



LEGACY OF
HELVETAS SWISS INTERCOOPERATION IN
SRI LANKA

1978 - 2025

Cover page: Camera in hand, Selvakumar Rinoshan represents how Helvetas' INSPIRE project helped turn creative interest into confident practice. Coming from the Malaiyaham Tamil community and studying Media Studies at the University of Jaffna, he gained practical skills, exposure, and encouragement through InSPIRE, enabling him to transform real-life stories into visual narratives. At an inter-university competition, his work won first prizes in short film and multimedia articles, and his photography was selected for an exhibition — marking a turning point that paved the way for further recognition and growth in his film-making journey.

Message from Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation

Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation has engaged in development cooperation in Sri Lanka since 1978, pioneering interventions in diverse working areas such as water and sanitation, sustainable organic agriculture, peacebuilding and the prevention of violent extremism, as well as safe labour migration, youth empowerment, and livelihood development.

After nearly five decades of impactful interventions, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation concluded programming in Sri Lanka in December 2025. Throughout the long years, Helvetas has empowered local communities, improved local expertise, and supported responsive institutions to fulfill their commitments to their communities. All of this would not have been possible without the support of the staff, partners, collaborators, and communities who made change a possibility. This report - 'Legacy of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in Sri Lanka' – traces the contributions of the diverse stakeholders who pioneered technical solutions, built networks and connections, and facilitated an enabling environment for Helvetas to successfully implement programmes.

We wish to extend our gratitude to the government institutions, civil society organizations, community members, and individuals who shared their insights and experiences, providing a wealth of detail to this legacy document. We also wish to thank the team of consultants who painstakingly documented nearly five decades of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation's history in Sri Lanka.

We hope that this report provides valuable insight into the successes and challenges of development programming across the ever-evolving context of Sri Lanka, and serves as a guide and inspiration for development practitioners. We further hope that the reflections and recommendations within this report will contribute to furthering, in Sri Lanka, Helvetas' vision of a just world in which all individuals can determine the course of their lives in dignity and security.

Esther Marthaler



Partnership Coordinator & Regional
Coordinator Sri Lanka

Celestine Kröschell



Director International Programmes

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We extend our thanks to government partners, civil society organisations, and community representatives who generously shared their insights, experiences, and reflections. Their perspectives provided invaluable depth and context to this legacy document. We are equally grateful to the former staff members and long-standing partners who took the time to revisit past milestones and lessons learned.

A special thanks to Nishani Ureka Liyanage for working on the graphics in this document.

Above all, we acknowledge the communities across the country whose stories form the heart of this narrative. Their trust and willingness to engage have enabled us to capture the true spirit and impact of Helvetas' presence in Sri Lanka.

It has been an honour to help bring this chapter to a close by documenting the legacy Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation leaves behind in Sri Lanka.

THAMILSELVY THAYAHARAN, HIMANGI JAYASUNDERE, & SHEILA RICHARDS

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ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALSDC	Asia Lanka Social Development Cooperation
BICs	Business Incubator Centres
Bt	Bacillus thuringiensis
CBSS	Country Based Support Scheme
CBY	Crossing Boundaries Youth
CHRD	Centre for Human Rights and Development
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DOs	Development Officers
DOD	Department of Defence
DPSL	Development and Peace in Sri Lanka
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EQUIP	Enhancing the Quality of Protection Services to Victims of Trafficking
FIOH	Future in Our Hands
GCERF	Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund
GMO	Genetically Modified Organisms
HDC	Human Development Centre
HRC	Human Rights Commission
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders
InSPIRE	Incubator Spaces for Promoting Information rights and freedom of Expression
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
KEY	Kids, Elder and Youth
LOAM	Lanka Organic Agriculture Movement
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NPC	National Peace Council
NPP	National People's Power
NWSDB	National Water Supply and Drainage Board
PCCs	Peace and Co-existence Committees
PGR	Plant Growth Regulators
PREDO	Plantation Rural Education Development Organisation

PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
PTR	Puddled Transplanted Rice
PVE	Prevention of Violent Extremism
RECOVER	Economic Recovery and Reintegration of COVID-19 affected Returned Female Migrant Workers
RTI	Right to Information
Sarvodaya	Sarvodaya Shramandhana Movement
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SLTB	Sri Lanka Tourism Board
SRTS	Sarvodaya Rural Technical Services
TAF	The Asia Foundation
TiP	Trafficking in Persons
TOR	Terms of Reference
ToT	Training-of-Trainers
VBB	Voices Beyond Barriers
VCCs	Village Co-existence Committees
WATSAN	Water and Sanitation
YouLEAP	Youth Led Economic Action for Prosperity

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND: A JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF A JUST WORLD

Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, an independent Swiss development organization, began its journey in 1955. Their vision: a just world where every person can determine the course of their lives with dignity, security, and respect for the environment. Politically and denominationally neutral, Helvetas has been working across developing, emerging and transition countries, partnering with disadvantaged communities to improve their livelihoods, strengthen local actors and build the foundation for sustainable development.

Helvetas arrived in Sri Lanka in 1978, in the wake of a devastating cyclone that struck the eastern part of the country. Guided by a commitment to help vulnerable communities rebuild their lives, dignity, and livelihoods, the organisation began a journey rooted in resilience and partnership. Nearly five decades later, in 2025, the organization bids farewell to the island nation, a month after Sri Lanka experienced its worst natural disaster: cyclone Ditwah. This book celebrates the enduring legacy of Helvetas, shaped through unwavering service, innovation, and solidarity during some of Sri Lanka's most difficult and defining chapters. It stands as a tribute to the countless communities strengthened, the partnerships forged, and the lasting impact woven into the fabric of the nation's development story.

SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Situated off the southern tip of the Indian Subcontinent, Sri Lanka is an island rich in biodiversity and home to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, including the indigenous “Veddha” community. In 1978, when Helvetas arrived, the island was in the midst of early post-colonial transformation having gained independence from the British in 1948.

1978 also marked a pivotal turning point in the country's political and economic history. A new constitution replaced the Westminster-style parliamentary system with an executive presidency vested with broad powers and introduced proportional representation in parliamentary elections. Economic liberalization in 1978, paved the way for foreign direct investment and trade, ending an era of nationalization and state control.

Amid these transitions, Sri Lanka's social fabric was transforming. The lasting effects of the colonial administrative structures, the legacy of feudalism, new capitalist economic models, an evolving education system, and rising geopolitical influences all contributed to reshaping society. During this period, expressions of Sinhala-Buddhist identity became more prominent in the political landscape, alongside other emerging social and political currents influencing national discourse along ethnic, religious, caste, and class lines.

In the early 1970s and late 1980s, Sri Lanka saw armed insurrections by economically marginalized Sinhala youth led by the JVP. The government responded with the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1979. Meanwhile, the 1983 July ethnic state-sanctioned violence

triggered a brutal civil war between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which sought a separate state in the North and East. The nearly three-decade long war which wrought a heavy human and economic cost, ended militarily in 2009, without a lasting political settlement.

To this day, majoritarian dominance continues to shape Sri Lanka's political, social, and economic realities, often at the expense of minority communities. The Easter Sunday bombings in 2019, carried out by a small, radicalized faction of extremist Muslims, further deepened divisions and reinforced the heavy-handed use of national security laws. The continued use of the PTA has led to widespread human rights violations and the suppression of activists, journalists, and minority voices. Post-conflict transitional justice mechanisms such as the Office of Missing Persons and the Reparations Commission function with minimum accountability, and even compensation set aside by the government in the annual budget is yet to be awarded.

2022 marked Sri Lanka's most severe economic crisis since independence.¹ Decades of unsustainable debt, ill-timed tax cuts, an abrupt shift to organic agriculture, chronic mismanagement, corruption, the collapse of tourism following the Easter Sunday attacks, and the COVID-19 pandemic culminated in a nationwide uprising known as the *Aragalaya*. The protests demanded systemic reform and accountability, leading to the resignations of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. President Ranil Wickremesinghe subsequently assumed office, negotiating an IMF bailout² and introducing tax reforms, market liberalization, state enterprise restructuring, and a controversial domestic debt restructuring that placed a disproportionate burden on the working people.

Amid Sri Lanka's turbulent political and economic climate, the newly elected National People's Power (NPP) government that came to power in the 2022 general election and the subsequent 2024 general elections has pledged to honour the IMF agreement while tackling corruption and pursuing systemic reform. Yet its agenda faces strong bureaucratic resistance, and efforts to bring the perpetrators of the Easter Sunday attacks to justice are only just beginning, with outcomes still uncertain. As Helvetas prepares to conclude its work in Sri Lanka, the island is once again battered by a cyclone and sweeping floods, bringing massive damage to infrastructure and a tragic loss of life, a stark reminder of the challenges that first drew the organisation here decades ago.

¹ IMF says the economic situation in debt-stricken Sri Lanka is gradually improving | AP News

² Sri Lanka: Request for an Extended Arrangement Under the extended Fund Facility-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Sri Lanka; IMF Country Report No. 23/116; March 6, 2023

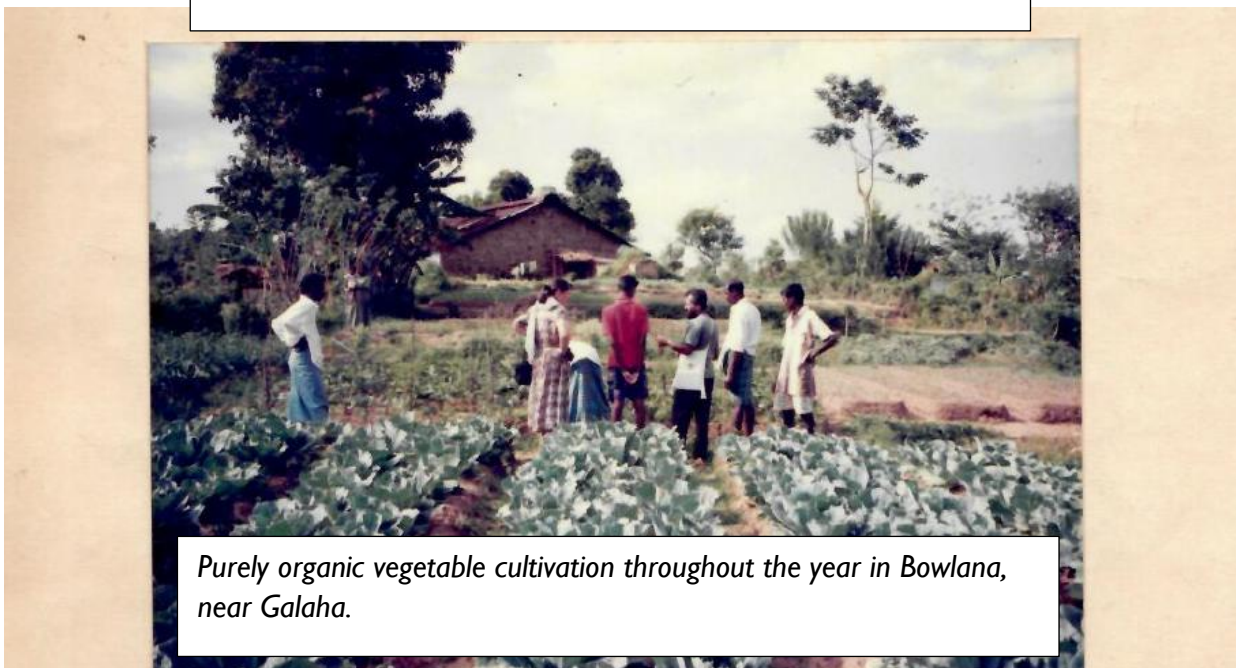
INTRODUCING THE HELVETAS LEGACY REPORT

This Helvetas Legacy Report traces the organisation's 47-year journey from 1978 to 2025, following the distinct strategic phases that shaped its work. Section 1 reflects on nearly three decades of contributions to Rural Development. Section 2 turns to the organisation's focus on Safe Labour Migration from 2010 onward. Section 3 explores Helvetas' engagement in Peacebuilding, capturing its diverse efforts across programs. Section 4 reviews The Empowering Youth for Peace through Prevention of Violent Extremism.

Each of the four sections highlights key interventions, celebrates successes, and reflects on challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations for the future.

The conclusion examines the strategic evolution of Helvetas' work and offers insights on how this legacy can be strengthened moving forward. Drawing on 47 years of experience in human rights and peacebuilding, it presents constructive recommendations to guide the next chapter.

SECTION I - RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A MEETING POINT



RURAL DEVELOPMENT

For nearly five decades, Helvetas played a pivotal role in strengthening rural communities across Sri Lanka through partnerships built on trust, technical expertise, and community engagement. Its first and longest-standing partnership began in 1978 with the Sarvodaya Shramadhana Movement, marking the start of a transformative era in rural development. According to Ms. Manu Tissera, Chief Transformation Officer at Sarvodaya, the partnership emerged at a critical moment, during Sarvodaya's decade of technological transfer. Three key ingredients brought mutual benefit: capital formation, technical collaboration, and community engagement. Helvetas contributed technical knowledge and financing (capital formation), while Sarvodaya brought extensive community networks, being an organisation deeply rooted in the community.

Overtime, Helvetas partnerships, including Civil Society Organisation (CSOs) and government institutions such as the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) and the Ministry of Housing. Through programs in water and sanitation and hygiene (WATSAN), post-tsunami housing reconstruction, sustainable organic agriculture, building community roads, culverts, and bridges, and income generation initiatives, Helvetas helped strengthen dignity and resilience and long-term well-being in some of Sri Lanka's most underserved rural communities.

IMPACT

Water and Sanitation and Hygiene (WATSAN): Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne – Hon. President of the Sarvodaya Shramandhana Movement (Sarvodaya) says safe drinking water was scarce at that time, and pipe borne water was a luxury for rural communities who mainly used surface water and deep wells, which were sometimes not safe for human consumption. Access to water in mountainous regions in the central province was arduous. The Swiss engineers, hailing from alpine terrain in Switzerland, introduced technology to access spring water through gravity-fed water schemes, enabling communities to tap spring water more easily. This innovation gave rise to the Sarvodaya Rural Technical Services (SRTS), which emerged from the partnership, sustained and grew, and registered as a separate company under the Sarvodaya umbrella in 2024. This unit specialised in water supply and sanitation, training youth who chose to become technicians in the sector. Manuals were developed to standardise the design and construction techniques of latrines, hand-dug wells, and gravity water systems. The SRTS partnered with Helvetas for around 30 years and built more than 100 gravity-fed water schemes, some of which are the main source of water for the respective communities to this day.³ According to Ms. Tissera, around 380 groundwater schemes, reaching around 500,000 beneficiaries, as well as 2,000 drinking water wells and 3,500 latrines were constructed. This demonstrates the lasting legacy of the relationship between Sarvodaya and Helvetas of nearly five decades.

³ Helvetas Sri Lanka Legacy Video

Helvetas collaborated with the NWSDB to expand the capacity of existing rainwater harvesting tanks by funding the first 80 cubic meter ferrocement tank in Polonnaruwa. Mr. Susil Jayasundere, former Technical Officer of Palm Foundation notes that the organisation promoted the concept of low-cost tanks and provided training to technical staff of the NWSDB on innovative methods, water system rehabilitation, and sustainable construction practices. In introducing technical methods for water systems, new simplified survey systems were introduced for ease of implementation. To maximise reach, training manuals were produced in all three national languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English.

According to Mr. Saman Bandara, Team Leader of Palm Foundation, the WASH program introduced by Helvetas helped the World Bank reform its strategies and contributed to Sri Lanka's community water supply policy. Since 1991, in collaboration with Helvetas, Palm Foundation provided safe drinking water facilities for over 10,000 families and sanitation facilities for over 5,000 families. especially in the Malaiyaham Tamil and rural communities of Nuwara Eliya. The communities have been involved in the entire program cycle, in planning, implementation, monitoring, operation, and maintenance of the program.⁴

Agriculture and Income Generation: Helvetas also invested in promoting sustainable agriculture by providing technical support on low-cost sustainable practices that secured soil fertility, minimizing the use of chemical fertilizers while combining the use of indigenous practices and organicmanure. According to Mr. Thilak Kariyawasam, President of the Lanka Organic Agriculture Movement (LOAM), the Country Representative of Helvetas during this time, Mr. Andreas was keen on working with farmer groups on preserving organic traditional seeds. Parallely, the National Seed Policy of 1993 was passed, which was revised in 2003 (Act No 22 of 2003). During this period, with the support of Helvetas, LOAM lobbied the government to consider the preservation and conservation of traditional rice and millet varieties. More than 500 farmers were trained around the country, together with the Green Movement, the Human Development Centre (HDC), and Future in Our Hands (FIOH), who worked together to conserve traditional seed varieties. Helvetas facilitated support from experts from the region such as Devinder Sharma and Suman Sai from India. They successfully lobbied the government to ensure proper labelling requirements for all imports containing genetically modified organisms (GMO). They sought to dissuade GMO trials from being conducted in the country to prevent contamination of indigenous seeds.

When discussions were initiated on agricultural seed decks with the Department of Agriculture and other stakeholders in 2003, there was no consideration given to how the farmers could exchange their seeds. This gap remained unaddressed in the revised Act. The government wanted to bring controls and patent seed varieties. If this process had been adopted, farmers would have required permits to exchange their seed, restricting a long-standing practice. The farmers lobbied vigorously with the support of Helvetas and its partners. The authorities eventually agreed to allow the exchange of traditional non-patented seeds. As a result, vital seed conservation efforts continue today.

⁴ Mr. D. S. K. Wijebandara, Team Leader PALM Foundation in HELVETAS legacy video

Mr. Kariyawasam says that the discussions on Puddled Transplanted Rice (PTR) and plant genetic resources commenced in late 1997. This was timely, because in India, there was pushback on genetically modified brinjals⁵ (Bt brinjals) after initial trials with Indian farmers opposing the widespread use of the variety. It contributed to the global discussion on the genetic modification of popular food varieties at that time.

Sri Lanka, however, was not open to those discussions. But with Plant Growth Regulators (PGR)⁶ conservation work, the ideas were brought to the farmers, recognizing the importance of community registries, biodiversity conservation, agro-biodiversity, and how these can work together on the important work of protecting uncultivated food crops. These pioneering interventions in the field of organic agriculture were led by the Human Development Centre assisted by LOAM and others with support from Helvetas. The National Federation of Traditional Seed and Agri Resources was also created with the support of Helvetas. Notably, farmer P. Gurusinghe,⁷ who is now a key leader in the traditional seed sector, was trained and mentored through these initiatives.

Helvetas lobbied and influenced policy recommendations by implementing a few pilot projects and empowering local grassroots CSOs to lobby and advocate the issues affecting the sector, specifically the smallholder farmers. The pilot projects were limited in the number of beneficiaries but the changes enabled through the impact of the policies affected several hundreds of smallholders. Examples from Australia, Switzerland, and India were shared in policy discussions with the government.

Following the tsunami of 2004, Helvetas supported home gardening and seed distribution to affected areas. As some of the seed was lost they were replenished from other farmers and distributed to those in need. Ampara, Hambantota and Kalmunai were some of the districts these interventions took place in. In Panama, different varieties of seeds were distributed.

Houses, rural roads, bridges and culverts: According to Ms. Manu Tissera, Sarvodaya and Helvetas collaborated in the construction of 90 housing schemes, 12 small bridges, 50 community roads, and more than 30 culverts.

Relief and post disaster reconstruction: In response to the cyclone that devastated the East in 1978, Helvetas supported through distribution of relief and reconstruction of water systems. When the tsunami struck on Boxing Day 2004, Helvetas supported the people of the coastal regions to rebuild Vahari, Batticaloa, and about 6,000 households were supported

⁵ A genetically modified brinjal (eggplant) that contains a gene from the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) to protect it from pests like the fruit and shoot borer.

⁶ PGR agriculture refers to the use of Plant Growth Regulators (PGRs), which are natural or synthetic chemicals used to modify plant growth and development.

⁷ P. Gurusinghe is a prominent figure and a recognised leader in the traditional seed and organic farming sector in Sri Lanka. He is primarily known for his work through the Movement for Traditional Seeds and Farmers' Heritage (MTSF) and the Gurusinghe Organic Farm and Seeds.

through two cash projects, i.e., Cash for Host Families and Cash for Livelihood' Ampara District's tsunami-affected area and water systems.⁸

SUCCESS STORY

A Community Can Go a Long Way with a Little Support

The community of Aththanakadawala in the Alahara division of Polonnaruwa struggled for decades without clean drinking water. Families walked miles to distant wells, relied on seasonal canal water, or dug unsafe pits for spring water. Agricultural pesticides often seeped into the groundwater, leading to widespread kidney disease, cholera, and urinary infections. "Many people were suffering because of the unclean water they consumed," recalls Mr. Sarath Bandara, who worked with the Rural Water Unit of the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) when Helvetas secured a grant from the George Fischer Water Foundation to support a community water program in 2003.

The program transformed life in the village. Two water tanks were installed, pumping 500 litres per hour and initially supplying 600 families, which increased to 800 families. The community contributed 20% of the program cost through labour and financial contributions, ensuring a strong sense of ownership. Alongside the water system, Helvetas built 100 toilets, conducted hygiene education, supported income-generation activities, and introduced an environmental initiative encouraging families to plant trees using excess water. "The program led to a healthier lifestyle. People began to grow trees and to choose more hygienic practices," says Mr. Bandara.

Today, the community continues to manage the water system through committees that supervise operations with the support of a small office that manages the supply and carries out regular water-quality checks. A survey has shown a decline in kidney-related illnesses, reflecting the program's long-term impact, says Mr. Bandara. With the rising demand for clean water, plans are underway to build a new tank for a neighbouring village. Looking ahead, Mr. Bandara believes continued support from the National Community Water Supply Department will help sustain the progress achieved. "This is something many other communities can do. With a little support, a community can go a long way," he affirms.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

During the initial decade or two, Helvetas was an INGO that transferred technical know-how to enhance sectors such as WATSAN and organic agriculture. However, Helvetas took a global decision to move away from being an organisation that only transferred technical skills through a sensitive community development model, as many of the countries in which it worked had already acquired these skills. In addition, given the evolution of the context within Sri Lanka, co-existence and peacebuilding became increasingly vital sectors for the Swiss.

⁸ https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/68cbdceb38167ec697105235/68cd3b36b92754a4e6147b6e_resettlementSriLanka.pdf
<https://media.odi.org/documents/4856.pdf> <https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/4882.pdf>
<https://media.odi.org/documents/4856.pdf>

Hence, a strategic shift was made to move away from sharing technical knowledge on WATSAN, organic agriculture, and other mainly infrastructure-related sectors to using the technical aspects as a vehicle for co-existence and peacebuilding. This strategic shift meant that the technical aspects were gradually phased out; when there remained a need for this to continue in some of the most remote areas in the country where WATSAN and organic agriculture needs remained. Given that WATSAN and organic agriculture were particular niche areas of Helvetas, the technical transference of this knowledge could have been combined with co-existence and peacebuilding initiatives in a continuous manner, similar to the design of the Development Peace Sri Lanka (DPSL) program, which is discussed further in the Reconciliation and Peacebuilding section of this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPACT

As Helvetas prepares to phase out in December 2025, Sri Lanka is once again grappling with devastation. This time, due to massive floods in the aftermath of cyclone Ditwa. The moment presents a critical opportunity to build back better ensuring strong adherence to environmental safeguards, especially in the hill country, where one of the most marginalised communities, the Malaiyaham Tamil population resides. With limited political and social equity, and exploitative commercial interests influencing their socio-economic wellbeing, the rights of these citizens of Sri Lanka have not been adequately recognized or acknowledged.

With much of the crops cultivated during the yala season being washed off, farmers who cultivated traditional crops varieties but did not get affected by Ditwah may be able to share their grain if facilitated through the established networks created, just as they did during the post tsunami period.

The technical knowledge transferred by Helvetas to its Sri Lankan counterparts, especially on water systems and organic agriculture, will be invaluable at a time such as this, as medium and long-term plans are drawn to restore vital basic needs such as water systems, food security and housing across 24 of the 25 districts affected by the floods, in the wake of cyclone Ditwah. This provides the opportunity to build back better in every sphere of life. Now is the time to mobilize in this endeavour, as civil society partners and the State remain committed to a better Sri Lanka.

As a strategy to address the worsening food security crisis among rural poor, Helvetas revived its Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture (LEISA) approach during the COVID 19 pandemic and the economic crisis.

As the effects of climate change become increasingly visible and severe, it is essential to strengthen climate-resilient food systems and adaptive agricultural practices. This is crucial for sustaining long-term outcomes and ensuring continuous benefits for farming families.

SECTION 2 - SAFE MIGRATION: PAVING SAFER PATHS TO SOAR



FEDOs with information material on safe migration



Street Drama Raising Awareness on Safe Migration



International Migrants Day Celebration

SAFE MIGRATION

In 2010, a quiet transformation began in Sri Lanka's approach to labour migration. The Swiss government, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), partnered with Helvetas Sri Lanka and local and international allies, including the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and International Labour Organisation (ILO). The result was the launch of the Safe Labour Migration Programme grounded in the 2008 National Policy on Migration in Sri Lanka. Taking off as a structured program, it eventually grew into a national discourse on safe migration and preventing internal and external trafficking of persons. This initiative, which commenced in 2010, continued for 14 long years. During this journey, there were other programs that complemented safe labour migration and the prevention of trafficking in persons (TiP). These included the Enhancing the Quality of Protection Services to Victims of Trafficking (EQUIP) - a program implemented by the ILO in collaboration with The Asia Foundation (TAF) and Helvetas, and the Economic Recovery and Reintegration of COVID-19-affected Returned Female Migrant Workers (RECOVER) program.

Fighting the good fight together - Labour Migration was viewed primarily as a development strategy for decades, with limited focus on migrant protection or family welfare. Under the programme, Helvetas and its partners began to change this narrative through building the capacities of government officials, CSOs, and migrant workers, via training, advocacy and policy coordination, as well as support to families of migrant workers.

A major milestone was the establishment of the Program Advisory Coordinating Committee in 2014 by the Ministry based on a proposal by SDC, where Helvetas took a leading role in convening and facilitating stakeholder engagement. The committee established a multi-stakeholder platform comprising of a broad range of actors, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau, International agencies such as the ILO, NGOs, and CSOs to review progress and address policy gaps. "The Ministry brought together all the partners, as well as all other ministries involved in safe migration programs, including CSOs such as Helvetas to meet once every three months to discuss program progress, address any lapses, and ensure the active involvement of all ministries and stakeholders," says Michael Joachim, Executive Director of the Plantation Rural Education Development Organisation (PREDO), a partner in the program. At the community level, civil society organizations like PREDO created information networks, local awareness campaigns, and support systems for migrants and their families, equipping them with relevant knowledge, especially at the pre-departure stage. He adds the most important outcome of establishing the Committee was the coordination it fostered among those working on safe migration and trafficking of persons. It brought together stakeholders who had previously been fragmented and were operating in silos, helping to build and strengthen a more cohesive and coordinated network to address gaps and challenges such as lack of awareness among aspiring migrants on safe migration, coordination of referrals and assistance for victims of trafficking, reintegration support for returning migrants, training for front-line government officers, and field level input to migration policies.

Helvetas' partnerships extended beyond program implementation to policy influence and donor coordination through its active engagement in bodies like the Donor Consortium on Anti trafficking together with IOM, ILO, and the Asia Foundation.

Under the SDC-supported Safe Labour Migration Programme, Helvetas played a significant role in strengthening civil society advocacy on migrant worker protection in Sri Lanka. This included building CSO capacity to engage in policy dialogue and supporting evidence-based advocacy on key issues such as the Family Background Report requirement.

With support from Helvetas, civil society organisations in Sri Lanka engaged in advocacy at both international and national levels to strengthen migrant worker protection. This included supporting the preparation and submission of a shadow report to the UN Committee⁹ on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, highlighting protection gaps and contributing to international human rights accountability processes. Parallely, civil society led a review of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment Act No. 21 of 1985¹⁰ and developed recommendations to improve governance, accountability, and worker protection. Several of these recommendations were incorporated into the proposed amendments, reflecting civil society's influence on national migration policy reform. "There's still not enough being done. But I think we're at a place now where, if you go to the government and talk about trafficking in persons, people know what you're talking about, which is great when you look back at the early days," says Dr. Ms. Ramani Jayasundere, Senior Technical Advisor at the Asia Foundation.

The Asia Foundation played a key role as a national implementation and policy partner in the Safe Labour Migration Programme. The organisation worked closely with government institutions to strengthen government systems, support migration policy development, and improve coordination and victim protection, to ensure safe migration and anti-trafficking interventions were integrated into Sri Lanka's institutional framework.

Helvetas worked together with The Asia Foundation, and the ILO on the Equipping Sri Lanka to Counter Trafficking in Persons (EQUIP) project, which was implemented from 2018-2019 with the objective of strengthening Sri Lanka's institutional capacity to prevent trafficking and improve services for victims, especially vulnerable migrant workers.¹¹ Focus areas included prevention of human trafficking, protection of victims, and strengthening prosecution and referral systems. Helvetas' role included training government officials on victim identification; referral procedures; and psychosocial support, as well as capacity building for shelters and migrant support centres and legal advice support for trafficking victims, in the Colombo, Gampaha, Kandy, and Kurunegala districts. Government officers, legal aid lawyers, and

⁹ UNHR_GuidancePaper_2018.pdf

¹⁰ Review of the SLBFE Act No 21 of 1985 and Review of the SLBFE ACT No 21.Of 1985 and Recommendations Made by the Civil Society (March 2017).pdf

¹¹ Counter Trafficking in Persons | Sri Lanka | Helvetas

counsellors were trained on the prevention of trafficking and victim identification. Helvetas also led training interventions to ensure fair and ethical business recruitment practices for foreign employment agencies.

IMPACT

Networking and Advocacy - From district awareness campaigns to national policy dialogue, Helvetas' role alongside that of government institutions, civil society, and international organisations has been both catalytic and connective. The safe migration and anti-trafficking ecosystem in Sri Lanka brought together government agencies such as the SLBFE and relevant ministries; international partners including SDC, IOM, and ILO; and civil society organisations such as the Action Network for Migrant Workers (ACTFORM), Asia Foundation, Caritas SEDEC/Seth Sarana, PREDO, Centre for Human Rights and Community Development (CHRCDD), Eastern Self-Reliant Community Awakening Organization (ESCO), and Social Welfare Organization Ampara District (SWOAD). Together, these interventions have transformed safe migration and the prevention of trafficking of persons from a mere concept into an operational reality embedded in communities, systems, and institutions across Sri Lanka.

Capacitating stakeholders - Capacity-building interventions were a central part of the program. Nearly 1,000 graduate foreign employment development officers were trained across all 25 districts of the country using standardized and comprehensive manuals. Their role was to provide effective and efficient services on labour migration and safe migration practices to potential migrant workers and their families at the community level. These officers became the face of safe migration. They disseminated information on safe migration and provided counselling and psychosocial support, child protection awareness, and grievance handling services at the divisional level. Training manuals were developed and translated into Sinhala and Tamil, and training-of-trainers (ToT) sessions included both government and civil society actors. Over time, changes were observed in the capacities, skills, and attitudes of not only development officers (DOs) but also of SLBFE staff who also received training. "This reflected the success of sustained technical support," says Mr. Gamini Senarath Yapa, Additional General Manager (International Affairs) of the SLBFE, reflecting on the trainings.

Referral mechanisms - The program also strengthened referral mechanisms for trafficking victims, bringing together ministries, law enforcement authorities, and community-based organisations. These included the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, Attorney General's Department, Police and the Legal Aid Commission. The Asia Foundation worked with the justice sector while Helvetas conducted trainings for government officers and lawyers, Says Dr. Jayasundere. The work included creating awareness on the concept of trafficking in the migration process, in addition to available referral services. To address unethical practices employed by private employment agencies, ethical recruitment practices were promoted through trainings delivered to this group. In addition, financial literacy training was provided to guide migrants and their families towards responsible savings and remittances, and for long-term financial planning.

Decentralizing services for easier access - The program led by Helvetas played a key role in decentralising services for migrant workers. “Together the partners in the program advocated and campaigned for the decentralization of services, as all services were centralized in Colombo and they had to travel from different districts for various matters, including complaints and conciliation,” says Mr. Ajith Kalularachchi, who worked with Helvetas for many years. These advocacy efforts led to the establishment of services at district and divisional levels, reducing the travel burden on migrants and their families. Monthly coordination meetings at district secretariats also helped ensure local issues were addressed quickly.

Migrant societies for welfare and protection - At the community level, Helvetas supported the creation of Migrant Societies. These were community-level groups formed by current and returnee migrant workers and their families to share information, support each other, and collectively address issues related to labour migration and protection. They provided a space for mutual support and collective learning, facilitating the dissemination of safe migration information, peer-to-peer problem solving, and community-based awareness-raising on safe labour migration and trafficking prevention. Women who had returned from migrant work, those who were running their households, women who were caring for children of migrant workers would meet once a month in the afternoon in one of their homes.¹²

Migrant societies served as early-warning systems against irregular migration and trafficking, by also providing psychosocial support, financial guidance, and legal referrals. “We suggested something called the migrant societies in which the families of the migrants and the returnees get together and work for the welfare of the families... in some places we even encouraged the wider community like temple committees, teachers, and others to come in as a committee to support migrant families,” says Mr. Joachim. He adds that the concept of migrant societies was one of the most effective community-based approaches to ensure welfare and protection of migrant families, and “some of them are still working independently without external support.” These societies continue to function as district-level advocates to safeguard the rights and welfare of migrant workers. At the time of writing this report 350-500 societies were believed to be still in existence around the country despite the withdrawal of various projects that had supported their funding.

Socializing safe migration and empowering communities - One of Helvetas’ most significant contributions was introducing and socializing the concept of safe labour migration, which was largely unfamiliar in Sri Lanka prior to the program. The concept aimed to achieve a human-centred, rights-based approach, making migration a dignified and rewarding process, and not just a source of foreign exchange. Today, courses on safe migration and trafficking in persons are taught at the Open University, University of Colombo, and University of Ruhuna, says Mr. Kalularachchi, reflecting on how the concept has evolved from awareness creation to academic and institutional integration.

¹² Safer Labour Migration Project | ESCO

At the community level, foreign employment development officers trained through the program with Helvetas taking a lead became catalysts of change, while CSOs and migrant societies emerged as key platforms for awareness and peer support. In high-migration districts such as Batticaloa, families learned about legal migration channels, worker rights, and protective measures, significantly reducing their vulnerability to exploitation. Migration Information Centres were established in divisional secretariats to provide Safe Labor Migration information, and over 1100 migrant workers were provided guidance counselling for skills development/certification.¹³ Compensation and insurance schemes provided essential relief to affected households, while the expansion of Sahana Piyasa Centres (Abode of Relief) ensured that counselling, complaint handling, and reintegration support were available closer to home. These were welfare centres, primarily run by the SLBFE, that provided support in terms of accommodation, transport, and food for returning migrant workers at airports like Katunayake and Jaffna.

Helvetas also helped institutionalize the development officers' role and introduced para-legal training for local leaders, including school principals, teachers, and Grama Sevaka Niladharis. These trainings, delivered by senior officers of the SLBFE, Ministry of External Affairs and Department of Immigration and Emigration, were based on a module developed by CHRD and finalized with Helvetas' technical input.

Godwin Francis who worked as project officer, Training and Coordination for CHRD, a Helvetas implementing partner recalls the work carried out on the ground. The days often began in remote villages where migration was high, listening to stories of loss, exploitation, and hardship. He spent countless hours accompanying distressed family members to the SLBFE, the Consular Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or even the Treasury Department to seek compensation or insurance. Some days brought joy through successful redress; others were spent in sombre moments such as when receiving the remains of deceased migrants at the airport or assisting families in court during forensic investigations.

"The issues they faced ranged from unpaid wages, exploitation, harassment, excessive working hours, and disability, to death and sexual assault," he recalls. "We were able to find solutions in each case and sometimes secure compensation."

Promoting financial responsibility and embedding anti-trafficking measures -

Recognizing that migration often came at a social cost, Helvetas introduced pre-departure training and financial literacy programmes that encouraged responsible money management and savings. Initiatives such as dual bank accounts encouraged families to save their earnings and break cycles of repeated migration.

At the institutional level, anti-trafficking measures were integrated into the broader migration framework. Specialized training for officers from the CID, Attorney General's Department, Ministry of Foreign Employment, and Legal Aid Commission improved the identification and

¹³ [safe-labour-migration-programme-factsheet_EN\(2\).pdf](#)

referral of victims. These efforts contributed to Sri Lanka advancing from the Tier 2 Watch List to Tier 2 in the U.S. Trafficking in Persons (TiP) Report in 2017, which was an important indicator of national progress.

Influencing policy and strengthening partnerships - According to Dr. Ms. Ramani Jayasundere, TAF, a major milestone was the government's decision to revise and update the National Labour Migration Policy, marking a turning point toward safer and more humane migration management. The introduction of the Migration Health Policy by the Ministry of Health further demonstrated a shift in perspective and recognition of migration beyond an economic process, to include matters relating to human wellbeing.

As Mr. Kanthasamy Nikarilkanth, Senior Assistant Secretary (Foreign Employment), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism notes, labour migration continues to cover nearly 80% of Sri Lanka's trade deficit and contributes around 8% of GDP, highlighting its importance to the national economy. In terms of influencing policy, persistent advocacy under the program also led to policy discussions on migrant voting rights and the inclusion of a seat for a migrant representative on the SLBFE Board of Directors.

"There was a turning point in the recognition given to civil society organisations, where the government realised and accepted the role of NGOs and CSOs in supporting the whole migration process," says Mr. Joachim, highlighting the program's wider influence on sectoral collaboration and policy dialogue.

Helvetas played a pivotal role in shaping Sri Lanka's approach to safe labour migration from 2010. Its work earned the trust and respect of both government officials and civil society partners. "When they started, Helvetas was not a migration agency, but today if you go and talk to the government, their name is mentioned as one among the first five agencies working at the national level. This tells us that through their program implementation and active engagement at different levels, they have proven themselves and become an important partner," says Benil Thavarasa, who was Regional Advisor and Regional Manager for SDC.

SUCCESS STORY:

Changing Mindsets in Simple but Powerful Ways

S. C. Malkanthi from Beligaswella in Karandeniya joined the Helvetas Programme through Sesatha in 2010 and has supported her community for over 15 years. Having once migrated through an unregistered agent and faced difficulties in Dubai, she understands the risks and confusion surrounding foreign employment. Before the programme, many families hid their struggles out of fear, which often led to stress, depression, and vulnerability to exploitation. "People looked fine on the outside, but inside they were suffering. I learned never to judge by appearances," she explains, talking about her visits to families affected by migration and to potential high-risk migrants.

Through Helvetas, Malkanthi visited more than 100 families, becoming a crucial link between migrant households and essential services provided by Helvetas, including legal aid, psychosocial support, safe migration awareness, and financial management. Working with Sesatha staff and technical specialists such as psychologist, she shared critical information with these families and psychosocial support. She witnessed a clear transformation: *“Families started asking questions before migrating. They would check if agencies were registered with the SLBFE instead of blindly trusting brokers.”* Financial literacy sessions also helped families rethink their spending. *“Even I changed, now I cut unnecessary expenses and plan better,”* she adds.

The programme brought lasting change to both the community and to Malkanthi personally. Children received more emotional support, families accessed help without fear, and community members avoided scammers by making informed decisions. As her husband now plans to migrate, she is applying the same guidance at home: *“Even if we don’t understand the English in the documents, we must question and verify everything.”* She adds that as the more responsible and primary caregiving-parent in her household, her absence may have been disastrous for her own family. And she believes her most meaningful achievement was protecting her own daughters by choosing not to migrate again: *“If I had left, my eldest may have gone into an early marriage. Being here changed their future.”* Deeply grateful, she says, *“Helvetas officers were humble and truly listened. They changed mindsets in simple but powerful ways.”*

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Sri Lanka’s efforts toward safe labour migration and preventing trafficking unfolded within a complex landscape of institutional gaps, shifting attitudes, and uneven implementation. One of the biggest challenges was the disconnect between policy and practice: migration was often viewed mainly as an economic activity, with limited attention to welfare, psychosocial well-being, or reintegration. Weak governance, inconsistent monitoring of recruitment agencies, corruption, and the absence of a national database of returnees further hindered effective support systems. Social and gender challenges added to this burden, as services remained concentrated in Colombo, registration fees were high, and women migrants, especially domestic workers, faced heightened risks. Poor coordination among stakeholders and weak data systems made it difficult to track outcomes or respond to emerging issues, particularly during crises such as the pandemic.

Amid these obstacles, Helvetas and its partners learned that durable change must be built from the ground up. Empowering SLBFE officers, development officers, and community-based organisations created structures that continued to function even after the program ended. Migrant Societies emerged as trusted community spaces that bring people together to access shared resources, social cohesion and integrated serviced, helping families access information, identify illegal recruiters, and support safe migration practices. Pre-departure trainings, as well as financial literacy, rights awareness, and psychosocial counselling, helped migrants feel prepared for life abroad and reintegrate upon return. More than 127,000 prospective migrant workers received pre-departure and pre employment orientation, including legal aid and

psychosocial services.¹⁴ Field-level insights from villages and districts also became essential for shaping national policies that reflected real needs and experiences.

The program underscored that meaningful collaboration, rooted in mutual respect rather than funding hierarchies, is key to lasting impact. Network partnerships between government and NGOs stakeholders strengthened ownership, trust, and the ability to adapt during crises. When the pandemic strained formal systems, community networks trained through the program became vital channels for information, psychosocial support, and referrals. Migrant Worker Societies facilitated support to over 6000 families of migrant workers affected by Covid19.¹⁵ These experiences highlight that resilience, collaboration, and community ownership are central to building a safer and more people-centred migration system in Sri Lanka.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPACT

To strengthen safe labour migration in Sri Lanka, stakeholders highlight the need to improve reintegration support by offering skills training, financial literacy, and psychosocial care, backed by a comprehensive national database of returnees. Expanding awareness and pre-departure preparation, through contract and legal rights training, school-based education, and strong community networks, will help prevent unsafe migration. Better regulation of recruitment agencies, transparent fee structures, and more responsive legal and diplomatic and consular services are essential to protect workers. A collaborative, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is needed to ensure continuity and shared responsibility. Promoting skilled and ethical migration pathways, increasing migrant representation in decision-making bodies, and strengthening welfare and data systems will help create a more accountable, people-centred migration system for the future.

Sustainable solutions should also focus on addressing both push and pull factors driving migration. This includes improving education, training, and enterprise opportunities to increase women's participation in the domestic economy, while also developing higher-value skills, such as nursing, hospitality, and teaching in order to maintain foreign remittances. To generate higher returns, the country should prioritise improving the quality of human resources rather than increasing numbers in low-paid jobs.

¹⁴ [safe-labour-migration-programme-factsheet_EN \(2\).pdf](#)

¹⁵ [ibid](#)

SECTION 3 - RECONCILIATION & PEACEBUILDING: ON THE WINDING ROAD TO PEACE



RECONCILIATION AND PEACEBUILDING

In the early 2000s, as Sri Lanka grappled with the weight of conflict and division, Helvetas began charting a quiet but determined path toward peace. Its peacebuilding and reconciliation work mirrored the shifting socio-political landscape of the time and responded to both urgent humanitarian needs and the deeper fractures between communities. The efforts began with a simple but powerful belief that peace could take root through shared development using a diverse set of interventions. This section explores the three key programs under Peacebuilding and Reconciliation: Development and Peace in Sri Lanka (DPSL), Incubator Spaces for Promoting Information Rights and Freedom of Expression (InSPIRE) and Voices Beyond Barriers (VBB).

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE IN SRI LANKA PROGRAM

Helvetas implemented the DPSL program from 2000 to 2010 in the Ampara and Batticaloa districts, with funding from the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC). The initiative aimed to promote peacebuilding by addressing economic needs, enhancing food security, and strengthening local capacities for non-violent conflict resolution. In its early stages, the program focused on improving food security and livelihoods as a foundation for reconciliation and inter-ethnic trust. Joint activities, such as street theatre, the construction of bus stops and a dam, as well as agricultural loan schemes, helped bring communities together. As the political context evolved, DPSL expanded its peacebuilding and conflict transformation efforts, placing greater emphasis on collaboration and structured engagement among divided communities.

Through these initiatives, Helvetas helped establish inter-ethnic farmer organisations, Village Co-existence Committees (VCCs), and Peace and Co-existence Committees (PCCs), creating local platforms for dialogue, trust building and cooperation. The PCCs led local initiatives to address shared development priorities in their constituencies, strengthening social capital across villages and ethnic groups, and promoting co-existence through sustainable relationships and mutual understanding. The establishment of locally driven mechanisms for cooperation and reconciliation remains one of the pivotal achievements of the DPSL programme.

IMPACT

Training provided to the committees under the DPSL program was well designed and effectively aligned with the program's broader theory of change. The technical assistance on organic agriculture was valued especially for its practicality and sensitivity to local needs. Participants praised the training sessions conducted for both agricultural groups and former sugar mill workers, as well as efforts to organise farmer associations and livelihood development programs.

Beyond formal training, the program also strengthened social cohesion through shared community events such as sports activities, funerals, weddings, ifthar gatherings in Muslim

villages, and *Poson* celebrations in Sinhala areas. Most respondents agree that the DPSL program significantly improved relationships among the Deegavapiya, Manikkamadu, and Kuduvil communities. The program's model was effective in encouraging dialogue and building inter-ethnic friendships, which gradually increased trust among the communities. Models of the PCC still continue in various parts of the East.¹⁶

"We really remember the coexistence work. We were scared to go in those other villages before, then when we were friendly, we found it easier. We do Pooja in the Manikamam kovil. We really appreciated the programs. We used to be very angry and have fear [sic] of them [Tamils]. Even if we hear Tamil language we were scared." – Female Sinhalese respondent, Deegavapiya¹⁷

"The Tamil and Muslim relations are good now. It was there even during the war in this place. [But] we had a fear of the Sinhalese. Helvetas helped us to demystify that fear. We have a lot of friends in Deegavapiya now." – Female Tamil respondent, Manikkamadu.¹⁸

SUCCESS STORY

Reconciliation through Development

E. N. Somasiri from Ampara lived in Veheragama, a village that had no contact with the Muslim and Tamil villages nearby due to deep fear of the other communities. During the war they would often hide in the forest with other Sinhala communities fearing attacks by the LTTE. However, when Helvetas approached Somasiri to work with the village of Veheragama and invited him to meet with the other communities. He and a few others from his village agreed, trusting the Helvetas team. Through the meetings that followed they realized that the other communities were equally afraid of the people from Veheragama. Through continuous interaction and trust building the mutual fear and distrust gradually dissipated. Eventually, five people from each of the three villages were selected to form a committee to plan and implement DPSL. The members from Veheragama felt that the new relationship established with the other two villages needed to be extended to the rest of their village.

Helvetas asked the communities about their most prevalent needs. They revealed that due to the war government service providers had not visited their border villages. The tank and the lake were overgrown, and the schools and pre-schools did not have adequate support. The committee then proposed a shramadhana (gift of labour) to clean the silt in the lake. The lake had previously been used by over 1000 people from all three communities but was no longer in a useable condition. As the President of the committee, Somasiri and another Tamil committee member went around colony 10, 11 and 12 announcing the planned shramadhana effort over a loudspeaker. Helvetas promised to provide some compensation towards this effort as the participants would lose a day's wage for their efforts. Surprisingly, around 1600 people turned up for the shramadhana. They thereafter, went to each other's villages to help

¹⁶ **The long and winding road to reconciliation: A report on the aftermath of the Helvetas DPSL project** – CEPA, Jan 2018.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

rehabilitate infrastructure. Subsequently, peace committees were formed, which spread across the entire Ampara district, and the links between villages continue today.

The Veheragama village lost around 33 people during the war. However, once the relationships between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim villages were built they remained strong, even in the face of later tensions, including the final war against the LTTE and the Easter Sunday. Helvetas also supported organic agriculture and livelihoods in these villages, further strengthening engagement across the communities. These relationships have now lasted over 18 years.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Governance challenges rooted in patronage continue to pose significant concerns. Local authorities could adopt more transparent and accountable practices to avoid perceptions of preferential treatment and increase public trust. Dysfunction within local government systems also hinders reconciliation, particularly when disputes such as those over land ownership in the Ampara District remain unresolved. Strengthening local governance could help address these issues by ensuring the timely issuance of land deeds and clarifying ownership. Prolonged unresolved disputes, if left unaddressed, risk deepening mistrust and tensions within and between communities.

The program was unable to address inequalities through a strong rights-based approach. Greater emphasis on advocacy could have helped tackle socio-political and ethno-religious disparities in a more concerted and inclusive manner. Further, the broader national and regional political and ethno-religious dynamics shaping community relations were not sufficiently considered.

Tensions among Muslim, Sinhalese, and Tamil communities have intensified in recent years, with new divisions emerging alongside longstanding differences, particularly following the 2019 Easter attacks. In addition, intra-community issues, such as those linked to religion and caste, demand careful attention. The resurgence of caste-based divisions is an especially pressing concern, prompting local initiatives to confront and address these complexities, particularly within Tamil communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPACT

The models of the PCCs and VCCs could be scaled up as part of a national initiative. However, this would require adaptation to the post-war context and greater attention to long-term local development needs. If the DPSL model is to be replicated, it should extend beyond facilitating community-level conflict resolution, to also address broader social and political transformation by addressing structural inequalities

Current reconciliation efforts are hampered by the politicization of ethnic tensions and the limited integration of historical perspectives into policy-making. Sustained progress will require continuous awareness and dialogue on reconciliation, deepened grassroots

engagement, stronger coordination among government stakeholders, and empowerment of communities to act as constructive pressure groups to advocate for decisions that are grounded in human rights and democratic values.

A flexible approach that recognizes and addresses horizontal inequalities is essential. Further, the track-one-and-a-half process ¹⁹ should provide a guiding framework for local-level initiatives, ensuring that grassroots-level processes are informed, connected, and sustainable.

Finally, national-level processes should be closely linked with community-level peacebuilding initiatives, to ensure that grassroots experiences inform policy and that reconciliation efforts remain inclusive and grounded in local realities.

VOICES BEYOND BARRIERS PROGRAM

The VBB Program, funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and Helvetas, was implemented from 2013 to 2018 to address human rights violations in Sri Lanka's Northern province. Operating in a context of deep mistrust and widespread abuse, the program sought to empower Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), including Women Human Rights Defenders, to support victims through documentation, legal aid, and capacity-building for CSOs. VBB provided targeted training, established defender networks, and expanded its case documentation to the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts, in the Eastern Province.

IMPACT

In September 2015, the program published a research paper titled *"Enforced Disappearance in Sri Lanka – Lessons from Advocacy."* The paper was presented at the 30th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, where the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Investigating Human Rights in Sri Lanka. The fourth resolution on Sri Lanka was adopted during these sessions. Notably, some of the paper's recommendations were incorporated into the OISL report by the Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, Reparation, and guarantee of Non-Recurrence. ²⁰

The program also significantly empowered affected communities, enabling them to advocate for their rights with courage and determination, even in the face of considerable risk. *"Before (the program) we felt alone with our problems. Now we have a huge list of phone numbers of like-minded people in Jaffna and the whole North in our cell phones. These people we can call for support*

¹⁹ [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-032-10223-](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-032-10223-2_1#:~:text=Track%201.5%20Diplomacy%20involves%20official,academics%2C%20and%20civil%20society%20representatives.)

[2_1#:~:text=Track%201.5%20Diplomacy%20involves%20official,academics%2C%20and%20civil%20society%20representatives.](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-032-10223-2_1#:~:text=Track%201.5%20Diplomacy%20involves%20official,academics%2C%20and%20civil%20society%20representatives.)

²⁰ Seeking Truth and Justice for Families of the Disappeared" Follow-up and conclusion of the Voices Beyond Barriers (VBB) project 2016-2018

at any time and they will help immediately.” - Women Human Rights Defender, Jaffna coalition member.

SUCCESS STORY

The Making of a Human Rights Defender

Kumar²¹, from Norochcholai, grew up in a family devastated by war. His sister and close relatives were killed, others disappeared, and his father was arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). *“Those experiences broke us, but they also pushed me to seek justice,”* he says. Before joining the organisation he currently works in, he volunteered in peacebuilding groups but had little understanding of human rights and struggled to join rights-focused organisations because of his limited knowledge. Although he attended a one-day human rights session by the Human Rights Commission (HRC), he felt he still did not know where to begin or how to help others.

His turning point came when the Helvetas' CSO partner launched a human rights defender training program in his district under the Voices Beyond Barriers program. Kumar joined the program and attended all the sessions, learning about fundamental human rights, safety and security of human rights defenders, women's rights, laws, international human rights instruments, UN complaints procedures, documentation, and court procedures. *“For the first time, I received a good understanding of what human rights work really meant,”* he says. The training gave him the skills and confidence to identify cases, support victims, and refer issues such as PTA arrests and domestic violence to the CSO partner. His commitment and growing expertise led to a major change, and he was selected as the successor district coordinator when the previous coordinator left.

Today, Kumar is involved in multiple advocacy efforts. He is a key figure involved in identifying cases, documenting violations, mobilizing communities, reporting to relevant authorities, and guiding legal action on several human rights issues in his district. He is also a board member of the Citizen Committee, and supports the Kids, Elder Youth (KEY) group formed by trained defenders. Many of his peers now work in civil society, expanding the impact. He has built strong networks and feels his work empowers communities to speak out. But he remains realistic: *“Justice in Sri Lanka is slow, and many issues remain unresolved. We still have far to go.”*

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Providing legal and psychosocial support to survivors of human rights violations is a long and arduous process, as the legal proceedings often take years to conclude given the backlog in courts. Therefore, short-term programs are not conducive to achieving sustainable outcomes, especially for individual families receiving legal support. Undertaking such interventions is risky. However, collective advocacy at the regional and national level with like-minded CSOs ensures some measure of success. Nevertheless, seeking truth and justice are key elements

²¹ Name changed to maintain anonymity

of any transitional justice mechanism in a post-war context, and the efforts undertaken by Helvetas have been highly appreciated, especially during a time fraught with mass-scale human rights abuse. The support received from other stakeholders as well is particularly noteworthy. When individuals are empowered through enhanced knowledge of their rights and are linked with those who face similar threats, the bonds that form are strong and last a lifetime.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPACT

Development partners that seek to support legal rights should be prepared for longer term commitment, although awards may be made year-on year, given the arduous and long drawn out legal processes. Often CSOs working on these processes are dependent on taking funding on the short term due to the dearth of resources in this sector. These form of programs are also human resource heavy. Hence core funding and close ties is encouraged.

INCUBATOR SPACES FOR PROMOTING INFORMATION RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION PROGRAM

Following two major religious riots in Aluthgama and Digana, Sri Lanka experienced a surge in the misuse of social media to spread misinformation, hate speech, and incite violence. Online platforms became tools for mobilizing attacks, with many users struggling to distinguish false information from fact. Community tensions intensified through online hate speech, particularly among youth, who were both targets and transmitters of misinformation and gender-based hate speech.

Although the Right to Information (RTI) Act was enacted in 2017, media literacy and responsible use of information on social media remained limited. These growing concerns about misinformation and hate speech led to the design of the InSPIRE program, funded by the EU's European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) from 2020 - 2023. At the outset, an assessment of existing university curricula revealed several gaps. There were limited multidisciplinary learning opportunities and some gaps in courses and curricula on topics such as online ethics, digital citizenship, the right to information, and fundamental freedoms. There was also a lack of dedicated spaces that encouraged freedom of expression, innovation, and the creation of content and journalistic material.

Understanding civic responsibility within media and journalism production was found to be limited, with low awareness of constitutionally guaranteed fundamental freedoms and their practical implications. Opportunities for students of media and mass communication to engage in civic activism or to practice fundamental freedoms in multidisciplinary, gender-inclusive, and conflict-sensitive ways were also rare. Additionally, the quality of media products did not

always meet global and regional standards, and there remained room for media responsibilities and ethical considerations not being fully understood or observed.²²

To address these gaps, *Incubator spaces* for creative work and skill development were established at the Universities of Colombo, Jaffna and Peradeniya. Due to budget constraints, the Southeastern University received only equipment support. Through these initiatives, students' skills were enhanced.

IMPACT

According to Dr. Uvasara Dissanayeke, Senior Lecturer of the Agriculture Extension Program, University of Peradeniya, the training and investment provided through the incubator spaces had a transformative effect on students, shaping how they viewed themselves and others from diverse backgrounds. These spaces became highly sought after within the wider university community. The universities have expressed appreciation, noting that the facilities surpass those previously available on campus. The curricula developed under the program continue to be used today, sustaining its impact beyond the program period.

Students gained practical skills in photography, cartooning, blogging, short film and documentary film-making, and digital drama. Under the guidance of experienced mentors, they created media products following training and exchange visits to each other's incubator spaces. These interactions not only enriched their skills but also fostered meaningful ethno-religious understanding and collaboration through shared learning experiences.

SUCCESS STORY

Inspire to Aspire: The Rise of an Up-Country Filmmaker

Selvakumar Rinoshan, from an estate community in Thalavakele, grew up with a passion for storytelling but lacked the skills, resources, and confidence to pursue filmmaking. As the first from his estate to enter university, he struggled to fit in and felt overshadowed. "I didn't think someone like me could shine here," he says. Before the INSPIRE program, he avoided competitions because he had no equipment and limited practical knowledge.

When Helvetas introduced the INSPIRE program at the University of Jaffna, Rinoshan's batch was selected, giving him access to training, mentorship, and an incubator space. "It was a big opportunity to explore myself and find the personality hidden inside me," he says. With new skills and encouragement, he created multimedia articles, photography, and a short film highlighting basic rights issues faced by Up-country Tamils. His short film and multimedia articles won first place at an inter-university competition, which was an emotional turning point. "A previously unnoticed student became known to everyone," he recalls, as students were moved to tears by his film.

²² Contracting authority: European Commission European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights Country Based Support Scheme (CBSS) for Sri Lanka - 2018-2019 Annex A.I – Grant application form - Concept note.

These achievements led to national and international festival screenings, improved academic performance, with his graduation with a Second-Class Upper Division Honors, and subsequent recruitment at the University of Jaffna as an Assistant Lecturer. He now works with the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka and continues to produce award-winning films. The change, he says, is life-defining: “The INSPIRE program changed me, made my dream come true, and showed me to the world.”

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

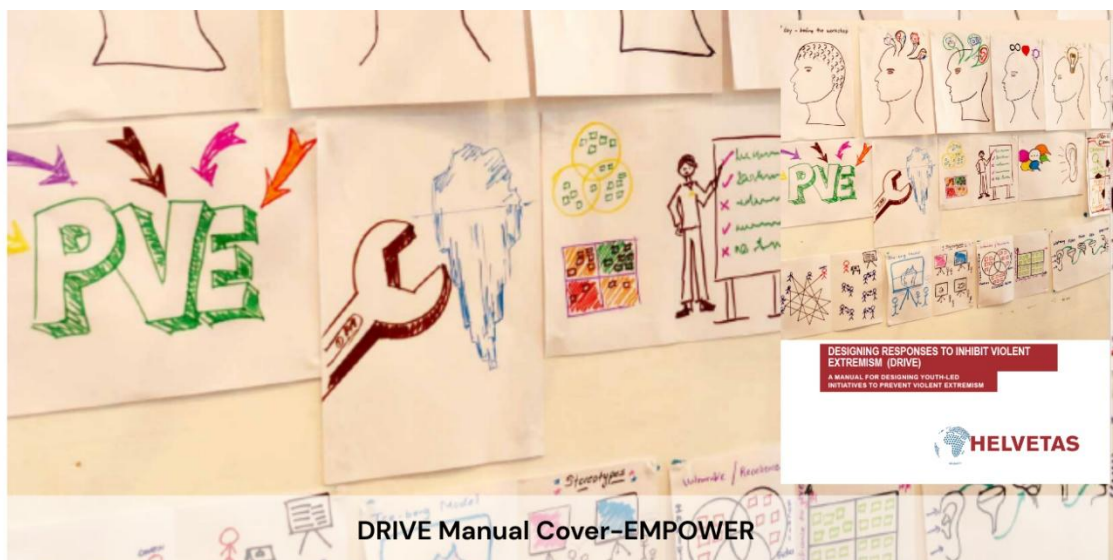
The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis caused significant delays and led to rising costs. As a result, the program had to be redesigned, with some inputs and planned activities scaled down or discontinued. Learning among students from different ethno-religious backgrounds enriched the participants and transformed their lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPACT

With the advancement and accessibility of social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI) increasing within the country, there will be an increase in the need for unbiased, accurate, and responsible information flows. This can only take place with responsible reporting. Courses developed through INSPIRE would be vital in the process of unlearning, re-shaping, challenging and inculcating sound values that are anchored in truth and accountability. Helvetas has left a lasting legacy in the University system, which can be updated and reused in the years to come.

Interventions and projects of this nature should adopt more innovative and out-of-the-box approaches. Contemporary Sri Lankan youth, especially in the rural and suburban areas are heavily influenced by language, religious culture and inherited narratives of history and social legacies such as the northern and southern legacies and claims. It is therefore important to critically examine and deconstruct these structural and agentic influences to pave the way for open-minded youth equipped with the power of knowledge and skills. Therefore, rigorous literature review and empirical methods are needed to ensure such projects and programs are more effective and contextually relevant.

SECTION 4 – EMPOWERING YOUTH FOR PEACE THROUGH PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM – A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION



EMPOWERING YOUTH FOR PEACE THROUGH PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Helvetas believes that facilitating young people to step out of their comfort zones and communities to interact with peers from different ethno-religious backgrounds and engage in fruitful economic initiatives plays a vital role in peacebuilding and the prevention of violent extremism. Through the following programs EMPOWER, Crossing Boundaries Youth (CBY) and Youth Led Economic Action for Prosperity (YouLEAP), Helvetas worked with youth to equip them with the skills, connections, and opportunities needed to steer them away from violent pathways, and foster coexistence and reconciliation.

EMPOWER PROGRAM

Empower, funded by the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), was implemented as a multi-country civil society initiative in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to prevent violent extremism among youth.

At the outset, civil society actors were provided with technical support to adapt and integrate PVE approaches into their specific community contexts, drawing on insights from cross-country learning and institutional dialogue.

The program positioned CSOs as key agents of change, promoting value-based approaches to PVE that emphasized pluralism in practice and rule of law. Through community-level capacity building and dialogue, counter-narratives to prevent radicalization, while promoting tolerance and social cohesion across various social, political and religious divides.²³

The EMPOWER program was implemented during a period of political fragility and rising ethno-religious tensions. In 2014, violent clashes erupted between hardline Sinhala Buddhists and Muslims in Darga Town, Beruwala. These tensions deepened following the 2019 Easter attacks, which triggered widespread suspicion and led to the boycott of businesses owned by Muslims, which severely affected their livelihoods.

In the multi-ethnic, multi-religious district of Kalutara, divisions between Sinhalese, Muslim, and Tamil communities were further fuelled by the actions of politicians, religious leaders, and certain youth groups. Meanwhile, women and Malaiyagam youth from plantation areas remained isolated.

Dr. Jehan Perera, Executive Director of the National Peace Council (NPC), a program partner, says understanding the root causes behind the rise of extremism, and the circumstances that led to a major terrorist attack, was essential. NPC examined what drives individuals toward extremism, why people adopt extremist views, and which underlying issues must be addressed, rather than relying solely on a security-focused approach with repressive

²³ <https://www.gcerf.org/sri-lanka/>

laws and actions against those perceived as threats. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, when suspicion between communities was high and ethnic and religious tensions had influenced public thinking, this exploration became especially important.

He further noted that learning from Bangladesh was highly relevant and helped shape NPC's program design. Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country with its own history of violent extremism and terrorist incidents, offered valuable lessons and comparative insights for Sri Lanka, where Muslims are a minority. This cross-country learning provided an important opportunity to strengthen understanding and approaches to preventing violent extremism.

Another CSO partner of Helvetas in the Empower program, Asia Lanka Social Development Cooperation (ALSDC) initially worked across four divisions, forming four ethno-religious youth groups and selecting 30 youth participants from each area. Upon identifying the root causes of local conflicts, the organisation designed targeted interventions to address them. A key finding was a limited understanding of other religions often led to mistrust and tension. To address this, ALSDC brought together religious leaders to share their faiths and engage in open discussions with youth, fostering mutual respect and understanding. This was followed by cultural exhibitions that celebrated religious and cultural diversity through displays of traditional clothing, food, and art.

Building on this success, the program later expanded to eight divisions, selecting 40 active youth from the original 120 participants, collectively naming them *BRAVE*. Five active youth from each division, along with the identified 40, received specialized training on preventing violent extremism, conflict resolution, inter-ethnic harmony, non-violent communication, and the rule of law.

The initiative also established four Coexistence Libraries, all managed by youth, serving as spaces for learning and dialogue. ALSDC further collaborated with government structures and three educational zones to identify conflict-prone areas and organize exhibitions and competitions promoting non-violence.

In its current phase, the program has provided livelihood support to 22 youth and conducted ToT workshops on coexistence to foster reconciliation among the diverse communities. Those trained under Brave are now leading community-level sessions to promote non-violence and peaceful coexistence.

IMPACT

The EMPOWER Program was a transformative experience that built lasting bonds among youth across socio-political and ethnic divides. Today, in all 14 divisions of Kalutara, there is a strong network of youth actively working to promote coexistence. Some young people who once held extremist views have shifted their perspectives and now serve as active members of coexistence committees within their communities. Many have shown genuine interest in learning about other religions and cultures. Young women, particularly from the Muslim

community, have become actively engaged in promoting coexistence in their spheres of influence.

The *Aragalaya* movement further inspired youth to reflect on the kind of country and values they wished to uphold, strengthening their commitment towards such change. Despite the evolving context, Helvetas demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness by adapting the program design to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness.

SUCCESS STORY

From Combative Engagement to Reconciliation

Asanga (name changed to maintain anonymity) hails from a village in the Kalutara district. Growing up, he had many friends, but he mostly associated with those from his own ethno-religious background. He had classmates of the Islamic faith in his school, whom he did not associate with much because they felt different. When tensions arose in the district between the Muslims and Buddhists in Dharga Town, and later during the Easter Sunday bombings, mistrust and fear spread rapidly. Rumours circulated that Muslims were contaminating the food of non-Muslims, and several Muslim-owned businesses and homes were destroyed. Asanga was strongly influenced by these events and by the rhetoric of extremist groups like Sinha Le (Lion's Blood) and admits to even engaging in violent acts during this time.

When Asanga and his friends were invited to a series of workshops to meet and engage with other youth from the area, they attended with some reservations. "I was picked because they saw me as a youth influencer who had leadership potential," he says. The workshops were eye-opening. His understanding and attitudes transformed as he learned about other faiths, which enabled him to see beyond the misconceptions propagated by others to instil fear and distrust. He recognised that he had been manipulated by politically motivated extremist rhetoric. Soon, he also made friends with those of other ethnic and religious backgrounds and gradually began to appreciate and understand other faiths and their lifestyles.

Together, the youth formed an inter-religious youth forum dedicated to building bridges across the divide. One of the first initiatives was an exhibition showcasing Sri Lanka's diverse arts, crafts, food, and clothing, which was attended by hundreds of youth. The group also undertook shramadhana (voluntary donation of free labour) to clean religious sites of worship. They also engaged with religious leaders to address their misconceptions. During the final phase of the EMPOWER program, Asanga was one of 20 youth selected to receive business support. He used the grant to purchase new tools for his construction business, and hires them out when they are not in use. Following the recent Ditwah disaster, Asanga and his inter-religious coexistence team mobilised quickly to help affected families clean their homes, return safely, and access essential relief. By bringing together community members across ethno-religious divides, Asanga has transformed from a once-divisive youth into a leader who embodies coexistence and celebrates diversity.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis, which fuelled the *Aragalaya*, caused delays in some program interventions. During the local government elections, several youth participants became actively involved in political activities. This initially led to misunderstandings within the communities, with some believing that the CSO partner intended to promote political engagement. However, these concerns were later dispelled, as it became clear that the youth were engaging with representatives from all political parties in a non-partisan manner.

The final phase of providing grants to youth for social enterprises has been economically empowering to the 20 youth who received them. This has led to greater engagement for them as youth peace makers in their communities.

The grant selection process for the EMPOWER program involved the national defence forces, which raised concerns among potential applicants. Many organisations felt vulnerable and viewed the process with suspicion. This fundamental design flaw introduced by GCERF may have discouraged valuable CSO partnerships and limited broader engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPACT

For future PVE programs, GCERF should reconsider involving the Ministry of Defence (MOD) as a stakeholder. The MOD had a significant role in the CSO award selection process. However, during the implementation of the program, engagement with national security forces fluctuated with each change in government. These shifts led to delays in selection and approval for some awards, affecting continuance and reducing the period for implementation.

The role of the MOD and its line agencies in program steering and monitoring was also challenging, particularly due to human rights violence allegations raised against them by watchdog organisations and the UNHRC. This context creates a conflict of interest when the MOD monitors CSOs, whom they have treated with suspicion and surveillance at times.

Working on building trust, stability and stakeholder management in the prevention of violent extremism requires sustained effort. Such interventions require time, patience and a nuanced understanding and sensitivity to the context and the changing landscape. They are difficult to implement through narrowly defined short term project cycles. More flexibility in program management and funding is therefore required for meaningful and lasting impact.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES YOUTH PROGRAM

The Crossing Boundaries Youth (CBY) Program, implemented from 2016–2022 in Sri Lanka, aimed to foster sustainable reconciliation and peace in selected districts by engaging young men and women from Batticaloa, Galle, and Kilinochchi. The initiative focused on promoting

inter-ethnic, inter-religious, and inter-cultural understanding, while empowering youth to actively participate in peacebuilding processes that contribute to national integration.

The program encouraged peer learning and relationship-building among culturally diverse youth, their families, and communities, creating spaces where their contributions to inclusive local development were recognized and valued.

Youth participants were trained as leaders and supported to conduct awareness programs for youth groups within their respective communities. Inter-district exchange visits were organized to enable youth to live and interact with one another across regions, along with their families and peers. These exchanges fostered dialogue, strengthened relationships, and deepened mutual understanding around reconciliation.

In addition, the program developed learning materials and social media content to further promote peace and reconciliation. It also encouraged youth participation in local governance by helping them prepare program proposals and engage in policy dialogue with decision-makers at the district level.²⁴

IMPACT

The post-program tracer study indicates a positive shift in youth attitudes toward individuals from different religious and cultural backgrounds. Although there is limited evidence of these learnings translating into broader, sustained efforts in reconciliation or peacebuilding at inter- and intra-community levels, emerging relationships and youth engagement suggest that participants are beginning to serve as catalysts for change within their own communities.

The networks of youth leaders established during the CBY program have remained active beyond the program's completion. The strength of these multi-ethnic networks lies largely in the personal connections and friendships formed during national training sessions and exchange visits with host families from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

The youth exchange program is seen as key in addressing stereotypes about other ethnic and religious groups. Its value has been widely acknowledged for fostering friendships, connections, and lasting networks.²⁵

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

One of the main challenges has been retaining youth from the beginning of the program to its completion. Many young people were highly mobile during this period, often relocating for studies or employment. Additionally, selecting and retaining Muslim youth has been difficult, especially in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks.

²⁴ Helvetas Annual Report 2019 – Crossing Boundaries Youth Groups in Sri Lanka.

²⁵ Crossing Boundaries – Youth Project Sri Lanka, Report on Tracer Study 2016-2018

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPACT

Experience and studies indicate that coexistence, peacebuilding, and reconciliation interventions work best when paired with constructive development initiatives. This has been evident in the lessons learned through the DPSL program. It is therefore encouraged that CBY-type programs incorporate strong community mobilization and development initiatives right from the design stage to ensure sustainability and greater community ownership. Water, sanitation, and organic agriculture are areas in which Helvetas has strong expertise, which can be combined with co-existence, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and transitional justice interventions, especially when the communities focused on are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic.

YOUTH LED ECONOMIC ACTION FOR PROSPERITY PROGRAM

The Youth Led Economic Action for Prosperity (YouLEAP) program was implemented from 2024 – 2025 with the goal of establishing youth-led cooperatives. The program was designed in response to the widespread unemployment and decline in economic participation of youth in Sri Lanka. The economic crisis of 2022, the *Aragalaya* (people's uprising), and the subsequent political changes have seen a great number of youth leave the shores of Sri Lanka for greener pastures overseas²⁶ as well as for higher education. The country's education and higher education system, which was once the pride of the land, has stagnated with successive governments investing minimal percentages in annual budgets; increasing investments year on year in national defence instead. Hence, both education and higher education have not kept abreast of international standards, churning out high school and university graduates who need to be re-skilled to be employable.²⁷

The primary goal was to enhance economic access and opportunities for diverse youth and their families by encouraging active participation in local economic development, fostering social cohesion, and creating a sustainable and inclusive economic environment in Sri Lanka. The YouLEAP program focused on key areas such as prioritizing higher education, skill development, and vocational training. The organisation also focused on participatory economic decision-making processes and encouraging youth to pursue desired career paths. The participation of women in the economy is low compared to men, which reflects social norms and barriers. As youth are particularly vulnerable to rhetoric and increasingly

²⁶ This includes semi-skilled and skilled youth.

²⁷ Youtube.com Unplugged - When classrooms Can't Keep Up - On the latest episode of Unplugged, UN Resident Coordinator Marc-André Franche and **UNICEF Sri Lanka Representative** Emma Brigham reflect the status of education in the country. 4 weeks ago.

influenced by social media, the program aimed to address conflict triggers based on ethno-religious and class divisions as well.

Helvetas initially identified cooperatives as an effective means of providing leadership within the program, and designed to foster a sense of ownership, essential for the sustainability of program outcomes. The governance structure of the cooperatives and the varying interests and commitments of youth did not synchronise. This led to a decrease in the participation of youth. Hence, the program was redesigned to link Business Incubator Centres (BICs) and social enterprises established by youth in Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Matara, and Trincomalee.

IMPACT

Helvetas supported five social enterprises in the four selected districts, mushroom cultivation and production of bee's honey in Anuradhapura, tourism in Trincomalee, coconut oil production in Batticaloa and cinnamon in Matara. Four fully equipped business incubation centres have also been established where around 40 business coaches have been trained to support and mentor youth who have continued with the YouLEAP program.

SUCCESS STORY

From an entrepreneur to mentoring others

Sivasegaram Dekshith is an entrepreneur engaged in tourism-related activities from Alas Garden in the Trincomalee district. He rents out three rooms and provides tourists transport services using his brother's vehicle. His business is registered at the district level, and he remains focused on developing tourism-based employment opportunities.

He was selected by Trincomalee District Youth Development staff to participate in training for business entrepreneurs and attended a three-day Business Counselling Workshop in July 2025 and a two-day Community-Based Tourism training designed for entrepreneurial mentors. Through these trainings, he gained knowledge on entrepreneurial mindset, business planning, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) registration processes, taxation, basic accounting, time management, mentoring, and online marketing.

As a result of the training, Dekshith supports his father - a driver serving local and foreign tourists. With the knowledge he gained from the trainings, he now keeps in touch with his guests through WhatsApp, facilitates referrals, and organises trips more efficiently. He plans to further develop his tourism business through the SLTB registration, creating a website and developing tourism packages. He looks forward to mentoring newcomers to business after obtaining a license to function as a business counsellor, as agreed by Helvetas during the training.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

The engagement and participation of youth was high during the early stages of implementation. Helvetas identified cooperatives as an effective vehicle to provide leadership and foster

ownership to facilitate the sustainability of the program outcomes. Despite some early successes, currently the program is facing a high turnover rate among youth with inconsistent participation in cooperatives and program activities. The mismatch between the governance structures of the cooperatives and the needs of the youth, and varying interests and commitments of the youth such as seeking jobs and marriage have been identified. In addition, there is no guarantee of a steady income during the start-up stage of new enterprises; thus, discouraging youth who look for a stable income.

The challenges were handled by shifting from a “cooperative-focused youth empowerment model to a regional ecosystem-focused governance approach”.²⁸ This approach redefines the model initially envisaged to support the issues affecting youth in tertiary and vocational education, entrepreneurship development, and the intersectionality of women's economic empowerment and social equity. Helvetas strives to link and promote Business Incubation Centres (BICs) as the regional resource hubs that address these issues of the economic empowerment of youth and women.

In addition, it is envisioned that the capacity of existing regional partners will be enhanced through this regional ecosystem-focused governance approach, enabling them to foster linkages and activities that support youth and women’s economic empowerment. Activities at the local level include focusing on youth equity in BICs and skills development of young business development coaches to support local social enterprises and entrepreneurs.

The districts chosen brings together a microcosm of ethno-religious representation of Sri Lankans. However, the focus on conflict triggers such as the influence of media is more subtly handled rather than overtly. As a result, valuable opportunities to engage more constructively on peacebuilding have slipped by.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPACT

Future YouLEAP programming could include a more decisive peacebuilding focus integrated. Helvetas has acquired rich experience of peacebuilding in Sri Lanka over the years. The socio-cultural representation of the selected districts reflects the diversity within the island. Hence, YouLEAP program would be greatly enhanced through the twinning of peacebuilding with the economic empowerment focus integrated within.

²⁸ **Terms of Reference (TOR)** of the Final Evaluation and End Line Survey of the Youth-led Economic Access for Prosperity (YouLEAP) Project (2024-2025)

CONCLUSION

Over the last 47 years, Helvetas' work in Sri Lanka has evolved alongside Sri Lanka's changing socio-political and economic landscape, adapting global development trends while remaining rooted in local realities.

In its early decades, Helvetas' focus was on rural development, providing technical expertise on water, sanitation, organic sustainable agriculture, and housing in multi-stakeholder partnerships with state and non-state actors. But as the organisation grew gradually its engagement became more multifaceted, extending to more diverse areas such as infrastructure, livelihoods, governance, migration, and peacebuilding.

From 2010 Helvetas played a key role in the Safe Labour Migration Programme grounded in Sri Lanka's 2008 National Policy on Migration. What began as a structured program, progressed into a national discourse on safe migration and the prevention of trafficking in persons, both internally and across borders. Through capacity building, policy engagement, and collaboration with government and civil society actors, Helvetas contributed to strengthening protection mechanisms for migrant workers and their families.

In the early 2000s, as Sri Lanka grappled with the weight of conflict and division, Helvetas began charting a quiet but determined path toward peace. Its peacebuilding and reconciliation work mirrored the shifting socio-political landscape of the time and responded to both urgent humanitarian needs and the deeper fractures between communities. The efforts began with a simple but powerful belief that peace could take root through shared development using a diverse set of interventions. The organisation partnered with community groups, local government authorities, and academic institutions, investing in institutional building and economic empowerment with peacebuilding, conflict resolution and transformation as the focus.

Helvetas commenced operations in Sri Lanka in 1978 in response to a devastating cyclone, driven by a commitment to support vulnerable communities in rebuilding their lives, dignity, and livelihoods. Nearly five decades later, in December 2025, the organisation concludes its presence in the country in the aftermath of yet another severe natural disaster, cyclone Ditwah.

From emergency response to long-term development, from rural infrastructure to national policy reform, and from community rebuilding to peacebuilding, Helvetas' journey in Sri Lanka has been defined by resilience, partnership, and adaptability.

This report honours that enduring legacy, a legacy not only of projects completed, but of institutions strengthened, communities empowered, and pathways created for a more inclusive and resilient Sri Lanka.