people with hearing disabilities.

The e-sign reader, however, has further to go before it can "properly" help the deaf community, Kasun says, pointing to technical and structural problems that arise when introducing it to schools for the deaf. For instance, two out of the three schools in the Southern Province have no

computers. “We are working slowly to overcome these hurdles, but we need the support of the National Institute of Education,” he points out.

Daya Jayawickrama, Sumaga Ruhunu president, beams with pride as Kasun recounts their achievements. At nine, she had contracted pneumonia leading to serious complications and, eventually, hearing loss at the age of 12. As the organisation’s secretary at inception in 1996, the 60-year-old remembers how they battled for a footing in Sri Lankan society.

Although the public largely excludes deaf people from everyday life, they are not immune to its adversities. Sumaga Ruhunu was a response to their need to find community in each other, especially in the face of social violence in the 1980s and 1990s when they realised they were weaker alone.

“We had 99 members at the beginning but not even a place to meet,” recalled Daya. They shifted from one rented room to another across the Matara district, adamant not to shut down as they were the only connection for many living in isolation. While operating out of one such minimally equipped building, they collaborated with NTT which, in 2022, helped them construct a shop on donated land. Within one year and three months, they had earned enough to add the office and livelihood centre to the premises.

From early on, Sumaga Ruhuna provided livelihood training to deaf people in the Southern Province including in cooking, shoemaking, handloom weaving, tailoring and “Juki” machine (industrial sewing machine) skills. They later partnered with the UK’s Marks & Spencer to train 350 members and get them garment industry jobs in the Koggala export processing zone, Galle district. And they now run a vibrant handloom and tailoring business at their headquarters where their community’s beautiful creations—from totes and laptop bags to beach towels—are produced and sold to businesses across Sri Lanka.

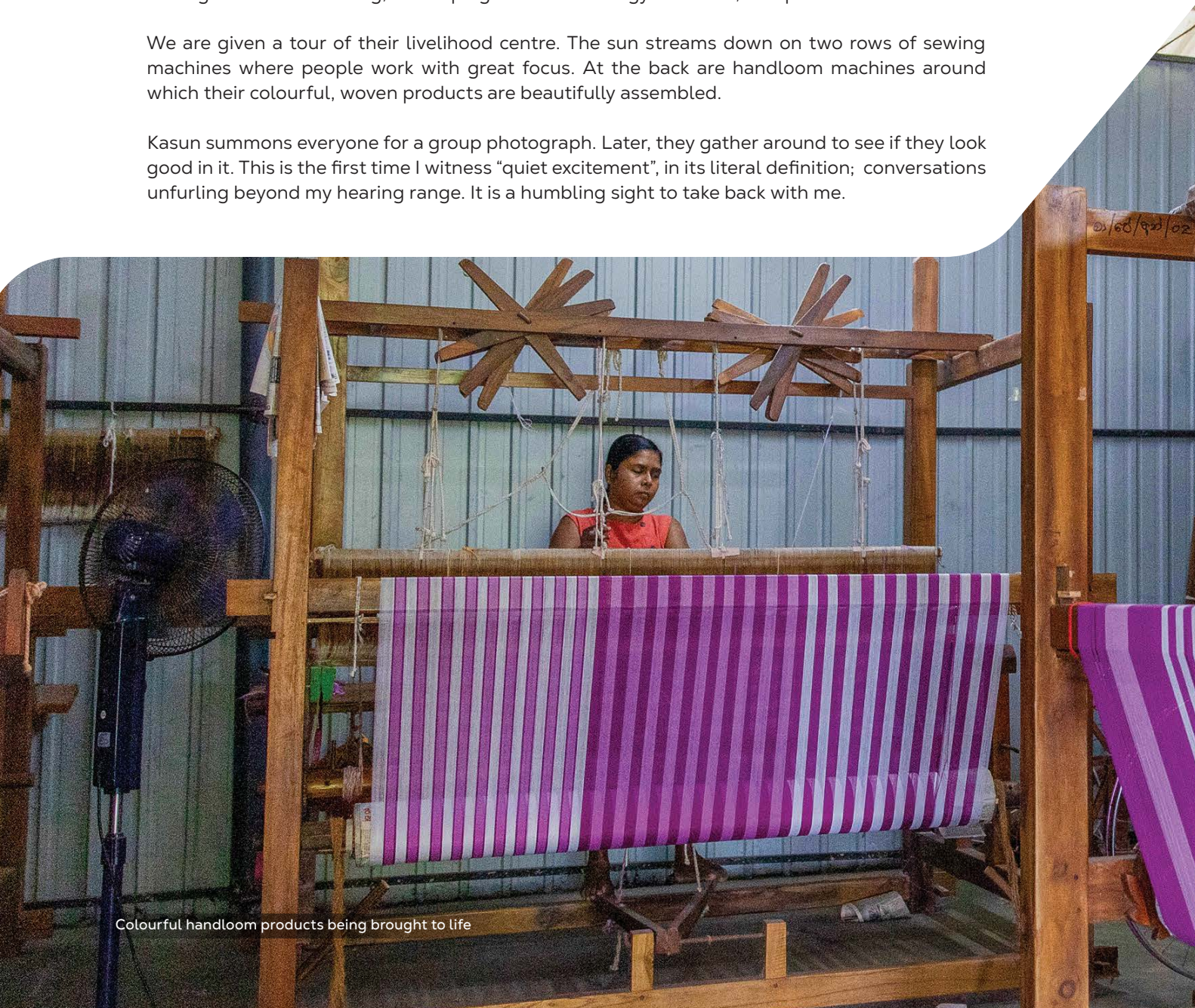
M Amjath, the Sumaga Ruhunu accountant, says NTT greatly enhanced their understanding of “the business side of things”, beyond book-balancing. The coaching he received through the Trust boosted his professional development, the 65-year-old explains, espousing more entrepreneurship training for deaf people engaged in businesses.

All three spoke with us through Mallika Kumarapperuma, a 42-year-old sign language interpreter who, after leaving her job at a school for the deaf in Matara, now volunteers with Sumaga Ruhunu.

Communication difficulties cause a multitude of problems, she affirmed. “That is why the work Sumaga Ruhunu are doing, developing these technology solutions, is important.”

We are given a tour of their livelihood centre. The sun streams down on two rows of sewing machines where people work with great focus. At the back are handloom machines around which their colourful, woven products are beautifully assembled.

Kasun summons everyone for a group photograph. Later, they gather around to see if they look good in it. This is the first time I witness “quiet excitement”, in its literal definition; conversations unfurling beyond my hearing range. It is a humbling sight to take back with me.



Colourful handloom products being brought to life

Karuvi's "Shine Detergent Liquid," the product that started their story

14 FROM EACH, ACCORDING TO ABILITY

Karuvi-Centre for Social Resource of Differently Abled

When Kanagalingam Tharmasekaram and his colleagues visited a fellow blind man at his home, they struggled to get him out the door. Since losing his vision in an accident, he hadn't left his house in a year. He now hesitated in the doorway. But that first step outside, whilst holding on to his newfound blind friends, gave him what he most needed: confidence.

Karuvi (which translates to "tool", in Tamil) Centre for Social Resource of Differently abled is an organisation run by and for people with disabilities in the Jaffna district. Their goal is to empower them through employment, thereby instilling in them strength and self-assurance. They are an NGO-cum-social enterprise that manufactures washing liquid, soap, sanitiser and garments by enlisting people with disabilities.

Forty-eight-year-old Tharmasekaram, founder and vice president, is blind in both eyes. He explained that people with disabilities struggle to find work and to live an independent, dignified life. Karuvi follow a social enterprise model that reduces their reliance on charity.

Starting with just three people and Rs.140,000[1], the organisation went door to door hawking their "Karuvi shine washing liquid". Today, they are a multi-product, multi-factory group that supplies buyers, including retailers, in Jaffna and Colombo. It was a groundbreaking initiative. No other entity in the North has promoted people with disabilities to such a central, public role in a business. "Initially, people bought our products because they felt sympathy for us," said Tharmasekaram. "But now they buy them because of the high standard of quality and service."

[1] LKR140,000 is equivalent USD472.58 (conversion date Jan 13, 2025).

As demand grew, NTT entered the scene, helping Karuvi scale up their business and support more people. Through their funding, Karuvi developed their factory and expanded to more products like handwash, hand sanitiser, dish wash, garments and paper recycling. They provided more people with disabilities employment, with 27 now working with them. Nine hundred more are registered with Karuvi and receive stipends, self-employment support and free marketing assistance, as funds permit.

Karuvi also boosted their assets through the support of NTT which paid for an installment on a lorry to transport goods to shops and expand their business. They no longer had to sell their products in small quantities using trishaws. Leaving behind the high-effort, low-reward, door-to-door business, they now deal in large quantities.

The lorry enabled more females to join Karuvi as workers. Women with disabilities are often discouraged from certain types of work because of heightened safety concerns arising from their gender and disability. Employment with their marketing team was especially discouraged by families and other members of society, citing risks associated with sending them to new locations. With Karuvi's private lorry to use for transport, they and their families felt reassured.

The lorry has now been paid for in full and their detergent factory is valued at over Rs. 20 million due to NTT's contribution. Assets are important for Karuvi, says Tharmasekaram, because they allow their business to be sustainable and reduce dependence on handouts, one of their foundational philosophies.

Running a company with employees who have disabilities requires good management and teamwork. It takes effort, trial and error to match someone to a job based on what he or she is able to do. At the soap factory, for instance, people without legs operate the machinery while the blind focus on sales and marketing.

Karuvi see themselves primarily as a role model for society. "If we want people to understand that disabled people are capable," said Tharmasekaram, "then we must start with ourselves. We need to show that disabled people can lead the organisation, too." There is more credibility in people like him working and inspiring others with disabilities than able-bodied allies encouraging them from the sidelines, he opines.

So their office welcomes all. In this simple, uncluttered space, there are more people than there is stuff. Both people with and without disabilities wander around, working, cleaning or just chatting. The office resembles a community centre that hundreds of members visit.

Tharmasekaram has big plans. He hopes to open a hostel for people from other districts who want to work at Karuvi and to create accessible housing where disabled people can feel at home and empowered. “There is an openness at Karuvi, where people with disabilities can explore different areas of work, to see what they are capable of and develop holistic skills,” he explained. “There is a level of independence to do that.”

The number of people working with Karuvi has reduced in recent years, something Tharmasekaram shares with pride. The reason is that many of them are employed by other companies, or even abroad, leveraging the skills they learned and developed at Karuvi when no one else gave them a chance.

A worker operates the soap making machinery in Jaffna

Sex workers in the Galle district find it difficult to access health services

15 A PLACE TO BE YOURSELF

Human & Natural Resources Development Foundation

It is midday when we take the stairs to the Human and Natural Resources Development Foundation's (HNRDF) rented office overlooking the picturesque Galle coastline. The road outside is quiet but the room inside brims with conversation and laughter.

Gathered are members of the Southern Province's LGBTQI community who have close connections with HNRDF. They're updating each other about their lives. I ask them how much time they can give us. All day if I want, they chuckled…because they love hanging out there. She cannot get rid of them when they come, Sanjeewani jokes.

While they relax in her office, Sanjeewani Kadawathage, HNRDF's 47-year-old executive director, reveals that the lives the community leads outside, in society, are not as cheerful. The stigma LGBTQI people face in the Southern Province borders on dangerous. They are widely excluded from public services, including health and jobs. And they are often deprived of the love of their families.

Sanjeewani's early focus was on the province's sex workers[1], for whom she facilitated access to sexual and reproductive health care. Since 2010, she has also worked with people from the LGBTQI community. This deepened her awareness of the marginalisation that they, too, experience. She discovered even more instances of structural discrimination when in 2019 she conducted a needs assessment to understand the inequities LGBTIQI people suffered, mainly at the hands of public officials including the police, healthcare workers and employers.

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[1] Sex work is not criminalised in Sri Lanka. However, associated activities such as soliciting, brothel keeping and living off earnings procured from sex work are criminalised. Sex workers are arrested in Sri Lanka under the Vagrants Ordinance of 1841 and the Brothel's Ordinance of 1889.

The study underscored the need to sensitise public officials, especially the police, as a first step towards countering the stigma and HNRDF initiated this work with NTT support. Since 2023, they've conducted awareness and training programmes with divisional secretariats and the police in the Galle and Matara districts.

Kanchana Mapalagamage is a 47-year-old women's development officer they linked up with. For years, she advocated for the rights of the LGBTQI community in a personal capacity amidst challenges from others in the public sector.

"I once posted on Facebook about the need for stress management among transgender people as they experience suicidal thoughts due to their circumstances," she recounted, to illustrate negative attitudes towards the LGBTQI community. "I got a call from a senior professor of a state university who told me it's 'okay' to work with them but not to 'promote' and 'validate' them on social media."

When government employees hold these views, they have harmful consequences, Kanchana said. "I once counselled a transgender girl whose father, a policeman, was organising a *thovilaya*[2] for her. She refused to leave my office, in fear. Her mother wanted to help her but told me she couldn't stand up to the father as she depended on him for money."

Despite the many "fairytales" Sri Lanka spouts about women's empowerment–from boasting about having produced the world's first female prime minister or quoting Buddhist philosophy that likens a mother to The Buddha–when a woman doesn't have an independent income, she's exposed to serious harm and discrimination, Kanchana maintained.

This is worse for LGBTQI persons as they're even more vulnerable and marginalised. They cannot easily obtain services through the public health sector, particularly where it concerns reproductive health, securing gender-affirming care or when obtaining the gender recognition certificate (GRC)[3]. Through HNRDF's awareness programmes, Kanchana has expanded her contacts with the community in the Southern Province and communicated to them that she is available to assist them.

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[2] A ritualistic exorcism ceremony.

[3] A certificate issued by the Ministry of Health to persons above the age of 16 wishing to change their gender, following consultations with a psychiatrist. It allows the person to change their sex in personal identification documents, such as the birth certificate.

LGBTQI people in the Southern Province are often stigmatised

This affiliation proves especially useful during disaster situations when the divisional secretariat office looks for the most vulnerable groups to distribute aid. With stable incomes rare, transgender people often qualify under this category. “During recent floods, I coordinated relief services for them using the network I’ve built via HNRDF,” Kanchana said.

But Kanchana is an exception, not the norm. LGBTQI people usually receive stepmotherly treatment in government offices, says Gayan Thisura*, a 39-year-old member of the community assisted by HNRDF. As the only organisation based in the South that works with the LGBTQI community, HNRDF allow them to connect with and better protect each other. Before this, they had only networked on World AIDS Day through various entities in the field of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. As a practice, the LGBTQI community in the Southern Province remains isolated–afraid to reach out to each other due to pressure from their families or villages.

So HNRDF’s work since the beginning of 2023 was crucial in building their confidence to deal with public officials and police. “As HNRDF did some activities with the police, their knowledge (on due process and human rights) has increased a bit,” says Gayan. “They don’t attack us each time they see us now. They talk to us like we’re human. And we stand up for ourselves better, based on the legal advice given by the organisation.”

Thushara Dhammika, HNRDF project coordinator, is a member of the LGBTQI community with whom he has worked since 2010. He hadn’t been happy with how other civil society organisations in the South engaged with them. When he tried establishing a drop-in centre (a safe space to socialise or bring their worries to) for them in Ambalangoda, they’d been chased out of the village.

“We didn’t back down, though,” 39-year-old Thushara says. And in Sanjeewani, he found the empathy, sensitivity and kindness vital to working with the LGBTQI community. They’re now establishing a drop-in centre in their office that sex workers and LGBTQI people can come to when they need protection or simply a glass of water (Sanjeewani saw that sex workers did not even have a place to get food or water while on the streets).

An important area Sanjeewani and Thushara have addressed is the lack of legal knowledge in the LGBTQI community. Through multiple awareness sessions, they have disseminated information about the law and how to deal with the police.

Their next step is to provide livelihood support. The story of Kamani Perera*, a 34-year-old transgender woman, demonstrates why this is important and urgent. Although experienced in the hospitality sector, having worked in hotels on the South coast from a young age, she is always sacked when her employers find out she's transgender. Employers also discriminate against them for other reasons including their attire. For instance, transitioning persons may wear wigs to align their physical appearance with the gender to which they are transitioning.

Financial difficulties in the LGBTIQ community worsened when the national economy collapsed in 2022. Many in the transgender community couldn't afford hormone replacement therapy as prices skyrocketed. NTT intervened through HNRDF, granting funds that enabled 20 persons to buy these medicines.

On the day we met her, Sanjeewani was busy. She has to extinguish many little fires each day, she says. Sex workers and LGBTQI people call from all corners of the province with problems they confront, simply trying to live life. She is adamant to continue her work. And in the society that Sanjeewani dreams of, parents accept their LGBTQI children with love and care.

*Names changed.

Roshini in her farm

16 NETWORKS OF CARE

Community Strength Development Foundation

At the start of 2002, Lakshman and Chandrakanthi began meeting during the lunch hour opposite the Tower Hall Theatre, Maradana, in Colombo, to discuss how to form a new organisation that could set up a refuge for sex workers in Colombo. They chose a name, evaluated prospective board members, drafted a constitution and registered the Community Strength Development Foundation (CSDF) the following year.

The pair first connected in 1995, when Chandrakanthi worked at a Colombo-based charity. Lakshman was with another NGO and used space in her office to conduct awareness programmes for sex workers. They became friends.

“I hadn’t known that women did sex work for money,” laughs 53-year-old Chandrakanthi Abeykoon, CSDF’s coordinator. “I was not from Colombo and argued with Lakshman that there weren’t any sex workers in my village. He countered that sex work is everywhere.”

His assignment with sex workers had been part of a short-term project with his then-employer. But 55-year-old H A Lakshman, CSDF executive director, says they had forged ties with the women, even handholding them through vital health and other wellbeing activities. When that initiative ended, they wanted to keep supporting them.

At the time, however, many organisations shunned sex workers. Lakshman said his former employer even reprimanded him for inviting them to their office. This hardened Chandrakanthi and Lakshman’s resolve to establish a drop-in centre for sex workers. With no funding or other help, the obstacles were significant.

They would meet during their respective lunch breaks to identify the main challenges sex workers faced and to find ways to bring their plans to fruition. Condom use wasn't treated as a priority by sex workers, so sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) were widespread, and harassment of sex workers by customers and police was common. Chandrakanthi remembers seeing sex workers come in with angry bruises.

CSDF were launched using the funds they had received to work with children from low-income areas in the Colombo District–*wattas*[1], as they are called in Sinhala. Children of sex workers fall into this category. With the Rs 12,000[2] monthly grant, they rented a small annex in the middle of such a *watta* in Peliyagoda on the outskirts of Colombo and hired an employee. This became their drop-in centre along with a reading circle for children.

At one point, the CSDF network had nearly 10,000 sex workers. It was a challenge to connect with sex workers; gathering their information had to be done sensitively. One effective strategy CSDF adopted was to work with peer leaders in identifying hotspots (where sex workers gather). This allowed their outreach teams to visit them, even at night, to educate them about CSDF's services. Another method was to contact "spas"[3] using telephone numbers published in advertisements. Multiple interactions were often needed to build trust and to encourage sex workers to register at STD clinics.

Separately, CSDF intervene to secure labour rights and healthcare access for sex workers while lobbying policymakers on issues related to their safety. Lakshman remembers how actively they campaigned to normalise the use of protection during sexual intercourse as the police habitually arrested women (for whom CSDF provided legal aid) if they had condoms with them. Amidst advocacy to end this harmful practice, the police in 2016 issued a circular stating that the possession of condoms wasn't a reason to arrest a person. "That was a victory for us as condom use among sex workers has now increased to about 93%," says Lakshman.

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[1] In Sri Lanka, a *watta* refers to an informal settlement, often a densely populated area with substandard housing and limited access to basic services.

[2] LKR12,000 is equivalent to USD40.57 (conversion date Jan 22, 2025).

[3] The operation of brothels is illegal in Sri Lanka but some establishments offering massage therapy, informally called "spas", are known to be places which offer sexual services.

Products made by sex workers supported by CSDF's “Graduation”

Many beneficiaries of the NTT project were from rural areas but would travel to towns for sex work. Their houses in the village–where people, sometimes even members of their own family, did not know they were sex workers–were usually on 10-20 perches[4] of land.

It is still not easy to convince decision-makers of the need to address sex workers' problems, Lakshman pointed out. So when during the COVID-19 pandemic sex workers found their incomes plummeting amidst lengthy lockdowns, CSDF stepped in with NTT backing.

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[4] A "perch" in land measurement is a unit of area typically equal to 25.29 square meters.

Alternative income generation during the COVID-19 pandemic

Kusuma* said she had gone “cold all over” when she realised the virus would keep her inside for months. As a 55-year-old single mother of a teenage daughter and carer for her own mother, she wasn’t immediately equipped to earn any other way. So she is grateful that CSDF passed her a grant to start a home garden. She grew enough chilies and vegetables to sell to her neighbours, and when the lockdowns were lifted, she began supplying to other vendors.

“That’s how we survived during COVID,” Kusuma recounted, adding proudly that her daughter excelled at her A/Levels and gained university entrance.

Unlike Kusuma, Roshini* didn’t take quickly to home gardening. At 42, she knew nothing about growing crops. Roshini is a changed person now. By 6.30 every morning, she stands in her patch of leafy greens, harvesting bunches to deliver to the neighbourhood shops by 9am. On a good day, she earns around Rs 2,500. And she boasts that she cannot keep up with the rising demand. While Roshini still doesn’t earn enough to save she covers her daily expenses and is debt-free. “I feel at peace now when I’m among my crops because I’ve grown them myself,” she smiles. That capital injection from CSDF led to a full career change. She is now a full-time cultivator.

Some of the sex workers supported under the NTT project were over 50 years old and had few, if any, customers. Some days, they earned nothing and could not provide for their families. Introducing alternative livelihoods was instrumental in helping them survive during challenging times. CSDF also printed booklets on home gardening for them.

Lakshman and his team say many sex workers who want to leave their field need assistance. This is why they launched the “Graduation” programme through which nearly 130 former sex workers have received support, including seed capital, to switch paths.

The organisation has found fulfillment in their dream becoming a reality: sex workers have a place to call their own, and where they can peacefully find solutions to their problems. “A powerful man will go to a ‘spa’, run by a man, to find the services of a sex worker,” Lakshman reflects. “If the police raid the ‘spa’, they harass the sex worker. The same police will purchase the services of a sex worker for their influential male friends.” It is an endless tale of exploitation and abuse at the hands of the very people who seek their services.

*Names changed.

TETSL provides condoms free-of-charge to sex workers

17 WITH THE PROTECTION OF GODDESS KALI

Trans Equality Trust Sri Lanka

Sakuni Maya was just 16 when she left her home in Borella to go live in Kelaniya, ten minutes from where she now has an office to advocate for the safety and protection of transgender sex workers. She was determined to find her community, although she didn't quite know who she was or what she was searching for.

After she shifted and began living independently, she thought she was a gay man. During this period, she also started sex work. But Sakuni still felt she missed a part of her identity.

Life was different in the late 90s for sex workers and transgender sex workers. She wanted to wear bras and dreamt of growing her hair but was too scared to do so. She couldn't easily buy makeup. She did find a wig that she wore to work the stretch from Town Hall to Cinnamon Gardens, Colombo. While there was a heavy stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, few sex workers had any knowledge of the importance of using condoms to protect against STDs.

Sakuni eventually joined the Family Planning Association (FPA) as a field supervisor where, in 2012, she first learned about hormones. Seeing the "beautiful" women who came there for hormone replacement therapy (HRT) made her cautiously optimistic about starting a new life. She sought help from a consultant psychiatrist who worked closely with the transgender community.

"Until then, I didn't know anything about transgender people or even what it meant to be trans," said Sakuni, now 49, the founder of the Trans Equality Trust Sri Lanka (TETSL). "I have five sisters and I was the only son. But from a young age, I knew there was something different about me."

“My father was more sensitive and understanding than my mother, maybe because he worked at the Manning Market in Pettah and had seen people from our community more frequently,” she reflected. “There were more people like me in the older classes of the mixed school I attended. Although I didn’t yet know exactly who I was, I realised I was different.”

Now running TETSL by day and engaging in sex work at night, Sakuni reminisces that although she worked with many NGOs advocating for reproductive health and LGBTQI rights, she didn’t encounter any that directly supported transgender sex workers. “So I wanted to set up an organisation for others like me,” she explained, “but I knew that if I did, I wouldn’t get help from anyone.” Even today, it is a struggle but she perseveres.

After starting hormone replacement therapy, Sakuni slowly gained pride in who she was: “At the time, I would go to the road as a woman only at night because the darkness gave me cover. Today, I’m not afraid even to use public transport as who I am.”

The seed funding Sakuni raised for TETSL (which was registered in 2019) through kind donors she met through her advocacy activities in the community was small. For Rs 10,000[1] a month, she rented a small room to operate from. Her goal for the organisation was to destigmatise her profession.

The reasons persons engage in sex work are complex. Transgender people are often shunned by their families and cannot continue their studies. Even with an education, jobs in the formal sector jobs are difficult to find as employers discriminate against them over their sexual orientation or gender identity. Without protection[2] or even food in Colombo, and usually far from their hometowns, many turn to sex work as a last resort. It is this community that Sakuni is determined to protect.

Since its inception, TETSL have confronted one external crisis after another–from the Easter Sunday terror attacks to Covid-19 to the 2022 economic meltdown. Curfews and unrest kept them homebound. Customers were sparse and their incomes plummeted.

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[1] LKR10,00 is equivalent to USD33.81 (conversion date Jan 22, 2025).

[2] Protecting sex workers involves ensuring their safety, rights, and access to services. This includes decriminalizing sex work, ending discrimination, and providing access to education, employment, and healthcare.

TETSL advocates for the safety of transgender sex workers

Sakuni Maya, founder, TETSL

Sakuni says there isn't a *devalaya*[3] in Sri Lanka that she didn't worship at, armed with the registration papers of her organisation in the hope that she would get funding. Like many from Sri Lanka's transgender community, Sakuni prays mostly to the Goddess Kali[4].

In 2022, they met NTT. Sakuni remembers the first time Ambika Satukananathan, NTT chairperson, visited. It was raining heavily and their "office" room was flooded, as usual. There was water beneath Ambika's feet, as she sat. Although she was there regarding another matter, she called a few days later to say NTT wanted to work with TETSL. When employees of the Trust returned to discuss the proposal, Sakuni scrambled to borrow chairs and teacups from her neighbours to provide them with some hospitality.

TETSL received their first training from NTT. "We learned everything from using a computer to filing cheques and keeping accounts," Sakuni related. "They developed our capacity to run an organisation. With their help, we moved into a new building."

From never having touched a laptop to employing four staff members and collaborating with two international funders, TETSL today seek to serve transgender sex workers in every conceivable way. These include providing assistance to meet their basic needs, guiding those undergoing HRT through the process, offering support in court cases and posting bail after arrests.

Their biggest challenges are with the police. While sex work isn't illegal in Sri Lanka, sex workers are routinely arrested under the Vagrants Ordinance, a colonial-era law that is widely abused to arrest anyone the police deem "suspicious". Sakuni's coworkers at TETSL, all of whom engage in sex work by night, have faced police harassment.

Kiruli Amandha, a 24-year-old TETSL field officer, was once assaulted so severely by police while practising her profession that she could not walk for a week. "I was black and blue all over," she recalled. "My one request to the police is that they stop beating us with batons."

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[3] Temple or shrine dedicated to a local deity or god.

[4] The Goddess Kali is a symbol of empowerment and safety for transgender people in India and Sri Lanka. She is worshipped by transgender communities as a "transreligious" figure.

TETSL have worked with police for over two years to make them aware of and sensitive to their issues. While they have noticed commendable differences at some police stations, there is no change in others. Continuous engagement with such institutions is vital so that new officers are also trained, they emphasised.

Preethi Ram* is a 27-year-old female sex worker that TETSL assisted. A Malaiyaha Tamil from Sri Lanka's South, Preethi met her husband at 18. He later abandoned her and their two children. "If he helped me, I wouldn't have to work on the street," Preethi said. "But I like this job because it allows me to feed my family, settle our loans, and not depend on anyone." Her previous job as a cleaner in Colombo had exploited her, she said, especially as she was only 13 at the time.

Kiruli's brushes with the police were distressing. She alleges that, after one arrest under the Vagrants Ordinance, they attempted to plant narcotics on her and charge her for possession. This was at the start of the government's *Yukthiya*[5] ("justice", in Sinhala) anti-drug campaign.

TETSL plan to expand their services to female sex workers. Ashani Saubhagya, another transgender field officer, says that female and transgender sex workers both work on the fringes of society with minimal protection. "Our struggles are similar, but trans sex workers face more issues as we are transgender people," she explained. "For instance, we are even more fearful of going to jail as we are sometimes imprisoned in the male ward where we are sexually abused. A woman police officer is rarely present during raids targeting sex workers, so we are handled by policemen."

Saubhagya first met Sakuni at her brother's place (where Sakuni was boarded). Later, when she saw Sakuni in a wig and makeup, her own identity began to make sense. After facing multiple issues with her family due to her identity, her brother requested Sakuni to take her into her care. He recognised that she needed someone from her own social group to help her.

Saubhagya now focuses on caring for her community. Despite feeling uncomfortable on public transport, she goes with them to see doctors and counsellors. She also accompanies them to state offices like the *grama niladhari* office to help them get gender-affirming care.

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[5] Police began a countrywide anti-drugs operation in December 2023, which ran for ten months amidst serious allegations of human rights violations.

Her goal is to ensure that nobody feels lonely despite being marginalised every step of their way to gender transition. Saubhagya answers phone calls at any time of the day from community members who, while undergoing HRT, have questions about breast development or the reduction of sperm production. Thus, she guides others in her social group to find the freedom she discovered when she finally accepted her identity.

Discrimination at her previous jobs pushed Saubhagya into sex work. Now she loves being her own boss. “I joined this organisation to serve my community,” she reflected. “We just want to do good by them. There are other organisations that assist transgender people but not trans sex workers. The community is scared to work with them so trans sex workers cannot even ask those organisations for a condom.”

Sakuni’s safe space at the edge of bustling Colombo, while small, harbours big dreams of ensuring protection for all trans sex workers. Her immediate aspirations are humble: to buy some video equipment to run social media awareness campaigns that will reach community members living in isolation and fear.

*Name changed.

Ashoka Nilimini joined CWRFU in 2022

18 LABOUR RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

Ceylon Workers Red Flag Union

In 2017, Mayakrishnan Ramkumari felt something was amiss. Things were fast-changing at the plantation she worked on since her marriage at 21 and she sensed these changes would threaten her job security and labour rights.

It was one year since the management of her tea estate in Deniyaya, run by a regional plantation company (RPC), introduced a system –which workers colloquially labelled "board leaf"–to pay tea pluckers merely for the number of kilogrammes they harvest per day. Ramkumari was wary of this new way of doing things. She was a permanent employee, like her parents were before her, and was entitled to healthcare insurance, EPF/ETF[1], maternity pay, bonuses and other entitlements.

The new outgrower arrangement pulls tea pluckers off the plantation company's payroll and gives them a plot of land to tend to under an "agreement" with the company[2]. The factory then buys the tea leaf the workers produce at a per-kilogramme price. There's minimal job security and no welfare, and they're often given old, less productive plots that the RPC can take away at any time.

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[1] The Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees' Trust Fund (ETF) are mandatory social security programmes which employees access upon retirement or when leaving employment.

[2] According to the Planter's Association website, the outgrowers do not own their small plots of tea land and are given about 1,000 to 1,200 bushes of tea "to look after". Estates then buy the outgrowers' leaf, paying them a percentage of what it pays for smallholders (who own the land) green leaf. The rest is injected back into outgrower plots as fertiliser and other inputs.

In June 2017, the management instructed Ramkumari and multiple others to accept their gratuity[3] payments. This meant they would lose their status as permanent workers. And if they wanted to continue working on the estate, they must do so as day labourers.

At 39, Ramkumari didn't want to take her "service" payment (as they called their gratuity benefit) because she knew that if she retired at 60, as her parents had done, she would earn significantly more. She was also incensed at the management for trying to hoodwink them into accepting dismissals leading to the loss of all benefits. So she refused, and with 13 other workers, marched angrily to the Ceylon Workers Red Flag Union (CWFRU) branch in Deniyaya.

It was an office Ramkumari had known since she was 16 when she first started speaking up regarding workplace issues. With the help of CWRFU, the group filed action in the Labour Tribunal (LT) which issued an order in their favour. The company challenged this ruling in the Court of Appeal in February 2022, citing the workers, the CWRFU and the Attorney General (AG), among others, as respondents. The case is ongoing with the next hearing scheduled for March 2025.

These changing labour practices haven't affected just Ramkumari, now 43, and her community. All three plantation companies in Deniyaya, a low-country tea hub, have favoured temporary workers over permanent ones since 2017. This has seriously affected their income, labour rights and job security, said P D Kumara, the 60-year-old district secretary of CWRFU.

When Ashoka Nilimini started working for an RPC in 2011, there were 70 permanent workers on the estate. "Now there are five, including me," said the 46-year-old. "In 2018, new workers were brought to the estate. It was when we saw their salary slips the following month that we realised they were paid through a manpower company. They get only a salary while we get other benefits." In the meantime, succumbing to management intimidation and pressure, many permanent workers had switched to day labour.

Nilmini, who still had a permanent position on her estate, joined CWRFU in 2022 when she realised the union's value to workers in resolving problems with employers. Even as a member of the majority Sinhala community, Nilmini has issues including management intimidation over her union membership.

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[1] A lump-sum payment that employers are legally obligated to pay eligible employees upon the termination of their employment.

Mayakrishnan Ramkumari highlights the injustices of changing labour practices

But her Tamil colleagues are worse off, she says: “They have no permanent housing, their children fall victim to child labour and face challenges related to alcoholism.”

K Dinesh Kumara is a plantation worker who grew up in line housing at the edge of a privately owned tea estate. He speaks strongly of the injustices suffered by successive generations of his family.

“Our grandparents were born and died on the estate, becoming fertiliser to the tea plants they plucked their entire lives,” 29-year-old Dinesh said. “Now my parents and my family live in the line room, but the estate’s new owner is trying to force us out. There are 23 families in our line.” Kumara says it’s problems like these that CWRFU hear all the time. In addition to assisting with human rights and legal cases, the union provides important Tamil language support to the Malaiyaha Tamil community in Deniyaya.

“Neither government offices nor private institutions have proper translators,” he said. “To obtain an EPF loan[4], they must fill out forms in Sinhala. If they want a loan from a private bank, they must fill out forms in Sinhala. In court, they’re allocated a translator who does a poor job of interpreting the proceedings. They also don’t understand the complicated Sinhala words spoken there.”

Currently, CWRFU do voluntary translations but they wish they had the funds to maintain a desk for language help. Daily struggles aside, CWRFU are also concerned about what they see as eroding faith in trade unions over the past two decades–especially as the employment model on estates becomes increasingly unregulated (with RPCs moving away from permanent workers).

With younger employees unaware of their entitlements, CWRFU are exploring strategies to protect them better. Supported by NTT, they ran an awareness programme for 20 workers to educate them about the negative effects of unregulated, temporary work and how it impacts their rights.

“The feedback was excellent,” Kumara says. “We showed them how their labour rights have been chipped away, as their grandparents received many more benefits from their employers.

[4] The EPF allows employees to access a portion of their accumulated funds as a loan for specific purposes, primarily housing-related needs.

This is impacting the survival of the tea industry as the younger generation is reluctant to work in plantations now. Many are going to Colombo or abroad for work."

Ramkumari agrees. She doesn't believe the tea industry can survive even another decade without its permanent workers. All she has known are tea estates, like her parents and grandparents before her, but she's adamant about forging a different future for her children. She has managed to send her eldest sons to Colombo to train as automobile servicemen and her daughter to a Sinhala school so she'd have access to a better education.

"She passed her O/Levels very well so Red Flag is supporting her with a small scholarship of Rs 3,000[5] a month for her A/Level education," Ramkumari smiled. "I want life to be different for her."

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[5] LKR3,000 is equivalent to USD10.14 (conversion date Jan 22, 2025).

With younger employees unaware of their entitlements, CWRFU is exploring strategies to protect them better

Navodi Liyanage, a young leader at Standup Movement Lanka

19 DREAMS IN BOARDING ROOMS

Standup Movement

"Maybe my naiveté made me ask that from the factory management," Ashila Dandeniya mulls, reminiscing how as a 23-year-old she broached the subject of a salary increase at the Katunayake free trade zone (FTZ) garment factory where she worked. "Maybe if I had been more experienced, I wouldn't have asked it. Maybe my naiveté was a blessing."

The workers' council meeting where she raised the question was in November 2003, just five months after she joined the factory as a quality checker. Her production line co-workers had nominated her to the employee body.

The council was meant to represent worker interests. But it was controlled by the factory managers and existed only to circumvent the formation of trade unions, Ashila, now 44, says. Within weeks, she was disillusioned. Mundane problems were taken up: too much salt in employee meals, the plates weren't big enough, larger buckets for the washrooms...

Ashila was versed in issues worse than these. She got her first job in an FTZ garment factory at 20, when she returned after a year in Jordan. The eldest daughter of a family from Beliatta in the South, she had to contribute financially as her father was forcibly disappeared when she was nine. She has two siblings.

But Ashila left the first job in 18 months when a supervisor's "unprofessional advances"–like touching her hand while inspecting her work–upset her. She hadn't known how to deal with it. So she joined a smaller factory at a lower salary.

The third job, however, was in one of the FTZ's largest factories which paid the best wages. She joined its workers' council in July 2003. In November, when they were notified of their increments for the next year, there was confusion in the production line. While their basic salaries had risen by a small percentage, some employees had received ad hoc, additional increases.

At the council meeting, Ashila waited until the usual problems were tackled. She then got up, saying she had a different question. "I asked them to explain how they had tabulated the salary increases that month," she related. "The faces of the managers went dark."

It was a Friday. There was no work that weekend. On Monday, the personnel manager (PM) summoned her and dug into "everything"–her family and educational background, her village, how long she had been working. Two days passed. On Thursday, the PM called her to his office again, this time over the public announcement system. Everyone heard.

Ashila was not suited to work at the factory as she had no love for it, he shot. She had two options: hand in her resignation or accept their letter dismissing her. "I didn't know much back then but I knew enough not to write my own letter," she recalled. "I took theirs and walked out." She learned about Right to Life (R2L), an organisation that helped FTZ workers, from her boarding mates. There, Ashila met Brito Fernando, a well-known activist, and filed a Labour Tribunal case. She appeared for herself, guided by Brito. The factory marched out several lawyers.

A settlement was proposed by the second hearing: twelve months of her Rs. 3,500 basic salary. The amount was small but, for Ashila, the victory was big. Brito then offered her a programme coordinator position at R2L covering FTZs, owing to her familiarity with labour rights violations and other hurdles. So passionate was she that even after R2L moved out of the FTZs, she persevered alone.

"Other organisations gave me openings but I resolved to stay on in the zone," she said. "As an FTZ employee, I felt the disconnect between workers and the bodies claiming to represent them."

So Standup Movement Lanka was born, with 12 other workers in a cramped boarding room. They dedicated their early days to relationship-building. Ashila laughs, remembering endless film discussions in boarding rooms, plain tea and buns in hand.

Treasured memories: forging relationships over evening movies and even a three-month cricket tournament for workers. Thirty-six matches on Sundays, their only free day.

They had neither formal projects nor funding, at the start. But in 2009, the Standup Movement published a book of case studies. Sri Lanka was undergoing a GSP+ review and lost the incentive—under which the European Union awards duty-free concessions to selected countries that meet specified human rights and governance objectives—the following year (regaining it only in 2017).

The book arose from Ashila's frustration that conversations regarding the GSP+ revocation concentrated on losses to the economy, suppliers and buyers—not workers. "The half-loaf of bread they got per meal suddenly dropped to a quarter," she sighed. "A bar of soap became a sliver. We wanted to highlight this."

Over 200 workers filed into Namel Malini Punchi Theatre in Borella for its launch, creating awareness about the unique dilemmas of FTZ workers. Ashila subsequently won a fellowship from India of a few hundred dollars a month with which she rented a boarding room for the Standup Movement. She spent evenings documenting their activities while working mornings at a factory.

The NTT is special to Ashila: it gave them their first grant to work directly with FTZ employees, facilitating the installment of 20 FTZ leaders who each oversaw 15 other workers. "Our connections, network and capacity were all enhanced through that project, although we made many mistakes," she enthused.

One leader who shone through this initiative is 23-year-old Navodi Liyanage. She lived in a hostel while schooling because her mother had worked abroad before joining an FTZ factory. Following her GCE O/Level exam, Navodi, feeling trapped in her hostel, took a job at the same factory.

They tasked her with quality-checking the stickers on their products—1,500 per hour. The day started at 8am. She was supposed to sign out at 6pm. But she was increasingly assigned an overnight shift that ended at 2am the next morning.

That slot was meant to be voluntary. "When the sheet came at 3.15 every afternoon, my name was always on it," Navodi recounted. "And it couldn't be taken off because the human resources department would call us then."

Navodi quickly realised that the male supervisor in the adjoining production line was responsible. He would flirt with her, she said, and had asked her mother if she was single. He also ensured that her parent would have to clock out at 6pm while he did the same overnight shift.

There was more trouble. Another male supervisor started acting up with her friend, despite his spouse working in that same production line. When the wife berated her friend, Navodi was incensed. In the middle of one work day, fuming at all these injustices, she stormed out after yelling at everyone within sight–never to return.

Overtime savings subsequently kept her afloat. One day, Navodi encountered a friend from her hostel days who suggested they visit a juice bar near the FTZ. It was run by the Standup Movement and they ended up registering for the NTT project. She is now a full-time field officer for the organisation.

Navodi met scores of employees through the NTT initiative. “We had to build relationships slowly because they don’t trust you,” she reflected. “I would make three visits to each person. They were reluctant to say anything negative about their factories in the first two meetings. They’d open up by the third.” The project introduced to her the fields of labour, human and union rights.

Today, Navodi’s advocacy extends beyond FTZ employees. She is campaigning for the rights of sex workers. That journey began after she met one such woman–the child of a Sri Lankan mother and an Indian father–in the Katunayake FTZ. They returned from Kuwait, where she was raised, when the mother suffered paralysis. The daughter now engages in commercial sex work to make ends meet.

Navodi helps in every way she can, such as bailing them out when they’re held under the Vagrants Ordinance, providing accommodation when required, and so on. She aspires to be a primary resource person for them, to help them achieve dignified working rights and conditions. Even one step higher would gladden her, she says.

The Standup Movement might have started humbly in a tiny boarding room but her dreams were larger, Ashila says. She wanted to push for workers’ rights, capacity building and whatever else was needed. They assist four main groups now: FTZ employees, external (abroad) migrant workers, sex workers and the LGBTQI community in the zone.

We met her on a Saturday. Her office was abuzz with activity, workers flowing in with requests, their children in tow. When she was at R2L, she often had no solutions to the complex labour problems they raised. She would go away and read, educate herself, so she could return with answers.

That habit continues to this day. Ashila is still searching for answers for the Katunayake FTZ workers.

Standup Movement Lanka began in a cramped boarding room

A manpower worker and her son

20 FABRIC OF RESISTANCE

Shramabhimani Kendraya

“What I can’t speak of in the factory, I come and tell Shramabhimani,” said a 29-year-old factory worker. She sits around an oval table with eight others at the Shramabhimani Kendraya office in Katunayake on the outskirts of Colombo, sharing their experiences of working in and around the Katunayake free trade zone (FTZ), the largest of Sri Lanka’s eight FTZs.

The workers are all Tamils–eight women and one man–who have migrated from Maskeliya, Jaffna, Bandarawela and Batticaloa to work at the many garment, coir and packaging factories in the Gampaha district where the FTZ is located. Some in this group are full-time employees while others are hired by manpower agencies that provide workers for a daily wage to various factories whenever they seek additional hands to meet their orders.

The FTZ and surrounding area attract many people who are desperate for jobs but is a hotbed of labour law violations and unethical practices. Factory workers complained of salaries being reduced, being punished for resting or sitting, and of poor quality food and daycare facilities run by the companies.

Many factories operate, in part, through manpower workers, effectively outsourcing their labour needs. Most trade certifications of the majority of global brands don't permit manufacturers to use manpower workers due to concerns about labour standards., In practice, however, this is common.

Manpower workers said that when brand inspectors visit factories to conduct audits they are instructed to “hide in the bathrooms”.

They are not always given protective wear, are very rarely paid EPF/ETF benefits, or compensated if they are injured–even killed–on the job, they alleged. Sometimes contracts are offered, sometimes not.

Manpower agencies largely function without any registration or oversight.[1] Daily incentive bonuses granted to workers by the factories are often pocketed by the agents. And if you work only for the first half of the day, no salary is paid. Agents will move workers around factories with no regard for whether they can do the job, be it stitching or packaging. One woman, a 28-year-old from Maskeliya holding an infant, recounted how her agent assigned her to a heavy-lifting job despite just having given birth via a caesarian section.

Women are especially vulnerable, the group said. Factories provide transport to their full-time employees but not to manpower workers, leaving many women to walk home alone late at night. They narrated stories of being catcalled, tailed and even assaulted. Agencies also refuse to hire pregnant mothers (even in their early trimesters) and discriminate against women who are not "giggly" and "polite" to them. "If we complain," said the woman from Maskeliya, rocking her child, "we won't get any work the next day." Factories are stingy with breaks and nearly all the women in the group narrated experiences of how they were scolded or punished for needing to go to the bathroom, even when they were sick or on their period.

There are few avenues for these workers to seek justice. They feel the Labour Department is so inaccessible that it isn't even considered an option and none of the women in the group had tried to contact them directly. They also say the manpower agencies intimidate workers, shouting at them using abusive language and punishing them by refusing to give them work. So they cannot complain directly to their "bosses". For manpower workers without contracts or regulator employment, approaching unions isn't an option. And turning to each other for solace is difficult, they explained, as they are suspicious of each other and worry that word would spread about their complaints, thereby ruining their chances at future employment.

So they come to Shramabhimani–an NGO founded in 1994 to empower poor communities in the Gampaha district–which address health, human rights and environmental issues.

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[1] A report by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka states that the Department of Labour does not appear to insist on the registration of all manpower agencies, making it difficult to ensure "fair treatment and proper documentation of workers."

Some publications of Shramabhimani

The organisation concentrates on worker communities that emerged around the Katunayake FTZ. They help these communities organise, donate dry rations where needed and advocate for them.

"I have confidence that nothing I say will go out," explained a woman from Jaffna about Shramabhimani. On their behalf, the organisation approaches the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka and the Labour Department to seek remedies for labour law violations. They also make policy recommendations to the Board of Investment, Department of Labour and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). They provided dry rations during COVID-19 and helped workers organise themselves to better negotiate with manpower agencies and factories.

Using NTT's funding, Shramabhimani focused on Tamil workers, a significant share of the labour force that struggles with unique problems. In some instances, they face direct discrimination with factories giving preference to Sinhala workers and manpower agencies refusing to recruit Tamils. "They [factory management] yelled at me when they found out I couldn't speak Sinhala well," said a 26-year-old from Batticaloa, "and sent me back to the manpower agency. I made no money that day."

Some factories only have enrollment forms in Sinhala, excluding the many Tamil speakers who seek work. Instructions and signage, too, are usually in Sinhala while supervisors exclusively speak Sinhala, scolding Tamil workers who make mistakes when they don't understand orders. Separately, many boarding houses where migrant workers live are hostile towards Tamil residents, the group said.

Shramabhimani pushed factories to make their employment accessible to Tamils, and some companies have responded by introducing Tamil signage and forms. The organisation also released several publications to advocate for language equity. One such book, published with NTT funding, contains fifteen stories narrating Tamil workers' experiences during COVID-19, when they had no income and paranoia erupted in boarding houses (with accusations that people were spreading the virus).

With NTT's support, Shramabhimani published several other books. They are *The Other Side of the Disease: Memoirs of Garment Factory Workers During the Time of COVID-19; Labour and Health Standard Violations at Export Processing Zones During COVID-19;* and *Analysis of the GSP+ Scheme and the Foreign Exchange: A Focus on the Benefits for Workers in the Sri Lankan Apparel Industry*.

These publications helped keep a record of the struggles of workers during COVID-19. They also informed policy decisions. Separately, Shramabhimani maintained a bilingual complaint hotline during the pandemic to collect data and advise the National Labour Advisory Council.[2]

Through core groups in boarding houses, Shramabhimani gather information and raises awareness on topics workers are too afraid to highlight on their own. They have become a trusted authority on labour rights in the Katunayake FTZ. And they demand recognition of and response to worker issues.

In particular, Shramabhimani are a refuge for Tamil women workers to gather, socialise and organise. While meeting with us, they update each other on goings-on in factories whilst flagging the bad manpower agencies.

“We can’t ask for anything alone or even with five people,” explained the most senior worker in the group, a 33-year-old from Maskeliya. “We need at least 30 or 40 people before we can demand anything. But whatever the problem is, we come to Shramabhimani to try and solve it.”

[2] A tripartite consultative mechanism established to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between the government, workers' organisations, and employers on labour-related matters.

Kannan plays cricket with his team

21 HISTORY AND HEALING AMIDST PAIN

Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research

"There are people who do not know about what happened. They do not know the speed of rounds, or understand the sounds of a shell falling. They do not know of the death, the wounds, the screams and the frantic running between bunkers. These people must read this book and know what happened."

Forty-six-year-old Kannan* sits under a tree in his wheelchair, generously imparting wisdom and views on current politics. He is missing a thumb and both legs up to the thighs. On his arm, he bears a long scar.

In 2023, Kannan was approached by Adayaalam, the only think tank in the North and East, to share his experiences in a book they were compiling titled *Mullivaikkal Stories*. He described to them his life as a combatant and as an internally displaced person (IDP). Adayaalam (which translates to "identity", in Tamil) meticulously recorded Kannan's story: how he lost both legs in a shell attack by the army on the Puthukudiyiruppu hospital during the last stages of the war as he was receiving treatment for other injuries; and how he survived the army camps where he was forcibly held after the war.

Adayaalam have conducted extensive research on topics that few others dare touch, including militarisation of the North and East, memorialisation, transitional justice, enforced disappearances and political prisoners. Initially, the woman-headed NGO struggled to carve out a space for themselves but have since become critical voices in research and advocacy on issues that impact communities in the North and East.

Mullivaikal Stories was first published in 2018 and was a huge success. In 2022, however, the *aragalaya*[1] brought with it renewed interest from the majority Sinhala-populated South about what had happened during the final stages of the civil war. Adayaalam used this opening to build on *Mullivaikal Stories*. With NTT support, they hired an illustrator, expanded the contents from nine to twenty stories, published a Sinhala version and released the books on May 16, 2024, to coincide with the 15th anniversary of the last day of the war (observed on May 18 each year at the memorial in Mullivaikkal, Mullaitivu, Northern Province).

For this exercise, Adayaalam gave preference to people who had not revealed their experiences before, avoiding the "usual voices" on history. "Many people told us that they had never told anyone what happened to them before," said 35-year-old Anushani Alagarajah, Adayaalam's co-founder and executive director. "It was a cathartic experience."

For Kannan, sharing his story with Adayaalam was an opportunity to engage in collective healing and to educate those who hadn't experienced the same events. In May 2009, people in Mullivaikkal were "worse than worms digging and writhing in the soil", but now there is no memory of that left, he said. Buildings cover the land and no one can identify where anything happened.

Kannan feels that many people, abroad and in Colombo, make matters worse by distorting the narrative. "Those who weren't there talk big," he observed. "You would think they saw the war in front of their eyes. I get angry when I hear them speak over us, who really know what happened."

This was the problem Adayaalam sought to address. Weary of being studied and spoken for by those who are not in the North and East, Anushani and Dharsha Jegatheeswaran, Adayaalam's other co-founder and director, conceptualised an organisation to produce research on, for, and by Tamils. "I was interested in how our stories are being told," said Anushani. "Outsiders view Tamils as victims but what I see constantly is resilience."

Despite having no legs, Kannan is a fisherman and farms peanuts, earning an income for his wife and himself. He is a member of the Uthayasooriyan Sports Club's wheelchair cricket team and travels regularly from Mullaitivu to Kilinochchi for practice.

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[1] *Aragalaya* means "the struggle" in Sinhala and refers to the 2022 protests and occupation of public spaces and official residences in an effort to oust then President Gotabaya Rakapaksa from office. It was triggered by an economic collapse but fleetingly created interest in the Sinhala majority South about Tamil perspectives on the civil war.

He proudly says that a society that looked down on him is now amazed, wondering how much more he would've done had he not lost his legs.

Kannan's emotional wounds remain. He recalls even now the feeling of being treated like "stray dogs", scurrying to flee the bombs and struggling in the camps where food was scarce, freedom was non-existent and children were treated like militants. He remembers the "unbearable pain" and worry of being separated from his family while dealing with the loss of his legs, alone in hospital, when the injured were separated from their families who were interned at camps controlled by the military.

Repeatedly, he says: "Our pain must die with us. I don't want it to affect our children." Kannan's way of healing is through his work, his cricket and his openness. Although he finds it difficult to talk about his experiences, he determinedly tells his story to all those, like Adayaalam, who ask.

Shanthi holds her copy of *Mullivaikkal Stories*

Kannan's eyes well up and his voice shakes as he speaks of his mother's passing two years ago, a woman who he says could always soothe his soul and calm his mind. "No one could comfort me like my mother when I rested my head on her lap," he said. "No matter the pain in my heart, I could always rely on her."

Now Kannan inspires and consoles others, particularly those traumatised by the war. He is their confidante, listening to their pain and encouraging them to persevere despite hardships.

Kannan travelled to Jaffna in May 2024 for Adayaalam's book launch. He was overwhelmed by how many others had endured similar experiences as him. Seventy to 80 people attended this one-of-a-kind commemoration. "I thought I would be the only person," Kannan said, "but when I went for the book release I realised it was not so. I spoke and laughed with all those who had come. We expressed our pain to each other and I was at peace knowing there were so many like me."

There, Kannan met Shanthi*, a community leader from Kilinochchi. Her family too was displaced and survived the bloodshed in Mullivaikkal. For Shanthi, sharing her story was an opportunity to build a community. Many years ago, she had met mothers of the disappeared from Mullaitivu and Adayaalam's book launch was a way to reconnect with them. "It was good for my soul to meet and speak with them again," she explained. "There were so many people who had come that I didn't think would be there."

Shanthi felt eager to open up about things she had kept hidden for so long. Even after the interviews with Adayaalam were complete, she found herself recalling memories she had forgotten to mention. "At the beginning, it is difficult to talk about what happened," she says, "but once you are done talking, you feel as though you have been freed."

Flipping through the book's pages to find her story, she expresses pride in the final product. She described it as an "autobiography" of everyone who had shared what they had seen and experienced. "What is in the book are things that have been hidden," she said. "There are not many people who would publish such a book." Shanthi is thankful for Adayaalam's courage in taking on this project. As a community leader, she places high value on disseminating a truthful account of what happened during the war years. *Mullivaikkal Stories* was one way to do so.

Beyond financial support for *Mullivaikkal Stories*, Anushani explained the value of having an established, local organisation like NTT strengthen Adayaalam's institutional practices.

It was put together by a small, eclectic group of activists and researchers without prior experience but is now a strong, formidable entity. According to Anushani, they are a force to be contended with–an organisation that cannot be ignored. For instance, dignitaries and ambassadors visiting the North always meet Adayaalam.

For Anushani, personally, leading Adayaalam as a Tamil woman was especially challenging. Adayaalam's staff are nearly all below the age of 35. Because it is headed by a woman and comprises mostly young activists, she feels Adayaalam struggled to be taken seriously and to be supported by traditional Tamil civil society. In this context, having NTT's backing and Ambika's support was helpful. NTT assisted the Adayaalam network, especially in Colombo, and had faith in them when few others would. Ambika acted as an adviser when Adayalam ran into legal problems.

"Because what we do is sensitive, donors can be intrusive, but NTT gave us a full reign," explained Anushani, speaking of the release of the second edition of *Mullivaikkal Stories* in May 2024. "We were able to curate the event exactly as we wanted ."

Children, academics, survivors, activists, families of the disappeared, clergy and politicians were all there. They inspected the commemorative IDP tent on display, reflected on exhibited artifacts from Mullivaikkal and shared *kanji*.[2]

Later, Anushani noticed Kannan answering a group of children as they sat and asked him questions like how he had lost his legs. "I felt at that moment," said Anushani with quiet satisfaction, "that this is why we do our work."

*Names changed.

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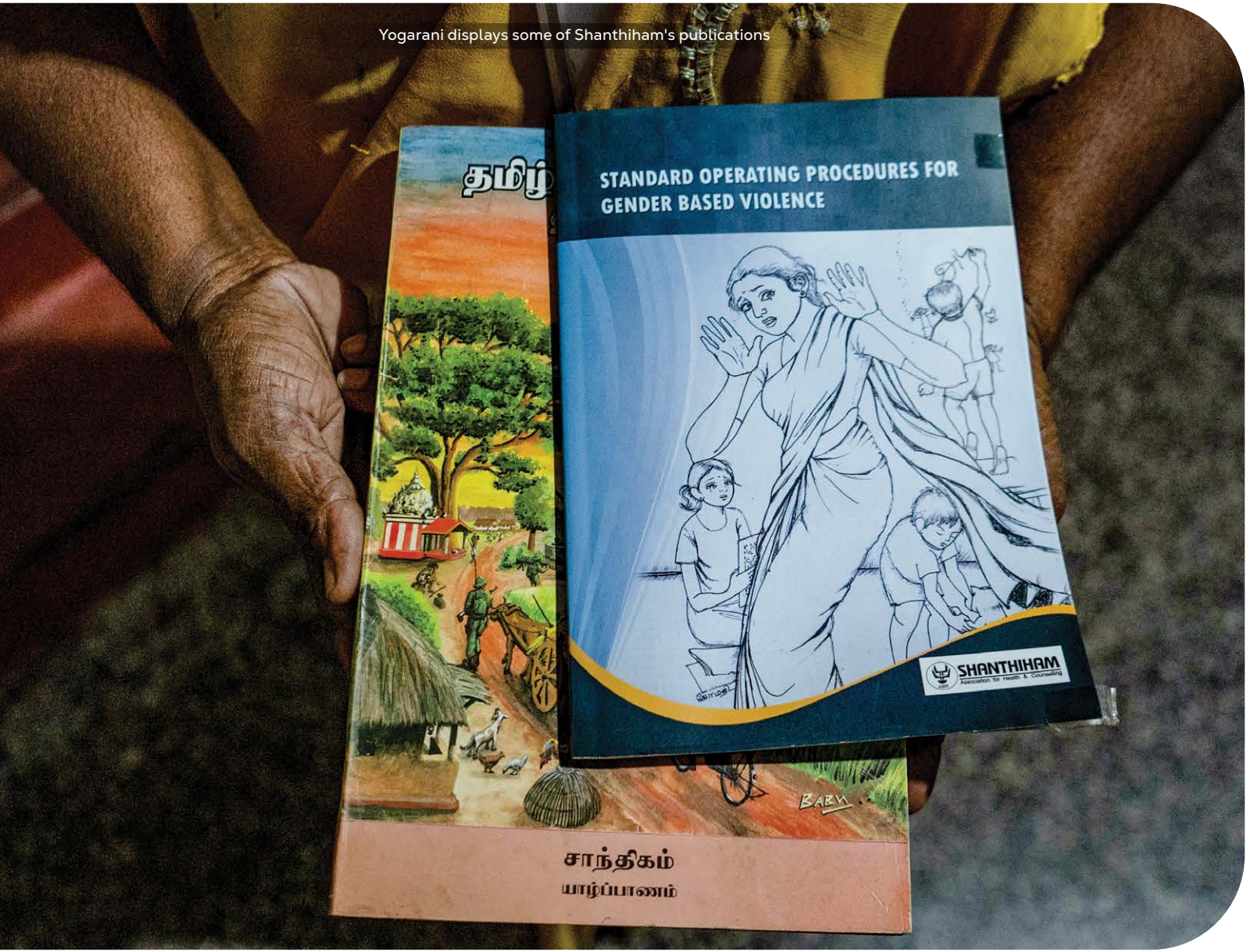
[2] *Kanji* is a mushy boiled rice (gruel) that became the sole source of food for survivors in Mullivaikkal as the bombing and resulting lack of basic provisions made food supplies scarce. It has since become a commemorative meal, eaten on 18 May to remember the victims of the massacre and the resilience of the survivors.



Yogarani displays some of Shanthiham's publications

22 A HIDDEN MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

- Shanthiham: Association for Health and Counselling
- Professional Psychological Counselling Centre

During the long and dreary war years, humanitarian organisations largely focused on fulfilling urgent basic needs like food, shelter and medicine. But two institutions –Shanthiham: Association for Health and Counselling and the Professional Psychological Counselling Centre (PPCC)–foresaw, identified and quietly began addressing a hidden problem. An increasing mental health crisis.

Over decades, both organisations have helped Sri Lanka's North and East navigate endless crises, including the Indian Ocean tsunami and the protracted armed conflict. But these veterans of enabling access to mental health care confronted new challenges in the postwar arena.

The 36-year legacy of Shanthiham was in jeopardy in 2022 when a director was caught embezzling funds. Donors stopped funding them, staff resigned and people stopped seeking their services. Then, NTT came forward. As Shanthiham's sole donor at the time, they supported salaries, programmes and the training of staff in institutional and administrative tasks. With their backing, Shanthiham slowly restored its credibility.

Yogarani Nadarajah has been a Shanthiham counsellor for 20 of her 62-year-long life. She first met them when they assisted her in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami.

“Hundreds of counselees came,” she says, of their early years. “And there were always programmes in this room that we’re sitting in now.” Shanthiham was a household name and they had regular counselees, both walk-in and through referrals. In the mid-2000s, they employed over 80 people and their two-storey office in Jaffna town bustled with activity.

Today, that building is quiet except during events or when the second floor is rented to other NGOs. But Shanthiham’s current five permanent employees still exude an energy reminiscent of those early days. They work hard to keep Shanthiham, one of the few counselling services available to Jaffna residents, afloat.

At 34, Vaishnave Balasingam is Shanthiham’s new officer-in-charge. She described their ongoing activities. For instance, Shanthiham train novice teachers on supporting students experiencing socio-economic challenges and formulating strategies to improve the workplace culture in their schools. These young instructors are then better geared to discuss difficult topics with their students and to handle the sometimes tense and hierarchical relationships trainee teachers have with senior school staff.

Through NTT funding, Shanthiham offer vocational training to youth from low-income families who are vulnerable to coming into conflict with the law. “A by-product of this project is to give these youth a purpose and prevent them from using drugs,” explained Vaishnave. “It also gives them a chance to approach us and talk about their problems.”

An increasing trend of absenteeism and dropouts was observed among students in the North. To address this, Shanthiham conduct workshops in schools on skills development, encouraging students to reflect on their lives and future. Shanthiham also have workshops for medical students on the psychosocial aspects of their work and lives. “Medical students are so stressed with their education,” explained Vaishnave. “The workshops give them a break and a chance to learn about themselves, as people.”

Most importantly, Shanthiham’s activities help spread the word about their counselling services. In the past, public officials regularly referred people to them. Their programme for women’s development officers had been particularly important as it coached them to view gender-based issues through a mental health lens and made them aware that they could send people to Shanthiham.

PPCC's signboard outside their office in Batticaloa

The Oddamavadi cemetary where Muslims and others were buried

But when the internal crisis struck in 2022–with financial impropriety being unearthed–public officials stopped attending their programmes and Shanthiham's reputation with the local government, schools, and the community was tarnished. But they continued their activities, albeit on a smaller scale, for which Vaishnave visited divisional secretariats, zonal education offices and schools to rebuild trust and to convince the public to give Shanthiham a chance. People are again trickling in, based primarily on referrals by teachers or government officers. Yogarani attended to 18 counselees in September 2024, the highest number since the fraud was detected.

Accessing mental health care is difficult in Jaffna. Conservative and patriarchal culture does not encourage people, particularly men, to express themselves. So counsellors are crucial, Yogarani asserts. She primarily adopts the role of a listener while asking questions intermittently to encourage those requesting their services to think through their problems.

One man she helped was sexually assaulted by his father as a child. He waited 20 years before speaking up. "He walked in and said: 'Something is weighing on my heart that I have not told anyone. I will tell you once so that I will be free'". "He sat and cried that whole session and I gave him the space to do so," Yogarani said. After many more sessions, he has begun to slowly deal with the abuse he suffered.

While a culture of shame still silences people, Yogarani has noticed changes. Women previously did not seek professional help as they were afraid of what their husbands would say. Her counselees now tell her that they simply inform their husbands they are going for counselling, "whether you come or not". "There is less hesitation," she explains. "Parents bring children, friends bring each other, wives bring their husbands."

Yogarani's counselees today grapple with issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, depression and anxiety, domestic violence, marital problems, alcohol and drug dependence, technology addiction and, to this day, trauma from the 30-year-long civil war.

The need for an organisation like Shanthiham did not reduce when the war ended. And unlike many others, they own a building, some funds in a fixed deposit and a vehicle, says Vaishnave, about their strong foundation. NTT is keen to help revitalise this entity that has immense potential and a history of providing critical mental health services.

If not for NTT, says Vaishnave, Shanthiham would have shut down by December 2024. She beams that another donor, having seen their work on social media, has said Shanthiham was a promising candidate for funding. “I am applying to that donor right now,” she said, “and I am hopeful we will get it.”

In general, however, funds for mental health support in the North and East have reduced. Even as generations are born free from direct contact with war, new challenges are emerging. And the Professional Psychological Counselling Centre (PPCC) in Batticaloa face them head-on.

Jayani* from Batticaloa is struggling with depression arising from a recent personal tragedy. In September 2021, as COVID-19 ravaged the world, the 34-year-old was suddenly widowed. Her husband’s passing was not peaceful, nor was it inevitable, insists Jayani, and the experience left her struggling to accept her new reality.

Jayani's husband had leukaemia and underwent chemotherapy at the Batticaloa hospital. In May 2021, he contracted COVID-19 and was forcibly quarantined in hospital. With three young children to care for, including an infant, Jayani was distraught. It was just four days before their youngest’s first birthday.

“We begged them not to because his cancer made him more vulnerable to other diseases but they wouldn’t listen,” said Jayani. Her husband wished their son a happy birthday and promised to be there for his second birthday the following year.

Jayani’s husband died of cancer but she insists it was due to neglect. The doctors halted chemotherapy after he contracted COVID-19 and didn’t restart it even when his PCR results became negative, she said, adding that they gave her no explanation. “They did not even take me into the hospital, sit me down, and talk to me,” she related. “They just abandoned him.”

Within months of stopping chemotherapy, her husband’s condition worsened and he was readmitted to a hospital where they administered (Jayani says) nothing but oxygen. She was by his side when he died five days later. And, after a rushed funeral, her feelings caught up with her.

Jayani's household was seen as infected as public health officials had home-quarantined them when her husband contracted COVID, pasting a large, red notice on their front door. Even weeks later nobody would come near her or her children."

“At a time when everyone left us, they sought us out to speak with me,” Jayani said, tearfully, referring to PPCC which provide free mental health services to Batticaloa’s large underserved community. They initially assisted people struggling with war trauma, displacement and the tsunami but their work has evolved over three decades.

The pandemic was especially challenging, remarked 49-year-old Sithampari Sureshini, one of PPCC’s counsellors. “People who were isolated really struggled with their mental health but we couldn’t meet them or organise group sessions the way we did in refugee camps and after the tsunami.” So they got creative.

With an NTT grant, PPCC established a psychological support hotline. They addressed the loneliness crisis caused by the pandemic over the phone. Sureshini said there were instances when she spent hours speaking with someone. “Sometimes, it wasn’t counselling at all,” she recalled. “They just wanted someone to talk to. At other times, I was able to suggest relaxation methods.”

Besides isolation, a range of new psychological problems became evident. There was paranoia about COVID-19 and panic when a family member tested positive. Without sufficient education about the disease and its spread, many people fell victim to a culture of fear created in part by an authoritarian official response to the disease.

“The red notice impacted heavily,” Sureshini pointed out. “It created a culture of shame around catching the virus and society would shun those who were infected.” The number of migrant workers quarantined in camps spiralled. Many didn’t know where they were being taken or if they would return. There was a widespread fear of being “picked up”.

Others, like Jayani, struggled with sudden deaths; of being unable to find the time, the space and community support needed for closure.

Among Muslims, especially, there was fear that relatives who pass would be forcibly cremated under the government’s initial COVID-19 policies. “Even after the government reversed its forced cremation policy, there was fear,” recalled 51-year-old Mohamed Buhary Mohamed Siddeek, another PPCC counsellor. “Because the bodies couldn’t be brought home for the funeral and as the burials often happened in the absence of family members, people were paranoid that their relatives were being cremated.”

The way in which COVID-19 deaths were handled heightened the tension, fear and grief. Culturally, Sri Lankans are expressive when it comes to death, Sureshini described. People cry and shout and throw themselves on the coffin to express their sorrow. None of this was possible during the pandemic.

Additionally, poor households struggled with the stress of losing their incomes and securing food. So the NTT-supported hotline also served as a conduit for obtaining other information, with counsellors using it to direct people towards online education resources and places offering ration packs and medical services.

Children were lonely and struggled to adjust to online classes. Siddeek, who also works for the Education Department, remembers it took considerable time for students to return to school after the pandemic ended. Absenteeism was fuelled by fear of the disease. School principals appealed to him for help.

Phone counselling wasn't ideal, Siddeek explained, it was harder to build trust, there was no eye contact and it was difficult to correctly assess the counselee's feelings. But he navigated these challenges to assist the children. He also encouraged family bonding, explaining the basics of mental wellbeing to parents to better equip them to manage their children's emotional needs.

PPCC supported 390 people through the hotline during the pandemic which introduced new counselees to them. Sureshini says some of them continue to receive mental health assistance from PPCC, many years later.

Jayani is one such person–she and her young family are still being guided through their experiences by Sureshini. With some encouragement from PPCC, Jayani finally became a nursery school teacher and is beginning to accept that, amidst the suffering, life also has joy to offer.

Ogha - a collective of artists from Anuradhapura

23 DISCONCERTING ART

Ogha Collective

On New Year's Eve 2022, a band of eight performers from Rajanganaya, Anuradhapura, made their way to the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) with a 100-foot white cloth. They were India-bound.

It had been a turbulent year for Sri Lanka. Amidst an unprecedented economic crisis, angry street protests dislodged the president and installed a new government. Food, fuel, electricity, medicines and other shortages crippled life and pushed more citizens into poverty.

The Ogha Collective's foreign trip was unplanned. Forty-three-year-old Kithsiri Sampath Bandara and his wife launched the group in 2019 as a forum of artists drawing attention to contemporary issues through visual and performing arts. In early December 2022, they got their first exposure to international artists when they were called upon to perform at the three-day Theertha Performance Platform[1], Kompagngna Veediya, Sri Lanka.

Ogha staged three performances at the Rio Cinema, Colombo, during which they connected with a leading Indian performance artist who invited them to a behavioural art (another term for performance art) festival scheduled for the following month in Kerala, India.

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[1] The Theertha International Artists Collective is a Colombo-based artist-led initiative engaging in contemporary art activities. The Performance Platform is part of an exchange programme that sees international artists working with local ones to kick off interesting dialogues locally.

Ogha don't charge for work. So they were in a quandary. Food and accommodation would be provided but they needed money for airline tickets. Guided by Duminda Alahakoon, one of the Collective's most senior artists and a 40-year-old seasoned political activist, they appealed to nearly 20 embassies, cultural centres and organisations to sponsor what they felt was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Among them was NTT, which scheduled an online meeting to get more details. Despite the uncertainty, Ogha had applied for visas in the anticipation that they would somehow secure funding. NTT confirmed its support while they were in line at the visa centre. And their dreams took flight.

Much of Ogha's past work was deeply political. In 2021, they'd performed at a 100-day protest at Hingurakgoda held by women entrapped in the vicious cycle of microfinance debt out of concern that indebtedness was suffocating people across Sri Lanka.

"Many women in our village are coerced into situations like sexual bribery when they can't settle these debts," Kithsiri related. "One mother from neighbouring Tambuttegama even died by suicide."

When writing scripts, Ogha relate closely to such issues as part of the working class, Kithsiri explained: "We don't approach them from an elevated position. We represent the people and understand these common struggles."

This need to speak for the common person prompted the creation of the Ogha Collective, to try and popularise their brand of performance art. When he first studied it at the University of Visual and Performing Arts in Colombo, however, the subject was largely confined to the privileged social classes. Kithsiri wanted to wield the power of performance art. But he was faced with and continues to confront many challenges.

Post-graduation, Kithsiri honed his skills through numerous activities–performing, working with different artists, experimenting with varied art forms–in Colombo. Upon returning to Rajanganaya, he and his wife, 39-year-old Priyadharshani Jayasinghe, breathed life into the Ogha Collective.

She now sat beside her husband in the rundown cultural centre in Rajanganaya where they practise. Like him, Priyadharshani is soft-spoken, a different persona to the woman in performance photographs; the one whose expressions range from livid to passionate to grief-stricken and who gives us a glimpse of her fierce, artistic side.

They had both been teachers at the same village school. He taught A/Level art and she, A/Level drama. Their students were passionate about the creative arts. So it was easy to get them and other like-minded youth to stage an annual performance on the streets of Rajanganaya town. The public didn't always get it. They were sometimes laughed at or greeted with suspicion. Nothing deterred Kithsiri.

"If anyone says a place is not 'suitable' for performance art, that is precisely where performance art should happen," he insists. Art should leave lasting impressions, he says, not be a source of temporary happiness.

The Ogha Collective's artists believe that art comes to life when the audience pauses to reflect upon it. Their Rajanganaya neighbours are sometimes confused by what they do, Kithsiri admits. But they succeed in generating conversations through each piece, even if these are just discussions about what they did. This provides enough rationale to continue with the performances.

"In these small villages, in our small schools, politics causes many problems," Kithsiri explains. "Children are discriminated against. We aim to bring these to light through our art. It releases some of the pressure of cohabiting in this world."

Despite living nearly 200km from Sri Lanka's bustling commercial capital, Colombo, they are not immune to the divisive political culture that threatens everyday life. In the lead-up to the 2022 people's uprising called the *aragalaya* (or "struggle", in Sinhala)—the epicentre of which was the Presidential Secretariat on a seafront called Galle Face—Kithsiri and his team performed at numerous other protests, highlighting everything from environmental degradation to threats to free education. They also staged shows at the main site, transporting their gear the night before by train to beat the curfews that came to be imposed.

"We started Ogha to express the protest in our heads against the prevailing political culture," explained Kithsiri. This meant their performances were often uncomfortable to watch.

This discomfort also gripped the audiences in Kerala. Ogha opened the “India Behavioural Art Festival” using the long white cloth that went with them on the aeroplane. They huddled under it, covered from head to toe, hiding skin colour, gender and physical appearance. And they asked the audience to apply sequins and glitter on the sheet’s edge to spread the message that we must uplift one another, regardless of physical differences. Some viewers even joined them under the cloth.

The next day’s performance generated pin-drop silence. Kithsiri walked around the room with a bucket of tea leaves while the actors hauntingly whispered “smell”. He dropped the contents on the floor and they piled on top of it, fighting for space among the tea leaves. Their objective: to illustrate the minimal space society still gives to the Malaiyaha community of Sri Lanka.

Their final show was a solo by Kithsiri using mirrors that warped his reflection. He had asked the audience to draw their own contorted faces–so that they could see how, despite the distortion of their outward appearance, their humanity was still recognisable, still intact.

Ogha's practice space

Uthumalebbe points in the direction of his property that was taken by settlers

24 THE BITTER SIDE OF SUGAR

Human Elevation Organization

Atham Bawa Uthumalebbe was a regular at the Damana Divisional Secretariat, a local government authority in the Ampara district. From 1999 to 2015, he went there on as many Wednesdays–public day–as he could.

Lebbe claims that, in the early 1960s, his family's sprawling agricultural property was forcibly taken over by Sinhala settlers brought in from other districts to work on sugar plantations. So when the divisional secretariat said they would issue new permits to inhabitants who could prove they had rights to their original properties, he readily handed over his documents.

But Lebbe, now 78, got neither his land nor his papers back–despite going to the office nearly every week for 16 years to plead his case.

Present in the Ampara district since 2006, the Human Elevation Organisation (HEO) started working on land rights in 2018. They painstakingly recorded and advocated in cases of land rights violations, like those experienced by Lebbe. From land appropriation by the Department of Forest Conservation and army to dispossession caused by the Gal Oya scheme[1], HEO's office cupboards overflow with files.

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[1] The Gal Oya Multipurpose Development Project started in 1949 was a massive project of state-sponsored settlements, irrigation and agriculture development along the Gal Oya River. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly minorities, were displaced amidst accusations that its purpose was to change the demographic to undermine the political claims of the Tamils. Ancestral farming lands have also been appropriated by state institutions, including the military, Department of Forest Conservation and the Department of Wildlife Conservation. Some are later released for private development projects.

This was an overwhelming quantity of documents. So HEO proposed a systematic review of land rights in Ampara, a district fraught with ethnic tension,[2] state repression, and competing corporate interests. So in 2024, with NTT support and the help of three independent researchers, they produced a comprehensive report on the large-scale land acquisition related to the sugar project, which remains one of the most serious land issues farmers face in Ampara.

The report was intended to inform policy and advocacy on sustainable agriculture and land rights in Ampara. Lebbe was one of their subjects, as was 73-year-old Thennakoon Mudiyanselage Chandraratne who explained how the project resulted in mass dispossession. For years, he had grown paddy on the four acres that his grandfather had cleared from the forest during the British colonial period[3] till it was decided that his land, like countless others like it, would be ideal for sugarcane. The property was acquired and he was "compensated" with 2.5 acres of less arable land elsewhere.

HEO interviewed 100 farmers and surveyed many more for their report *The Sugar Project 2023: Food Security and Land Rights of Sugarcane Farmers in the Ampara District (The Sugar Project).* It identified multiple issues, starting with how lands were acquired.

"Some lands were grabbed through government gazette[4] but others were done totally illegally," explained Nihal Ahmed, HEO executive director. "When people come to us, their complaint is always 'our land was taken for sugarcane' so we investigate those cases." HEO are also part of the People's Alliance for Right to Land (PARL) and the Ampara District Alliance for Land Rights (ADALR).

Large-scale state-sponsored sugar production in Sri Lanka goes back to the 1960s. The Gal Oya project area was divided into five major zones, namely Varipathanchena, Galmuduwa, Deegavapi, Hingurana and Neetha. While the initial land allotments were restricted to paddy cultivation, this changed with the establishment of the Hingurana Sugar Factory–commissioned by the Gal Oya Development Board–in 1960 and a distillery in 1962.

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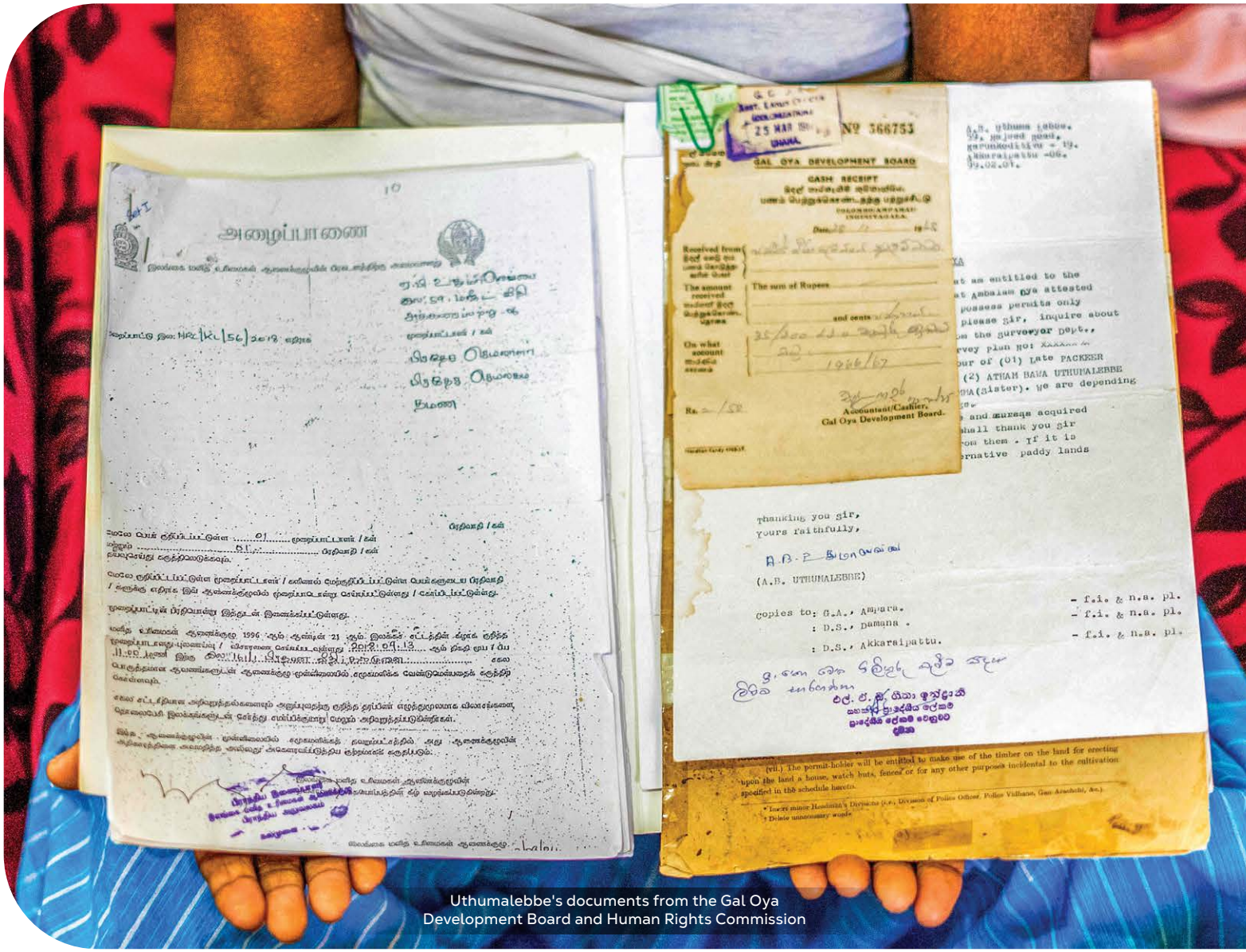
[2] The ethnic breakdown of Ampara District in Sri Lanka includes Muslim, Sinhalese, Tamil, and other ethnic groups.

[3] Legal titles were not the norm before Britain colonised Sri Lanka (1818-1948). People lived on the land and made a living from natural resources.

[4] Historically, the state has acquired lands through the Land Acquisition Act for "public purpose", in many instances despite allegations that the purpose for which the land was being acquired was not public and the law was being weaponized to engage in state sanctioned land grabs.



Uthumalebbe's documents from the Gal Oya Development Board and Human Rights Commission

Controversial sugarcane production in Ampara

In 1966, the state-owned Sri Lanka Sugar Corporation was given the power to acquire and develop land for the cultivation of sugar-yielding crops. In 1975, one gazette alone granted it over 18,000 acres. Many people living and farming on these lands for generations were not monetarily compensated and/or assigned alternative land. Most of the land thus acquired for sugarcane cultivation was given to Sinhala settlers via permits. In some instances, when the original inhabitants returned to their lands, they were violently chased away by the new settlers.

In his old age, Lebbe confuses dates and names but some memories remain strong. He recalls how as a young boy in rural Ampara he and his father trundled by bullock cart to the paddy field. They would spend time in a hut where they stocked paddy, corn and tobacco. His family made everything from scratch, he reminisced, describing in detail how they manufactured shoes from cowhide and wire. There was a small pond where their cows drank water and people bathed. "That's how it was those days," he sighed.

"One day machines and people came and started to dig up the pond," says Lebbe, "I thought it was a good thing because we would have a larger water source." Uthumalebbe was mistaken. Not long after, settlers earlier brought in to cut sugarcane in neighbouring areas arrived at their paddy field.

"I must've been 13 or 14," narrates Lebbe. "Around noon, I saw Muslims running. Behind them were Sinhala people with machetes and clubs." He and his fellow villagers fled to the mosque, he said, saying he got a cut on his back from a mammoty[5] while many others were injured. "The police told us to stay on our land," he said. "How could we, when they were attacking us? Neither the police nor the *kachcheri*[6], nobody ever came." To this day, Lebbe has not returned. But he does look at his land from a distance, accompanied by his son.

So began Lebbe's long struggle. He visited government offices, wrote letters, protested and filed court cases while piecing together a living as a daily wage worker. Having been forced to leave behind their farm, livestock and employment, Lebbe says he was reduced to the "life of a beggar", relying on the charity of relatives and whatever work he could find.

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[5] A special type of garden hoe common in India and Sri Lanka.

[6] The district secretariat or the principal government department that administrates a district.

Lebbe's land files are meticulously organised. He shows me permits and letters from the 1930s till 2024. Some of his documents are nearly 100 years old and yellow, the words fading. With expenses mounting, however, Lebbe has given up his legal battles and his regular visits to the divisional secretariat.

Today, he cries as he explains that this history will die with him. Many others of his era who suffered similar experiences have since died. But HEO have copies of all his documents. In *The Sugar Project*, Lebbe's story is featured as a case study of how people were dispossessed by the sugarcane project and the settlers that came with it.

Since 2007, the factory is run by the Gal Oya Plantation Company (Pvt.) Ltd., a public-private partnership and successor to the now-defunct Hingurana Sugar Industries (Pvt.) Ltd. The company also controls hundreds of acres of land dedicated to sugarcane cultivation.

Problems persist. The same outgrower model popularised in Sri Lanka's tea plantations is used here. Cultivators obtain seeds and fertiliser from the company which deducts this from their final payment. But the Gal Oya Plantation Company does not give them contracts and has the right to allocate the land to another grower if sugarcane isn't cultivated. And while global sugar prices have increased more than 250% since 2020, the price the company pays the growers has remained the same over the years.

Chandraratne fell victim to this economic exploitation. He says sugarcane doesn't grow well on the land allocated to him. "After paying back the loans[7] and with all the expenses, sometimes there is nothing left for us," he maintains. "Rice and corn bring in higher, more regular income. Besides, paddy is better for the mind. Sugarcane doesn't respect the earth. Rice, unlike sugarcane, respects the earth and lets it regenerate."

They were not even allowed to plant a banana tree on these lands, Chandraratne continued. They had neither the power to negotiate a better price with the company nor to stop cultivating sugarcane. Chandraratne has attended meetings and participated in actions urging the government to resolve this protracted problem. He has petitioned the courts and enlisted with the Neethai Karumbu Vivasaayikal Sangam (Neethai Sugarcane Farmers' Association, in Tamil). So far, nothing has changed.

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[7] The ongoing practice is that the company provides fertiliser and seedlings through a (interest-included) loan system and brings machinery for the harvest. But as they "never give enough" (according to Chandraratne) farmers purchase fertiliser/seedlings themselves while a shortage of machinery sees them hiring private machine operators with their own funds.

Nihal has distributed *The Sugar Project* among the media, lawyers, government officers, diplomats, the UN, civil society and the affected public. He considers it to be "a kind of evidence" invaluable in policy, advocacy and in courts. HEO and PARL are currently providing pro bono legal support for 10 court cases and 37 others are being fought by farmers with their own funds.

HEO's advocacy is based on a desire to extract justice for these local communities. Many who are being dispossessed of land due to various reasons–including from acquisition for sugarcane, inability to grow sugarcane productively or displacement due to the Gal Oya Multipurpose Development Project decades ago–are members of ADALR and benefit from HEO's work. The community and organisations collectively demand that the right these local communities have to their lands be honoured; and that they be allowed to become productive contributors towards the country's food security and sustainable economic development.

HEO's work is controversial and, as Nihal says, "We are up against a strong force." He is accustomed to being on the receiving end of violence and intimidation. Affected landowners and HEO staff were attacked and beaten by thugs associated with the plantation company while they were gathering information for *The Sugar Project* while Nihal has been summoned by the police on various occasions based on complaints the company lodged against him. "The police show up all the time," says Nihal, "that's no big deal."

Despite the obstacles, Nihal and his four-person team have remained committed and persistent. The Sugar Report and an accompanying video were released in October 2024.[8]

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[8] The NTT is conscious of the intersectional conflicts related to landownership in Sri Lanka, especially in the Eastern Province. The concept of land registration started in Sri Lanka with British colonial rule, complicating the relationship communities had with the land and the use of natural resources. This was then further complicated by decades of government policies on colonisation, settlements, politicising and ethnicising land. Many state-sponsored such settlements were done with the intention of changing the demography of the land, and were called 'colonising of uninhabited land' (Britannica: Gal Oya Project), with no regard to the communities already living on those lands. Multiple rounds of displacements due to the war, coupled with state-sponsored and unsponsored settlements have today resulted in multiple claims to ownership of land in these areas. Land administration continues to be "institutionally and functionally fragmented and incomplete" (World Bank report: Improving Quality of Land Administration in Sri Lanka). Over 80% of the land today is state-owned (World Bank report:Improving Quality of Land Administration in Sri Lanka) and the state has the right to allow the use of land to people by way of grants and permits. The nexus of private corporations, government policies, and appropriation by state agencies such as the Department of Archaeology and the military continue to dispossess communities of the land on which they have lived for generations.

The Supreme Court

25 A STEP CLOSER TO ELUSIVE JUSTICE[1]

"There is only a small window of opportunity," says Piyumi*, a lawyer at an organisation that provides legal assistance to victims of human rights violations. Seated in their one-roomed office, she talks about the limited time the public, including victims, have to seek remedies in the apex court.

Under the Constitution of Sri Lanka, victims of fundamental rights violations have a month to file a case in the Supreme Court. But as this limitation is not widely known, they miss the window and cannot obtain remedies, Piyumi explained, adding that she meets people who write appeal after appeal to various authorities in the hope of finding solutions. "When they finally seek us out to file a fundamental rights petition, it is too late," she remarked.

NTT supports the organisation to urgently help those whose rights have been violated to seek justice by providing pro bono services. Through this project, called "Access to Justice", they have represented people who have experienced torture, violence or discriminatory treatment by state officials. They have handled multiple critical cases including for victims of the shootings that took place in Rambukkana in the Sabaragamuwa Province, when police opened fire on a protest; and for those arbitrarily arrested in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019, which targeted churches and hotels.

When taking such cases to court, they hope to gain more than just compensation for the victim, Piyumi explains. Their petitions plead for disciplinary as well as criminal action to be instituted against responsible officers; or the issuance of guidelines on, for example, the use of firearms by the police.

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[1] One of the organisations featured here is not identified owing to the sensitivity of their work.

“Even a judgement by the court that the authorities violated the law helps hold people accountable,” she said. This “strategic litigation” undertaken by the organisation has resulted in rulings that not only directly benefit the victim but also the general public.

The organisation started as a group of lawyers who challenged former President Maithripala Sirisena’s attempts to re-implement the death penalty–on which there has been a de facto moratorium since 1976–for drug offenders. Since then, they have expanded the scope of their activities. They no longer handle solely fundamental rights cases. They also run the “Bill Challenges Project”, with NTT support. As with fundamental rights cases, a swift response is critical.

In Sri Lanka, unlike in some other countries, the judicial review of laws passed in Parliament is not possible. As such, any challenge to a new law must be done before it is enacted. The public has fourteen days from when the bill is placed on the order paper of Parliament to challenge it in the Supreme Court. “Citizens find it difficult to read, understand and challenge these bills within a short time,” explained Piyumi. “So we track and review bills as they are gazetted.” Three staff members are assigned to read all bills and work against the clock to identify provisions that are inconsistent with the Constitution and could potentially violate human rights. Piyumi is certain that a recent past government put forward a large number of bills in rapid succession to impede citizens from challenging them, thereby ensuring their uncontested passage into law. But the organisation rose to the occasion by challenging particularly problematic draft laws–the Online Safety Bill among many others.

Their work often draws attention to bills that would otherwise be passed without deeper scrutiny. “It is a way of putting them on the radar for everyone,” Piyumi pointed out.

Although justice is meant to be accessible to all, the time limits and the prohibitive cost of litigation make that impossible, Piyumi said. As one of the few organisations consistently tracking and analysing bills as soon as they are made public, they are able to navigate the multiple obstacles to public interest litigation.

Another organisation focused on protecting the fundamental rights of citizens is the Right to Life Human Rights Centre (R2L). Those who pursue justice for the victims of fundamental rights violations are often exhausted due to the time it takes to obtain remedies, but they remain undeterred, says Dulan Dasanayaka, attorney at law and R2L director and legal adviser.

R2L focuses on securing justice for victims of police torture but cases take years to conclude due to systemic challenges at every step of the process. While lawyers and the various courts are usually criticised for the protracted process, several other institutions and stakeholders contribute, 39-year-old Dulan explained.

For instance, the Government Analyst's Department sometimes submits reports only after several months. In the meantime, police witnesses may be transferred, leading to further delays. This lengthy process only erodes the people's will to seek justice, he pointed out.

R2L has pursued some cases of human rights violations for nearly 15 years, determined to hold the perpetrators accountable. However, donors rarely provide grants for this kind of work as traditional funders only support projects that last two to three years. They felt the pinch during COVID-19: they had seven important fundamental rights violation cases to pursue but no money for it.

This was when NTT began its most recent collaboration with R2L. Philip Dissanayake, R2L's 56-year-old executive director, says NTT previously supported them to implement multiple initiatives–especially in 2008[2] when the threats against human rights defenders were more pronounced.

"We started in 2003 to engage in interventions to take the human rights conversation to the grassroots and stand up for those whose human rights had been violated," Philip said. "However, 2008 was tough for those in Sri Lanka who spoke about human rights. We faced many threats. Two victims to whom we provided legal aid were killed."

R2L initially formed human rights defenders' groups in the Galle, Matara and Puttalam districts. They subsequently became "human rights first aid centres" of which there are now 24 countrywide. For Philip, this is R2L's most valuable service, enabling them to work outside of Colombo and to maintain a grassroots-level network where people know they can obtain quick intervention. Last year alone, they received 940 cases of which around 400 were human rights violations.

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[2] The years preceding the war ending in 2009 saw many serious human rights violations, including the crackdown on dissent, curtailment of the freedom of expression and threats, intimidation and violence against civil society and journalists.

For torture to stop in Sri Lanka, the "culture of torture" needs to end–where the public stop accepting it as normal, Philip says.

Interventions over the years, including by R2L, led to many vital frameworks being developed to curtail human rights violations. "But neither the government nor the public is aware of them or interested in ensuring they function effectively," Philip said, regretfully. "This is our next challenge–to activate these mechanisms so the public can enjoy the rights to which they are entitled but have had to fight for".

*Names changed.

We have considered the said submissions of the Petitioner, the relevant facts of the instant matter revolving around the impugned incident and especially the 1st Respondent's act of assault and the punch on the mouth of the Petitioner whilst being involved in a poster campaign. We have also considered the implication and the development of the fundamental rights guaranteed to citizens under Article 14(1)(a) of our Constitution. However, we are of the view that the Petitioner has failed to establish a rational connection and/or a positive relationship between the said two elements in the instant case in order to obtain a declaration by this Court, that consequentially to Article 11, the Petitioner's rights have been violated under Article 14(1)(a) of the Constitution.

Conclusion

For reasons morefully adumbrated in this judgement, this Court holds that the 1st Respondent has subjected the Petitioner to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and thereby violated the fundamental rights of the Petitioner guaranteed under Article 11 of the Constitution.

Accordingly, the 1st Respondent is directed to pay a sum of Rs. 150,000/= as compensation to the Petitioner from his personal funds.

Further, the State is also directed to pay a sum of Rs. 100,000/= as compensation and costs to the Petitioner.

The Petitioner is thus, entitled to a total sum of Rs. 250,000/= as compensation and costs and all payments to be made within six months from the date of the judgement.

Judge of the Supreme Court

P.P. Surasena, J.
I agree

Judge of the Supreme Court

S.Thurairaja, PC. J.
I agree

Judge of the Supreme Court

Fundamental rights judgemnet in a case of police torture

WFP fellows during the training in Madurai, India

THE WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME, AN APT EXAMPLE OF NTT'S VISION

I am glad for the opportunity to review the Women's Fellowship Programme (WPF) which I know of from those who were fellows of the programme over the years. For Sri Lanka's North and East, engaging in social justice work since the war's end in 2009 has been a process of rebuilding society from the ravages of armed conflict and the tsunami. The damage is manifold, complex, intergenerational and persistent. In this context, visitors to the region will find women from different villages and towns in the North and East engaged in public life of various kinds.

They work with institutions–sometimes non-governmental, sometimes local government, often a combination of both–towards social justice. They are more world-wise owing to their lack of mobility and access, which is the reality of women in a patriarchal society. They often wield the language and register of human rights, in general, and women's rights, in particular. All of them were/are living in poverty, with some social class mobility possible over time, and are war-affected. They include women from families of the disappeared; those living with disabilities; those who have lost loved ones; may have been ex-combatants (often child soldiers); been displaced (usually more than once); and lost moveable and immoveable assets, repeatedly.

Many among them also have suffered or still experience domestic violence, abuse and assault within and beyond the home. Building a robust network of activists from among women who have been through this level of trauma is nothing short of miraculous.

A watershed moment in these women's lives that often affirmed their commitment to continue working on social justice is the one-month Tamil language Sangat training course held once a year in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. It is attended by women activists from Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka who exclusively speak Tamil. The trainers are also Tamil feminist activists from across both countries. The participation of Sri Lankan activists is made possible largely by support provided by the NTT's Women's Fellowship Programme. Over time, this contribution has had results well beyond support to attend a single training course.

Its impacts have brought us to the position where we now have a sprinkling of Tamil-speaking women activists across the North, East and Malaiyaham equipped with the language, intention and skills required to work on social justice issues in their own communities. These women have, in turn, inspired others or created institutions/collectives/networks that provide the next generation of Tamil women the opportunity to explore a life in social justice work. In effect, the WFP has contributed to a web of women social justice activists from marginalised backgrounds that temporally spans two generations and spreads spatially across Tamil-speaking areas on the island.

As with all programmes, many aspects needed to be reflected upon and re-envisioned, intermittently. This was my job in the review of the programme I undertook for NTT. I engaged in this task and made my proposals to NTT. They were heartily welcomed and it would be an understatement to say that I am excited to see how the programme is revamped and relaunched to continue its contribution.

The WFP is very much in line with the Trust's vision of "the establishment of a just, equitable and peaceful society" and mission to "collectively promote peace, reconciliation and human rights, sharing responsibility, resources and risks through strategic partnerships with civil society, public sector, business community, diaspora, academia and donors". This task involves far more complicated negotiations than the simplicity of these sentences may lead us to believe. NTT is one of the few organisations in Sri Lanka that focuses on building capacity in Tamil-speaking communities from outside the narrow, sometimes patronising, perspective of them being "affected by war and thus needing assistance".

The WFP's approach is based on the understanding that women must be provided space in Tamil-speaking societies so they are able to acknowledge the pain and injustice they have endured; and redirect that energy towards learning and being agents of change in their own societies.

Other spaces adopting this self-determining approach within Tamil-speaking communities might utilise the default tropes of ethnic exceptionalism and understanding of cultural/political nationalism that emerge thereof. NTT, and the WFP, more specifically, do not fall into the trap of patronising "war victims" or the utilitarian employment of ethnic identity-based nationalism that are often hollow in content and, thus, useless at best and harmful at worst. This is very much in line with Neelan Tiruchelvam's place as a thinker, lawyer, advocate and member of parliament. He acknowledged the very real sense of grievance among Tamil people in Sri Lanka; the feeling of being disrespected for their language, culture and history; and the fear that a life with dignity, freedom and equality may not be possible for them on the island. The solution he sought and advocated for was self-determination without violent nationalism. This needs a robust, reflexive and vibrant society.

On the one hand, the WFP is tasked with addressing the need to acknowledge the very real marginalisation of all of Sri Lanka's minorities, most of whom speak Tamil. On the other, it must recognise the default solutions within these communities–of violence, division and constructions of insurmountable differences across communities–as not being viable, just or effective ways of addressing such marginalisation. To some extent, the WFP has already done so. Further, the foundational understanding of women's rights and feminism that forms the basis of the WFP creates space to provide the tools to acknowledge structural obstacles–not just across differing social groups, but also within groups–to resisting violence and injustice from the home to the nation (Veetilum nattilum vanmuraiyai ethirthal, which translates to "opposing violence in the home and the country", is a popular slogan among women's organisations in the North and East).

A gender perspective and feminist principles enable WFP fellows to make connections across different systems of oppression and not succumb to easy answers when it concerns understandings of injustice or visions of how to work towards holistic social justice. While this requires much more honing and sharpening, the presence of a foundation upon which to build this public sphere–made up of ordinary women who have committed to complex understandings of work towards justice and rights–was made possible, among other things, by the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust's Women's Fellowship Programme.

The process of reviewing the WFP led me to recommend that NTT considers setting up and supporting structures for more consistent and holistic mentorship of fellows during the entire fellowship. On this occasion of acknowledging the Trust's contribution over the past 25 years, I would like to propose that NTT includes within its mandate directly setting up, and/or supporting the setting up of, structures of mentorship for emerging and existing generations of social justice activists.

I heartily congratulate NTT on embodying and affirming the visions of Neelan Tiruchelvam, honing and evolving them and sustaining the work of creating an enabling environment for movements for social justice and change in Sri Lanka. I am glad to have had the opportunity to engage in an exercise of reviewing and envisioning future directions for the Trust and offer my support for this work going forward.

Conversations with the community during monitoring visits

LESSONS LEARNT ON A JOURNEY TOWARDS EQUITABLE CHANGE

Grantmaking, which entails wanting to "fix" communities and/or "save" them, is inherently colonial and occurs within a hierarchical and inequitable power structure. This creates an unequal relationship in which the recipient institution is placed in the weaker position. That said, financial resources from the Global North to the Global South have supported civil society initiatives to protect and promote democracy and human rights. The Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust (NTT) is cognisant of this paradox and in its 25-year journey has strived–sometimes successfully, sometimes not so successfully–to avoid replicating these power imbalances and inequities.

The Global North's grantmaking model has been critiqued for the structural racism embedded in its systems and processes. An example of this is its tendency to view the Global South as lacking in capacity and to habitually devalue its practices and knowledge. Moreover, the power and resources Global North grantmakers possess enable them to act as gatekeepers, thereby maintaining their privilege and position within the international development system.[1] Conscious that even intermediaries or local branches of international organisations tend to reproduce these inequities, NTT endeavours to check its privilege as the first step towards dismantling these inequitable structures.

This is the story of the Trust's journey of learning how to be more than just a grantmaker, through trial and error.

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[1] https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/news/ingo-problem-reimagining/#:~:text=INGOs%20capitalize%20on%20a%20system,that%20INGOs%20claim%20to%20serve.

Risk-taking integral to creating an enabling environment

As a local grantmaker with no headquarters to dictate policy or rules, NTT can formulate institutional policies and processes that respond to evolving contexts and needs. This freedom allows NTT to have a high (but considered and conscious) appetite for risk-taking. This is a critical part of our grantmaking model owing to the principles upon which the Trust is founded. For instance, NTT prioritises grantmaking to community-based organisations (CBOs), including the provision of seed funding. This process is inherently risky since these organisations might not have a track record and there is potential for failure. However, the NTT's ethos of being more than just a grantmaker includes institution-building and strengthening and enabling local entities to work on and speak about issues of concern to their communities.

Sometimes, the context requires risk-taking. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, NTT made over 90 grants to organisations countrywide to facilitate emergency relief and support. The projects supported included providing dry rations, strengthening intermediate care centres and hospitals, offering counselling, supporting livelihoods, enabling access to education and remote learning, creating community awareness and undertaking research. Travel restrictions meant that the NTT had to approve grants without visiting the applicant organisations and conducting capacity assessments. Not surprisingly, this led to some problems. A grant issued to a dairy farmers cooperative in the Northern Province is one such example, where NTT found that shortcomings in governance and management processes could not be addressed due to disagreement among the cooperative's board members. This hindered the project's implementation and resulted in the board and staff requesting NTT to intervene to resolve the dispute.

NTT had to tread a fine line between being a grantmaker and helping the cooperative build capacity, without interfering in its functions. The Trust enlisted cooperative development officers to guide the organisation in resolving their governance issues. We also requested another grantee partner from the region to build this organisation's financial and project management capacity. Furthermore, NTT allocated additional resources for capacity building, such as purchasing computer equipment to enable the digitalisation of certain processes. Through this, NTT learnt that supporting institutional strengthening requires patience and the willingness to expend time and resources. This experience highlighted the importance of conducting thorough due diligence, which mitigates risks by identifying risks and institutional vulnerabilities at the outset and enabling protective measures to be taken. Providing long-term support, financial and for capacity building, is another solution.

Visiting remote areas and connecting with communities

Viewing communities through their own eyes

NTT therefore approaches problematic and challenging experiences as lessons learnt instead of warnings that dissuade us from supporting organisations that do not have strong governance and management structures. Today, we continue to engage with CBOs that have shortcomings in institutional structures or processes if they wish to address those issues. Consequently, we have learnt that certain flaws in institutional structures or processes that we identify in CBOs tell a story of structural weaknesses in Sri Lanka's not-for-profit sector. Therefore, we cannot simply attribute such shortcomings to a particular CBO and write them off as being high-risk. Instead, we must help them build capacity and dedicate resources to engage in sector-wise capacity building.

For instance, a current partner in the Western Province established recently was engaging in management and governance practices that resulted in conflicts of interest and the absence of checks and balances. When NTT became aware of this during our report review process, we brought it to the partner's attention, leading to conversations about the importance of an independent, accountable governance body to oversee the organisation's strategic direction and activities. At this moment, the partner explained to NTT that the existing structures were modelled on a national-level civil society organisation (CSO). The partner was of the impression that their system was "good" since they had followed a reputed CSO's systems and processes. Instead of taking the path of least resistance by suspending the grant, the NTT team extended assistance to the partner to untangle the web of conflicts of interest by enlisting the services of professionals. This is an example of why it is important to understand the root causes of risks when a grantmaker identifies them.

Risk-taking to some extent involves having high expectations of partners and, by extension, ourselves. The story of Trans Equality Trust (TETSL), an organisation of transgender sex workers who had registered an entity that hadn't begun operations, illustrates the impact of such standards. Although TETSL was in the activism space for many years, they did not have administrative or management knowledge or experience. NTT afforded them the financial backing to rent office space and purchase office supplies while also training them on financial and administrative procedures and other skills required to run an organisation. NTT also encouraged them to reach out to other groups functioning in the same space for guidance and training. Despite this, the objectives were not achieved due to many reasons. The social and structural limitations they encountered due to their identity, coupled with years of trauma experienced by their members due to discrimination, stigmatisation and violence meant they required more time to absorb and internalise practices and processes integral to running an organisation.

Similarly, NTT is supporting two multipurpose cooperatives through the Northern Cooperative Development Bank (NCDB) to establish and upgrade organic fertiliser factories. During monitoring visits, we identified that one of the multi-purpose cooperatives required technical assistance in understanding proper financial management practices to ensure that they do not overextend the profits of one entity to operate the other without recognising the financial risks involved. Candid discussions were held with the organisation about the need to create sustainable business as well as operational plans for their fertiliser processing unit for when the grant ends.

A risk worth taking is supporting organisations that do carry a prima facie impressive track record. Grantmakers should not equate past experience and a well-written proposal with low risk. What appears strong on paper might not result in impactful outcomes when implemented, while proposals that are not particularly well-presented might be community-oriented and spark significant change. Instead of judging a CBO's activities based on a proposal, we always meet and talk to the organisation to understand their work. If their programmes benefit the community, we take the risk of supporting them.

Gemisarana Maha Sangamaya, a rural women's credit and savings union in Hingurakkoda, Polonnaruwa, demonstrates this. They were established about 20 years ago through a Canadian Embassy-funded project to encourage community credit and savings unions and to empower women. However, their grant application to NTT did not appear impressive, prima facie. In the past, they had only functioned as an implementing partner to national-level CSOs, in addition to running the credit and savings union. Even though the organisation had not carried out a project of the size presented to NTT, they demonstrated how they placed the community at the centre of their design. This was not evident in the proposal they submitted, which we learnt was written by an external consultant. Today, the relationship between NTT and Gemisarana is not merely that of donor and grantee, but a two-way relationship where we, too, learn from them and share those lessons with our other partner organisations, proving that the chance that NTT took is paying off.

It is generally assumed that well-established organisations pose less risk because they have years of experience working with multiple partners. Grantmakers hence choose to work solely or mainly with national-level CSOs or well-established organisations. This is because of their size, positionality (i.e., urban, proficiency in English), multi-layered/multi-department organisational structure and impressive outward communication strategies, etc.

communities share their expertise during monitoring visits

Leave no one behind

These factors are equated with better accountability and performance and thereby less risk. However, we have realised that experience, organisational structure or language proficiency don't necessarily translate into expertise in identifying and responding to community needs. For instance, one Colombo-based organisation received a grant from the NTT for the specific objective of addressing a critical research gap affecting the livelihoods of a marginalised community in the North. Given their reputation, we assumed the project would be implemented effectively. However, the final output deviated from the original objective and resulted in the marginalised community being used only as a source from which to extract information.

Reimagining capacity building as a two-way process

When working with CBOs, daily grant management and even monitoring become capacity building. During visits, we share monitoring and evaluation methods, project design methods and explore avenues for sustainability with partners. For new organisations, our capacity assessments after they submit the grant application contribute to their institutional strengthening process. We not only conduct due diligence but also explain to them the reasons for the questions we pose, and the best practices that drive these questions. Even if we do not provide the applicant with a grant, we strive to contribute to organisational strengthening in some manner. This has led to regular requests from CSOs, NGO consortia and even the NGO coordinators stationed at district secretariats for us to conduct capacity-building sessions for CSOs.

The Sumaga Ruhunu Circle of the Deaf formed by and for the deaf and hearing-impaired[2] community in the Southern Province is an example of the need for consistent and continuous capacity building spanning many years. Even after several years of NTT support, despite noteworthy growth, the organisation faces significant challenges with administrative aspects, communication and financial management. Regardless of these obstacles, NTT recognised their determination to succeed and provided training with the help of an interpreter. Conducting an orientation programme for them notably takes more time, which might deter organisations from carrying out capacity-building programmes. However, if time, energy, and resources are not expended, historically, structurally and systemically discriminated against groups will not be able to overcome these barriers to enjoying their rights fully. The objective of NTT's capacity-building programme is to enable them to work with any grantmaker and ultimately operate as a social enterprise without donor support.

[2] Here, the term 'deaf' refers to individuals whose hearing is completely impaired while 'hearing impaired' refers to individuals who can hear at some level though not completely deaf.

Capacity building of partners is a two-way learning process, as it also strengthens NTT's ability to become a better grantmaker. This is demonstrated in the example of Shanthiham, a reputed organisation in Jaffna, and its partnership with NTT. Shanthiham initially applied for a project on mental health awareness and providing access to young people who have dropped out of school to engage in vocational training opportunities. They have provided counselling support to war-affected communities for over three decades, but vocational training for young people was new to them. During in-depth discussions, it became clear to both NTT and Shanthiham that more information was required to ascertain the requirements of the focus population and that, based on new information, the project design might have to be revisited.

Supporting vocational training initiatives was also new to NTT. Therefore, these discussions were brainstorming sessions for both organisations. Along with Shanthiham, we learnt what an organisation should prioritise from design to the implementation phase who should be consulted as key stakeholders and how target groups should be identified. Shanthiham returned to the drawing board and held discussions with state entities, including school principals, zonal education office representatives and divisional secretariat officials to better understand the issues faced by school dropouts in Jaffna. This analysis and the process helped NTT and Shanthiham determine how to create a strong network with key stakeholders from the project design stage to ensure that the support rendered goes where it is most required. This experience during the proposal assessment process strengthened NTT's approach to evaluating grant applications. Consequently, we are supporting several vocational training programmes in 2024-2025, all implemented by partners with no experience in this regard who are nevertheless making a significant impact in the communities they serve today.

NTT views capacity building as contributing to creating an enabling environment for civil society, since strengthening institutions makes them respond more effectively to community needs. Moreover, increased levels of institutional accountability and transparency offer a form of protection against state attempts to weaponise alleged misuse of funds to restrict the independence of civil society. Rules to enhance accountability and transparency should not be disconnected from ground realities. For example, mandating a CBO to submit three quotations for a procurement process may not always be practical if the organisation is located hundreds of kilometres away from the city and is sourcing its material from the local community. One such example is Nawayugam Social Development Forum (NSDF) which proposed purchasing goats for their 2024 livelihood project from a beneficiary of their 2022 project. This required NTT to deviate from the condition of obtaining three quotations and to allow NSDF to proceed with purchases from local farmers.

A sign language interpretation training for counsellors in Matara district

A monitoring visit to a school in Bibile

This enabled them to strengthen the local economy while ensuring the sustainability of their previous project and staying true to their objectives. It leads to localisation, which is discussed in the next section. Accountability and transparency should therefore not be a tick-box exercise but be incorporated into partner capacity building.

Localising - moving beyond the buzzword

NTT's grantmaking model, which is locally owned, has evolved in response to lessons learnt–key among which is the importance of ensuring that our partners always adopt a community-centric approach. During proposal evaluation and discussions, we seek to understand whether the applicant is providing space to the community to express their needs and expectations so that intervention aligns with community aspirations. This approach has helped NTT support initiatives that, through their positive impacts, lead the community to feel a sense of ownership of the project.

The experience of the Institute of Rural Social Development (IRSD), one of our partners in Anuradhapura which works on empowering women-headed households and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), showcases how localisation and inclusion lead to tangible results. Rather than imposing predefined income-generating activities, IRSD invited the women to propose solutions that were most relevant to their circumstances. This inclusivity resulted in higher community engagement, practical programme designs and a stronger sense of ownership among participants. Because of this approach that we adopt, the benefit of the interventions often spills over to the entire community. Gemisarana conducts training programmes on people's fields, allowing them to be put into practice and tested on the spot. When these initiatives are held on local fields, villagers who are not "beneficiaries" of the project also assemble to watch and learn. They ask questions and use the techniques in their own fields. Gamisarana is therefore creating an enabling environment for the entire community to learn, to adopt technically superior farming practices to strengthen their livelihoods and consequently build local economies.

The positive effect of community involvement is also witnessed in NTT-supported school meal programmes implemented by the Centre for Child Development (CFCD) in Jaffna. CFCD engages with large-scale donors such as UN agencies and has multimillion-dollar, multi-year grants. The project backed by NTT is comparatively small but has resulted in significant changes exceeding the expectations of NTT and CFCD.

The school meals programme aims to mitigate the impact of Sri Lanka's economic crisis on the education and nutrition of preschool children from vulnerable communities, including war-effected villages. The project design emphasises the role of parents, children, teachers, school boards, community leaders and public health workers in ensuring children have equitable access to education, healthcare and food security. This has resulted in stay-at-home mothers volunteering to cook for the children in rotation, community leaders coming together to provide utensils for free and public health workers engaging with and educating teachers and community leaders on the nutritional needs of children.

According to the data gathered by CFCD with the support of public health workers, 20% of students were underweight at the beginning of the programme, while the midpoint data indicates the percentage of underweight children has decreased to 5%. In one instance, a preschool run by a Hindu kovil refused to allow boiled eggs to be provided daily to the children due to their religious beliefs. However, a month into the programme, when the kovil trustee board learnt that all other preschool children in the programme are given half a boiled egg per day and that this has improved their BMI (body mass index), they requested CFCD to add eggs to their pre-school programme as well. This is illustrative of a community coming together to prioritise the health and wellbeing of children.

Another example of the importance of listening to communities is an organisation that applied to support the livelihoods of Malayaiha Tamils in the Southern Province. To find out more about the context of the Southern Province's Malaiyaha Tamils (as our previous projects for the community were in the Central Province) NTT visited the project locations with the partner and held discussions in Tamil which encouraged the community to express their needs confidently and honestly. In the process, it became evident that the organisation had not designed the project alongside and with due regard to the community's specific needs; and that the they did not want the type of interventions designed for them. This experience taught us the importance of honest communication with the community–in their language–to better understand them and their needs when designing a project.

Localisation also requires ensuring equity and inclusion. Often, implementing organisations favour the "good beneficiaries" who can show "results" within the project period, while those who may not be able to perform as expected are not preferred. This is because grantmaking largely tends to be results-driven, and outcomes are often expected to fit within complex and timebound frameworks. Consequently, organisations pick the '"good beneficiaries" who can deliver as per the dictates of their donor.

Pre-school children In Haliela waving us goodbye

A finance capacity training for partners

This often happens when donors insist on meeting quantitatively measurable results based on frameworks designed by their head offices in the Global North without understanding the local realities of the community. In this process, projects become donor-oriented and beneficiaries become tools to satisfy donor frameworks.

This donor-oriented strategy seeps into how accountability is perceived. Accountability is frequently considered a one-way street, where a local partner is answerable to the donor whose guidelines they must abide by. Local organisations do not get to negotiate the standards, often designed by a head office in the Global North, against which accountability is measured. Instead, they are dictated to them. Organisations not able to conform are then omitted. We have, for instance, come across donors instructing CSOs to purchase food only for the specific number of participants at workshops, and not staff members, because project budget lines should only reflect beneficiaries. Yet, providing access to learning and food to staff should not be viewed as laxity in accountable grant implementation since a CBO's staff, who are often from the same community and work for relatively small salaries, represent the ground realities.

Effective localisation also requires grantmakers to recognise the need for inclusion of the ultra-marginalised, even within marginalised groups. Our grantmaking strives to ensure no one is left behind and that vulnerable and marginalised groups are drawn intothe development process. To achieve this, we request our grantee partners to take additional measures to make their activities responsive to the needs of the marginalised within marginalised groups. For example, we ask them to accommodate female sex workers (FSWs) who cannot attend early morning programmes and women who might bring with them small children they are caring for. Compensating FSWs, garment factory workers and tea pickers dependent on daily wages for income forgone by participating in our programmes and meetings should not be considered unjustified expenses but an integral part of guaranteeing economic inclusion.

Ground presence is another important aspect of localisation because it ensures that the partner is aware of the realities of the community as well as able to maintain close and frequent interactions with them. If the partner is not based in the community, the interventions proposed are often disconnected from the needs of the people. We had one such experience with an organisation in the Eastern Province which did not have a strong ground presence. Their staff did not regularly monitor the project and were consequently unaware of the hygiene and health issues faced by the children; or that the mothers who cooked the school meals did not have the relevant medical certificates.

However, following observations made during visits by the NTT, the organisation strengthened their monitoring, connecting the communities with public health workers, employing better oversight over the field officers and taking the initiative to bridge certain identified gaps. This experience additionally underscored the importance of maintaining open lines of communication and collaboration with grantee partners, prompting them to act swiftly and effectively on feedback.

In our experience of reviewing grant applications, we have learnt that many CBOs hire consultants to draft their proposals in English because they lack language proficiency. This is due to their perception that a donor will not consider their proposal favourably if it is not in English. Unfortunately, when an external party writes the proposal, the nuances, complexities and uniqueness of the initiative might not be captured. This is why NTT allows applicants to submit proposals in any local language and never disqualifies an applicant based on language. NTT further allocates considerable time to engage in conversations with the applicant to understand the realities–including their activities and capacities–that are not reflected in the application. Through this process, we have learned that many CBOs are better communicators verbally than in writing. Once partners are selected, we continue to communicate in local languages because we believe it creates a more inclusive environment which gives them confidence to candidly share their opinions and experiences. On several occasions, we observed that this approach brought us closer to both field staff and community members and encouraged them to speak without reservations about their challenges, share insights and actively engage in discussions.

Another strategy NTT uses to enable localisation is connecting communities and partners doing similar interventions to facilitate knowledge sharing. We act as the bridge between organisations from different parts of the country to share and learn from each other's experiences. For example, CFCD conducted an awareness and training session for several Tamil-speaking grantee partners who are also conducting school meal programmes. NSDF, whose activities have been supported by the NTT for several years, has taken the initiative to develop an equitable beneficiary selection process for their current project. Having recognised this, NTT facilitated NSDF to provide a training session to another grantee partner engaging in this type of intervention for the first time.


Learning from the communities

Children enjoying morning break, Wattala

Monitoring, not policing

Monitoring is a vital component of project implementation that should be done at the right time. Delays can have serious consequences, often resulting in missed opportunities to identify challenges early and to implement timely corrective measures. For instance, in one project to increase the incomes of poor families in the Jaffna district, the organisation was based in Colombo and lacked a ground-level mechanism, such as a field office or dedicated field officers, to ensure smooth implementation. They relied entirely on state officials, such as grama niladharis and development officers from the divisional secretariat. This led to significant shortcomings in beneficiary selection, as the most vulnerable families were not included.

Regrettably, this issue remained undetected until we conducted a monitoring visit during the project's latter stages. By then, it was too late to undertake meaningful corrective actions and the intended objectives could not be achieved. Valuable resources were misallocated and the opportunity to create lasting impact was lost. Conversely, when monitoring visits are conducted at the right time, we have seen significant improvements in project outcomes such as in Gemisarana Maha Sangamaya's initiative to enhance agricultural productivity among poor families. During the early stages, we visited the project locations and engaged with the beneficiaries identified by the grantee. This allowed us to identify that some beneficiaries did not meet the agreed-upon selection criteria. The grantee responded positively to comments, revisited their process and selected beneficiaries in line with the project's objectives. Consequently, the project not only met its goals, but in some cases, exceeded expectations.

An example of how timely joint monitoring, along with the partner, provides an opportunity for course correction and learning was demonstrated in the case of Devasarana, an organisation based in Kurunegala district. One of their project objectives was to uplift the living standards of the Malayaiha community in coconut plantations in Kurunegala. Although they did not have prior experience in this type of intervention, NTT extended its partnership, because the Malayaiha community in these areas receives little to no attention. During a monitoring visit, we observed that some beneficiaries selected for home gardening had limited space and that this was insufficient to create a meaningful change in their livelihoods. Additionally, we noticed that animals such as toque macaques, wild boars and peacocks habitually attacked the crops, making this intervention unfeasible.

We also found that some beneficiaries did not meet the agreed selection criteria and showed little interest in actively participating. The grantee partner acknowledged the gaps, attributing them to their limited experience in implementing livelihood development projects. They accepted the feedback and reselected beneficiaries following the guidelines. We adopted a collaborative approach, discussed shortcomings and jointly agreed on the necessary changes. This enabled us to resolve challenges without damaging the trust and relationship built with the partner.

Our experience reaffirms the importance of maintaining flexibility and open communication for projects to achieve their intended impact. For example, the Wayamba Farmers Organisation in Kobeigane, Kurunegala district, is implementing a school meal programme in schools serving children from marginalised communities. There is no mainline to carry filtered water to the village and the wells are unsafe. So people in the community were forced to buy filtered water at five rupees per litre, forcing low-income families to ration water intake. During our monitoring visits, we observed that two schools did not have clean drinking water facilities for the children, a critical issue in an area where CKDu (chronic kidney disease of unknown etiology) is rising. (Un)surprisingly, the grantee partner had not communicated this issue to us.

We recognised that providing meals alone would not yield the intended benefits if children had no access to clean water. Therefore, we decided to extend the original project scope and allocate additional resources to restore water purification systems in those schools. During our monitoring visit to the same project, we also observed that some schools charged Rs. 20.00 per student to compensate for the costs incurred by the mother cooking for the children. This practice contradicted the project's objective of providing nutritious meals to students from economically disadvantaged families. NTT took the initiative to provide a top-up to the existing grant to cover meal preparation costs, demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness to the local context.

Immersed in chess

Vocational training for youth

Learning is a journey

Being a donor does not mean we have nothing more to learn or change. At NTT, we are constantly learning. Our learning helps shape our processes and practices. We strive to incorporate new learnings in our grantmaking, thereby ensuring that our work resonates with the communities with which we work. We allow the learnings from our partnerships and the context in which the target communities function to guide our grantmaking priorities. When partnering with CBOs, NTT focuses on understanding the specific needs of communities. Most importantly, we learn through our partnerships what these needs are, and sometimes needs change or evolve. For instance, in the process of supporting a grantee working with the deaf and hearing-impaired community to build and strengthen livelihoods, NTT discovered that many in that community faced health challenges, particularly related to sexual and reproductive health. The partner explained to NTT that their members confronted personal and familial mental health challenges due to these issues. Since NTT was open to learning about this growing need, we encouraged our partner to provide us with more information.

We understood that public health officials and counsellors lacked knowledge of sign language and couldn't adequately address the problems. Due to this, we identified ensuring equitable access to mental health for extremely vulnerable communities as a priority. While the NTT has supported this organisation for several years to create economic opportunities for community members, we were ready, as the need evolved, to extend resources to address it. The organisation is now collaborating with experts to develop signs for specific health terms and has created an online dictionary and website to share this knowledge. This holistic approach raised awareness among health officials and counsellors and helped address the community's needs sustainably. This example further highlights why grantmakers must be open to learning and incorporating that learning in our work.

Another example is the identification of school meals and vocational training programmes as a priority area for support in 2024-2025. During a monitoring visit to women heads of households in the Anuradhapura district, NTT met several women struggling to educate their children. Nearly all spoke of aspirations for upward social mobility for their children. Many were survivors of domestic violence and experienced mental health issues in addition to dealing with economic difficulties.

They were also bearing the brunt of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Children were dropping out of school as they couldn't afford at least two meals a day. Young school dropouts were unable even to enroll in subsidised government programmes for vocational training because their parents could not spare money for a uniform or bus fare. One of our beneficiaries once told us she was short of Rs. 2,000 to pay the registration fee for a government-funded bakery course for her daughter. It was through a series of monitoring visits conducted in 2023 that the NTT concluded that children and young people from marginalised backgrounds required additional support, which we could provide. This was the inception of NTT's support for school meals and vocational training programmes.

Conclusion

Grantmaking is an opportunity to create an enabling environment for communities to seek solutions to complex societal problems. As many countries are experiencing some degree of shrinking of civic space, it is important for grantmakers/donors to ensure that civil society actors are supported to resist state oppression and maintain civic space.

However, grantmakers should not set the agenda–especially agendas based on priorities developed thousands of miles away. Context matters, and transplanting approaches and ideas merely because they worked in another context denies communities the choice to decide what suits their needs.

Taking risks, perceiving capacity building as a two-way process, enabling localisation, learning, and allowing our learnings to shape how we do grantmaking engenders a collaborative approach. This will ensure that donors understand ground realities, acknowledge that communities know best and are willing to be flexible in their interventions.

Effective grantmaking should therefore move away from favouring low-risk projects while expecting exceptional impacts. Although this sector in Sri Lanka might be a considerable distance from being a "trust-based"[3] grantmaking system, we, as grantmakers, should build mutual respect and trust.

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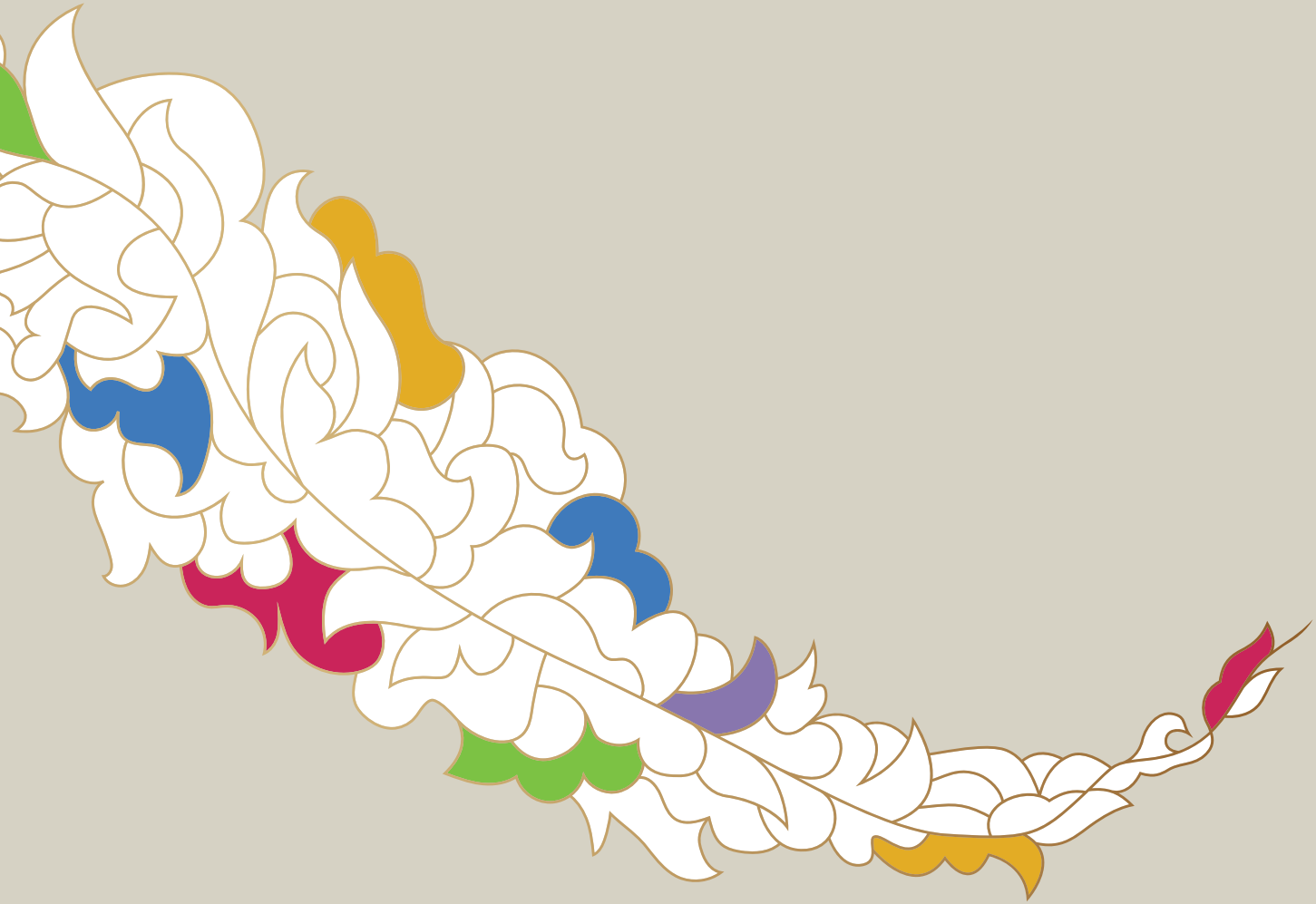
[3] https://ssir.org/articles/entry/trust-based-philanthropy-strategic

NTT does not adhere to the traditional grantmaking model. In fact, certain aspects of its grantmaking process may be viewed as challenging the traditional grantmaking model. As a local grantmaker, we remain flexible and responsive to ground realities, accommodating requests for changes even after project implementation has begun. Whether it involves reallocating funds, modifying activities, or, in some cases, shifting target groups, we prioritise impact over rigid adherence to plans. Through this adaptive approach, we strive to deliver meaningful outcomes and foster strong, trust-based relationships with our grantee partners. Our experience shows that accommodating necessary revisions often leads to greater significant changes at all levels: community, organisational and individual.

The past 25 years of NTT's journey tell the story of the need for patience, flexibility, and resources to become more than just a grantmaker. Our path has in no way been perfect. By contrast, we have evolved through trial, error and risk-taking. As we mark 25 years of partnering for justice and peace, we are dedicated to ensuring that this is a milestone towards a more equitable model of enabling social change.

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