

## Enhancing the incomes of fisher families through handicraft production



Women beneficiaries of handicraft production © R. Mahindapala

whose inhabitants harvest the mangrove trees and other plants for firewood and timber poles. As a result, the populations of *Rhizophora mucronata* and *Bruguiera gymnorhiza* trees in these forests are declining. This project sought to reverse this trend by educating villagers about the importance of the mangroves, and by empowering women economically through income-generating alternatives to fishing. To test one alternative, Wanasarana Thurulatha Volunteer Society, a CBO from Matara, began a training programme in handicraft production using locally abundant *Pandanus kaida* leaves.

### Target beneficiaries

Fifty women from five villages.

### Outputs

- ▶ Delivery by a qualified instructor of five training programmes on processing *Pandanus* leaves, dyeing techniques, bag design, bag making, and marketing techniques.
- ▶ Provision for each trainee of a monthly supply of *Pandanus* leaves, dye, cloth, thread, cardboard and gum for the first nine months of their venture.
- ▶ Planting of 6,000 *P. kaida* plants in selected areas of Medilla beach in Netolpitiya village.



#### LOCATION

Rekawa, Ussangoda and Kalametiya (RUK) area, Sri Lanka

#### PRIORITY POWS

- Sustainable Livelihoods
- Sustainable Business Practices

#### DURATION

One year

#### MFF GRANT AMOUNT

US\$4,342

### Objectives

This project had three main objectives:

- 1 to enhance the knowledge of the community about mangrove protection and management;
- 2 to bring timber cutting in Medilla lagoon under control; and
- 3 to improve the livelihoods of 50 women living close to the lagoon.

### Background

Danketiya, Palathuduwa and Netolpitiya are three coastal villages in south-east Sri Lanka that were hit by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Thanks to the mangroves and other coastal vegetation that protect the area, the tsunami did not cause severe damage, though it did affect the local fishing industry and fishing incomes. The continued protection and management of these forests are vital, but local authorities apparently have done little to ensure this happens.

The threat to the mangroves stems from the villages situated close to Medilla lagoon,

### Accomplishments and challenges

As a result of the project, 50 women were gainfully self-employed on a part-time basis in producing handicrafts. The women produced a range of items, including mats, satchels, vegetable and fruit bags, ladies' handbags, clutch bags and coin purses. The project also introduced weaving of reed bags. Production time varied for each item, ranging from three to seven days.

Each women earned between US\$25

and US\$45 from selling bags, increasing the average income of their households by around 60%. The women were able to earn this income while still carrying out their household responsibilities, as they could operate from home and choose their hours of work themselves.

The *Pandanus* planted on Medilla beach as a source of leaves for producing handicrafts grew well and will contribute to coastal protection.

### Challenges

One challenge was that the models and designs of bags change rapidly along with fashion trends, and it was sometimes difficult for the women to keep pace with these changes. Dry weather and browsing by stray cattle also affected the growth of the *Pandanus* plants.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Wanasarana Thurulatha Volunteer Society

Weeraketiya Road, Danketiya,  
Tangalle, Sri Lanka

Tel: +94 47 2242628

## Contributions to cross-cutting themes

### Gender equality

Fifty women from five villages were empowered economically by the extra income they earned under this project.

### Lessons learned

Community awareness is the key to success for projects of this nature. Also essential is to develop market linkages before implementing such projects, and to adopt a clear, realistic implementation schedule and stick to it.

Women in the community now have part-time jobs which do not depend on anyone else. They have organised small savings societies in which each member deposits 5% of her monthly earnings into a common bank account. This money is used to buy raw materials.



Handicrafts, Danketiya, Sri Lanka © K. Ekaratne

*“Thanks to handicraft production, the income of the women in 50 beneficiary families living in the coastal areas of Rekawa and Medilla increased by about 60%. They are aware of the importance of coastal ecosystems in the area and no longer cut mangroves for fuelwood.”*

— MR H. P. PIYATISSA  
PROJECT MANAGER