

SAFANSI

The South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative

SANJEEVI:

AN ENTERPRISING SOLUTION FOR FOOD AND NUTRITION IN SRI LANKA

The landscape of Northeast Sri Lanka is similar to so many countries emerging from conflict. After more than two decades of civil war, the family structure has been severely disrupted. Many families are either living in or are just returning from refugee camps. Many households are headed by women, either due to the death of a husband or out-migration. Beyond the household, communities and markets are similarly damaged, with formal financial services rare and most agricultural fields, institutions, and markets destroyed by violence. As is common in post-conflict situations, beyond the physical damage, the psychological impact of such an extended conflict has negatively affected how people relate to each other and the extent to which they are willing and/or able to work collectively.

Advocacy for war-widows

Viluthu is a civil society organization (CSO), established in 2003, that aims to improve governance and strengthen civil society by building the capacity of youth, vulnerable women, local government, the private sector and the media in those areas of Sri Lanka most significantly affected by war. In the Tamil language, *Viluthu* means “the hanging roots of a Banyan tree.” Just as the hanging roots of the tree support and nourish the tree’s branches to spread wide and grow, Viluthu supports and strengthens those in the network it serves.

In 2011, Viluthu joined the BEES Network to work on enhancing women’s economic empowerment throughout South Asia.¹ As a member of BEES, Viluthu came together with two other CSOs—

Manusher Jonno Foundation in Bangladesh and Tarayana Foundation in Bhutan—seeking funding from the *South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative* (SAFANSI), to explore the role of women in boosting the food and nutrition security within their communities. Since its inception the BEES Network has become a strong knowledge-sharing network that advances good practices across South Asia.

SAFANSI is a multi-donor trust fund that finances analysis, advocacy, and capacity building activities to improve food and nutrition security and address the South Asian Enigma—the intractable and chronic malnutrition despite high economic growth. SAFANSI tackles these challenges by fostering the cross-cutting actions that will improve food and nutrition security. Before SAFANSI funding for Viluthu, its advocacy only extended to empowering women through counseling and training, leading democracy-building initiatives with the media, and performing street theatre to promote social accountability. Promotion of nutrition was not a part of that program even though it was desperately needed. However, within six months of receiving the SAFANSI grant, Viluthu not only provided nutrition training for Tamil war widows, but also established a nutrition enterprise called Sanjeevi.

Through the BEES network and SAFANSI funding, Viluthu was able to conduct a nutrition survey and implement resulting recommendations. In this context Viluthu has provided various forms of outreach to help women learn about the foods that grow locally and seasonally, and how they can incorporate them into their meals,

thus, increasing the bioavailability of nutrient-rich foods and nutrient intake. The effects this is having on positive nutrition behavior-change are immense.

How Food Secure is Mutur?

Mutur is a town in Northeast Sri Lanka, home to approximately 65,000² people, many of whom are war widows. It is in need of much support given that it is a part of the country that has been deeply affected by conflict. Viluthu's work in the area focuses on providing support to women in the form of advocacy training and mobile nutrition training. In addition, youth empowerment is advanced through street theatre.

Initially, Viluthu conducted the Nutrition Survey in October 2013 to answer questions about basic food and nutrition needs in Mutur, focusing on what, when, and how much families ate. Understanding: (1) how people were able to access food, (2) habits around and during mealtime, and (3) dietary diversity, were the focus of questions asked in the Nutrition Survey. By appointing and empowering groups of women leaders in the area, Viluthu taught them how to work together as a team; these women leaders then conducted the survey and recorded the findings. The findings were then shared with all the stakeholders from the government agencies, and a work plan was drawn up to empower Viluthu's groups of mothers and other women to improve the food and nutrition security in their communities.

In February 2014, Viluthu completed a food security assessment in Mutur through a participatory process. The women leaders of the community and some of the female heads of households were consulted and trained as enumerators for this study. This provided the opportunity to reinforce the importance of teamwork again. The study revealed food insecurity to be as high as 57% within this community as a whole, and statistics are believed to be even higher for women-headed households.

After the results of the survey were finalized, Viluthu took a two-pronged approach to address the issues of malnutrition and the lack of opportunity for women to earn a living in Mutur. Viluthu established a small enterprise called Sanjeevi that would recruit and train women through a mobile nutrition training program, and then help these women market the one-dish meals they had learned to prepare.

Sanjeevi Mobile Nutrition Training

The survey results highlighted a clear need for intervention: these women needed to address nutrition for their families, and provide a livelihood for themselves. Viluthu has addressed these needs through creating the Sanjeevi brand, which provides a one-dish, nutritionally-balanced meal that a woman can cook and either feed to her family, or sell to a local consumer. The concept required training and the right group of motivated women entrepreneurs.



Mobile nutrition training, through the Sanjeevi enterprise, started in April 2014. Eight women were identified as the core mobile support team who function as "group leaders." An additional 29 women have been trained in the one-dish meal concept across the Mutur community. Viluthu's Mobile Nutrition Trainer can train up to 10 women at a time from her small home kitchen. Ten recipes have been taught and

reviewed, and practical training is given through the preparation of these dishes in small groups using a hands-on approach. One-dish meals focus on 3 pillars:

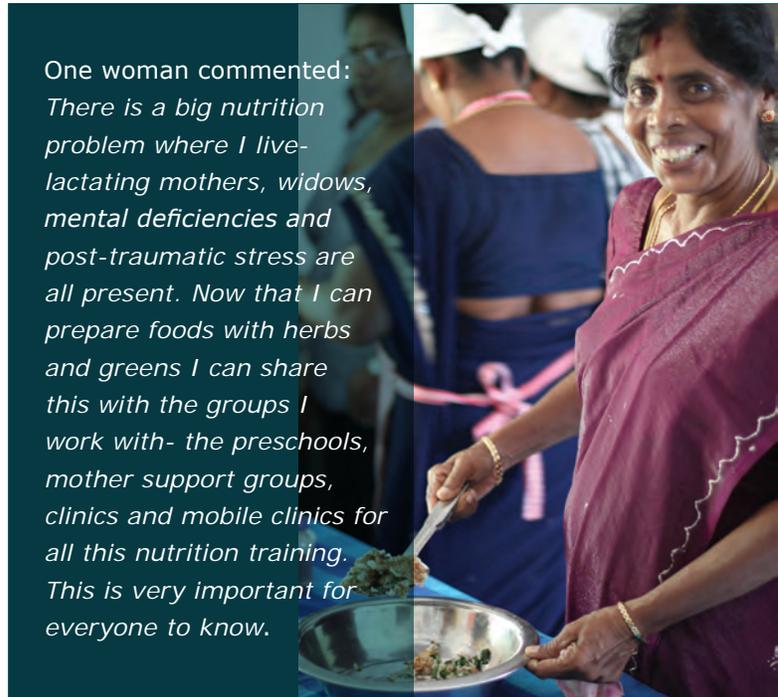
- I. **Low cost.** The meals should use locally available ingredients and each meal is below SLR 50 (approximately USD 0.38).
- II. **Fast.** All one-dish meals should take under 30 minutes to prepare.
- III. **Nutritionally balanced.** The meals should provide a healthy ratio of fats, calories, proteins, and vitamins/minerals to keep blood sugars balanced and digestion at maximum efficiency for optimal nutrient absorption and retention.

The women participated in fun group activities during a follow-up workshop which included going to the market, purchasing grains and vegetables, and cooking a healthy “one-dish” meal. The training focuses on utilizing locally available foods, reinforcing the logic—*why buy it when you can grow it?*

Many of the women commented that they had never before thought to combine foods into one dish as they learned to do in this training, given that eating foods prepared separately is much more common. For example, one might eat a rice-heavy breakfast with some sugared-juice. Now, adding lentils to the rice-base, as well as milk and whole fruit, makes a breakfast healthier and nutritionally balanced. The women were eager to take this back to their villages to recreate the meals and share these healthy concepts with others.

The nutrition training also reinforced the nutritive value of foods. Because they understood the importance of having a balance of carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, minerals, and calcium, making the meals in one dish and the new combinations of food now made sense. The nutrition training helps guide the women to cook healthier meals.

One woman commented:
There is a big nutrition problem where I live—lactating mothers, widows, mental deficiencies and post-traumatic stress are all present. Now that I can prepare foods with herbs and greens I can share this with the groups I work with— the preschools, mother support groups, clinics and mobile clinics for all this nutrition training. This is very important for everyone to know.



Sanjeevi Food Stalls

After the women completed their nutrition training, Viluthu gave the groups raw materials in the form of a single pot, and the palm-leaf roof and wooden structure. Two Sanjeevi food stalls were established and operational in early July 2014, and each food stall employs ten women. Food preparation for the day begins at each woman’s home, and five specific recipes of meals are prepared daily, on a rotating basis. Farming, foraging, and contributing raw materials (i.e., ingredients) as well as meal planning are done in a group setting, reinforcing the importance of teamwork. Demand for the meals is high: the Sanjeevi stall sells out of meals every day. Now that these women from Mutur are making steady earnings, they have each agreed to save SLR 20 a day, and are planning to invest in improving their stalls (e.g., display cases for the meals).

Prior to working in the food stalls, these women worked as agricultural laborers and received little, if any, consistent work in a given month. Conditions were very hard, and often they weren’t paid in full for the work they performed. A “good” month provided them with ten 12-hour days of back-breaking work (e.g., harvesting and

carrying heavy baskets of produce, exposed to harsh weather conditions without any protective cover). The daily rate was SLR 500, on a monthly basis, this is equivalent to a salary of SLR 5,000 (approximately USD 38). This places these families in the lowest income decile in the country, compared to the average monthly salary of SLR 6,499 (nationally).³

Now at the food stalls, women work an average of 22 consistent days a month, cutting in half their work hours. An average day is 6 hours with light labor (cooking, transporting food, protected under the cover of the food stall). They take home approximately SLR 450 a day, which is a monthly salary of SLR 9,900 (approximately USD 75). This is a 98% increase in earnings in just 4 months, and it moves them closer to the next income decile where the income range is SLR 10,750 – 16,162.

Looking Ahead

Viluthu has successfully created and leveraged the Sanjeevi brand by providing nutrition training, as well as creating the one-dish meal enterprise. Mutur is fast becoming a community that is not only aware of, but also accepting of good, healthy eating habits as they adapt behaviors to reflect better food choices. This is reinforced by colorful

Sanjeevi murals on the external Mutur hospital walls that encourage healthy habits such as the reduction of sweets, the increase of vegetable and water intake, and the increase of exercise. The same murals and signage are displayed at the food stalls to reinforce good eating practices and make it easier for people to accept the one-dish meals as a better choice as well as a more delicious choice than the fried snacks people are used to eating. Perhaps one of the best impacts of this SAFANSI-funded activity is that it has started the conversation about how the food that people eat is linked to their health.

Thanks to the SAFANSI grant and through the BEES Network, in an unprecedented 6-month timeframe, Viluthu has been able to survey and identify the needs of a community, train a network of committed implementers, open and establish two food stalls, and increase employee income by a consistent 98%. The success of the project is evident. The community also recognizes that Sanjeevi is an important business to support because it provides good, wholesome food for the community. Sanjeevi plans to open a third food stall in February 2015 leveraging the determination and drive of its employees and scaling across the Eastern region of the country, and hopefully, someday, across the entire country.

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¹ BEES, or Business, Enterprise and Employment Support for Women in South Asia, is a knowledge-sharing and learning network of civil society organizations and select World Bank-funded projects that are working to enhance women's economic empowerment through training and cooperative investment.

² <http://www.citypopulation.de/php/srilanka-admin.php?adm2id=5327>

³ Data comes from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2012/13: Preliminary Report. Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Sri Lanka.

This results series highlights development results, operational innovations and lessons emerging from the South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI) of the World Bank South Asia region.

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