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SRI LANKA

FIRST PERSON Plastics Bring Plentiful Payoff

Women cash in on unique waste management and recycling effort



Photo: Arthacharya Foundation

Sikkuwa Wasam Kusumawathie with discarded items which she collects and sells to a recycling organization in Galle, Sri Lanka.

“Before this project we could not even dream of saving 5 rupees but now we have already saved more than 10 thousand rupees,” said Sikkuwa Wasam Kusumawathie.

Telling Our Story
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Sikkuwa Wasam Kusumawathie is a 65-year-old mother of three living in a small village near Galle, a port city in southwestern Sri Lanka. Her husband sells lottery tickets, but his income often cannot meet the family’s needs. Like many Sri Lankan women, Kusumawathie had limited opportunities to earn income or participate in community activities. Her family would sometimes take out short-term loans from local shopkeepers when an urgent need for money rose, at annual interest rates of up to 60 percent.

Fortunately for Kusumawathie, she found a chance to change her situation for good. A local foundation was bringing women into small collective groups and showing them how to collect, clean, sort, and sell plastic and paper to recyclers. In addition, each participant saves 5 rupees per week (about 5 cents), which is then pooled with everyone’s savings to create a small credit system. Under this system, low-interest loans are provided to members. USAID strengthened the project by helping finance a recycling unit that turns the plastic waste into pellets, increasing the plastic’s value from 3.5 cents per kilo to between two and 15 times that, depending on quality.

Kusumawathie initially worried about the stigma associated with collecting garbage, but she saw its benefits and joined. She began collecting plastics daily from a stretch of beach near her home. After the recycling unit was installed, her earnings increased significantly. She now earns more than \$25 a month—a real accomplishment for a woman who never before had personal savings. The income has allowed her to take care of her family’s needs, including buying her grandchildren clothes and books for the new school year. The project also provided her with a loan of \$450 to help her son restart his business after the 2004 tsunami.

Of 100 families in Kusumawathie’s village, 86 have joined the project. Her village has built up a well established credit fund, with a repayment rate close to 100 percent. The project has encouraged social harmony by reducing competition for resources, and women have gained important personal finance and leadership skills. Kusumawathie is more independent and confident, willing to express her views at public meetings. She now works hand in hand with her husband in providing for the family to improve their well being and standard of living.