



PHOTO KRISHAN KARIYAWASAM

PREVENTION

is better than cure, especially with the environment

ChildFund SL hosts 'Young Leaders for Environment 2021' to better protect our ecosystems

BY NAVEED ROZAIS

Empowering youth in any form is always an investment made in our future as mankind. Recently, ChildFund Sri Lanka hosted "Young Leaders for Environment 2021", a symposium that shared ChildFund Sri Lanka's progress and experience with youth engagement initiatives on Ecosystems-based Disaster Risk Reduction (ECO DRR).

These initiatives discussed and reviewed at the "Young Leaders for Environment 2021" symposium were based on a three-year project implemented by ChildFund Sri Lanka, with financial assistance from ChildFund Korea. The project was implemented with the technical support from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Defining ECO DRR

The IUCN explains ECO DRR as the "sustainable management, conservation, and restoration of ecosystems to reduce disaster risk, with the aim to achieve sustainable and resilient development".

Well-managed ecosystems, such as wetlands, forests, and coastal systems, act as natural infrastructure, reducing physical exposure to many hazards and increasing socio-economic resilience of people and communities by sustaining local livelihoods and providing essential natural resources such as food, water, and building materials.

ECO DRR not only offers an opportunity to strengthen natural infrastructure and human resilience against hazard impacts, but also generates a range of other social, economic, and environmental benefits for multiple stakeholders, which in turn feed back into reduced risk.

Sri Lanka is prone to floods,

droughts, and landslides and even vulnerable to rising sea levels. These disasters are continuously challenging the wellbeing and survival of some of Sri Lanka's most vulnerable communities. In an attempt to strengthen youth participation and increase livelihood resilience, ChildFund Sri Lanka has invested in youth-led Disaster Risk Management (DRM) initiatives since 2015, testing the potential of youth-led ecosystem-based approaches in mitigating adverse effects of both manmade and natural disasters.

This project was implemented in identifying vulnerable ecosystems in four districts, namely Batticaloa, Nuwara Eliya, Mullaitivu, and Puttalam.

Taking stock of how far we've come

The "Young Leaders for Environment 2021" symposium showcased the work conducted by

ChildFund Sri Lanka to promote ECO DRR practices within Sri Lanka and served as a vibrant platform for the youth who have been driving ECO DRR initiatives in Sri Lanka to share their key accomplishments with a wider local and international audience. It was also an opportunity for ChildFund Sri Lanka and youth leaders themselves to lobby stakeholders into incorporating ECO DRR aspects and practices into mainstream national-level planning.

A diverse range of speakers addressed the symposium to showcase the work completed and outcomes achieved over the last few years. Disaster Management Centre Director General (Retd.) Maj. Gen. S. Ranasinghe delivered the keynote speech with other speakers including ChildFund India and Sri Lanka Country Director Neelam Makhijani and ChildFund Korea Humanitarian Project Manager Unjgae Wong discussing the ECO DRR project and its outcomes.

The first session of the symposium highlighted the "Global and National Landscape on Youth Led ECO DRR". Disaster Risk Reduction Senior Advisor Dr. Karen Sudmeier-Rieux with the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Disasters and Conflicts programme in Geneva addressed the participants on the global landscape while Commonwealth Secretariat National Climate Finance Advisor Ranga Pallawala elaborated on the local setting.

The second session showcased the work accomplished by the youth groups. The Field Youth Ambassadors representing Batticaloa, Puttalam, Mullaitivu, and Nuwara Eliya engaged participants in the interventions and work completed in their respective areas.

Youth driving change

The symposium concluded with a vibrant panel discussion with expert panellists; IUCN Country Representative Dr. Ananda Mallawatantri, and ChildFund Sri Lanka Country Manager Nalaka Siriwardena, while Thurukka Youth Club Batticaloa Secretary Thavaputhalvan Thavapiraja and Drops Youth Club Radella, Nuwara Eliya President S. Rockshanthan also voiced their views. The panel discussion was moderated by ChildFund Sri Lanka Technical Specialist Kaushal Attanayake.

The panel discussion emphasised the importance of recognising youth potential and aspirations and investing in mobilising youth populations. Other key points of youth-based ECO DRR that were raised during the discussion were how having knowledge, building technology and technological awareness, and instilling quality practices from the grassroots level up is



Drops Youth Club Radella, Nuwara Eliya President S. Rockshanthan



UCN Country Representative Dr. Ananda Mallawatantri



ChildFund Sri Lanka Country Manager Nalaka Siriwardena



Thurukka Youth Club Batticaloa Secretary Thavaputhalvan Thavapiraja

instrumental to successful ECO DRR.

Thavapiraja of the Thurukka Youth Club, Batticaloa encouraged youth to anticipate more disasters and called upon them to explore and appreciate nature now and work towards preventing them before they can happen. She also explained that through the ECO DRR initiatives that have been established by ChildFund Sri Lanka over the last few years, the youth in her area practising ECO DRR initiatives now have an open-door policy with officials from divisional secretariats and provincial councils when it comes to trying to find solutions to problems.

Rockshanthan of the Nuwara Eliya Drops Youth Club highlighted that ECO DRR initiatives help change attitudes and mindsets and that prevention is better than cure and that youth have the resources at their disposal to prepare and take preventative measures to avoid or at least minimise the risk they face from eco disasters.