

Dimbulgalla 2, Sri Lanka: Alagaiah Sundaradevi holds a basket of rice grown using the System of Rice Intensification method, learned through Oxfam partner JSSK. Oxfam helped Sundaradevi secure title to her land. Photo: Tom Greenwood/OxfamAUS.



GROWING HOPE AGAINST HUNGER



TO FEED THEIR FAMILIES, WOMEN FARMERS IN SRI LANKA FACE DEBT, FLOODS, DROUGHT, LACK OF LAND, HIGH FOOD PRICES AND DISCRIMINATION. COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR MARIAN REID MET SOME INSPIRING WOMEN WHO ARE MAKING POWERFUL CHANGES IN THEIR LIVES.



"It was my father-in-law who mortgaged the land," says single mother and farmer Alagaiah Sundaradevi. "I went to work for a daily wage. I didn't mind what I did ... so I used to go fishing and work on other people's land to help with the harvest. I used to cut bricks. I worked in the stone quarry. I would do anything for the money."

We are seated around a table outside the home of Sundaradevi's friend in the small village of Dimbulgalla 2 in eastern Sri Lanka. The air is thick and steamy — it's the beginning of the monsoon season.

AT A GLANCE

Women farmers are one of the most marginalised groups in Sri Lanka, having to contend not only with droughts, floods and high food prices, but also lack of equality regarding decision-making, access to land and other farming resources.

Oxfam is providing training in eco-friendly home-gardening and rice-growing, helping communities build irrigation schemes, and supporting women to start businesses, strengthen leadership skills and increase awareness of rights.

A community marketing network has been set up which enables farmers to sell their produce at a fair price to our community-based partners, who then sell the items at a reduced rate to families in other communities.

Sundaradevi is a small-scale rice farmer who understands how crippling debt can be.

"I have two kids who are going to school so I have to give them a meal in the morning," she says. "I also have an old mother at home who I look after. There were some days I didn't have anything because sometimes I couldn't find work."

Women farmers are some of the most vulnerable people in Sri Lanka. Many have lived through 30 years of civil war, and ongoing natural disasters like the 2004 tsunami and the devastating floods in January 2011. But they often face more subtle challenges when it comes to having enough food to eat and saving enough money to live a normal life — one of the main ones being having land title in their name.

"[Our land] was mortgaged for around five years. And it was through [Oxfam partner] JSSK that I was able to get the land back. They gave me the money to pay the mortgage," Sundaradevi explains.

"My father-in-law passed away two years ago and now I am the one who is making decisions. I was given [part] of the land when he passed away ... [That] land belongs to me ... I make all the decisions and consult with my group. It makes me feel very happy."

Across Sri Lanka, Oxfam is supporting community-based organisations who are working closely with women like Sundaradevi to access farmland and learn new cultivation techniques to make farming more viable and less prone to weather extremes. A common model is to work with a small group of about five women, providing training in agriculture,

starting small businesses, women's rights and land access, resulting in the women making powerful changes in their lives.

JSSK trained Sundaradevi and her group in the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) — an organic method of rice-growing that produces higher yields than the traditional method and is more resistant to flood and drought.

"Before SRI I got 10 bags, but after the introduction of SRI I got 30 bags," Sundaradevi says.

"I can get a good price in the market. I was promised that this season they could pay 100 rupees per kilo ... For non-SRI rice it is about 55-60 rupees per kilo.

"After adopting SRI I did not have any shortages of food."

Diversification of income is also important to ensure there is always something to fall back on if rice crops fail. Oxfam provides training, small loans, seeds and support to form savings groups so the women can develop alternative livelihoods such as raising chickens, growing vegetables to sell or starting small businesses.

After the 2011 floods wiped out her small vegetable garden, Nasara Beevi — who lives in Batticaloa with her husband and two children — received training and support from Oxfam partner SSDF to start a new home garden.

"Oxfam gave us seeds and saplings of different varieties of plants," Nasara says. "They told us how to use locally-available materials to ward off various diseases and





Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka: Chandrani, and her husband Premachandra, pick spinach in their home garden, developed with training and support from Oxfam. The couple can now live debt-free, thanks to their farming efforts. Photo: Tom Greenwood/OxfamAUS.

2,713 FAMILIES IN SRI LANKA ESTABLISHED HOME GARDENS IN 2011 WITH OXFAM'S SUPPORT.

pests. I grow okra, eggplants, spinach, green chillies and some green leaves.

"I get produce from my home garden for cooking and the rest, what is in excess, I sell ... This has increased my confidence because now we have money ... [Selling vegetables] relieves my difficulty.

"Before I started the home garden I was totally dependent on my husband's income ... his income was not enough. So we had to borrow money. After Oxfam's support we could live without borrowing money. We could manage our daily expenses."

To help ensure farmers have a market to sell their produce, Oxfam's community-based partners have formed a marketing network called the Community Coalition for Alternative Marketing Program (CCAMP). Each partner organisation who participates in CCAMP buys produce, such as rice, tea, spices, curry powder and dried fish, from local farmer members for a fair price, then sells them at a lower rate to members in other communities.

Currently, 238 producers and 3,058 consumers benefit from the program, which helps them avoid being exploited by middlemen.

Farmer Nelum Kumari Obadakumbura, of Anuradhapura — who grows SRI rice and other varieties not often found in local markets — says CCAMP provides a way for her to sell her rice.

"I sell to [CCAMP] because there are no other traders who will buy the local rice," Nelum says. "When we sell our rice through CCAMP we get more money and we get all the money at once."

Oxfam's work in Sri Lanka is about long-term change — beginning with the creation of community groups and discussion, which leads to the women seeking training in gardening and assistance with irrigation and marketing. They then train other women and men in these sustainable agricultural practices.

"Before women were very much marginalised. They did not make any contribution to production. They just used to cook whatever was given to them by their husbands," RGNK Central Committee President Manel Muthunayake says.

"Now it's different. They are coming forward and playing a significant role in the production aspect of the family. They can stand on their own feet. They have become empowered.

Chandrani has been working with Oxfam partner RGNK in Anuradhapura district for almost 10 years and in that time has helped implement a small-scale irrigation scheme, developed a home garden, learned how to make organic compost and fertiliser, formed an organic vegetable production co-operative with 21 fellow women and learnt about the importance of savings.

"Before we had a problem of accessing water; we could not cultivate paddy fields (rice) and vegetables," Chandrani says. "Now we have enough water so we can cultivate paddy, we can cultivate vegetables ... Now we have some permanent crops like coconut and bananas ... and that way I have been able to provide myself and my family with a very good nutritious meal.

"The most important thing I have received from Oxfam is new knowledge ... through the program I have my self confidence and I can do anything ... Oxfam has helped us to go forward; to develop our future. They have shown us a path, and it is up to us now."

**WHAT
CAN
I DO?**

**YOU CAN HELP FAMILIES IN SRI LANKA HAVE ENOUGH FOOD TO EAT
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