

## Cover Story



## ‘Our nutrition from our own garden’

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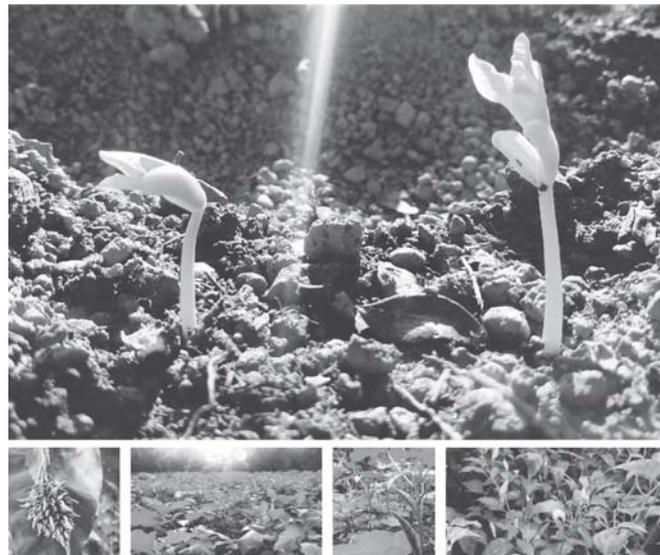
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Sri Lanka has performed well in most areas of maternal and child health (MCH), which is evident from many excellent MCH related indices including low rates of maternal mortality, neonatal mortality, child mortality, vaccine preventable diseases and high level of skilled birth attendance, standing well ahead of countries with equal Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, a similar level of success has not been achieved in the area of nutrition, with high prevalence of malnutrition including micronutrient deficiencies among children and pregnant mothers that is stagnant over the last decade or so.

A shortage of food production, importation and impaired affordability of food are likely to be experienced during the present global crisis leading to poor access to food, possibly exacerbating the already existing problem of malnutrition in the population, especially among the vulnerable groups.

Public health experts in the field of nutrition as well as in agriculture in Sri Lanka believe that a nationwide, nutrition-oriented and strategically-targeted home gardening project that involves new technology could be an effective and sustainable solution to the problem of micronutrient deficiencies in the population. There have been many attempts to promote home gardening previously. However, these have mostly focused on improving the livelihood of participants and had a minimal focus on nutrition. This could explain why they could not demonstrate a significant impact on the nutritional status of the population.



The National Nutrition Month (NNM) is an important annual event in the agenda of the Ministry of Health, which is aimed at improving nutrition of the population. Most of the activities initiated during the nutrition month are not confined to that month but continued and sustained in the long term. It has been decided the main focus of the NNM in 2020 to be a home gardening project themed 'Our nutrition from our own garden'.

The proposed project will be focusing on promoting a selected set of micronutrient rich food crops that suits urban home gardening in smaller spaces or rural settings with more space for cultivation, and the two main agro-

climatic conditions of the country. The intended programme will focus on vulnerable groups such as urban poor, pregnant and lactating mothers. One component of the program will be targeting families of nutritionally vulnerable children that have the willingness and capacity for home gardening identified through public health midwives (PHM) with the support of mother support group leaders. Promoting home gardening as a family activity may also bring about positive changes in dietary behaviours, especially among children. The programme will also be integrating nutrition education including optimal cooking methods through effective nutrition communication.

The project will be implemented with the participation of multiple sectors. A chain of supply for saplings and plantlets will be established through the Ministry of Agriculture, and points of sale would be established through medical officer of health (MOH) offices, supermarkets, and government offices. A buy back mechanism for any excess harvest of growers through involvement of the private sector is planned to be established to assure the sustainability of the programme. Several activities including a media campaign using multiple media platforms and methods of communication will be launched to motivate, create awareness, and mobilize people for the project and

create nutrition awareness. Capacity building including provision of technical knowhow among participating families will be carried out through traditional methods such as in-person sessions for small groups and home visits by agriculture field assistants, leaflets, booklets and more modern methods such as websites and short media clips. The support of civil society organizations including mother support groups will also be sought.

Many international development partners including the Food & Agriculture Organization, World Food Programme, and Scaling Up Nutrition Peoples Forum have pledged their support to this project. A high level of success and sustainability is expected to be achieved through a collective effort by both health and the agriculture sectors in an integrated approach. This programme is expected to be launched in the month of October to coincide with the World Food Day on the 16 October.

The cover of this issue highlights a similar health promotive initiative taken during the lockdown period of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. The COVID-19 pandemic changed lifestyles of people remarkably, yet the changes have not been always negative after all. This issue cover depicts one such positive modification of lifestyles.