

RESILIENT AND GENDER INCLUSIVE ENTERPRISE SYSTEMS

A Development Initiative of Oxfam and DevPro

TRANSFORMING LIVES, EMPOWERING GENERATIONS...

JUNE 2025



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“With every challenge, I've grown stronger, thanks to Oxfam, DevPro and my family's love. Together, we've turned challenges into successes, proving that with perseverance, anything is possible,” says Shriyani, a local pepper entrepreneur from Kegalle who, with the aid of Australian Aid, Oxfam and DevPro, overcame personal adversity to thrive in the pepper industry.

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Devaranjini is another beneficiary from Ampara who was able to weave her future with DevPro's support. “I have been able to transform my small business into a thriving enterprise that not only supports my family but also empowers the women in my community. Embracing new skills and techniques has been key to our success.

”

“



The RIES project transformed the lives of Bandusena and his family from Moneragala as they developed their plant nursery business. What began as a habit to cope with the stress became their lifeblood thanks to the interventions by DevPro. “The training we received from DevPro on finding suppliers and the encouragement we received from them was what increased our sales and encouraged us to also step out,” he said.

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Even though Mohamed Jafeer's family had a rich history entwined in the handloom industry, he was faced with challenges due to the scarcity of raw materials. But in 2014, Jafeer decided to follow his passion for the handloom industry with just three looms. With the help of Oxfam, his business grew and thrived significantly. “I am very happy today for being able to provide work opportunities to 35 people and by doing this, I have been able to support their families as well,” he said.

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- Shriyani

- Devaranjini

- Bandusena

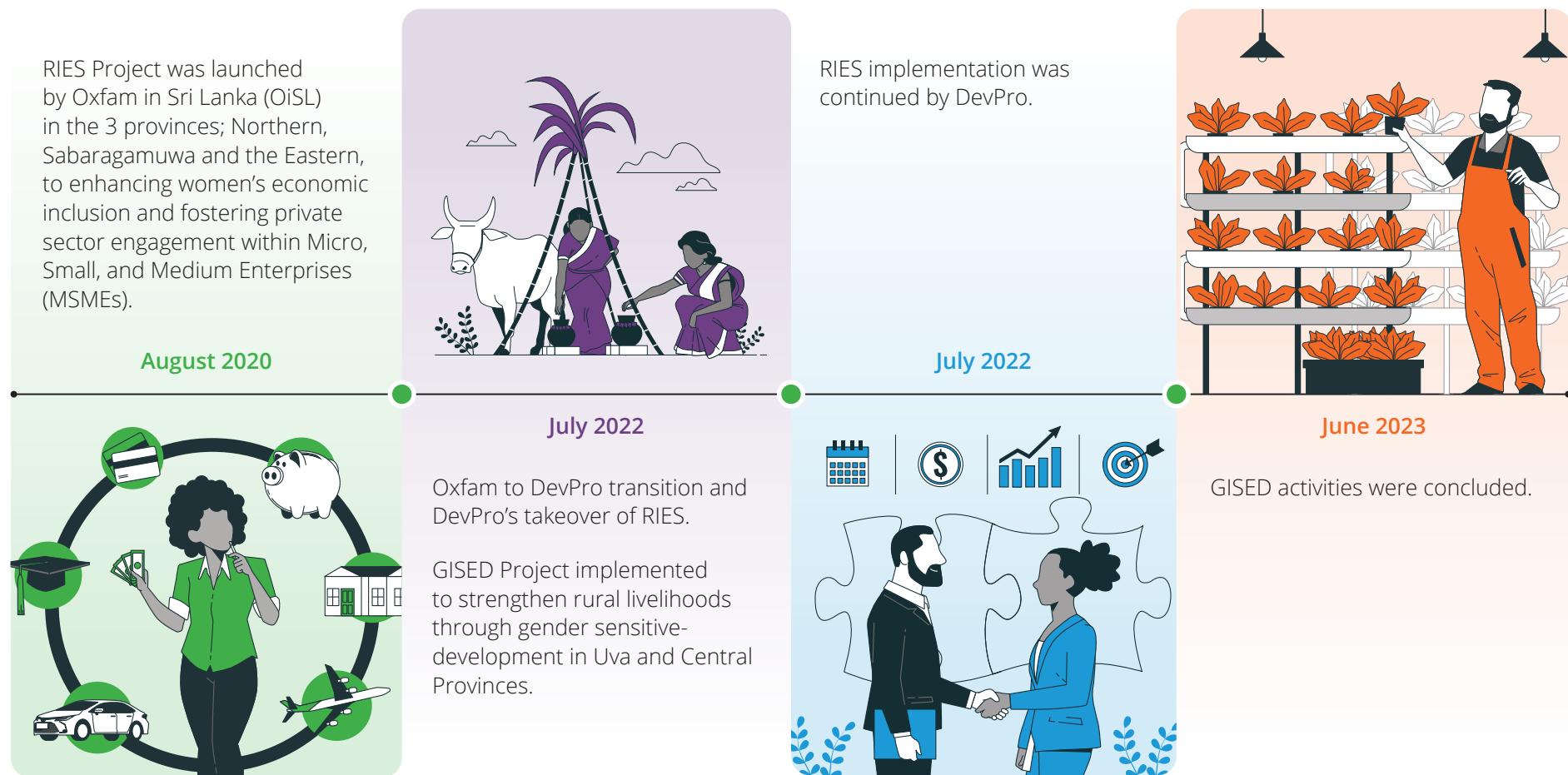
- Jafeer

ABBREVIATIONS

ASSC	- Agriculture Sector Skills Council (a government-partner)
ANCP	- Australian NGO Cooperation Programme (an initiative of Australian government)
DAPH	- Department of Animal Production and Health (a government agency)
DoEA	- Department of Export Agriculture (a government agency)
EGSD	- Enhancing Gender Inclusive Socio-Economic Development (a project)
FOSDO	- Federation of Social Development Organizations (an NGO, a partner for RIES)
GAD	- Gender and Development (a development approach)
GAP	- Good Agricultural Practices (a certification process)
GISED	- Gender Inclusive Socio-Economic Development in Uva & Central Provinces (a project)
GMP	- Good Manufacturing Practices (a certification process)
HARTI	- Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute
MSME	- Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
NPC	- Northern Provincial Council (a government-agency)

OAU	- Oxfam Australia (an NGO)
oisl	- Oxfam in Sri Lanka (an NGO)
ORHAN	- Organization for Rehabilitation of the Handicapped (an NGO, a partner for RIES)
PDF	- People's Development Foundation (an NGO, a partner for RIES)
RIES	- Resilient and Gender Inclusive Enterprise Systems (a project)
SUNRISE	- Sustaining and Nurturing Rural Agro-Industrial Social Enterprises (a project)
WDF	- Women Development Foundation (a partner organization)
WEE	- Women Economic Empowerment

PROJECT TIMELINE







FOREWORD

Oxfam is a humanitarian organization fighting against poverty and injustice. DevPro is the Oxfam's legacy entity in Sri Lanka. For both Oxfam and DevPro, inclusion of the marginalized in the mainstream development processes is the key, as it opens many opportunities for those left out/behind to get out of poverty. When access to resources and opportunities are enabled, the marginalized are 'included' to a larger extent and they can achieve their targets in life. That will also contribute to the national economy and development as well.

The RIES project demonstrates just that, innovating the models using strengths and opportunities of both entities and new concepts and the technologies. For that, the project has chosen the avenues with high potential for livelihood creation while contributing much to the nation's growth. It selected diverse geographies and community groups and used the most widely available vehicle – MSMEs. Thereby the RIES project attempted to transform the producer to entrepreneur and, especially to make women, empowered. This publication has recorded key information on that journey to share with the public, believing that would broaden their insights and be of use.

*Tilak Karunaratne
Executive Director (Interim)
DevPro Guarantee Limited*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DevPro Guarantee Limited extends its heartfelt gratitude to all its staff members, and the Oxfam staff during the initial two years of the project (2020 - 2022), who contributed to making the RIES Project a success. This project was implemented during a challenging period, facing both political and economic turmoil in the country in addition to a pandemic. Nevertheless, many of them remained dedicated to the project despite a transition in project proponents. Without them, this project wouldn't have been a success.

DevPro also thank its partner organizations, both Government agencies and the Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), who joined it in planning and implementing the RIES project.

The project beneficiaries and the communities associated with them ensured that this project reached greater heights and remarkable milestones along the project period. DevPro thanks them immensely for their cooperation and participation in the project.

The RIES project wouldn't have been possible if not for Oxfam Australia (OAU), which is the project holder, and the funding received from the Australian NGO Cooperation Programme (ANCP), an initiative of the Australian Government. DevPro extends its thanks to all of them.

We extend our gratitude to every individual, organisation, government institution, and subject experts who contributed to make this project a success.



ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION



This publication aims to capture the journey, impact, key achievements and lessons learned following the implementation of the RIES project spearheaded by Oxfam in Sri Lanka and subsequently by DevPro Guarantee Limited. The RIES project aimed to bring about inclusive economic development among beneficiaries in several provinces of the country during 2020-2025.

Having inspired over 7000 beneficiaries to develop their Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) - a majority are women-led among the enterprises, the project strived to increase the numbers, income, profitability, and resilience of women-led MSMEs in targeted value chains with improved access to domestic and international markets.

A photograph of a person working on a traditional wooden loom, weaving a fabric with a blue and white checkered pattern. In the foreground, a person wearing a colorful striped shirt is visible, partially out of focus. The scene is set in a workshop with wooden walls.

CHAPTER 1

THE JOURNEY

CHAPTER 1 – THE JOURNEY

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Despite being a country that grappled with a 30-year conflict, Sri Lanka bounced stronger, with interventions from both the government and the private sector. Economic growth took centre stage following the conflict which resulted in an average growth rate of 5.6% within the period 2010-2019.

Sri Lanka is a country that transitioned from a predominantly rural-based economy towards a more urbanized economy oriented around manufacturing and services. In 2015 with the election of a new government, the expectations were running high that the country will fulfil its potential. But its snail-paced efforts to implement proposed policy reforms caused sluggish economic growth and rising inequalities.

In Sri Lanka, women-owned and led Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a crucial role in employment and poverty reduction, particularly in spice sector. However, they face significant challenges including the inability to access finance, information, and networking, as well as lack of training and technology.



It is in this backdrop that Oxfam in Sri Lanka (OiSL) made it its responsibility to empower women and introduce them to new markets by making them real entrepreneurs. Its initiatives supported many Shriyanis, Devaranjinis, Bandusenas and Jafeers introduced earlier in this publication, thereby making them entrepreneurs who provide employment to more people.

OXFAM IN SRI LANKA

Oxfam in Sri Lanka (OiSL) started operations in the country over 40 years ago and had continuously delivered impact ever since. It attended to the country's needs, ranging from humanitarian response to advanced development programming. The OiSL's strategy revolved around inclusive economic development, climate and weather resilience, and access to water and sanitation. Women empowerment however was at the core of all activities.

Using experience and evidence from its programmes, OiSL gradually shifted its focus to create and support new private sector agents in the form of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to define success. This was based

on economic feasibility and social impact, thus creating a new corporate culture and active citizenship.

The approach combined market systems, climate resilience and women economic empowerment as key priorities, relying on entrepreneurial spirit and motivation, apart from encouraging extensive engagement with diverse audiences. The main areas focused included;

- Developing inclusive, resilient and feasible business models
- Capacity building by raising competitiveness,
- Facilitation and creation of market linkages, and
- Extensive cooperation with large corporates

DEVPRO GUARANTEE LIMITED

DevPro was founded with Oxfam's support in 2021 and is described as a value-driven company limited by guarantee. At the heart of DevPro lies inclusive economic development. It strives to be the leader in innovation in inclusive economic development in Sri Lanka. The initial two years of the four-year RIES project were implemented by OiSL while DevPro continued the project since July, 2022.



With the vision of 'A just world where development is in service of equality', DevPro's arenas of work are Agriculture, Climate Resilience, Skills and Development Education, Water and Sanitation and Hygiene (WaSH), Handicrafts and Tourism.

In managing the project, DevPro's responsibilities included executing technical and administrative tasks and ensuring coordination with local partners.

INTRODUCTION TO RIES PROJECT

The Sustaining and Nurturing Rural Agro-Industrial Social Enterprises in Sri Lanka (SUNRISE; 2017 to 2020) project was seen as a platform for multiplying the impact, scale and leverage of future investment. It recognised the importance of economic development and addressed key issues that prevented equal distribution of opportunities, with a focus on women inclusion.

Having an agile, vibrant and awareness-driven MSME sector is of crucial importance for the country's development. Oxfam in Sri Lanka felt this need to carry out another phase of the SUNRISE Project and increase MSMEs with more institutions and companies to innovate an improved economic model. The Resilient and

Gender Inclusive Enterprise System (RIES) project, of which the key information are below, was initiated in 2020 for just that.

Duration:	August 2020 – June 2025
Purpose/Goal:	To strengthen the enabling environment for MSMEs by creating a more inclusive value chain ecosystem for fruits, vegetables, handloom, cinnamon, and pepper, focusing on women's economic empowerment and climate resilience
Objective:	To create a more inclusive value chain ecosystem for industries across relevant provinces
Focus (and the Districts):	Value chains of: fruits and vegetables (Mullaitivu and Vavuniya), handlooms (Ampara and Batticaloa), cinnamon and pepper (Kegalle and Rathnapura). In July 2023, GISED project's value chains of cinnamon (Badulla), cocoa (Monaragala), dairy (Badulla, Monaragala and Nuwara Eliya), and seed potato (Nuwara Eliya) along with few non value chain related interventions were added.
Partners:	NGOs and CSOs, private sector companies including financial institutions, universities and the Government agencies
Beneficiaries:	7000 approximately, including individual farmers and producers, society members, MSMEs and its employees, and government officers
Budget:	The total investment of the RIES project is approximately 4.5 million AUDs.



Funded by the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Programme (ANCP), the project provided the SMEs an opportunity to position their products in an international market. (Repeating).

Key implementing partners included the Federation of Social Development Organizations (FOSDO) in Vavuniya for northern province, Women Development Foundation (WDF) in Akkaraipattu for eastern province, Peoples Development Foundation (PDF) in Kegalle for Sabaragamuwa province, Organisation for

Rehabilitation of the Handicapped (ORHAN) in Vavuniya for disability inclusion across the project, and the Government-agencies Agriculture Sector Skills Council (ASSC) and Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute (HARTI) in Colombo. The project collaborated with several other government departments and private companies to enhance technical expertise, market access and policy advocacy.

GISED PROJECT

In parallel, DevPro implemented the 'Gender Inclusive Sustainable Economic Development (GISED)' project from July 2022 to June 2023, to strengthen the rural livelihoods through gender-sensitive development, under the same funding mechanism of the RIES project. As a continuation of OiSL implemented, European Union-funded 'Enhancing Gender Inclusive Socio-Economic Development' (EGSD) project, GISED emphasized improving productivity and profitability in four value chains: dairy, seed potato, cinnamon, and cocoa. Working with private and public sector actors, the project targeted rural and estate communities from the 3 districts: Badulla, Monaragala, and Nuwara Eliya in Uva and Central provinces.



This project efforted to increase income levels and reduce poverty and inequality by enhancing productivity and profitability of value chains. This was by improving the knowledge and skills of producers and entrepreneurs and access to the market through increased market linkages with the private sector.

OBJECTIVES OF RIES PROJECT

RIES Project's overall objective was to create market eco-systems and inclusive business models in targeted value chains thereby allowing entrepreneurs to pursue their ideas and economic opportunities, create changes in the lives of their communities and contribute to an improved policy and practice environment, where women's role is being accepted and celebrated.

The more specific objectives were to increase; the number of MSMEs, income, profitability, and resilience of MSMEs with a special focus on women-led MSMEs in the targeted value chains. Improving access to domestic and international markets by tapping into supply chains of medium and large enterprises and corporates was another objective that the project aspired to achieve. When realized, these will bring changes

in the system which involved formal and informal domains of policies and practices.

FILLING A VOID IN SRI LANKA'S WOMEN EMPOWERMENT LANDSCAPE

Women entrepreneurs often face barriers to accessing capital, including discrimination and implicit gender bias. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations restrict women's opportunities and participation in the workforce. These trends have been observed within the South Asian context, but interventions like RIES Project can reverse such trends.

The RIES Project benefitted over 2000 women. Sri Lanka benefits significantly from gender-inclusive enterprise systems due to their potential to boost economic growth and productivity, empower women, and promote sustainable development. By increasing female participation in the workforce and entrepreneurship, the country can leverage a large, untapped pool of talent and achieve more inclusive and equitable economic development.

Gender-inclusive enterprise systems could contribute to closing the gender gap in the

workplace and potentially increase Sri Lanka's Gross Domestic Production (GDP) by as much as 20% in the long term. Such enterprise systems challenge gender stereotypes, allowing women to pursue their ambitions and contribute fully to the society.

Building on the SUNRISE's foundation, RIES elevated its ambitions to include the creation of a national enterprise ecosystem that normalizes women's and disability inclusion while introducing a new economic model at the national level.

A woman with dark hair tied back is working at a long wooden table in a workshop. She is wearing a pink short-sleeved shirt with dark polka dots and a blue skirt. She is focused on her work, which involves handling long, thin wooden sticks. A stack of these sticks is visible on the table behind her. The workshop has a simple, rustic feel with a window in the background showing some greenery.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPACT

CHAPTER 2 – THE IMPACT

ADDRESSING THE GAP

RIES Project aimed at creating a more enabling environment for farmer producers and MSMEs, especially women-led enterprises, by fostering profitability, promoting sustainable business practices, and expanding business networks to enhance economic empowerment and climate resilience.

To reap maximum potential of this five-year project, four key outcomes were designed for.

1. Increased profitability of the market's identified value chain actors (1500) - By improving productivity and production while adding further value to women-led MSMEs through the availability of improved inputs, skills, knowledge, services, and enhanced bargaining power.
2. Increased participation of women producers (500) and women MSMEs (100) - By identifying new business models, entrepreneurial skills, business operations, access to markets and services, improvement of business partnerships, and addressing gender inequality

3. Strengthened business-enabling environment and increased trade – By partnering with at least 15 medium and large enterprises and corporates, ensured sustainable market linkages to cater to national and international markets
4. Bring about progressive policy recommendations - Influence key national and regional policies that act as barriers to women's participation in SMEs in the country to enable and facilitate women's participation in SMEs by advocating policy alternatives.

THE PROCESS

The project's Theory of Change (ToC) was underpinned by three major components, aimed at driving systemic change in the MSME ecosystem and the inclusive business model as listed below:

1. Working with MSMEs
2. Women led MSMEs
3. Engaging with the communities, government institutions, and the private sector

The three components were interconnected to bring up a system change in the MSME environment (eco-system), and to make an inclusive model that sought to overcome current impediments of MSME development with a more inclusive and women empowerment approach.

Interactions between project stakeholders were to connect local actors in production and service provision through intermediary agents with wider markets, both domestic and international.

It aimed at changing the MSME ecosystem and creating an inclusive business model through women and disability inclusion. Introducing digitalization was to enable capacity building for technical and market information to advance the MSME eco-system.

The improved policy conduciveness for social inclusion and climate risk mitigation and adaptation for much resilient production and markets were integral parts of the project. They were for wider change in the systems for the development of new and inclusive business models.

MAJOR INTERVENTIONS

Major Component	Major Interventions
Working with MSMEs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Training for capacity development: Knowledge, skills, and attitudes for Business, technology, social impact, climate change adaption) b. Linkages and access with service providers: Markets, transport, input providers, finance institutions, and extension , certification (e.g., GAP, and business registration)
Women-led MSMEs	<p>Training in three main groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business – looking at all issues related to the particular business • Women in business – identifying particular issues related to women in business • Gender- addressing gender issues like unpaid care work, gender awareness and acceptance
Engaging with the communities, government institutions, and private sector	<p>Training and capacity building programs to cover following topic needed to create an inclusive business eco-system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpaid care work • Women's role in economy • Men as agents of change • MSMEs role in economy • Fortifying supply chains • Inclusive and resilient business models

Table 1: Major Interventions under the Three Major Components of the Project's TOC

SUMMARY OF RIES PROJECT OUTPUTS

Since its start in 2020, the RIES Project has delivered significant outputs, supporting the beneficiaries and farmers through exposure visits, training and coaching sessions thereby achieving the expected outcomes.

Some outputs delivered over the four year period are as follows ;

Expected outcome	Outputs delivered
Increased profitability of the identified value chain actors in the market	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Events to improve selected value chainsProject support to renovate processing centresMarket exposure visitsSessions on market linkages with exportersOrganizing trade fairsTraining and coaching sessions on women entrepreneurshipTechnical training sessions on pre and post harvesting technologyGood Agricultural Practices (GAP) training for GAP certificationSessions on climate resilient farming, organic farming and compost makingTraining on irrigation management, machinery maintenance and value added production
Increased participation of women producers (500) and women MSMEs (100)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sessions addressing barriers of women economic empowermentSessions and exposure visits on Good Agricultural PracticesAwareness sessions on insurance for farmers and MSMEsTrainings on Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) certificate, Climate Adoption Agriculture FarmingSessions on Gender Based Violence (GBV) and shifting social norms, and Women Economic LeadershipSessions for women-led MSMEs on bookkeepingCoaching sessions to improve business development capacitySessions for men on sharing care responsibility

Expected outcome	Outputs delivered
Strengthened business environment and increased trade between farmers and SMEs in project areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops on reducing discrimination by changing social norms, prevention of SGBV • Workshops to improve male contribution on unpaid care work and shifting social norms on gender • Workshops and coaching sessions to develop branding and labelling • Digital marketing sessions for participants and government officers • Trade fairs and market linkage events
Influence key national and regional policies that affect women's economic empowerment and SMEs in the country, to enable and facilitate women's participation in SMEs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops for government and private sector staff to improve women's participation in MSMEs • Sessions to strengthen district level handloom, fruits, vegetables and spice producers organisations • Advocacy event on women and unpaid care work for government and private sector staff • "Role of Banking Sector in Women Economic Empowerment in Sri Lanka" study with recommendations to improve women's access to financial services • Workshop for stakeholders' key staff members on Business Model Canvas to enable support for MSMEs • Workshop on Gender Norms and Gender Budgeting for government officers in the Northern Province • Developed 4 action plans with government authorities • Developed a Good Manufacturing Practices manual for handloom SMEs in Eastern Province

Pictorial on training sessions, workshops and exposure visits





ANNUALLY MEASURED IMPACT OF THE RIES PROJECT

Following the project implementation in 2020, the staff conducted internal surveys to determine the progress of various initiatives. The transition from OiSL to DevPro introduced structural changes that influenced implementation. The project remained aligned with its Theory of Change (ToC), which focused on enhancing MSMEs' market access at the national and international levels, empowering women entrepreneurs by addressing market knowledge gaps and socio-economic barriers and strengthening the MSME ecosystem through partnerships with government institutions and private sector actors. Some of the notable impacts are as follows.

Year 2020-2021

The introduction of innovative processes helped to improve the quality of product for



of the beneficiaries



improved income

6 out of 10 families recognized the need to reduce women's unpaid care work at home

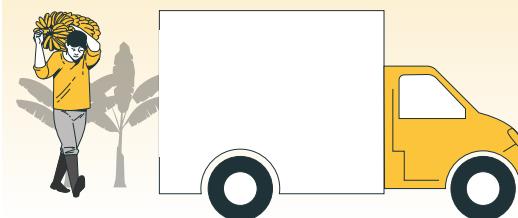


On average, around **114 hours** unpaid care work hours a month were scrapped away after household activities were equally shared by men.

In 2021,

48%

of fruits and vegetable farming families claimed the networking with service providers and stakeholders improved



45

farmers sold 130 metric tonnes of products to CBL Natural Foods (local market and exporter)

Year 2021 - 2022

Although cinnamon cultivation decreased by 3.6% due to the government-imposed fertilizer ban, cinnamon cultivation among women increased by

11%

due to RIES project



Land area under pepper cultivation increased by

18%

(22% amongst women farmers)



Increased access to market and productivity raised employment opportunities in the MSME sector by



while



of employment opportunities were provided to women and girls

Technology transfer introduced to handloom MSMEs such as yarn winding machines, increased income by

51%

Gross profit increased by 26% per farming family



Project intervention inspired

37%

of MSMEs to develop workplace gender ethics guidance.

Year 2022-2023

Of the 288 farmers and MSMEs trained, 89% reported a

2.54%

in gross profit due to improved production and technical capacity, and linkages with market actors



Assessments on the impact of the men's engagement strategy in the East showed that **65** men (**108 surveyed**) are doing more household work and reducing the burden on women. Subsequently, **57** women (**184 surveyed**) have shared that the redistribution of care responsibility has enabled them to engage in income generating activities such as poultry.

25 farmers

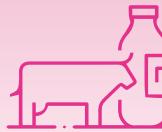
(476 trained) who attained the GAP certifications (certification required by buyers and supermarkets) were linked with large retailers such as Cargills, CBL, and AKM



RIES developed Sri Lanka's first-ever GMP Manual for the Handloom sector which is led by women. This manual, outlining the international and national standards in handloom manufacturing, has been shared with the government authorities for formal adoption.



In 22-23, the GISED project continued to provide technical training and create market linkages to **3894 farmers** and MSMEs across four value chains, resulting in **38%** of farmers reporting increase in production, **41%** reporting an increase in income, and **73%** reporting increase in gross profit.



The project linked dairy farmers with multiple leading processors such as Kotmale-Cargills, Pelwatte, Chello, and Milco, creating greater competition. The improved ecosystem combined with the technical coaching through GISED has improved farmers' capacity to bargain. This has enabled the dairy farmers to leverage the competition to increase the price they are paid for a litre of milk from **Rs. 120 to Rs. 160**.

Year 2023-2024

In its penultimate implementation year, significant efforts were made to transfer ownership to local government and communities.

The project worked with the Ministry of Women Affairs to conduct workshops on gender auditing. 39 officials from the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) participated in the Gender Audit training, with the intended outcome to complete a self-assessment audit which was compiled into a recommendation report for the Chief Secretary to further improve and sustain gender practices across ministerial departments.

The Leader Farmer concept, to deliver extension services to satellite farmers through peer-to-peer training. As a result, 30 Leader Farmers were identified in the Uva and Central Provinces. Each Leader farmer was equipped with training skills and materials to disseminate the knowledge among 300 peer farmers.

The Leader Farmer model was recognized as an effective tool for delivering extension services by the Director General of the Department of Animal Production and Health (DAPH) and other senior government officials.

The Leader Farmer concept was expanded to all three districts of the Eastern Province, reaching 75 Leader Farmers and approximately 450 Peer Farmers.



The final evaluation of the RIES Project revealed that the project made commendable progress despite challenges such as COVID-19, economic crisis, and political instability. The project successfully improved productivity, increased incomes, and enhanced business sustainability, particularly benefiting women farmer producers and women-led enterprises. However, systemic institutional engagement and policy-level interventions faced challenges due to external factors.

OVERALL IMPACT BASED ON FOUR EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Outcome 1 - Profitability

Results of final evaluation showed an overall improvement in profitability among farmer producers. Among the various value chains, those in the spice sector (pepper and cinnamon) saw the most significant improvement in profitability indicators. This improvement was attributed to project interventions that encouraged new producers to engage in commercial spice cultivation using Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), proper processing, grading, and marketing.

Women, particularly in spice production, demonstrated more significant profitability. This suggests that high capital, time, and labor demands of dairy production made it less economical for women to participate in. In contrast, spice and vegetable farming allowed women to work close to home, manage their time more effectively, and require less capital, making these ventures more profitable for them.

Outcome 2 - Increased participation of women producers and women MSMEs

The project interventions enhanced many women's understandings of their potential to play a stronger economic role. The development of women's self-confidence to opine in public spaces, even in the presence of men, was clearly observed. Women explicitly mentioned this as a positive change they achieved through their participation in the project. Women participants further claimed they developed self-confidence to be economically active, became confident in voicing their opinions in public, stimulated women to utilize resources they already have for economic gains, improved economic leadership and decision-making capacity, expanding their

contacts and networks with new markets, information, advisory service providers and accessing financial institutions.

The gender interventions of the project moved beyond the conventional WID (Women in Development) approach which treated women's empowerment as a separate issue from men, and instead followed the more advanced GAD (Gender and Development) approach. The GAD approach recognized that both women and men must be engaged equally within their shared context rather than isolating women to provide development support.

Prior to project's awareness programmes, women participants had perceived domestic work as free, unworthy, second-grade and that they were done primarily by women and that it was a taboo for men. The evaluation revealed that awareness programmes on unpaid care work had been a new area of exposure for men and women in gender sensitization and education. Women expressed their satisfaction in educating men on the domestic care burden held by women, its importance, and the need to share it. Many had expressed it was the first time they felt about the worth and importance of domestic care work.

Outcome 3 - Strengthened business-enabling environment and increased trade

The introduction of new business models, entrepreneurial skills, and enhanced market access led to significant improvements in the involvement of women in agriculture and related sectors. For example, 40% of women producers (805 individuals) adopted mechanized production techniques, while 50% (1,007 individuals) implemented advanced cultivation methods. Additionally, 36% (725 individuals) acquired skills in farming and dairy production, and 46% (926 individuals) focused on climate resilience, highlighting a strong shift towards sustainable practices. Among women-led SMEs, 61% (59 individuals) reported increased machine usage, 39% (38 individuals) expanded their business premises, and 57% (55 individuals) improved their marketing skills.

Outcome 4 - Enabling and facilitating women's participation in SMEs by advocating policy alternatives

During the project period, significant external and internal challenges affected the realization of Outcome 04. The country experienced multiple crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, political unrest, economic instability, and changes in government, alongside organizational restructuring due to the Oxfam-DevPro transition. Unlike the other Outcomes, Outcome 4 struggled to meet its targets due to both structural and contextual challenges.

However, following attempts were made to achieve intended policy-level outcomes.

- Partnership with Agriculture Sectors Skills Council (ASSC) with the aim of decentralizing the GAP Certification process, starting with a pilot initiative in the Northern Province in collaboration with Northern Provincial Council (NPC).
- The Leader-Farmer Concept in dairy was a joint initiative with Department of Animal Production and Health (DAPH) and Veterinary Services to

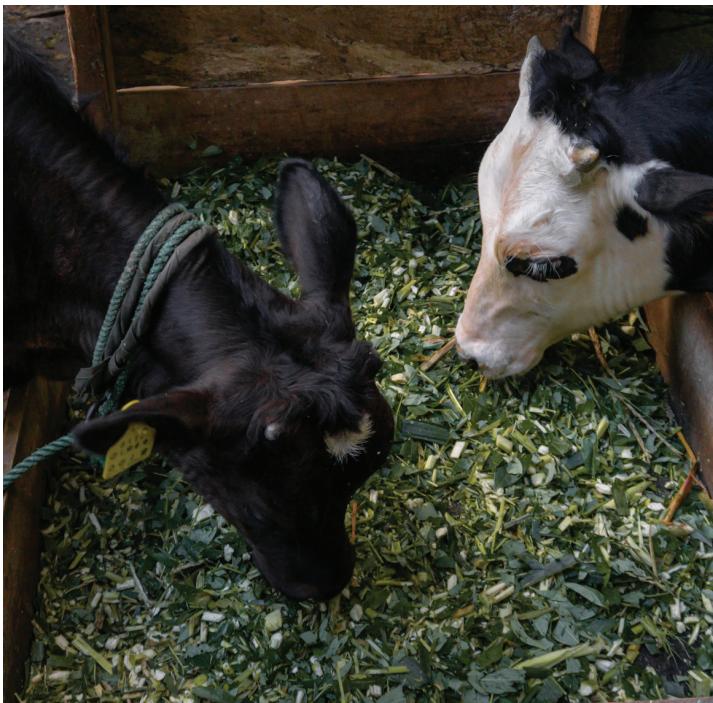
introduce a sustainable, community-driven system of dairy farming. This concept was recognized by DAPH and was being replicated. In the long term, it is expected to inform policy recommendations.

- The gender audit process has been acknowledged by the NPC, and steps were taken to make gender audits mandatory for various departments under the NPC.
- The GAP certification process and requirements for export agriculture were inconsistent among different geographies and offices, and farmer awareness was limited. A video on the GAP process, initiated by the RIES project, was completed. The efforts were taken to streamline the process and increase farmer outreach.
- The Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) for handloom products did not exist in Sri Lanka until the RIES project developed a GMP system from the scratch, which is adopted by the Industrial Department and Export Development Board now.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Introduction of Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) to farmers and staff of the Department of Export Agriculture particularly reducing misuse of agricultural pesticides and ensuring sustainable land management practices.
- The replication of the Leader Farmer (LF) concept in the Eastern Province has progressed with the approval of the Secretary to the Provincial Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and the Provincial Director of Veterinary Services
- Developed Sri Lanka's first ever Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) Manual for Handloom SMEs in the Eastern Province.
- Development of a Handbook on Drought Resilient Dairy Farming, Seed Potato Manual and Video on GAP Certification Process for Pepper and Cocoa
- One of DevPro's most notable achievements was raising awareness about disability inclusion across various stakeholder groups, including Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), government officials, and project staff
- The project introduced Batik, a new design and product development technology to handloom SMEs to add product value. 17 MSMEs were trained on Batik techniques and 5 SMEs have adapted and are producing Batik embedded products.
- Partnership with Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) to provide financial literacy and access to financial service for women MSMEs for 283 participants. 152 (71 women) benefited on opening bank account, access to loan and support service for MSMEs development.
- Oxfam worked with SenzAgro Pvt. Ltd, an agro-tech company, and piloted a digital Farmer Information Management System. The platform gathers information related to farmers, farms, extension officers and agricultural activities implemented under RIES to improve understanding around pricing and climate data.





CHALLENGES

At the onset of the project implementation period, half of planned project activities were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With limited access due to lockdowns, certain activities in specific areas couldn't be conducted. Monitoring visits too were postponed. Fresh fruit and vegetable producers, traders, agro-industrial companies, importers and exporters etc. were affected due to disrupted supply chains. Since physical meetings were not possible, virtual (online) discussions were held with field staff, staff of partners and project beneficiaries. Most of the country's economic activities were badly affected in turn affecting MSMEs covered by the project.

Due to export market restrictions, import restrictions on yarn and impact of the tourism sector affected the traditional handloom industry which provided many economic opportunities to rural people, especially women.

The government ban on the import of fertilizers and agrochemicals at the beginning of May 2021, impacted productivity in project's 2nd year, especially pepper, fruits and vegetable value chains.

The economic crisis impacted the project's achievements by reducing the crop for the unavailability of fertilizers. Presentations, field visits and other travel couldn't be executed due to the fuel shortage.

Other challenges included limited institutional engagement and policy impact, low financial inclusion, with only 30% of women-led MSMEs securing credit compared to 38% of men-led enterprises, slower adoption of advanced processing methods and quality assurance by women-led MSMEs, gaps in producer group sustainability and market scaling strategies, and high production costs post-inflation, impacting profitability. Digital marketing adoption was higher among MSMEs (43%) than producers (7%), highlighting a need for further digital integration.

It was a challenging journey for rural women to transform into a new role as economic actors from the previous role of an economic-dependent, who devoted fully to unpaid care work at home. With the prevailing patriarchal system, the stereotypical care role was still impeding her journey. Men still perceived unpaid care work as a woman's personal responsibility.

In addition, persisting barriers to accessing credit, safety in transport, and mobility to make contacts outside their community are obstacles that bar women from participating in new business models.

Following the project transition from Oxfam to DevPro, a significant number of staff resigned. Therefore a new team had to be deployed and they had to sit through a learning curve, familiarizing themselves with the project which slowed down the process to some extent.



CHAPTER 3

SUCCESS STORIES



DIVYAMALAR: AN ESTATE WORKER TURNED FARMER

With her husband's injury, Divyamalar from Nuwara Eliya found it difficult to send her children to school. But when Oxfam Australia facilitated a poly-tunnel building programme at her estate she decided to embark on a journey to become a farmer. With DevPro's intervention and provision of essential farming equipment, quality seeds and fertilizer she was able to cultivate her land more efficiently than before. She managed to earn an income of Rs. 7000-10,000 despite challenges which helped her to send her children to school.

Speaking about DevPro she said that the continuous support extended by this Organisation helped her to provide a better life for her children and she expressed her gratitude towards DevPro for helping her come out of her own crisis.



FROM LANDSCAPER TO FARMER

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HOW DEVARANJINI WEAVED A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR HERSELF

Devaranjini's entrepreneurial journey began in 2020, fuelled by a loan from Samurdhi Bank. But she soon gained recognition and support from DevPro. DevPro supplied her with essential raw materials to jumpstart production. With that she not only expanded her business and improved her livelihood but also empowered other women in her community, transforming her journey into one of resilience and shared success. She aspires to create employment opportunities for women in her village, particularly those facing difficult circumstances such as single mothers and breadwinners. In future she plans to improve her workspace to provide better working conditions for her employees, especially during rainy seasons.



GIVING UP MASONRY FOR FARMING

Despite his passion for farming, Manivannan from Nedunkerni, Vavuniya had to work as a mason to make ends meet. But one day he decided to give up his mason job and become a full time farmer. During the early days of his farming journey Manivannan had cultivated crops such as pepper, cowpea, green gram, tobacco and so on. However, his introduction to DevPro was a turning point in his life. He was not only introduced to new technology but also familiarized himself with new farming techniques and the art of making natural fertilizer. Now, Manivannan's family is actively involved in his farming journey.

"Farmers like me put our heart and soul into every seed we plant, and with the right support, we can nourish not just our families but our entire community," he said speaking about DevPro and its interventions.



PRIYANI : FROM HOMEMAKER TO CINNAMON FARMER

Priyani is a stay-at-home mother from Omalpe. One day she decided to join a programme conducted by Oxfam in cinnamon cultivation. But little did she know that this programme was the first step in her journey towards success!

She then travelled long distances to learn about cinnamon cultivation and obtain knowledge about how she could setup and develop a business. From cultivating H2 cinnamon on her land, she transitioned to cultivate C4 and C5 cinnamon which are being sold at good rates. She's grateful for DevPro's interventions as she now has access to essential resources, knowledge and tools to improve her livelihood.

"Learning about cinnamon cultivation not only transformed my business but also my life," she said.



A DAIRY FARMER WHO PRODUCES MOZZARELLA CHEESE LOCALLY

S. P. Manawadu is acknowledged as a pioneer in the dairy industry back in Monaragala. As the founder of a successful dairy product manufacturing company, Manawadu has been instrumental in introducing a range of high-quality dairy products to the market.

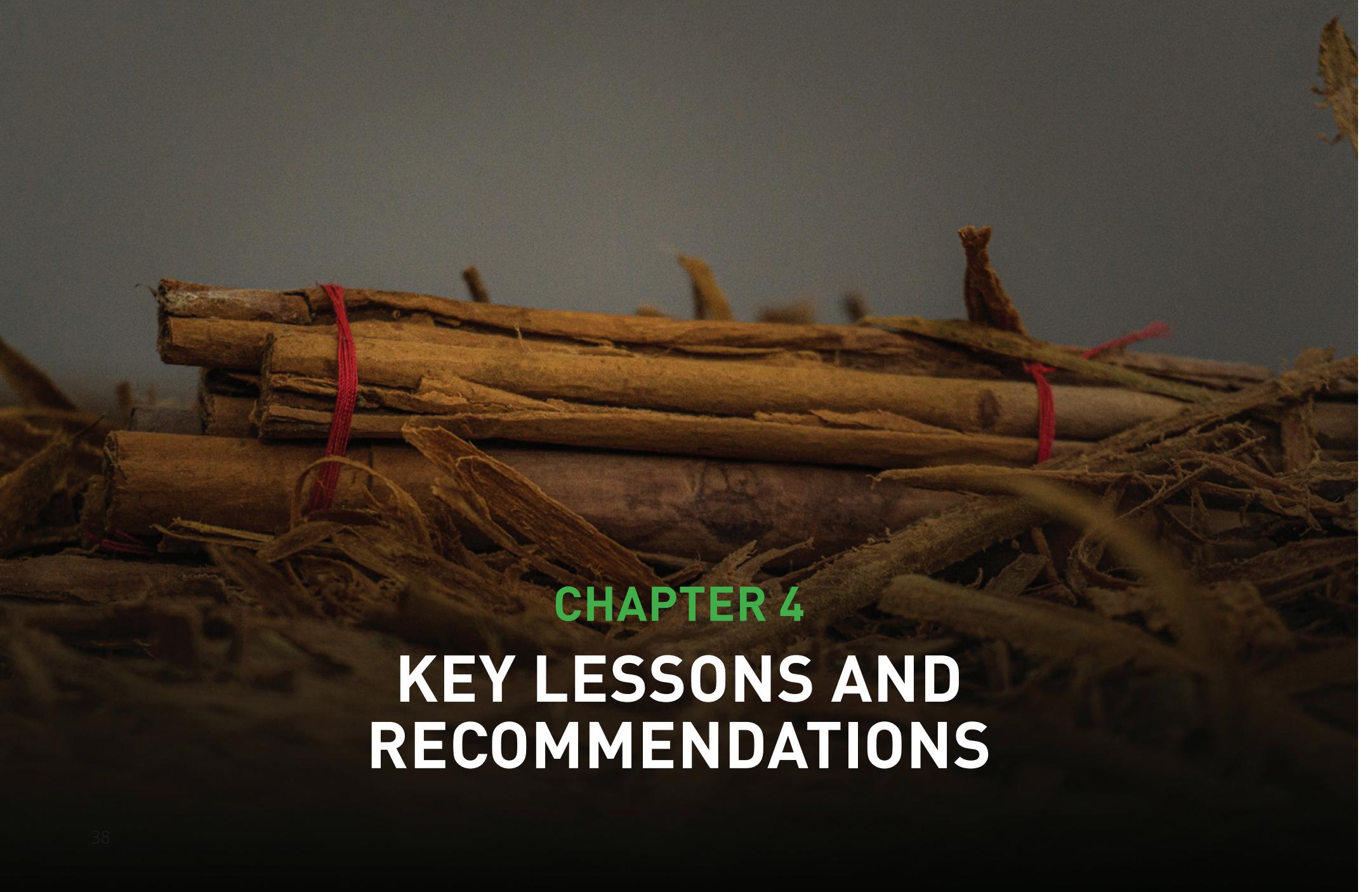
These include mozzarella cheese, butter, ghee and yoghurt bridging a gap in the market. The skills and knowledge gained by the RIES project helped him build a successful enterprise. He is grateful for DevPro's collaboration as he explores avenues to expand cheese production. With a team of over eight people working for him in producing and packaging his products are currently being transported and sold islandwide.



THEJANI'S FLAVORFUL TRANSFORMATION

Sujewa Thejani from Badulla, embarked on her entrepreneurial journey in 2016, fueled by a passion for creating delectable dishes and crafting unforgettable events. But without confining herself to one venture she decided to step into the salon industry, competing a level 4 qualification and opening her first salon in 2016. During this process of expanding her venture, she crossed paths with DevPro where she received essential supplies to launch her business along with a training session on business management, financial literacy and loan acquisition. With DevPro's support, her catering and salon businesses flourished.

She says that DevPro was a game-changer and the turning point she needed to elevate her businesses with a growing clientele and a brighter future.



CHAPTER 4

KEY LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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KEY LESSONS

- Key lessons highlight that market access remains a critical barrier, particularly for GAP- certified producers who require stronger linkages with premium markets.
- Additionally, many MSMEs lack structured post-project sustainability plans, underscoring the need for stronger financial and institutional support.
- Policy engagement should be prioritized to address gender pay gaps, financial exclusion, and childcare support.
- Scalable interventions such as the Leader-Farmer Model, digital marketing training, and mobile veterinary clinics have proven effective and should be further leveraged.
- Focussing more on the implementation of project activities made noticeable and more-individualist improvements in the farmer producer-level and MSME level, with profit increase and women empowerment.
- There is a clear demand for economic and social development in the project's beneficiaries as shown by their strong positive response to the project's activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To ensure long-term sustainability and scalability, future efforts should focus on strengthening market linkages for GAP/GMP-certified products and integrating MSMEs into high-value markets.
- Expanding tailored financial inclusion initiatives, including access to business insurance and flexible credit schemes for women entrepreneurs, is essential.
- High potential value chains such as spices and dairy should be prioritized while promoting ethical production and social responsibility.
- Investing in digital competency and technology adaptation will enhance productivity and business resilience.
- MSMEs should be connected to business hubs, development organizations, and regional support networks to foster growth.
- Systemic policy changes must be advocated to support gender-inclusive MSME development.
- Developing structured exit strategies will ensure long-term MSME viability beyond project support.



CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

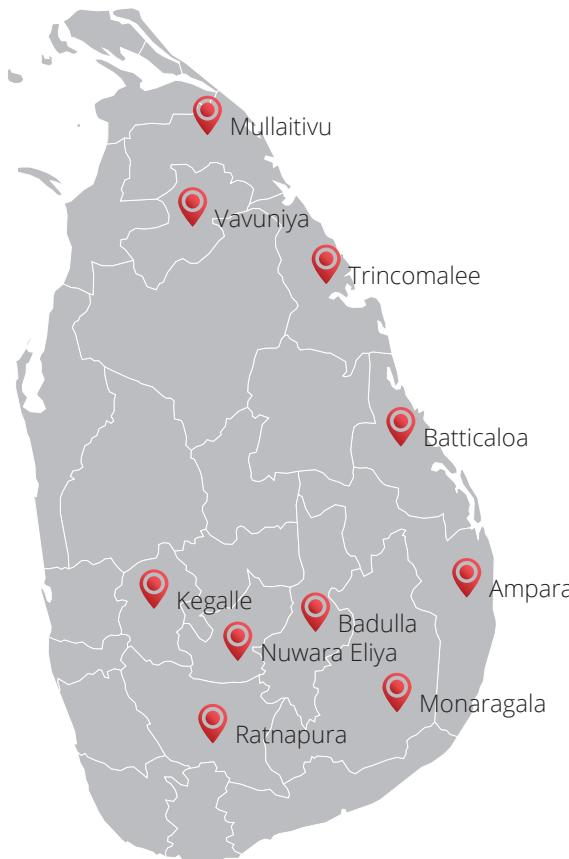
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

The contents of this publication summarises the work of DevPro in implementing its RIES Project from 2020-2025. Information outlined in these pages aims to shed light on how the project was implemented amidst challenging times and how it managed to transform the lives of many beneficiaries from across the island, to become more resilient with the introduction to sustainable livelihoods. Due to various internal and external factors, the expected project outcomes were not realized in full. As mentioned earlier, on Outcome 4, the link between beneficiaries and the state sector is essential in supporting them in the long term. Despite evaluations and project reports being tabled in government institutions, continuous monitoring is required to ensure that expected outcomes are being met.

On the other hand, the fact that a majority of women were being up-skilled and empowered amidst a male-dominated setting, especially in rural areas comes with its own challenges and obstacles. Financial literacy too is key in sustaining livelihoods. While inclusive economic development and gender inclusive enterprise systems are ongoing processes, projects of this nature would help improve awareness among target beneficiaries in rural settings. Therefore, all stakeholders, partners and actors involved in this project should continue supporting these entrepreneurs before they fully integrate into the competitive business landscape within the country.



MAP OF LOCATIONS INDICATING BENEFICIARIES AND PROJECT OUTREACH



Value Chains	Districts	Provinces	Approx no of participants
Fruit and Vegetable	Vavuniya and Mullaitivu	North	630
Handloom	Ampara and Batticaloa	East	325
Spices (including Cinnamon)	Kegalle and Rathnapura	Sabaragamuwa	600
Cinnamon	Badulla	Uva	400
Cocoa	Monaragala	Uva	1050
Seed potato	Nuwara Eliya	Central	62
Dairy	Badulla, Monaragala and Nuwara Eliya	Uva and Central	3050
Dairy Expansion	Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara	East	450
Non-value-chain interventions	Badulla, Monaragala and Nuwara Eliya	Uva and Central	116
Non-value chain - non-enterprise actors	All districts	All provinces	350



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