



# SEDR

Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution  
உலகளாவிய ஈடுபாட்டு கிரகணாசை சகாசலீம  
பயனுறுதிமிக்க வகையில் பிணக்கை  
தீர்ப்பதற்கு ஆதரவளித்தல்

# Stories of Impact

Part of the programme



Implemented by





# Stories of Impact

SEDR stories of impact showcase how European Union (EU) - funded alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mediation transforms Sri Lankan communities by resolving longstanding conflicts, rebuilding trust, and creating people-centred justice pathways for marginalised groups while strengthening citizen-state relationships.

# Foreword

The Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) project is a European Union funded initiative implemented in Sri Lanka by the British Council in partnership with The Asia Foundation (TAF), through the Ministry of Justice and National Integration from 2020 to 2025. The project forms part of the EU's broader Strengthening Transformation, Reconciliation, and Inclusive Democratic Engagement (STRIDE) programme. Operating mainly in Sri Lanka's Uva, Northern, and Eastern Provinces, SEDR aims to enhance access to justice by improving alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. The project improves dispute resolution services for individual grievances by strengthening the effectiveness of Community Mediation Boards (CMBs), as well as Financial and Land Special Mediation Boards (SMBs) under the auspices of the Mediation boards Commission (MBC). Through partnerships with civil society organisations SEDR also builds ADR capacity of local forums to address broader community level grievances. By addressing both individual and community-level grievances, SEDR promotes social cohesion, equitable community-state engagement, and inclusivity in dispute resolution.

While a countless number of people joined us on our journey, this publication profiles twelve extraordinary citizens of Sri Lanka, who strive to make a difference within their communities. It has been our privilege to play a small role in motivating and supporting them in their tireless missions to ensure peace, justice and wellbeing within their communities.

Post-war Sri Lanka continues to face a number of challenges, not only in relation to dealing with the legacy of the past, but also the fallouts of more recent governance and economic crises. However, the people of Sri Lanka have proved time and again the power of their resilience. This resilience is built and strengthened by the likes of our protagonists, who work across the country with a strong conviction and commitment to uplift their communities. SEDR salutes these individuals and their communities and thanks them for helping to make SEDR a success.

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# Water Woes

## Jayasekera's Story



Sixty-year-old Jayasekera is a well-known and well-respected individual in his village of Karagahaulpatha, Uva Paranagama, situated in the district of Badulla, in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka. Jayasekera started out as a Police Officer, then joined the banking sector, but found his true calling years later as a community leader. In this role as community leader, he had been involved in a number of village welfare committees and societies, as well as charity and religious endeavours, over many years. But while he would often get involved in matters that he saw as important for his community, he had no prior experience or inclination toward dispute resolution. This changed after he was identified by Search for Common Ground (Search) and its partner Uva Shakthi Foundation, to be a part of the local Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Forum. This initiative supported by Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project,

aimed to strengthen existing village forums to be able to better address disputes within and between communities before they escalate into violence.

“All my choices in career were driven by the desire to help those around me, whether it be their safety and security as a Police Officer or economic wellbeing as a banker. Getting this opportunity, post-retirement, therefore, allowed me to continue my mission.”

Despite his experience and desire to work for the betterment of his community, Jayasekera and his forum members were initially apprehensive of taking on issues that had an ethnic dimension. But there was

a growing water problem in the area that they could no longer afford to ignore: Muslim farmers living downstream believed their water shortage was being created by Sinhala farmers living upstream.

“Water is precious, and in these parts, water can also be a great source of conflict. I know, because I am also a farmer. In this instance, I realised that if steps were not taken to address the issue soon, it could result in bigger problems for the entire locality,” Jayasekera said. However, even government officials and local NGOs had tried to intervene before, with little success. This, Jayasekera added, was because they were only looking at the issue from one side. So, Jayasekera and his team set out to try and understand the problem from all angles. They had learned these techniques of problem analysis and mediation through the ADR trainings held by Search.

Jayasekera soon discovered that the true cause of the problem was a nearby pine forest that was absorbing much of the water and preventing it from flowing in adequate amounts downstream. While this had not been a problem in previous years, rapidly changing weather and rainfall patterns had resulted in the current situation. Apart from discussing this with both communities and helping the Muslim community understand that it was not a deliberate attempt to deprive them of water, the ADR Forum also decided to work with the local farming community to take steps to mitigate the water shortage issue from an environmental standpoint. As a first step to this, they began planting *Kumbuk* and *Mee* trees — that are known to improve the water table over time— in the catchment areas. The project received enthusiastic support from the local authorities as well as members from all ethnic communities alike.

“This project took a long time, almost one-and-a-half-years, but we did not want to rush it.” While Jayasekera and the other members discussed the larger matter with the community and tried to design longer term solutions, they also took steps to implement smaller more immediate solutions. For instance, the ADR Forum facilitated the process of getting water to a school located in an area where water supply is low. “As a result of the ethnic divisions caused by the broader water issue, the school didn’t have pipe-borne water. The pipes had to be placed under a neighbouring property, but the owner didn’t allow it.” After engaging in discussions with the land owner over the span of a few months, we got his approval to start placing the pipe lines.” This slow and multifaceted approach helped to build both awareness and trust.

Jayasekera says he truly values and enjoys this work and wants to find ways to sustain in. “One of the challenges of doing projects is that once the supporting organisation leaves, it is difficult to sustain efforts thereafter. “In this case also it is a challenge; I have to admit that not all members in the forum continue to be active, but I have tried to motivate the group to stay together so that we can sustain efforts to encourage peaceful resolution of community disputes. The training we received and the work we carried out have also helped me gain a lot personally.

I have changed the way I act and react to many things and I feel this has strengthened my commitment and widened my perspective on things. I believe that some of these skills should be learned by everyone and even taught in schools. If people can learn healthy ways of managing disputes, our society can develop very fast.”



“Water is precious, and in these parts, water can also be a great source of conflict. I know, because I am also a farmer. In this instance, I realised that if steps were not taken to address the issue soon, it could result in bigger problems for the entire locality.”

- B M Jayasekara

# An Activist Never Sleeps

## Amirunnisha's Story



It is not every day that one meets a woman as resolute as Amirunnisha. She doesn't hesitate a moment in introducing herself confidently as a social activist. Perhaps this comes from years of struggle and Amirunnisha has certainly seen more than her fair share of it. Now 38, Mohamed Amir Amirunnisha and her family, together with the entire Muslim community in the area, were forcibly displaced from their homes in Silavathurai, in the Mannar district of the Northern Province, in 1990<sup>1</sup>. Amirunnisha was only four at the time, but remembers the day they were forced to leave their home clearly. "The war tore our lives apart. We lived in a state of limbo in our place of displacement in Puttalam [a district in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka] for 20 years. We only returned after the war ended in 2009, but to date, our original lands have not been released and so we have been forced to make our homes in the bordering areas."

Amirunnisha is a single mother of three teenaged children. In an act not common in conservative societies, such as the one she lives in, Amirunnisha decided to leave her husband after many years of abuse and betrayal. She now works as a coordinator for preschools and is also a seamstress, but because of her active involvement in community rights issues, she prefers to identify herself firstly as a social activist. Amirunnisha and her children live with her parents and siblings. She is grateful that they took her back with open arms, following her decision to leave her husband and emphasises how lucky she is to have a supportive family.

As an activist, Amirunnisha was no doubt a top candidate for the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project's Active Citizens Programme, as she is often chosen to be part of local development projects and also had experience working in local NGOs. At first, Amirunnisha expected it to be similar to the many projects she had been involved in the past, but said she was pleasantly surprised by the training she received as it offered her new and practical skills along with a fresh perspective. She seized the opportunity knowing that these skills would serve her and the community far beyond the immediate project itself. "The training really helped me to learn problem solving and mediation. I was chosen with six others from the Musali area [the division within which the village of Silavathurai is situated] and most of us had some experience working in our community and sometimes even mediating community issues, but this training really provided us with the technical skills and know-how to engage in such processes in a more informed manner. It also allowed the team to decide on, design and lead a community mediation project, entirely on our own. I must note that the course really helped to build my character and communication skills," Amirunnisha emphasised.

The project that Amirunnisha and her team chose to pursue was to mediate between the villages of Silavathurai and Koolankulam. Animosity had begun to brew, particularly between the youth and there was a clear threat of potential violence. The cause of these tensions was a piece of land that belonged to the Irrigation Department, which one group was using as a makeshift playground, but the other village did not have access to. Amirunnisha and the team, through their Social Action Project, managed to

mobilise the support of all the relevant authorities, including the Divisional Secretariat<sup>2</sup> and the Irrigation Department, as well as the Farmers' Society and the local communities and secure a common playground, which could be officially used as such and would benefit both villages.

"It was a big victory for our team. We received a lot of appreciation from all quarters as land issues are a very sensitive topic in these parts. It was also a personal victory for me. It elevated me in the eyes of my community and brought me respect. Previously I passed the selection process to be an official community mediator in the local mediation board, but had to drop out due to the fact that I was divorced. But now people's perceptions towards me are changing. I continue to fight for the land rights of my community. In fact, I have also been in talks with the military over the release of our original lands [...]"

Amirunnisha notes that all this focus on the community sometimes annoys her family who constantly worry about her wellbeing. The Rs. 6000 salary she earns as a preschool coordinator serves only as an allowance for her to attend the necessary meetings to fulfil her responsibilities. "It is my seamstress work that brings me an income, but because of my other responsibilities I have to do this at night, so I don't have much time to rest," Occasionally Amirunnisha also gets a client for makeup. It is difficult to make ends meet and she often has to ask her family, especially her brother for help, but when expressing this, Amirunnisha is careful not to allow even the slightest hint of self-pity to escape her.

Amirunnisha is a slightly built woman, but her personality and strength fill the room. “I have worked with the Elections Commission as an Elections Monitor and also tried to enter local politics. I had some challenges last time around, but this time I plan to contest in the Provincial Council Elections. I believe I have built up my contacts and also the respect of my community, and so I might have a good chance.” Amirunnisha is a strong advocate for women carving their own paths to success. “It might be much harder for us, but we need to persist.”



<sup>1</sup> In October 1990, an estimated 72,000 Sri Lankan Muslims from the Northern Province were evicted from their homes and forced into displacement by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), during the Sri Lankan Civil War.

<sup>2</sup> The Divisional Secretariats (DS) are the grass root level administrative units which delivers most government services in Sri Lanka. Apart from extending services to public, the DSs are responsible in directing and coordinating all the development activities taking place in a specific division as well as management of government land usage.

“It might be much harder for us,” she says, “but we need to persist.”

- Ameerunnisha

# What's in a Name?

## Nancy's Story



The people of the village of Thengamalai had felt excluded and discriminated against for so long, that they had resigned themselves to it. Little did they know that a 21-year-old young woman from their village, would finally be able to bring about a change in their situation.

Rukshan Nancy is now 26 years old. She was part of the first batch of Active Citizens Programme of the Supporting the Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project, in 2020. Nancy is a resident of Thengamalai, a small remote village in the Monaragala District of the Uva Province of Sri Lanka. She moved there from Badulla with her family when she was 10 years old. Nancy grew up a quiet and shy girl, with no real intentions to seek out the world beyond her community. “After I completed my Advanced Level examination, I had no idea what I wanted to do,” she recalls, “but I was a good

student, so my school Principal recommended me for the project. At the time I did not know what to expect, but decided to go for the interview as I thought I could learn something.” The training that she underwent and the community work she undertook thereafter, proved to be “the biggest turning point” in her life.

After intense training on what it meant to be an Active Citizen and the key tenets of Alternative Dispute Resolution – which included mediation skills and non-violent communication – Nancy and her team of five other young people, belonging to mixed ethnicities, were asked to identify potential issues and disputes within their communities that they could endeavour to

address. The issue they decided to take on, primarily as a result of Nancy's relentless persuasion, proved to be no easy task. "Everyone was sceptical in the beginning, but I wanted to do something about it and I was able to convince my team mates as well," Nancy said.

Thengamalai has both Sinhala as well as Tamil residents. The Sinhala community lives closer to the main roads, while the Tamil community lives further inland. The two communities did not see eye-to-eye due to decades of communal disharmony. The Sinhala community did not use the name Thengamalai (a Tamil name) to identify where they lived, preferring to align themselves with a neighbouring Sinhala village. This meant that the Tamils who lived further inside and used the name Thengamalai faced a number of difficulties: government services, including health and ambulance services could not locate them and letters never reached them. *The Grama Sevaka* <sup>1</sup> was aware of the issue, but did not do anything to address it, due to the potential communal tensions it could set off. This did not stop Nancy and the team of Active Citizens from taking on the challenge.

"People scoffed at us, but didn't really try to sabotage our work because they saw us as children. But we worked hard. We spoke a lot with the people, and tried to understand all sides of the issue. Then we tried to create empathy and mutual trust between the two communities." Nancy herself had had very little exposure to Sinhala people before she began working closely with her team mates, two of whom were Sinhala. "In the beginning we would even struggle to understand each other, but the training had motivated us to look beyond all this."

The team met with the *Grama Sevaka*, and then held discussions with religious leaders, government

officials, and community representatives of the village. They first spoke separately to the Sinhala and Tamil villagers, attempting to understand each side better. Then, they brought together the two communities for joint discussions. After many discussions, that were also supported by the religious leaders, and lengthy, often individualised, conversations with the people, the team decided to undertake a *Shramadana* <sup>2</sup> within the village and successfully manage to get both communities to participate.

Their persistent actions began to breakdown certain preconceived notions on the part of both communities. Finally, the team managed to convince the communities to use the name Thengamalai for their village. To showcase this success, and the coming together of the two communities, the team secured a spot to air their story on the Uva Community Radio programme called People's Voice. They were joined by representatives from both communities. During this programme the team presented the villagers with a name board bearing the name Thengamalai, which was finally accepted by both communities. "This was a historic moment for all of us and for me personally. I was happy we were able to achieve what we set out to do, despite the big challenges at the time, including the impacts of COVID and the economic crisis in the country."

Nancy's work did not stop there. She went on to work with NGOs on a number of community relief, welfare and reconciliation efforts. She also continued to fight for the rights of her community by organising a legal documentation clinic for her village. "The Tamil community in these areas <sup>3</sup> still don't have proper legal

documents, including birth certificates and national identity cards. In fact, even my father had lost his identity card and had been unable to get a replacement. It was through the clinic that I helped organise, that he was also able to get his card.”

Despite her young age, Nancy has secured the trust and respect of her community and even community representatives sometimes ask her for advice. Currently Nancy is part of a youth missionary organisation. Her studies and work as part of this organisation, have taken her far away from home to the district of Trincomalee in the Eastern part of Sri Lanka. “In my current work I even have to interact with internationals, it is the training and exposure that I first received as a participant of the SEDR Active Citizen Programme, that has enabled me to confidently interact with people in multi-cultural environments today. Even my English has improved now and I can communicate well. I attribute the choice of my life path entirely to my participation in the Active Citizen’s programme. Perhaps it was destiny.”



“In the beginning we would even struggle to understand each other, but the training had motivated us to look beyond all this.”

- Rukshan Nancy

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<sup>1</sup> A ‘Grama Sevaka’ is the grassroots level administrator in the Sri Lankan state, responsible for a demarcated area.

<sup>2</sup> Shramadana directly translated means “gift of labour” and in the Sri Lankan context refers to an event or project where volunteers provide support or services to a local community

<sup>3</sup> The Tamils in these parts belong to the Malaiyaha community; a historically marginalised community brought from India by the British to work on plantations.

# Youth Voice for Reconciliation

## Shahath's Story



Twenty-three-year-old Mohamed Fouwmy Shahath always wanted to be teacher. “Teachers play a crucial role in building children’s personalities and futures”. Unfortunately, he feels that not all teachers from where he comes from understand the full impact of their role and so Shahath wants to fix this by becoming a “model teacher” and role model for young people in his community.

Shahath is from the village of Neithal Nagar in Muthur, Trincomalee, in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, where he has lived all his life. He is currently in his final year of undergraduate studies in Physical Sciences, at the Eastern University. He also conducts free classes for children as part of the Undergraduate Social and Education Aid programme.

“My father is a fisherman and my mother is a housewife, I have three elder sisters and one younger sister. From a very early age, both my mother and father showed us how to be charitable and help people. I remember my mother would never turn away anyone who came to our house seeking help; this is perhaps, why social service is so important to me.” This meant that Shahath didn’t hesitate to apply, when he heard of the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project’s Active Citizens Programme through an INGO called Muslim Aid. “I saw the call for applicants on a WhatsApp group message and decided to apply immediately.”

Shahath found the training both practical as well as inspiring. “The training motivated us to be able to

believe that we could bring about positive change within our communities and the skills we learned equipped us with the right ways to achieve this. The skills we received on how to engage with stakeholders, were most useful and enabled us to approach anyone, including government officials, with confidence.”

Equipped with these new skills and a fresh dose of motivation, Shahath and his team decided to take on an issue in a nearby village called Sandanavettai, that had long been festering. They termed their Social Action Project, ‘Youth Voice for Reconciliation’.

Santhanavettai is home to both Tamil and Muslim communities, who were forcefully displaced due to the war. When the war ended and families began to resettle, they found the land inadequate for the returning families. This resulted in tensions between the Tamils and the Muslims particularly over land disputes, but also in relation to leadership positions in village societies such as the Rural Development Society (RDS). These tensions worsened when the Muslim community distributed dry rations during the COVID19 pandemic through the mosque, stirring resentment amongst the Hindus and Christians who belonged to the Tamil community. Tensions also began to increase in relation to the use of a common cemetery.

The first challenge that Shahath faced was the fact that his team members were all Muslim; this would create an impression of bias the team felt. So, they recruited several young volunteers to be part of their team. The team also faced a number of logistical challenges, including transport to and from the village of Sandanavettai, particularly for the female members of his team. Shahath also struggled personally to

manage his studies, other personal responsibilities and the new responsibilities of leading his team and managing time and finances effectively. Despite this, the team and their extended team of volunteers began their door-to-door campaign. “I don’t think we missed a single house. We spoke to everyone,” Shahath recalls. The team also met with government officials, village leaders and religious leaders separately. “After these meetings, we would come back and analyse our findings. In this way our problem-analysis revealed that the RDS headed by men was more prone to disputes on leadership matters, often leading to aggressive confrontations. The Women’s RDS on the other, hand appeared to be more inclusive. This insight led us to design an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) strategy together with the women’s RDS, who were very receptive to our ideas.”

Shahath and his team then set about conducting a series of activities. “We invited all three communities to an awareness programme that emphasised the importance of working together for a harmonious post-war future; we hosted an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) session, based on what we learnt in our training, specifically for the women’s RDS; we also conducted awareness sessions on common issues affecting the entire community such as early marriage, school drop outs and drug abuse.” Stepping up the ante, Shahath and his team then decided to conduct cooking programmes where members of the different ethnicities could cook together and share their meals. For the young people of the village, the team organised a sports and cultural event and encouraged joint participation.

Slowly Shahath and his team began to see positive changes. “In the beginning when I would go to talk to the people, they would not even offer me a chair, but

later they recognised what we were trying to do for the village and even organised Ifthar<sup>1</sup> for us and other Muslims in the village. They also began to help each other out; there was an instance where an old man fell ill and everyone went to see him and bring him food and other essentials [...].”

Shahath does not believe his job is done, and says there is a long way to go to rebuild the communal harmony in Muthur that the war in Sri Lanka had destroyed. “I don’t take these small positive changes for granted and believe that young people in particular need to work hard to bring about lasting changes. This is the true meaning of being an Active Citizen.” Shahath’s keen desire to improve his community has not gone unnoticed. He was invited to take on the role of treasurer in both his village RDS as well as the Community Centre. He now holds these positions with pride, particularly because he feels that the elders, who usually hold such positions, have also recognised the importance of including youth such as him in these societies in order to work towards community development. “Youth cannot be disheartened by the challenges that we face, instead we need to take more ownership and leadership to bring about the changes we desire. You saw how the youth brought about change in the country’s politics, similarly, with the right skills and knowledge, youth involvement can bring about a lot of positive change to our society.”



“I don’t take these small positive changes for granted and believe that young people in particular need to work hard to bring about lasting changes. This is the true meaning of being an Active Citizen.”

- Shahath

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<sup>1</sup> The evening meal eaten by Muslims after the sun has gone down during the holy month of Ramadan

# Daring to Dream

## Anushan's Story



Arulnesan Anushan, 28, lives in the picturesque fishing village of Anthoniyapuram in the Mannar District of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, with his wife and baby. Anushan dreamed of pursuing higher studies, but could not complete his degree as his mother fell ill and he was forced to seek employment. But Anushan retained his ambitious streak and wanted to achieve something more for himself and yearned for an outlet for what he knew was his true potential.

“I wanted to do more for my community and for myself. A majority of the families in my village are very poor and even the youth have no motivation to do anything. Previously the families were entirely dependent on aid distributed by the church and other charity organisations. So many families got used to living for the day. They would fish or labour for their daily survival, but do nothing more to improve their lives

further. Many of them also drink excessively. As a result, my village saw very little development and I felt very stuck. At first, I thought the way out was to become a father, [Catholic Priest] but again, due to my family responsibilities I could not pursue this, so I was constantly searching for ways to improve my condition and become a more productive individual.”

When Anushan realised he could not really get ahead with the salary he was earning from his job, he decided to start a business. He used all his savings and also took out loans and bought a van. He is now the proud proprietor of a transport business. “I am my own boss and soon I will be able to save up and buy another vehicle and maybe even employ someone. I also have a

small chicken farm.” By starting his own business, Anushan has become a role model for other young people in his village.

While Anushan worked hard to develop his business, he still felt like he could do more, especially for his community; so, he became a member of the Parish Council of the local church and soon became its Secretary. He is also a member of the local Youth Club. “It was through the Club that I heard about the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project’s Active Citizen’s Programme. I was very curious, but also sceptical. Our village had received numerous projects in the past, but none of them had really been able to uplift the community.”

In the beginning Anushan was one of 16 or 17 youth who came forward, but when they heard that they had to attend an eight-day seminar, many dropped out. Finally, five, including Anushan were selected. “As with most such projects, I thought they would train us and give us something and that would be the end of it, but from the moment I went for the training in Vavuniya [a neighbouring district in the Northern Province] it was different, and I was thoroughly confused. At the end of the four days, they told us that we could carry out a project within our community and it was entirely up to us to design and implement it. They then gave us a week’s break to go and think about it and return for the remaining four days of training with a solid idea. We came back and discussed it with the Parish Council, village elders and religious leaders, but we were still unsure about what we were going to do. It was only in the second half of the training that it began to dawn on me what this project was all about, and that it had to be led by us and involved working with the community to bring about changes in behaviours and attitudes.”

The project that Anushan and his team finally decided on, involved temporarily enlarging a canal that led to the boat docking area in his village. Since the canal was narrow, it had resulted in disputes between those who owned motorised fibre glass boats (FGB) and those who owned canoes, (known locally as *vallam*). The *vallam* have to be pulled manually through the shallow waters of the canal if they are to be brought to shore, as such, their owners would often choose to park them at the entrance to the canal instead. The FGB owners however, could use their motors to force the boats to shore. When they did this, they often hit and damaged the *vallam* parked at the entrance to the canal. The *vallam* owners are much poorer fishermen and this damage was causing them considerable hardship, resulting in regular arguments and even fights between the two groups.

Anushan recalls that when they started talking to people about their plans, people ridiculed them. “This is because the people were more used to projects that provided them with some kind of handout. Further this was seen as a problem that could not be solved unless a proper harbour is built. But we wanted to do something that would at least temporarily alleviate the issue and get the community involved.” Consequently, Anushan and his team spoke to the members of the Fisheries Society, the Rural Development Society and the Women’s Rural Development Society and gradually began to secure their buy-in.

“We started out by organising a community *Shramadana*<sup>1</sup> to clean the area. The Fisheries Society decided to give us a chance. They sent notice to all the villagers to come for the *Shramadana* and even declared the day a holiday. A large number of people turned up, and everyone was shocked to see this. This made people see that it was possible to mobilise

people to do something together for the village. At the Shramadana we spoke to all the fishermen about our plans to widen the canal as a means of addressing their issues and also helped them see the impact of their current practices on the other party. We used all the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) skills we had learned at our training to do this and managed to get everyone to listen. Once we secured their approval, we had to face the next challenge of securing permission from the authorities to dig the canal. We spent months going to various offices including the Department of Wildlife Conservation, the Department of Coastal Conservation and Coastal Resource Management and the district authorities and finally we were able to secure the necessary permission. The entire village provided their labour and even additional financial resources for us to complete the project. It was a great victory for us.”



Anushan knows that the solution is only temporary, but hopes that the initiative taught the community a valuable lesson on what could be achieved if they pool their time and resources and worked towards a common goal. In the meanwhile, Anushan and his teammates have managed to grow their youth group within the village and impart some of their knowledge and skills to the new members. The group now plans to start a social enterprise within the village and as a first step, have decided to buy furniture and rent them out for village events and free of charge for charity events and funerals. “These might seem like very small things, but in our village, we are still taking baby steps towards development.”

“I wanted to do more for my community and for myself.”

- Arulnesan Anushan

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<sup>1</sup> Shramadana directly translated means “gift of labour” and in the Sri Lankan context refers to an event or project where volunteers provide support or services to a local community

# Not a 9-to-5 Kind of Person

## Champa's Story



Champa Priyadarshinie Kumarasinghe's first posting as Mediation Training Officer (MTO) was far away from her home; she was asked to cover the large district of Anuradhapura in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. "The Ministry said that the first posting would be necessarily hard, and that we needed to be prepared for it." When her family heard that she had to move, her husband was supportive but anxious, while her parents were against it, but Champa, now 54 had already made up her mind to go. She would take her two-year-old daughter and move from her home in the District of Kalutara in the Western Province all the way to Anuradhapura. "I was a little scared, but I wanted to work on the field and this was my opportunity. I didn't want to be stuck at a desk all my life," Champa who had previously held a clerical job in Colombo at the Land Commissioner General's Department, said.

Champa did not have much knowledge of mediation in the beginning. In 2003, she heard of a call for candidates for the post of Mediation Training Officer – known at that time as Mediation Trainer. "Anyone who held a government post and a degree could apply and sit for an exam for this post under the Ministry of Justice." Champa passed the exam and an interview and got her posting in 2004. The cadre thus selected, received intensive training including from international mediation experts, but Champa also had a lot to learn on-the-job. "The situation on the ground was very complex, and the war was raging at the time. Several parts of the Anuradhapura district bordered the Northern Province where active fighting was taking place, and often we could hear the sounds of guns and

bombs. The mediators who I had trained in the district were also diverse. In Anuradhapura town, individuals selected for the boards were highly educated, and somewhat well-off. But those selected for the community mediation boards in the more rural areas were themselves struggling with the conditions they lived in, the lack of facilities and proximity to the war.”

None of these challenges however, deterred Champa. Her husband visited over most weekends, but for the most part, she had to manage entirely on her own. She lived in boarding houses and managed with the help of fellow government officers. Subsequently, Champa received a supporting trainer and later programme officers were also recruited. “Some of these officers were from Anuradhapura, so they helped me a lot, particularly with childcare. It was like a family away from home. Sometimes the locations we had to travel to, had no proper accommodation and we had to stay in the Assistant Government Agents’ Offices. Transportation was also difficult. I don’t know how I managed, we didn’t even have phones, but 20 years later, I still look back fondly at those times. I felt like I was given an opportunity to truly help the people in those remote parts of the country, during very difficult times. Also, that experience really strengthened me and gave me the confidence that I can face any situation.” It is clear that Champa knows she was a bit of a trail blazer at the time, but she laughs it off saying that anyone in her place would have done the same.

Given her experience, Champa has also seen how the process of mediation has evolved. Various trainings programmes, exposure as well as individual and collective experiences have shaped this process. “In the last few years, the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project provided a number of

advance trainings [...] the idea of diversity, for example, was introduced through these trainings. These trainings have really helped to shape the perspectives of both the trainers and through us the mediators”.

In 2022, in recognition of Champa’s long term-commitment and wealth of experience, she was selected along with three others to attend the World Justice Forum in the Hague, Netherlands. “With support from SEDR, I was able to travel to this event and meet people from different parts of the world and belonging to diverse sectors, ranging from governments to NGOs” The Sri Lankan delegation conducted a session titled "Pathways to Justice: Effective tools for localised community solutions" and Champa’s presentation focused on the role of women in community mediation processes. “It was truly an incredibly experience for me, as I not only got a chance to share my own knowledge and experience with people from across the world, but I also learnt a lot from their experiences.” After returning to Sri Lanka, Champa was able to share her experience at the Forum and her learnings with other MTOs as well.

Champa is glad she was able to share her ideas and experiences on a topic that is very close to her: the importance of women mediators in mediation processes. “Mediation is an effective mechanism to solve disputes as it pushes people to communicate. A strong mediation process makes the parties feel like they have solved their own problems. This is very empowering and therefore, disputes resolved in this way are more sustainable. Women play a special role in this process, not just in relation to women’s problems, but also in creating a safe space. Women are able to do this more effectively.”

Champa believes that enhancing women's participation in mediation boards, plays a role in breaking negative stereotypes of women. "Even for me as an MTO, it was a struggle in the beginning to be taken seriously, this was mainly due to misconceptions held in relation to women's commitment levels, but these stereotypes and misconceptions can be broken by having good and strong women as trainers and mediators. I believe small changes can make all the difference in the way people interact with each other. The simple act of listening intently can help solve longstanding issues and change people's beliefs."

Today, more than two decades after she first began, Champa continues her mission. After Anuradhapura she was posted in the Kandy District in the Central Province and her current posting is in Colombo, which was close enough to allow her to finally move back to her home in Kalutara. While this has made life easier for her and her family, Champa notes that her passion for her work has only grown. "I cannot think of anything else I would rather do and I am so glad I took that posting in Anuradhapura all those years ago."



"I felt like I was given an opportunity to truly help people in those remote parts of the country, during very difficult times."

- Champa Priyadarshinie

# Temple Bells and Community Bonds

## Gnanashymala's story



On the face of it, the area of Uppukulam in Mannar island, in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, is representative of a kind of quiet co-existence shared by the multi ethnic communities that live there. The town is visually idyllic. Muslim neighbourhoods lead into Hindu neighbourhoods and images of Catholic saints share the street with idols of Hindu Gods. But this quiet co-existence is palpably fragile, as memories of violence and war still hang heavy in the collective consciousness of the people. Mathivathanan Gnanashymala, 42, is aware that healing these fissures and building trust may take generations, but in the meanwhile, stresses that everything needs to be done to prevent any future triggers. This is the role, she believes, the local Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Forum that she is a part of, plays.

Gnanashymala is a teacher and seamstress, with a small tailoring shop set up as an extension of her home.

She is also the Secretary of her school's Past Pupils' Association and an active member of the local Women's Rural Development Society. Her interest in community development and wellbeing is what prompted her to also become a member of the ADR Forum in her village, which was convened and supported by a local organisation called Rural Development Foundation<sup>1</sup>. "I like to keep busy," she says with a laugh, when queried about her multiple roles.

"Since we were given a lot of training on conflict analysis and ADR, our forum decided to take on an issue, which we believed was slowly eroding the relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims of our village and needed to be tackled urgently before it grew out of control."

The problem appeared to be a small misunderstanding between the Hindu and Muslim communities, following a temple festival, but when Gnanashymala and the team analysed it further, they realised it had had been festering in the minds of the communities for a while, leading to a growing sense of animosity between them.

“Two Hindu temples are on one side of the pond, and the opposite side is predominantly Muslim. The temple closest to the pond shares its borders with both communities. Over time, the temple has grown larger, and its rituals have become grander, leading to increased significance in the local community. During the temple *thiruvizha* [festival], the temple decided to barricade a portion of the surrounding area to cook food for the festival. The temple said it was doing this to prevent people who use the nearby bus stand, from dirtying the area. The Muslims feared that it was an attempt by the temple to take over the common area.”

Gnanashymala and her team spoke to people from both sides to try and understand their perspectives. Then they brought both sides together to discuss matters. “The joint meetings were a great success, even though we were apprehensive in the beginning – particularly because we are also from the village and in the beginning, people were suspicious about our intentions. But we answered questions patiently and allowed each side to voice their grievances respectfully. This process showed us that if we create the right space, problems could indeed be discussed and resolved.”

Last year (2024), when the temple festival took place again, there were no more disagreements between the communities. In fact, the Muslims also attended the cultural programmes that were held inside the

temple premises as part of the festival; it was the first time this had ever happened, much to the joy of Gnanashymala and the rest of the Forum members.

Gnanashymala admits that she has gained a kind of notoriety within her village since. “I feel I am recognised and respected,” she says smiling, adding that her family is also very proud of her. “Since my A/Levels, I have been involved in community work. Getting involved in this project has therefore, been very rewarding. Even the Divisional Secretariat Office has asked us to conduct the training we received for their staff. This is testament to the good work we are doing in our village.”

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<sup>1</sup> Rural Development Foundation, is a local partner organisation of Search for Common Ground, a grantee of the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) project.



“This process showed us that if we create the right space, problems could indeed be discussed and resolved.”

- Mathivathanan Gnanashymala

# Breaking Stereotypes

## Mufeeda's Story



When Mufeeda Ramiz, 45, received a letter 15 years ago from the Kattankudy <sup>1</sup> Divisional Secretariat Office, asking her to attend an interview for the selection of community mediators, she did not know what to make of it. Not only was she unfamiliar with the topic of mediation, she was also baffled by why and how her name had got on the nomination list. She took the letter to her father, a retired principal, and asked him what he thought about it. Her father did not hesitate a moment and immediately told her she must go. “My father explained to me what mediation is and why it is such an important role within the community. He also said that I should feel honoured to have been nominated as it meant government officials and community leaders see potential in me.”

Mufeeda, was not entirely convinced, because she already had a full-time job working as an Agricultural

Instructor with the Agricultural Department, but decided to go because her father seemed excited. “At the interview they asked me to tell them about myself, including my experience working on the field. I realised then that it was this field work in the villages that must have been noticed and resulted in my nomination.”

Mufeeda and the others who passed the interview stage had to then undergo five days of intensive training on mediation, “[...] missing even one day would result in automatic disqualification [...]but it was during the training that I became fully convinced that this is something I wanted to do,” Mufeeda recalls. After the training the candidates had to sit for an exam and Mufeeda passed with high marks. She remembers how

the trainer had come up to her personally and told her how much he had enjoyed reading her responses.

After selection, Mufeeda had to juggle her full-time job and her family commitments with her role as mediator, which involved having to set aside every Sunday morning. “I cannot say it was easy. But I was able to do this only because of the support of my husband.”

In 2022, the board was reformulated and the incumbent board members, including Mufeeda had to go through the entire process again. This time the rules had changed, with additional weightage attached to marks earned at the exam. Based on Mufeeda’s performance, she was made Vice Chair of the Kattankudy Community Mediation Board.

“In our division, there is a policy to encourage women’s participation and leadership. Of the 33 members, 13 are women, and I am the Vice Chair. This is significant in comparison to mediation boards in most areas. Also, I believe there is a lot of respect for women mediators in our area. A large number of disputes involve women, and they feel comfortable to have women mediators to speak to. Additionally, I must say, that women are often maligned for looking too deeply into matters, but when it comes to mediation, this very feature becomes an advantage,” Mufeeda said.

Mufeeda added that there are common misconceptions and stereotypes of Muslim women and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka. “People think they [Muslim women] won’t come forward or that they are entirely subservient to men, but the women members on the Kattankudy Board have proved this wrong. We are able to hold our own and we are well respected in our communities in our own right.”

Mufeeda noted that this respect has translated into an increase in the number of disputes being brought directly to the Board (in addition to those that are referred to them by the Courts and the Police).

Fortunately, the Mediation Boards Commission of Sri Lanka, in 2022 launched a new system where a dispute intake box (known locally as a complaints box) has been placed at each Divisional Secretariat Office. This initiative was supported by the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution Project (SEDR). “Earlier, if people wanted to submit a dispute to the mediation board, they would have to submit a formal letter to the Chair. People were not very familiar with this process and it was also time consuming and inconvenient, still many would come to us directly in this manner. But now, the complaints box has made it very easy.”

Despite the respect and status that often comes with the role, Mufeeda says that it is a must that one remains humble. “This role cannot be performed well unless you are humble and expect nothing from it. “People often thank us profusely and bow down to us when their issues are resolved, but we do not encourage this, neither can we let it go to our heads.

I do not take my work home with me. I don't even share details with my family, due to the need to maintain confidentiality. When I am home, I am just Mufeeda. But sometimes when I have had a particularly good day, my family can tell it from my face.”

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<sup>1</sup> A division in the District of Batticaloa in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka



“People often thank us profusely and bow down to us when their issues are resolved, but we do not encourage this, neither can we let it go to our heads. ”

- Mufeeda Ramiz

# A Bright Spark

## Piyumi's Story



Driving her bright green tuk-tuk, nodding and smiling to fellow tuk-tuk drivers while expertly navigating the precarious mountainous roads, it is hard to imagine that this dynamic, young Piyumi Nissansala was too shy to speak in public not so long ago.

Twenty- three-year-old Piyumi is from the village of Thalakumbura in the Badulla District of the Uva Province in Sri Lanka. Piyumi belongs to the Sinhala community, but is currently studying to be a Tamil teacher; an uncommon choice. “I like Tamil a lot and I believe communication can solve a lot of problems. Sinhala people in these areas cannot speak Tamil even though there are Tamil communities living in our midst. It is important that we begin to understand each other.” Currently, Piyumi also gives Tamil and English language tuitions for students in her village. Also uncommon is her mode of transport, which she admits has become part of her identity.

Piyumi is a very self-aware young woman and it is this trait that made her challenge herself and come out of her shell. When she heard of the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project's Active Citizen training programme, through her local *Grama Sevaka*, she asked to be included. She was then selected through an interview process, which was the first step for her to overcome some of her introversion.

“I was fortunate to be selected for this training as it taught me a lot. At the workshops facilitated by the Uva Shakthi Foundation, I met a number of individuals from across the Uva Province and the trainings taught us how to understand disputes, their causes, as well as approaches to address them, including through

effective communication. I began to see that effective communication was a key underlying factor to addressing many issues, both personal as well as collective.” Following the trainings five of us were selected to undertake a Social Action Project (SAP). I was chosen as the reporter of my team.”

The team quickly identified a specific source of conflict in Thalakumbura, which is made up of three separate areas: lhalagama is situated on top of the hill, Pahalagama at the bottom and Aepalagama in the middle. The team found out that those living higher up, often did not gain access to government support. The issue had peaked in 2019, when those living higher up on the hill did not receive fertilizer as they had not attended the distribution programme. The team found out that this had happened because the information had only been communicated to those living in Pahalgama. Believing this to be a deliberate attempt to leave the others out, animosity began to grow between the villagers. To make matters worse, a majority of village committees—including women’s organisations and farmer’s organisations— were dominated by members of the Pahalagama area. The COVID-19 pandemic had also worsened lines of communication.

Piyumi and her team immediately realised that this issue could be solved if official communication was improved. Therefore, they named their SAP ‘Sahajeevanaya Agayana Sannivedana Sabandiyavak’ (A Communicative Bond That Values Co-Existence) and set about planning a range of activities to improve communication between the villages and between the villages and the authorities. “As we were a new group, we started out by conducting awareness campaigns about our vision and mission for the village and gaining support from the relevant government

officials and the leaders of the targeted communities. Then we began to focus on the issue of communication, providing awareness, skills as well as insight into attitudes needed to enhance communication. Based on our discussions, and together with the communities, we then devised a series of strategies to enhance information-sharing as a means to resolve the ongoing dispute. For this, we created two directories (one in hard copy and one in electronic format), which contained information about government employees in the Thalakumbura Division, organisations that provided community services, and representatives of all active societies, in addition to information about residents of each village. We also supported the establishment of a WhatsApp group so all community leaders could actively communicate and coordinate with each other. However, we were careful not to impose anything directly. We practiced what we learnt in the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) training, striving for a ‘win-win’ solution, where we did not directly offer solutions, but rather through discussion and dialogue were able to mediate sessions that resulted in the groups themselves coming up with suitable solutions. Following this, we were thrilled to see visible changes, and we were applauded by our community for the work we had done.”

As part of a youth networking event organised by SEDR, Piyumi also went to *Thulhira*<sup>1</sup>. There she met youth from the Uva, Eastern and Northern Provinces of the country. “My roommate at the event, could not speak Sinhala and I could not speak Tamil, so we used signs and gestures to communicate. I realised that

communication is more than the use of words, it is how you connect with another person, but it also further strengthened my desire to learn and teach Tamil.”

With so much insight and a deep sense of empathy for those around her, it is no surprise that Piyumi was chosen as a winner of the SEDR Active Citizens Alumni Challenge Fund<sup>2</sup>. Through this, she received a scholarship to attend a course in non-violent communication at the Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) in Colombo. “My parents were very supportive and thrilled for me. They even came to Colombo with me and made sure I was comfortable. I am extremely grateful for the experience I gained at KDU. With my ambitions being in teaching, I found the course material invaluable and I know it will serve me well in the future”, Piyumi noted, adding that the greatest lesson she learned through her journey with the SEDR Project was the importance in gaining a rounded education. “We always look at education as books and exams, but true education teaches us life skills. That is what I gained.”



“I like Tamil a lot and I believe communication can solve a lot of problems. ”

- Piyumi

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<sup>1</sup> Situated in the Kegalle District of the Sabaragamuwa Province of Sri Lanka

<sup>2</sup> A fund set up to support a select group of youth participants of the Active Citizens Programme to pursue skills education that would further enhance their profiles and work within their communities.

# The Village Elder

## Sabarimuttu's Story



Sabarimuttu's smile is infectious. He is the kind of village elder that one would not hesitate to visit with one's problems and seek advice. Seventy- three- year- old Asirvatham Sabarimuttu Swaminathan happily obliges each time, as he believes that it is his duty to impart the knowledge and experience, he has gained over the years, to others. He also believes that community-level problems, if left undressed, often simmer and grow into something ugly. "Elders like us have to play a part in guiding our communities in the right direction. We owe this to the next generation." Thus, when the village youth came to him to help them solve a problem that even he had been struggling with for years, it made him very happy and he immediately offered them his full support.

Sabarimuttu, lives with his wife, youngest daughter and grandchildren in Karukkakulam, an agrarian village in

the Mannar district of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. He is a mainly a paddy farmer, but also cultivates chillies and chick peas. He is the President of the local Farmers' Society as well as an active member in several other village societies and the local St. Anthony's church. Because of this Sabarimuttu has held the post of *Kama Vithanayar* (farmer representative) on more occasions than most farmers in his village. The role of the farmer representative<sup>1</sup> is to provide leadership in organising water distribution on the basis of rotations, and in maintaining the irrigation channels.

However, Sabarimuttu began to face tremendous pressure, when in 2017, he was unable to resolve a

dispute where one farmer had extended his fencing line into land belonging to the Department of Agrarian Development, which blocked the natural flow of water downstream, impacting farmers downstream and leading to the irrigation channel drying out and adversely affecting the cultivation of over 100 acres of paddy land. Sabarimuttu had lost heart as he had been facing complaints for years, but was unable to do anything about it. The reason being that the encroached land belonged to the Department, which would have had to take the matter to court. The Department however, being under resourced, had chosen to do nothing about it despite his pleas.

In 2021, following the commencement of a Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project, a local partner organisation called Federation of Institutions for Rural Management (FIRM) began training and working with local youth to equip them with Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) skills to support in local dispute resolution. One group of youth met Sabarimuttu and his Farmers' Society, where they became aware of the ongoing irrigation dispute. In an attempt to resolve this issue, a series of consultations (facilitated by FIRM) took place between the trained youth, the Farmers' Society and the encroaching farmer himself.

After several rounds of negotiations and consultations, where members of the youth group used and applied their ADR knowledge and skills, the encroaching farmer finally agreed to remove the fence on the encroached land. Thereafter, consensus emerged to renovate the irrigation channel that had been damaged over the years due to the dispute. Utilising a small community initiation grant from FIRM and contributions from the Farmer's Society, an

excavator was used to dig through the overgrown vegetation blocking the abandoned irrigation channel and the encroaching fencing line was also removed. With the fencing line back to its original position, the natural water flow was re-established, allowing the adjoining farmers' paddy cultivations to receive timely and sufficient water. This allowed the farmers to increase the paddy cultivable area by 70 to 80 acres. The coming together of the entire community to rebuild the irrigation channel, under the leadership of Sabarimuttu and the Farmers' Society was seen as a victory for the community, as well as the youth that had come forward to support them.

Today, Sabarimuttu is still thankful to the youth "who came to the rescue" and emphasises the importance of getting youth involved in community development and decision making. "Many years ago, the youth in our parts started a war because they were not being heard. Recently the youth ousted a President. Youth possess a great degree of energy; it is our duty as elders to help channel it in the right direction and not stifle it. My family and I were directly affected by the war; one of my sons joined the *tigers*<sup>2</sup> and died in the war. This is all in the past now. My wish is for this country to never to see war again and for our youth to flourish not perish. Projects such as these which equip the youth to help resolve community disputes; this will in turn also serve to prevent larger conflicts that culminate in war. These projects also provide us elders with an avenue to support the work of our youth and contribute to a prosperous future."

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<sup>1</sup> While the Irrigation Department controls the flow of water at the turnout gate, farmers control the distribution of water beyond this point and are expected to follow rotations to ensure that each operator receives an equitable share. The turnout gate is the point through which water flows from the distributary to the field channel and it demarcates the management division between the government agency and farmers.

<sup>2</sup> The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE)

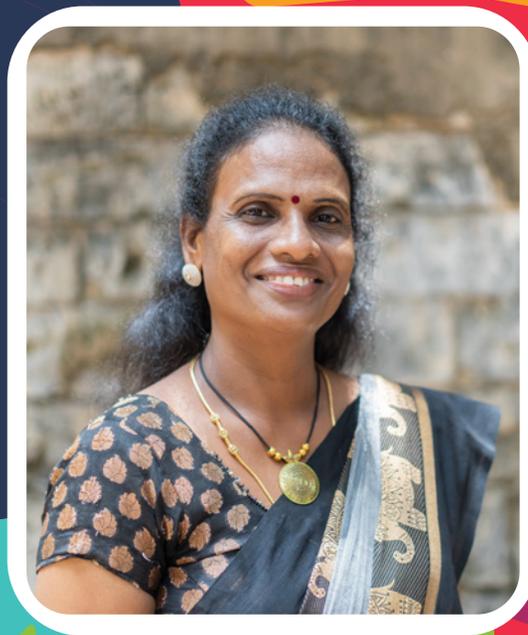


“Elders like us have to play a part in guiding our communities in the right direction. We owe this to the next generation.”

- Asirvatham Sabarimuttu

# Star Mediator

## Tharmini's Story



Tharmini is a high-performing, all-rounder. The numerous accolades that are displayed in her house are testament to her feats. Tharmini is proud of how far she has come. “I was raised by my aunt. We were very poor and faced extreme difficulties as a result of the war and constant displacement. I also had epilepsy growing up, so I fell back in my studies, but I fought hard and have become who I am today.”

Mrs. Tharmini Rajeevan is 46 years old. She works as a Social Development Officer at the Nallur Divisional Secretariat Office in the Jaffna District of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. She has a Master's Degree in Sociology from the Kamaraj University Madurai, India and numerous other qualifications such as diplomas in counselling, human rights and journalism. She is also an award-winning poet, writer and public speaker. But the role that is closest to her heart is that of mediator in

the Nallur Community Mediation Board, in which she also currently holds the post of Chair.

“In 2015, Sarvodaya [a local NGO] had some training on mediation. I had studied counselling, so I was very interested and decided to join. Following this training, I was nominated for the post of mediator. I went through the selection process and performed very well. At the time they were also actively looking for women to take on this role, but it proved to be a challenge— it still does. Based on my performance, I was made Vice Chairperson, even though I was relatively young and the rest of the Board were made up of elderly, mostly retired individuals. The Chairperson at the time was an older gentleman who was extremely disciplined and it

was very difficult for me in the beginning as I had to play multiple roles. But he explained to me that this role was equally important and should not take a backseat simply because it was unpaid. This advice struck me hard.”

Tharmini decided to leave her weekend lecturing job—even though it was a paid position and she also felt sad to leave behind her students—and take her job as mediator more seriously. Two years later, the Chair died and Tharmini took his place and has managed the Board since with the same level of commitment and discipline that the previous Chair had instilled in her. “Community mediation plays such an important role. I am proud that our Board has been able to mediate a number of cases that have dragged on for years, and even cases that had gone to court and come back to mediation. The Mediation Boards Commission and Asia Foundation have also recognised our Board as one of the best in the country. I was even featured in a video clip done by the Ministry of Justice,” Tharmini notes.

Despite the vital role that mediation plays in community dispute resolution and access to justice, it often does not receive the recognition or funding that it deserves. Therefore, Tharmini notes how important projects such as the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) Project can be in advancing the profile of mediation and motivating the mediators. “The project has supported numerous mediators across the country, particularly women and has also taken the concept of mediation to schools. This is very important, as it is a skill that can benefit society a great deal if introduced early on in the lives of people. The project also helped us to continue our work during very trying times. As a result of COVID and the economic crisis, the Commission reduced our sittings to twice a month. But we had a large backlog, the

project helped us by paying us an additional transport allowance that allowed us to continue to meet four times a month and clear the backlog.”

Tharmini regrets that there is still a dearth of women mediators in the system and attributes it to the additional challenges that women face in coming forward. But she is determined to spread the word and push for greater women’s representation in the mediation boards. “A significant number of cases that come to us involve women; and often they bring very personal problems. They feel more comfortable talking to women and share things more openly. Even though we have good male mediators, it is still important to ensure representation to ensure a balance in the Board and the process of mediating.”

Tharmini said that she is lucky that her husband, a Cultural Officer at the same Divisional Secretariat, is supportive of her work and notes that most women cannot take on additional community work due to the lack of support at home. But she is quick to clarify that women cannot continue to depend on luck alone and need to work hard to change perceptions within their communities to allow them greater space to engage in multiple roles. “Nowadays women working is more acceptable, because the additional income is useful, but the working woman still has to do everything at home, and therefore has little time to spend on community work. We have to work hard to change this and bring about certain behavioural changes within the family that allow women to bring their skills and talents to the forefront in the public sphere. This will benefit society as a whole. This is why recognition is so important, for me personally as well as for all other women community leaders. We need to recognise and reward women’s efforts more. As a mediator, I have been given the “Justice of Peace” title. My efforts were

also recognised by the Ministry and I was sent to China for a programme; such opportunities motivate us.”

Apart from the recognition she has received, Tharmini has a great closeness and affinity towards her community. “Our communities have faced much hardship and it is important to build harmony so that we can see greater development. While court systems and the police are the usual avenues to seek redress for disputes, these processes are punitive. Mediation on the other hand can help resolve matters in a mutually beneficial manner. When people come to us and are offered a chance to talk in these mediated spaces, they realise this. In the instances we are able to achieve a settlement and both parties are happy. there is an immense sense of joy that I feel.”



“When people come to us and are offered a chance to talk in these mediated spaces... there is an immense sense of joy that I feel.”

- Tharmini Rajeevan

# The Joys of Working with Children

## Thushari's story



Thushari Balasuriya, 45, began her career as a Mediation Programme Officer in 2005 quite by chance. She had applied for a post within the Ministry of Justice after graduating and was selected for this particular role. But Thushari's appointment was special. She was part of the first cohort of officers who would be involved in the launch of a pilot school mediation programme that was being tested out at the time as a collaborative initiative of the Ministry Education and Ministry of Justice, with support from the British Council. Since this was a new concept, Thushari and the others selected for this programme received specialised training, including from international trainers, on a diverse range of topics; not only related to the subject of mediation, but also on areas such as children's education, behaviour and development.

After the trainings, Thushari was posted in the Kandy District – one of the five chosen districts – to oversee this special programme. Twenty-five children and five teachers were selected and Thushari led their training. Subsequently, the first school mediation board in the district was set up at the Peradeniya Madhyama Maha Vidyalaya.

On completion of the first year, the pilot was deemed a success and the Government decided to continue the programme. Meanwhile, Thushari had found her niche. She felt very lucky to have been chosen for this special programme, as it provided her with an opportunity to work with children, which she enjoyed a great deal, and also bring some of her creative skills to the forefront,

which a regular posting would not have.

In 2018, recognising her efforts, the Mediation Boards Commission chose Thushari to present the work of the school mediation boards and pitch for a special project. “The Commission chose me to make that presentation at the Presidential Secretariat. There I was able to secure funding to implement a special training programme for 100 schools across the country. A year later, I had to once again present my experience of rolling out this project and its progress at the Presidential Secretariat. The officials appeared pleased and I was asked whether I could lead the developing of a short educational film on school mediation that could be used as training material across the country. I agreed and developed the concept and scripted the film, which was then shot and edited into a 26-minute short film. This film is still used all over the country in the setting up of school mediation boards, as well as for general awareness on mediation for the public.”

Thushari never expected that some of her old creative skills would come in handy, but she was thrilled at the outcome and so were those who trusted her with the project. This helped the Commission secure another round of funding for training of a 100 more schools.

Unfortunately, in 2020 all activities came to a standstill when the COVID 19 pandemic struck. “We tried our best to keep things going through online sessions, but it was near-impossible. Our morale had also diminished because COVID was followed by the economic crisis and the government didn’t have adequate funds to allocate for our work. Our next big boost came in 2024, through the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) project and we began working again with 58 schools. This reignited our

drive. The project also gave us an opportunity to revisit the idea of putting together a formal trainer’s manual for school mediation. In the past we used a small handbook, which was developed at the onset during the pilot in 2005. This was the only document containing some of the guidelines for school mediation, but for years we felt the need for putting together a more comprehensive and up-to-date manual. This we were able to do with the support of SEDR and I was the one who led its development,” Thushari says proudly.

“Regardless of these personal achievements and recognition, the greatest reward for my work, is when children become friendly with me and share their experiences openly, or come to me for advice. It has helped me understand children better and this has also enabled me to have a very healthy relationship with my own children,” Thushari says. She goes on to describes a particular incident where she and the school teachers decided to make one of the more troubled children a school mediator “Normally the ones chosen to mediate are the smarter, more conscientious children, but this time we decided to take a chance with this one boy. In the beginning he kept disrupting the training, but we were patient. One day he spoke to me and told me his problems, he did not have parents and lived with his grandmother and felt very angry about his situation, particular in comparison to his other school mates. Working with us on school mediation eventually helped him gain a sense of purpose and his own struggles helped him to empathise more. We watched as he began to improve after this; in his studies and overall manner. It made me feel extremely happy. Some of these children are still in touch with me.”

Thushari believes that school mediation is a useful tool

to help children express themselves and deal with their problems. She also believes peer-sharing has a lot of benefits and has seen how it can transform the personalities of children who may otherwise be very withdrawn.

“The idea of setting up mediation boards in schools was a really good one, and I am so happy to have been selected to be a part of it right from the onset. School mediation really helps children to find positive ways of dealing with their problems, and helps them find solutions. It also helps them to regulate their emotions and teaches them life skills in fun and meaningful ways. As I told you, I have seen first-hand, the positive impact it created in the schools that had them. The children also really enjoy it, because it gives them the opportunity to get involved in various fun activities, competitions and training camps, that we organise around this concept. Finally, I must say that children are the best teachers. I have learnt so much from them. If we adults care to really listen closely to children, they have much wisdom to impart to the world and sometimes I feel like they are better mediators than us adults.”



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they have much wisdom to  
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- Thushari Balasuriya

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# SEDR

Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution  
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