



THE STORY OF **LANKA Farmers' FORUM**





The Beginning

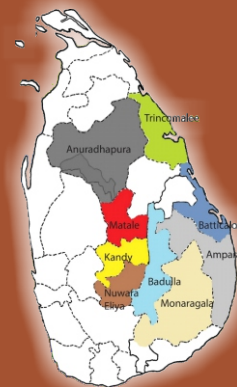
The history of Lanka Farmers' Forum (LFF) draws back to the project implemented through the Medium Term Corporation Program (MTCP) which supported by the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD), which was started as a pilot project in 2009 with the farmer organizations in Asia and the Pacific. The main objective of this program was to strengthen small scale sub national farmer organizations (SNFOs) and to create a powerful network among them in order to provide improved services to their members and engage in policy processes. Ultimately this network named as Lanka Farmers Forum. The project was implemented by Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) as the National Implementing Agency (NIA) in Sri Lanka, as a member of La Via Campesina.

During the first phase, MTCPI, The task was to the identifying of the FOs in the country and profiling and networking them. As a result, 2,100 SNFOs identified and selected for the program. However, due to the limited capacities of the program, the working districts had to limit to 9 and the total Fos to 400.

The second phase, MTCPII initiated in Sri Lanka in September 2013 followed by the

completion of and on the gaining of MTCPI. The program linked with 345 Sub National Farmer Organizations (SNFOs) that accounted for 21,969 individual farmer members expanded in 9 districts of Sri Lanka by June 2019.

The Lanka Farmers' Forum (LFF), the national platform (formulated under MTCP) of the SNFOs which encompasses from the presidents of District Farmers' Forums (DFF), the 9 district level platforms were strengthened together during the period providing capacities for them to deliver improved services to their members and engaging in policy advocacy to develop and improve farmer friendly public policies and programs with a gender mainstreaming perspective at all the levels.



MTCPII program implementing districts in Sri Lanka.



Kandy coffee flourishes thanks to women farmers

Although Sri Lanka is famous all over the world for its Ceylon tea, the first plantation crop under the British rule in Ceylon (the colonial name of Sri Lanka) was coffee. In the early years of British rule in the country, coffee was a very minor crop propagated by peasants. However, the coffee plantations were completely destroyed when a fungus spread in the hill country area. Cultivation of tea later took place to replace coffee, but several local varieties of coffee were preserved and are currently being propagated as a minor crop in the Kandyan Home Gardens.

The Kandyan Home Gardens are popular among environmentalists, agriculturists, and farmers in Sri Lanka as a sustainable, organic agricultural pattern because these gardens have everything even if in small scales. Majority of the work in the gardens are done by women. In the gardens, they cultivate cloves, pepper, spices, and coffee. Coffee provides them with a reasonable income when its price is high. But oftentimes, the farmers do not get a good price for their goods. As a result, many of them decided to cut down the coffee trees because they were not economically productive but they occupy lots of space in the gardens.

Women farmers bring Kandy coffee to life

Bandara Manike is a mother of three and a community leader in Polgolla, Kandy. She owns a small plot of land in the Kandyan Home Gardens where she cultivates multiple crops including coffee. In 2016, the Lanka Farmers' Forum (LFF), the MTCP2 national implementing agency in Sri Lanka, met with her along with other farmers in their village. From the meetings, a farmer organization with 35 coffee farmers was formed, majority of which are women. This gave hope to the people in the community because for the first time, they were able to discuss their agriculture related problems collectively. Before the intervention of the LFF, the villagers

SNFO and farmer member distribution of Lanka Farmers Forum

	District	SNFOs	Male	Female	Youth	Total
01	Ampara	46	1745	450	421	2195
02	Anuradhapura	41	1789	1988	307	3777
03	Badulla	34	1587	1236	388	2823
04	Batticaloa	39	1208	1093	266	2301
05	Kandy	41	1082	983	264	2065
06	Matale	42	550	891	278	1441
07	Monaragala	31	977	882	238	1859
08	Nuwaraeliya	34	660	411	180	1071
09	Trincomalee	37	3687	750	339	4437
	Total	345	13285	8684	2681	21969



Bandara Manike

acted individually. They collect whatever they can harvest from their gardens and sell these in small quantities even for a low price.

The group participated in various trainings. “We were invited to participate in other programs of the LFF. We felt very happy because we feel that we are a part of a big movement. We get to meet farmers from other areas. We learned lots of things including how to grow coffee the right way, how to prune, how to get the best out of the plants, how to dry them, and how to maintain the quality of the product, etc. We learned the strength and the beauty of collective action,” says Bandara Manike.

Now, as a group, if each of the farmers in their group are able to harvest two kilograms of coffee from their respective gardens, the harvest will total to 70 kilograms. They can then go to a wholesale trader and get a good price for their coffee.

The group also participated in discussions on 'value adding' for their produce. LFF took the group to NERD, a government sponsored institute in Colombo, where they were exposed to machineries they saw for the first time. The farmers realized all the things they can do with their produce if they have such machineries. Furthermore, the farmers were also taught to prepare business plans.

“We, ourselves, were surprised because we have come a long way from being simple women farmers and housewives. Now, we are doing our own business,” exclaims Bandara Manike.

The group decided to start their own coffee business. They collected all the coffee beans from their members and LFF helped them acquire a grinding machine, sealer, and other equipment. They started their small business under the name “Kandurata Products” (Kandurata meaning hill country).

During their opening day, they invited government officials and made them try their coffee products. The officials gave positive responses on their products and pledged to provide assistance to further their business. They also received positive responses from other people that tried their coffee saying that their coffee states good because it is organic. The group aims to make their coffee famous not just in Kandy, but in the entire country as well.





Sachini, Chandani and Bandara Manike

With guidance from LFF, the group opened a bank account where they will keep their earnings. The bankers were very happy to cater them and even suggested ideas for their business ventures.

Youth showing interest in agriculture

“My elder son who is studying Commerce became interested when he observed the developments in

our farmer organization. Before, he did not even want to be involved in any of the agricultural work we do,” says Bandara Manike.

“Few days ago, we participated in a business promotion training program organized by LFF. My son was also there. At the end of the training, one of the resource persons asked my son, “What are you





going to do in the future?” He answered, “I will probably be involved in my mother’s business and help them to further their it.”

Most of the people in Kandy are involved in agriculture as their main source of livelihood. However, they usually generate low income from selling their produce that is why many people in the village suffer from poverty. With knowledge on value adding and business planning, the farmers now have the capacity to add value on their produce which will help increase their income and consequently, improve their living standards.



Coffee supplier farmers

Mayura, Age 19, Son of Bandara Manike



Lanka Farmers Forum
ලංකා ගොවි සංසදය
இலங்கை விவசாய ஒன்றியம்

Building a Strong and Autonomous Farmer Movement in Sri Lanka

Lanka Farmers Forum (LFF)



Cooperative flow of LFF (Proposed)





Food production by vegetable dehydration

In the village of Rahathungoda in Nuwaraeliya District, Sri Lanka during the harvest season, many farmers are 'ensnared' by intermediary sellers that purchase their vegetables on despoiling low rates. Because of this, farmers fall into a helpless and desolated situation. Sometimes, they could not even earn back the money they invested in their farms.

To overcome this problem, thirty-three farmers gathered and started dehydrating their vegetable produce whenever the price in the market goes down. This way, the produce can be kept for a long time in good condition.

In 2014, Sri Lanka Farmers' Forum (LFF) intervened to search for a better and sustainable solution for the farmers' problems. They

recommended to the farmers to produce various food products from the dehydrated vegetables but without using chemicals. They introduced manufacturing systems for dehydrated ready-made products instead of selling fresh vegetables. LFF also supplied drier machines and other equipment for the farmers.

Under the MTCP2 Program, LFF provided training on cultivation of conventional crops without using chemicals and pesticides, producing dehydrated ready-made products, as well as several business training to further help the farmers. After the training, the farmers were able to produce 1,000

Dehydrated vegetables





"I was able to attend the first SAARC agri-cooperative forum held in Kathmandu, Nepal. That was a great experience for me as an cooperative practitioner in Sri Lanka. It allowed me to learn from other countries, discuss with policy makers and provide my proposals for the development of agri-cooperatives"

Abhepala, a cooperative and farmer leader.

Vegetable soup packets



kilograms of dehydrated vegetables for vegetable soup and other Ayurvedic products.

This is only the start. Through these initiatives, LFF was able to take specified financial rate for the vegetables and thus, contributing to the development of farmers' economic strength.

EDEN is the brand name for the instant vegetable soup produced out of dehydrated vegetables by value addition. These soup products are marketing at hospitals and school canteen in the area.

Further, hotels are purchasing these dehydrated vegetables as an ingredient prepare other foods.



“Jack fruit is a very nutritious food and widely available in Sri Lanka. We called it “Rice Tree” as it could provide daily meals. Jack fruits in my home garden wasted during the season. But now I provide them to our cooperative to dehydrate and make other products. Now I earn an extra income”.

M. Madanayake, Rikillagaskada



“I shifted to ecological agriculture about 6 years back after the training provided by Lanka Farmers Forum. Today, I'm seeing the success, impacts and benefits of it by myself. The production cost decreases and can witness the soil is becoming more and more fertile. I can sell these harvest to a better price now”.

S. B. Dissanayake, Denike



“Using Jeewamurtham instead of chemical fertilizer is really beneficial for crop growth. I apply this brilliant input in my farming for more than five years now. This gives me a better harvest than before. And it is toxic free. I'm rally happy now”.

S. B. Rajanayake, Denike



Dodamkumbura tomato story

Tomato is a food that is enjoyed worldwide. In Sri Lanka, tomato is eaten as it is or used as an ingredient for salad, processed as a juice drink, jam, and tomato sauce, and mixed in almost all types of curries.

In the village of Dodamkumbura, tomato is one of the crops that the farmers grow. Dodamkumbura is a remote village about 200 kilometers from Colombo where 90% of the families make their living through farming—mainly vegetables and paddy. Almost all the family members take part in vegetable farming including preparing the site, making vegetable beds, fertilizing, weeding, watering, protecting, harvesting, taking the produce to the roadsides, and waiting for the lorries to come and collect them. The farmers sell around 30,000 kilograms of their goods daily to traders.

Growing vegetables in the area is not easy because of the sloppy terrain, cold climate, and even attacks from wild animals. Tomato farmers even face additional problems compared to farmers growing other vegetables. Tomatoes are very

Rathnayake, Age 27, with his tomato harvest



delicate and difficult to handle. Once harvested, tomatoes cannot be kept for long—they ripe and decay easily so they have to be sold immediately.

Dodamkumbura farmers sell 3,000 kilograms of tomatoes every day at the price the traders set, which is always lower than the prices for other vegetables. The prices are so low that most of the time, farmers get less than the cost of production. They usually just level off the cost of the labor. The traders make a huge profit while the farmers continually suffer. Sometimes, the farmers no longer even bother to harvest the tomatoes and just left them to decay in the farm because of unfair prices.


Going Green after MTCP2 Intervention

Advocating change in their farming methods was not an easy task. The farmers were used to

selling their harvest in bulk instantly at the farmland itself. In most cases, the traders give loans to the farmers, thus they have to sell them their entire harvest without bargaining on the price. They were stuck in a credit trap.

The farmers were also accustomed to using imported hybrid seeds, which has to be followed by costly and deadly chemical inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, and weedicides. Not only do they not get any profit from growing tomatoes, but they are also exposed to dangerous chemicals. Sri Lanka is one of the countries experiencing the spread of Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) which is a result of being exposed to chemical inputs.

After several awareness training programs conducted through MTCP2, the members of the Dodamkumbura Farmer Organization decided to shift to organic farming as they identified it as healthy, environmentally friendly, and cheaper. As

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white sweater, stands in a tomato field. She is holding a large, woven basket filled with ripe, red tomatoes. The background shows rows of tomato plants with green leaves and some red fruit. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

“I was almost give up farming. Luckily I met Lanka Farmers’ Forum and got to know about the ecological agriculture and their marketing initiatives. Now I organically produce local tomatoes and provide them to add value as source. Now I earn a better income and I’m really happy to become a cooperative member”.

Kanthy Menike, Rikillagaskada



Women farmers working in the field

many people eat raw tomatoes, it is a responsibility of the farmers to produce them without using chemicals. When the farmers shifted to organic farming, the cost of inputs was lessened they hardly need to get loans. They also shifted to cultivating traditional varieties of tomatoes, including Goraka tomatoes, which are rich in taste, nutrition, and are even heavier.

Linking the farmers to simple modern technology

With support from MTCP, training programs were conducted to give necessary knowledge to the farmers on growing various crops organically and adding value to their produce, specifically tomatoes. The farmers were exposed to simple technologies, which they have never operated, touched, or seen in their whole life. Slowly but steadily, the tomato farmers in Dodamkumbura became part of the whole food production chain, starting from growing raw primary products to producing value-added end products.

Forty-one tomato farmers were organized and among them, potential farmer entrepreneurs were identified to start value adding for the whole group. The group underwent trainings and exposure programs ranging from proper cultivation of organic tomatoes, adding value to the excess tomato harvest by making jams and sauces, making use of small scale machineries, keeping proper accounts, proper storage, packing, and marketing.

The farmer-entrepreneur group now produces 70 kilograms of sauce and 80 kilograms of jam per week. They get around LKR 600 (USD 3) per kilogram of sauce and jam. The farmers observed that there is a satisfactory profit when adding value to the primary products. They get more income from these than selling bulk raw tomatoes to traders. Another important aspect in this whole process is that the youth in these farmer families have shown interest in being involved in the agri-business.

Challenges

The tomato value adding is happening in the country in a massive scale using some of the local tomato harvests and largely with imported tomatoes believed to be genetically modified. The Dodamkumbura tomato farmers still have a niche market as of the moment. However, many consumers are now concerned with having “poison-free food”. Though vigorous campaigns promoting healthier agricultural practices and healthy eating, a wider market for Dodamkumbura products may be reached in the near future.

Tomato sauce



"I'm Nandawathi, a farmer from Naula. I provide my finger millet harvest to Naula Women Development Society, a member of Lanka Farmers' Forum. I also an entrepreneur in the agri cooperative society started by the society. Now, I have a better income to support my family and I'm really proud of my self".





From isolation to a woman farmer leader

My name is Indika Somasiri. I live in Matale district, Sri Lanka with my husband and two children. My husband is a farmer just like many other people in our district. Although Matale is believed to be the “center” of the country, the reality is we were isolated. Our area is quite a distance from the town centers. The only mode of public transportation is not available in the evening. Some use small motorbikes for transportation, but it is risky because once the sun sets, wild elephants take over the roads.

Rays of hope

Four years ago, some people came to our village and introduced themselves as MONLAR (Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform), an

organization based in Colombo. They indicated that they want to meet with the farmers. The farmers, including my husband and I, in our village had an initial meeting with them and eventually ended up forming a group as a Farmer Organization (FO). We were introduced to the District Farmer Organization and became a member of it. Next, we became part of the National Farmer Organization—the Lanka Farmers’ Forum (LFF). The whole thing was an initiative of the Medium Term Cooperation Program (MTCP), which has become a household name among the lead farmers.

Women farmers are attending a meeting in Moragahakanda



Dreaming

During the last four years, a lot of things happened. Sometimes when we look back, we still wonder if those were merely dreams. It was so hard for us to believe the good things happening to us after joining the LFF.

Getting organized

The FOs in Matale District formed the District Farmer Forum and I was elected as the president. Later on, at the National Lanka Farmers Forum, I was elected as the secretary.

Earlier, the farmers were engaged in farming individually. They grow and sell their harvest in bulk to the traders from the city coming in a lorry. The prices are generally very low, compared to the retail prices in town, but we had no alternative to make money for our hard labor. We were weak because we were acting individually. There was no collective strength.

Strengthening farmers and Farmer Organizations

The MTCP initiative is focused on “strengthening the farmers organizations”. We now only realized the value of it as we were earlier isolated in our own plot of lands. The only person we dealt with was the trader who was also the money lender. We bought all the chemical inputs from the nearby shop nearby. Our whole world was limited to these interactions.

After becoming a member of the LFF, even at village level, we were able to interact closely with our fellow farmers and share our problems. It was also a huge step forward when we participated in several training and awareness programs. We were able to interact with the members of the other FOs in other districts. Apart from establishing relationships with them, we gained knowledge on farming methods, post-harvest techniques, value adding, usage of small scale machineries, packaging, and marketing. The experience and the exposure we had were very helpful.

Farmers harvest Onion, Moragahakanda, Matale





Food sovereignty caravan, Colombo.

Breaking the silence

We never thought that we could influence the government and policy makers. The reason was that we were alone and spent most of the time in our plot of land struggling to make an income.

We were amazed to participate in the discussions where we discussed the decisions made by the government with regard to our agriculture, our livelihood. We participated in many protest campaigns even in the capital Colombo.

Making a decent living

Farming was a kind of vocation traditionally, comes on to the rural women. We were not on the top of it.

Women do most of the hard work, but the transactions were done by the men. Until MTCP and

LFF suggested the idea of adding values to our primary products, we were always at the back seat. We put what we learned from the trainings to practice and processed our primary products. We then decided collectively to open up a ‘sales outlet’ of our own where we are going to sell our value added products. We named our products “PINK PRODUCTS” to give a feminine touch to them because this is an initiative of the women.

We are also operating in Naula and found out that the sales outlet is very busy in the morning. We offer ‘poison-free food’ or organic food to the consumers and our shop was getting the attention of many people in town.

Now that we are all working together, we feel the strength and the beauty of togetherness. We made lots of friends in LFF. We feel that we have broken our isolation.

A women farmer from Matale in SAARC!

I was particularly happy that I, the Secretary of LFF and a woman farmer from Matale district, presented our story in a conference in Nepal where the Secretary General of SAARC was also in attendance.

This was just a dream that I never thought will come true, but it became a reality thanks to MTCP interventions. Before, we did not even have the slightest hope or even a dream to come out of isolation and interact in regional forums in our lifetime.

Being a woman farmer in an isolated village, I am so proud to be who I am today. A woman farmer, an entrepreneur, a National Leader of the LFF, a policy campaigner and a farmer representative of Sri Lanka at regional conferences. The most important thing to note is that there are a number of farmers—men and women—who have marched through the same path and underwent through the same processes and became leaders of the farmer community. All of these happened because of the moral, material, financial, and mentoring support extended by the MTCP Program and its dedicated, grounded and friendly staff members.



Indika at South-South cooperation forum in South Asia , 2017.



Pink Products.



Women entrepreneurs at Pink Products.



Value added products.



Moragahakanda reservoir.

“We were relocated three years back due to the Moragahakanda irrigation project. We didn’t had a proper market to sell our finger millet harvest. We had to sell them to traders at very low prices. In 2018, we met Matale district Lanka farmers’ forum members. They had initiated a cooperative enterprise and afford us to buy our miller for their processing center. Since then, we are really happy, because they give us a very good price than other traders”.

P. G. Seelawathi, Galporugolla





The Medium Term Cooperation Program Phase 2 (MTCP2), a five-year capacity building program supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and the European Union (EU), has been implemented in 19 countries across three sub-regions—Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific—engaging 1,544 sub-national farmers organizations (FOs) with a total membership of around 22 million farmers.

The funding support (total budget of \$ 5 million for the whole duration of the project across 19 countries) serves as a catalytic fund that will allow FOs to enhance their capacity to be effective channels of economic services to farmers.

So far, the program has contributed to the formation of strong national platform of FOs with improved capacity to engage in policy processes and mobilize resources from mainstream agricultural development programs like extension services, credit, and pre and post harvest facilities. The program also helped in transforming farmers associations into commodity-based cooperatives to strengthen the role of small-scale farmers within an inclusive and sustainable value-chain.

The program is being implemented by the consortium Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA) and La Via Campesina (LVC).

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