



Local agricultural innovation in a time of major food instability



W. M. Dilhani R. K

Ellawala Horticulture's farmer

Ellawala Horticulture (EH) is Sri Lanka's first agribusiness to venture into commercial cultivation of the TJC mango variety using new technology and methods. It is also a leading exporter of processed foods, including a line of preserved organic produce sold under the brand Ella's Organic. In the face of increasing demand from its existing customer base, EH required a sustainable sourcing model for certified organic produce. The business devised a model to promote a mix of short-, medium- and long-term crops while also sharing information on organic farming with farmers.

MDF supported the business to develop a backyard farming cluster comprising the farming households surrounding the EH mango plantation. The EH business model promoted a mix of crops that served the dual purpose of being suitable for EH's purposes while also contributing to farming household food security. MDF had the opportunity to speak to one of the partner's backyard farmers to discuss her experience with the home gardening program and how it supported her to bring economic value as the leading female member of her household.

W. M. Dilhani Ruwani Kumari is a farmer for EH, based in Kalagama. A preschool teacher by profession, Dilhani left her job when she had her first child and has, since then, been a full-time care provider dependent on remittances from her husband abroad. When she encountered the EH home gardening program, she was unsure what to expect. However, since joining it, Dilhani has converted her land into a home garden that not only provides her with a source of income but also a source of savings and diversity of nutrition that she could not afford before.

● MDF

● W. M. Dilhani Ruwani Kumari

Did you have any previous experience in home gardening?

We mostly grew ornamental plants and had a few perennial crops like mango, ambarella, lime and coconut. My mother once grew some bananas, which she sold—but after it was lost to elephant attacks, we didn't try again. I had never grown vegetables before and didn't know how to design and cultivate a garden. This program has enabled me to have produce to the extent that my family and I could depend on it for day-to-day meals and as a source of income. And after joining, I expanded to a variety of leafy greens (spinach, *gotukola*, *mukunuwenna*), tomatoes, eggplant, bird's eye chilli, kochchi (a type of potent chili) and spices.

What were your expectations when joining the program? Did the program meet these expectations?

I stopped working when I had the baby and was looking for something to keep me engaged—besides housework—and as means of feeding my family. I was going to get my COVID-19 vaccine at the Ellawala Farm when I saw the poster and thought of joining. I wasn't sure what the program was about or what to expect. I thought maybe I would learn how to use my garden to feed my family.

Since joining the program, I have learned so many new skills related to farming! How to select crops suitable for my land, design a garden that makes the most out of limited space, how to pick the right area for planting, how to pot and the suitable material for potting, land preparation, crop selection,

remedies for pest management, soil sterilisation, seed propagation, and how to use household waste and organic material from the land for fertiliser. I already had some basic knowledge of composting, but with the training, I learned how to use neem ash for pest control and which organic materials in my garden could increase the productivity of the compost.

I also value the support Ellawala gave us to get started with the project. The distribution of seeds, fertiliser and irrigation pumps came at a good time when we did not have the extra cash to invest. The access to good advice and Ms. Maheshi's (Project Coordinator at EH) regular house visits helped with the garden's success.

What kind of impact has the project had on you and your family?

At this stage, the biggest benefit has come from cost savings. With increasing food prices, we were cutting a lot of corners in terms of how much vegetables and leafy greens we ate. On average, we spent at least LKR300–400 (AUD1–2) a week on vegetables. A bunch of leafy greens, which used to cost LKR10–20 (AUD0.044–0.089) has gone up to LKR50 (AUD0.22). Now, almost every meal is supplemented with greens and vegetables from the garden. We feel as if we are having a more nutritious diet than before; I have been able to add nutrition to my baby's meals. Additionally, the money saved goes towards buying dry rations and upcountry vegetables we can't grow, like leeks and carrots. I used my income from the EH farmers' market to pay for my child's preschool fees.



Most importantly, it has been a personal growth journey for me. It has given me a sense of purpose and something to call my own. I don't see it as an increase in workload because it is what I employ my time with while my child is at preschool. My mother and aunt support me, which has been a source of strength and encouragement.

What are some of the challenges you have faced in being a part of this model?

Access to water has been a problem. The soil loses a lot of moisture during the dry season, which means long hours spent watering the cultivation. It also limits how much I can expand my farm, as it needs to be within the radius of my water hose. The irrigation systems provided to us by EH have been very useful in reducing the hours spent watering the plants—but if I am to expand my chilli cultivation, I will have to invest in a large-scale irrigation system.

What are your future plans? Do you plan to continue home gardening?

I do plan to continue home gardening! My main goal is to provide my family with clean and healthy meals. I also see a growth potential to earn more through expanding my green chilli, *kochchi* and *naimiris* chilli plants. These are in high demand right now; they fetch a high price and can be grown in a small garden. I am currently propagating seeds to increase the number of plants in the garden and increase my income from chillies. Seeing the results of my hard work has been a great source of joy—so yes, I plan on continuing!

