

Youth Participatory Symposium

Youth-led ecosystems for disaster risk reduction

By **AMA H. VANNIARACHCHY**

"We have to protect the environment if we are to protect our future generations."

'Young Leaders for Environment 2021' is a programme that engages the country's youth in initiatives on Ecosystems Based Disaster Risk Reduction (ECO DRR) a project implemented by ChildFund Sri Lanka with financial assistance from ChildFund Korea with the technical support from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It is a three-year project.

The project

Floods, droughts and landslides are not new to Sri Lanka. Such natural disasters make daily human lives vulnerable and challenges their wellbeing and survival. This mostly affects marginalised communities of the country. As an attempt to strengthen youth participation and also to increase livelihood resilience ChildFund Sri Lanka invested in youth-led disaster risk management initiatives since 2015. The project tested the potential of youth-led ecosystem-based approaches in mitigating adverse effects of these many disasters.

The project was implemented in four districts which were identified as vulnerable ecosystems. They are Batticaloa, Nuwara Eliya, Mullaithivu, and Puttalam.

The project invested in building knowledge and capacities of youth to identify issues related to disasters in their respective communities and also develop the ability to design and implement community projects. During the last stages of the project, youth groups were supposed to design and implement youth led nature-based interventions to address the identified issues.

"We are all a part of the problem which means we are all a part of the



Dr. Ananda Mallawatantri



Kaushal Attanayake



Nalaka Siriwardena



S. Rockshanthan



Thavaputhalvan Thavapiraj

solution. So we need to fix our planet together."

The symposium

To share their experience and to showcase youth engagement initiatives on ECO DRR a symposium was organised at the BMICH on 29 March 2021.

The objectives of this symposium were to:

- Showcase the work conducted by ChildFund Sri Lanka to promote ECO DRR practices
 - Create a vibrant platform for youth who led the initiatives to share their key accomplishments to a wider local and international audience
 - To lobby stakeholders to mainstream ECO DRR aspects into national level planning
- To showcase the completed work and the outcome of the project, the symposium included a diverse range of speakers including Neelam Makhijani (Country Director, ChildFund India and Sri Lanka) and Unigae Wong (Humanitarian Project Manager, ChildFund Korea) who joined the programme on a virtual platform.

Director General, Disaster Management Center, Rtd Maj. Gen. S. Ranasinghe, delivered the keynote speech.



The first session of the symposium was to highlight 'Global and National Landscape on Youth Led ECO DRR'. Senior Advisor, Disaster Risk Reduction Dr. Karen Sudmeier-Rieux, with the UN Environment Programme's (UNEP) Disasters and Conflicts programme in Geneva addressed the gathering on the global landscape.

The panel discussion

An interesting panel discussion was held at the symposium which was the highlight of the event and the final segment of the symposium.

The panelists were:
● Dr. Ananda Mallawatantri (Country

- Representative, IUCN)
 - Nalaka Siriwardena (Country Manager, ChildFund Sri Lanka)
 - Thavaputhalvan Thavapiraj, (Secretary, Thurukka Youth Club, Batticaloa)
 - S. Rockshanthan, (President, Drops Youth Club, Radella, Nuwara Eliya)
- The discussion was moderated by Kaushal Attanayake (Technical Specialist, ChildFund Sri Lanka).

Dr. Mallawatantri focused on the policy related issues in Sri Lanka when it comes to ECO DRRs while Siriwardene focussed on the importance of getting the youth engaged in such programmes. He also spoke of the challenges faced by

marginalised communities with regards to their livelihoods and wellbeing.

Promising youth leaders...

Thavapiraj from Batticaloa, shared her experiences as a youth leader and how taking part in this project has helped her personal development. She was able to break cultural barriers that would hold back a woman's journey and she mentioned how this has helped her to improve her personality. Thavapiraj also said that it is important to be a nature lover and to care for nature; especially the youth should be more sensitive towards the environment.

Rockshanthan, another young leader from Nuwara Eliya also shared his experience working with the project and how it had helped to improve the living conditions of the village as well as the natural environment. The young leader also told how this has helped him to improve her communication skills and leadership skills.

What is ChildFund Sri Lanka?

ChildFund Sri Lanka is an international child development organisation working with children for the past 40 years in the country, committed to uplift the lives of over 200,000 children and their families. ChildFund Sri Lanka works with marginalised communities in ten districts and implements programmes on education, nutrition, youth empowerment, the inclusion of children with disabilities, child protection, environment, and disaster risk reduction. ChildFund ensures that children and youth are growing in a healthy, protective and supportive environment, enabling them to reach their full potential.

"It is only by taking care of nature will we take care of ourselves"

(Pix by Ashan Gamage)