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Photo Credit: Kannan Arunasalam



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Urban agriculture gets policy-level support in Sri Lanka's Western Province

The urban poor in South Asia often lack livelihood opportunities and adequate nutrition. One way to address both these shortcomings is to encourage urban farming. Projects facilitated by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), one of the partners of the Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security (RUAF) Foundation, assisted urban gardeners and entrepreneurs in Gampaha, Sri Lanka, with marketing, business planning and agricultural water management. The initiative led to a policy amendment in Sri Lanka's Western Province followed by a process to incorporate urban agriculture in the National Agriculture Policy.



Photo Credit: Kannan Arunasalam

Members of the farmer company have diversified into packaging and marketing their produce.

Urban farmers: Making a valuable contribution

The urban poor in Sri Lanka have long been growing their own food on small plots. These 'micro-farms' produce a ready supply of cheap, fresh produce, which is important for both family income and nutrition. The shortage of land and limited access to water, however, means that the productivity of urban plots is often low, and few urban farmers manage to grow enough food to profitably sell a surplus. Many urban farmers are also poorly organized and lack access to micro-credit, marketing cooperatives, and improved seedlings and fertilizer.

A new approach: Grassroots enterprise

IWMI, in partnership with the RUAF Foundation, and together with Practical Action, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), started a project in Sri Lanka's Western Province to improve the livelihoods of the marginalized urban poor by strengthening their farming skills and marketing capabilities. The project focused on the Gampaha District, which is one of the country's fastest growing urban centers.

As a first step, a farmer company was set up to manage micro-loans through a revolving fund. Local advocates identified over 100 farmer families (most of them led by women) that were

interested in joining the company. Urban producer field schools helped build capacity and trust. Practical Action provided training on value-additions, such as the packaging and marketing of produce to make it more attractive to supermarket wholesalers. Roadside stalls to sell the produce were also established. Over 1,500 households and 75 entrepreneurs were direct beneficiaries.

Smart water use

Water is a critical resource in urban settings, with the poor often being forced to endure unreliable supplies and contaminated wells. Flooding is also a major cause for concern and there is little space for rainwater storage. IWMI researchers guided the growers on vertical farming and how best to use local water resources, including the safe reuse of domestic wastewater and grey water.

Making a difference

"We had been growing vegetables in a very small way, at home, just for our families," said Sudharma, a grower who has won several local awards for her enterprise. "The project helped us to go commercial. Joining the farmer company gave us reassurance that we were part of a larger group, so we had the courage to face whatever comes - even failure. Now, we are growing extra produce for sale."

Policymakers take notice

The success of the project attracted the attention of the Western Provincial Council, which incorporated a new agenda on urban agriculture into its agriculture implementation plan. The Council also initiated a roundtable discussion with other provinces which resulted in the endorsement of a set of recommendations on urban agriculture by the Minister of Agriculture, who directed his ministry to correspondingly amend the national agriculture policy.

Donors and partners

Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security (RUAF) Foundation; Practical Action; Wayamba University of Sri Lanka; and Rural Enterprise Network (REN).

For more information

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