

The ornamental fish breeders of Polonnaruwa District in Sri Lanka had a problem. Not enough water. There was a good market for their fish, both in Sri Lanka and overseas. However, the water in the district was reserved for paddy farmers and the farmers associations had blocked water to the fish-breeding ponds. As a result, development of the ornamental fish sector came to a standstill and its potential to generate new jobs and better incomes in this poor district went unfulfilled.

But two years ago the District Enterprise Forum of Polonnaruwa, with the help of the ILO, found a solution. The problem came to light after an analysis of the value chain of ornamental fish production, carried out by local organizations with support from the ILO's Sida-funded Enterprise for Pro-poor Growth project, or Enter-Growth for short.

A value chain is the system of enterprises that brings specific products or services to the market. Solving constraints in a value chain can increase the competitiveness of the entire chain and so enable the enterprises that are part of it to grow.

To carry out the analysis Enter-Growth developed its own methodology, which required the participation of the local private sector and development partners. Facilitators were trained in the methodology and worked with Enter-Growth to collect and analyse the data.

The analysis revealed that some of the problems restricting the ornamental fish industry could be solved relatively easily. These included improving the skills of the breeders, helping them get finance, and providing better information on market requirements. However, improving access to water was beyond the power of the local organizations, so they took the issue to the District Enterprise Forum. This Forum is an informal body that aims to encourage dialogue about enterprise development between the public and the private sector. Its members include district authorities, public sector business development organizations and private sector organizations such as Chambers of Commerce and NGOs.

The Forum was set up in 2004 with the help of Enter-Growth. Since then it has become a well recognized player in the economic development of the District. The Chambers of Commerce serve as the body's Secretariat and the ILO project now only provides technical advice.

"Our strategy is clear," says Enter-Growth project manager Gemunu Wijesena. We want to give local people the tools and the skills to take ownership and direct their own development. We don't tell them where they have to go but assist them to get where they want to be. We also don't take them there, which means we do not fund direct assistance to enterprises. There is too much dependency on that sort of help".

The Forum is one of the main tools that Enter-Growth uses to make this strategy work and the approach has shown that local conditions for business can be improved by local people taking the initiative. There are now four Forums, one in each of the four districts covered by Enter-Growth. When the Mahaweli Forum learned about the ornamental fish breeders' need to access irrigation water, its then chairman, District Secretary Mr Ranith Wijetilake arranged a meeting between the Forum, top level officials of the Mahaweli Authority and the Ministry of Agriculture. Ornamental fish breeders were invited as well. After several discussions it was eventually agreed to grant the breeders access to water. The Farmers' Associations were informed and the reasons for the decision explained.

Since then, the ornamental fish breeding sector has grown rapidly and it now has some 600 fish ponds. Many young people in particular have taken up fish breeding and are generating work and income. The Chambers of Commerce have played a role by holding information meetings and providing support such as training. The District Enterprise Forum has facilitated support from national organizations, such as the Export Development Board and the National Aquaculture Development Authority. With the help of Enter-Growth, the breeders set up an Association to promote their interests and provide the number of fish the market needs. In less than two years its membership has grown from 80 to 500.

In largely rural Polonnaruwa attitudes towards private enterprise used to be negative. Business was seen as a last employment option, after public service and agriculture. Business people were seen as greedy and dishonest people who did not contribute to the community. This is slowly changing, partly because of Enter-Growth's "Palama" campaign.

Palama means bridge in Sinhala (the Tamil equivalent is similar). The campaign promotes enterprise as a bridge to prosperity, not just for the individual but for the family and community. Its approach focuses on forum theatre, a type of interactive drama. Enter-Growth set up and trained four theatre groups, one in each district, with Polonnaruwa as the first. The theatre scripts were developed by the drama groups themselves, using their own experiences. This ensured that the stories spoke to local audiences.

The plays present a tragic story, usually one of poverty and conflicting interests, in which starting an enterprise or supporting someone who wants to do so, could make a difference. In one play a young man studies to become an auto mechanic and wants to start a business. His family ridicules him and gives all its

support to a son who studies to enter public service. Eventually the young man becomes desperate and attempts suicide. The story is then presented a second time, but members of the audience are encouraged to come on stage to act and change the roles of some of the protagonists and so bring the story to a better end.

The Palama campaign has been a great success, reaching an audience of more than 190,000 people so far. Studies commissioned by Enter-Growth found that nearly all appreciated the performances and thought the stories and messages were relevant to their lives. One spectator commented: "Villagers have skills that need to be exposed, hidden talents that should be revealed. Poverty is not the heritage of people – the plays show that one can overcome it". Another said: "The whole drama was good. It is a meaningful, exemplary drama for both parents and children to make their lives. And it tells you how to start a business with the money available in your hand".

Attitudes to enterprise also improved significantly. After one show two audience members commented: "We discussed the possibility of doing our own business. I encouraged my family members to start our own business. I have considered doing business to make a living. After my A levels I plan to start a shop that sells phone cards. I am planning to borrow some money from my elder brother".

Micro-credit providers in the villages reported that more people took loans after the shows. New people entering business and those who were in business also reported finding the courage to continue and expand. One business woman said: "I found more strength to continue my current business. I thought that whatever problems I face I must run the business. My dedication and courage is the main reason why I could improve the business so far. Palama gave me some kind of support to reinforce this idea".

Enter-Growth has also introduced annual Business Service Fairs in the districts. These four-day events have information stalls run by local entrepreneurs and business service providers, such as banks, micro-credit providers, government and NGO business development organizations. To attract large crowds the fairs also offer entertainment, such as popular bands, theatre (including Palama shows) and fairground entertainments for children. The fairs have become the biggest such events in the four districts, attracting crowds of up to 40,000. They now generate a lot of business for stallholders, both during and after the event.

The three fairs held in Polonnaruwa have attracted the largest crowds, and the Enterprise Development Forum, under whose auspices the fairs were organized, believes they have contributed to its high standing in the District. The District Secretary Mr Wijetilake said: "At first I was not sure the Forum would last very long, since it depended on voluntary work and involves a change from old working habits. The first fair was such a great success that it established us in the District. People knew about us and listened to us. We, the members, also had some accomplishment to be proud of, and this and later successes kept us together".

Recently Mr Wijetilake was promoted to Secretary of Agriculture. Mr Ari Subasinghe, Enter-Growth's Polonnaruwa manager said that he was missed by Forum members. "Enter-Growth provided the idea of the Forum but it was his active and inspiring leadership that made it work". However, the new District Secretary, Mr Nimal Abesiri has enthusiastically taken up the chairmanship of the Forum, showing it will survive changes in leadership and continue beyond the project.

Enter-Growth is about improving conditions for local business and encouraging local ownership of development. This is being achieved through the Forums it set up. An independent assessment found that people in the district "emphasized the significance of the Forum in addressing the concerns of entrepreneurs, offering direct access to powerful state officers and changing the attitudes of government officers and institutions towards business and entrepreneurs. Many problems that the private sector had for years have been sorted out within the last years".