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## 'Our Precious Roots'- Back on Our Plate

<b>Project Title</b>	: Community Conservation and Management of Traditional Tuber Varieties
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<b>Partner Organization</b>	: Community Development Centre (CDC)
<b>Project Contact</b>	: Ms. Damayanthi Godamulla
<b>Address</b>	: Nikapitiya, Heleswatta, Attapitiya, Ussapitiya, Sri Lanka
<b>Contact No.</b>	: +94 35 3352715 / +94 71 8110710
<b>Email</b>	: dgodamulla@gmail.com
<b>Website</b>	: www.cdcsrilanka.org



Winner of the 2008 UNDP Equator Prize Asia Section, awarded in Barcelona, Spain at the World Conservation Congress

## Background

Yams and tubers have been an important component of the Sri Lankan diet for centuries, as a staple as well as a constituent of other food items. However over time villagers tended to disregard the value of including traditional yams as a food item and grow economically more important crops which would give money in their hands fast. The reasons given by farmers for the lack of motivation to cultivate yams are the general indifference towards growing and eating yams and tubers, difficulties in protecting the crop from wild animals, lack of demand and a fair price and lack of facilities to convert the produce into value-added products.

Aranayake a village in the interior of Kegalle district with a majority of low income families had preserved indigenous farming practices in particular of growing yams and tubers. Despite this attribute, many farmers declined cultivation bringing the once rich and diverse crop to irrelevance. The Community Development Center (CDC) Aranayake an organization led by a group of motivated rural women, started an initiative to revitalize cultivation and popularize use in daily meals and to increase income of farmers while achieving food security.



## Initiative

The initial work involved working with 100 selected farmers in ten hamlets of Aranayake, conservation of seeds through maintaining seed banks and community savings & credit schemes. The elderly farmers with experience and knowledge on farming practices were taken as trainers, some had over 17 varieties of yams and tubers preserved in their home gardens, which were used initially as farmer seed banks.

## Implementation

The initiative was well received by the farmers, the pioneers being mainly women. They organized themselves into small groups at village level to get trained, support each other and initiate self help work. They were given training on identification of yams and tubers especially those that were fast disappearing and organic farming methods including composting and vermiculture. Live fencing, soil conservation techniques, maintaining diverse crops in home gardens and conserving seeds for cultivation in the next season were emphasized upon. The women farmers maintained 100 home gardens, 10 of which were developed as model farms to draw lessons and as inspiration for others, accounting for over 20 ha. of land under tuber cultivation. The fertilizer was produced in the home gardens with the composting of household waste and vermicomposting. The household needs such as leafy vegetables and other vegetables as well as herbs were grown along with tuber varieties so that the family could get most of their food needs from the home plots.

Forming farmer societies in the 10 selected hamlets were a key activity that led to empowerment of the women, enabling them to initiate savings schemes



including buying and selling of consumer goods and other welfare activities in their villages.

Over the years more women expressed their interest in joining in the work which had brought economic independence to their neighbours. With the extensive social mobilization work to awaken interest, the organization has been able to extend its work to 18 villages in five GN divisions with over 2,000 direct beneficiaries. It has built networks with relevant Government agencies in particular Departments of Agriculture and Agrarian Services, University Academics, the Private Sector and other non government organizations.

In the 10 year period of carrying out their work, CDC has expanded activities to cover villages in other GN divisions as well as undertake training sessions in many parts of the country on request. They have collected and planted 61 varieties of yams and roots which they say is not found in any one place in the country. They have been successful in purchasing a land of their own and establish a farm and training center. The curricula include training in yam and tuber cultivation, seed conservation, organic farming and methodology in small group formation and motivation of low income farmers. The purchase of land was made possible with the money awarded to them in winning the Equator Prize in 2008.

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## Sustainability

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The farmers, mostly women have become self reliant through the activities implemented in the 10 year period. They continue to work with no supervision by CDC who visits the villages only on invitation and in turn the women will attend meetings to share knowledge and training programmes when invited by CDC. Some members who are fully competent in all aspects of cultivation of yams and tubers as well as in social mobilization work are employed as trainers bringing them an additional income.

Earning a regular income and acquiring savings for themselves through the various savings schemes has led to a remarkable build up of self respect which is motivation enough to continue with the work. Some have enough confidence to come forward to contest for positions in village societies.

CDC has a vision for the future of making the training centre, a centre of excellence for the propagation of tubers and yams. They have designed several training programmes which will bring them a substantial income in the coming years as they are now ready to venture into new initiatives such as agriculture eco tourism where like minded groups will visit the centre for short training courses or for tasting locally prepared indigenous foods.



## Results

Farmers fully understand the need to grow and preserve indigenous food species and the need to conserve diversity in home gardens.

With the promotion of indigenous foods in the country, the yams have a ready market giving an increased income to farmers. The sale of vegetables and yams from a home garden ranges between LKR 3,500 – 8,000 per month compared to LKR 500 prior to project initiation.

Value added products are being experimented by 5 – 6 women in each village, some of whom are supplying local shops with packeted fried chips and sweet meats made with yams.

Organic farming has been embraced fully by the farmers. CDC states that they can guarantee 75 home gardens for certification, a process they hope to initiate in the coming period.

All farmers conserve seed and plant material making them independent and self reliant. Of the soil conservation methods adopted by the farmers, the most popular have been live fences of *Gliricidia sepium* which besides minimizing erosion of their sloping farm lands has given farmers benefits such as nitrogen fixing leaves, organic fertilizer material and ability to grow creepers such as pepper on the live fence.

The Groups maintain a revolving fund scheme where the amount circulated has reached over LKR 1,200,000. Loan amounts vary from LKR 5,000 – 15,000 with an interest rate of 1% - 3%. The pay back rate has been over 98% so far.

Through the various schemes, the women have acquired savings ranging from LKR 5,000 to 25,000, in comparison to 0 savings earlier and being in debt to the village traders. Through the savings maintained by the group they have been able to undertake welfare activities such as offering a donation at times of bereavement, illness or an emergency, cutting out the need to obtain a bank loan at high interest rates or be rejected as non-creditworthy by the banks.

The self help groups are flourishing, a popular activity is buying and selling of consumer goods where groups undertake bulk purchase in the nearby town and sell to members at a small profit. This has the benefit of cutting the middle trader in the village and ensures savings for the women as well as for the group.

Women are now adept at managing their monies as well as at decision making as compared to earlier.

