

Learning Agenda Mini Case #2

Sri Lanka

DGP grantee: Lanka Rainwater Harvesting Forum

“Let not a single drop of water that falls from the skies flow to the sea without it being used for the benefit of humans” famously proclaimed Sri Lanka’s King Parakrama Bahu the great (1153-1186 A.D.). The 21st century refrain has been taken up by the Lanka Rainwater Harvesting Forum (LRWHF), currently one of two organizations receiving USAID’s Development Grants Program (DGP) awards in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan observers agree that this is a highly deserving organization, unique in its mission to propagate a relatively new practice and rare in the unflagging zeal demonstrated by its Director, Tanuja Ariyananda, and its board members and supporters including several eminent scientists.

LRWHF’s praxis combines applied science, advocacy and harvested rainwater supply services mainly targeting low-income families. LRWHF began as an association in 1997 formed by like-minded enthusiasts who came together after attending a conference in China in 1996. Since then, LRWHF has built roughly 6,000 mainly ferro-cement or brick water storage tanks for collecting rain water. LRWHF is interested in joining advocates abroad, especially in the South Asia Region, to develop more appropriate, cost efficient rainwater catchment and storage systems in homes and other buildings. In 2007, LRWHF helped the Sri Lanka government to organize the International Conference on Rainwater Harvesting in Sri Lanka. This conference led to the formation of the South Asia Network for Rainwater Harvesting. LRWHF has played a critical role in highlighting the importance of harvesting rainwater and demonstrating viable rainwater harvesting methods to the Sri Lankan public, the government of Sri Lanka, and donor agencies. LRWHF’s strong advocacy includes proposing new policies and amendments to the government’s building regulations, including the World’s first policy devoted exclusively to rainwater harvesting.

The DGP grant is a life-saver for LRWHF. After rapid scale-up and a big burst of activity immediately after the Tsunami (2005), LRWHF struggled desperately to keep afloat during 2009-2011. During the immediate post Tsunami period, LRWHF got SLR 120 million from the German donor Malteser International and generous funding from DANIDA, IUCN, CIDA and UNICEF. LRWHF operated two regional offices in Matara and Kalmunai employing 16 full-time staff. After the Tsunami bubble deflated, LRWHF let go most of its staff and dropped to just the Director and an assistant. After sending 10-12 proposals, the DGP grant came through.

The DGP grant application and implementation process is a new and mixed experience for LRWHF. A concept paper was submitted in March 2010 and a proposal was submitted in November 2010. This period was punctuated with email conversations and meetings with USAID, proposal writing workshops and a Pre-Award Survey in 2010. LRWHF appreciates the unprecedented interaction with the donor and the learning experience. But the application process was “too long” and difficult. LRWHF is very

disappointed that its DGP grant funds were cut back from the original USD 2 million (as notified in the original RFP) to USD 500,000 limiting its work now to just one district for 18 months rather than three districts for three years. LRWHF thinks this scale-back occurred because USAID adopted the Fixed Obligation Grant (FOG) mechanism mid-stream. However, USAID maintains that DGP grant amounts were reduced to USD 500,000 because grantees did not demonstrate the ability to manage larger sums of money.

LRWHF got to know that they won the DGP grant only end of 2011. They received some grant money in March 2012. According to the USAID FOG conditions, LRWHF had to start implementing activities in February before getting any grant money. This was a hard to do. LRWHF worked with USAID to make the first milestones do-able. As a result of rushing to recruit staff, LRWHF lost two of the five new staff recruited (one left because he was not interested in the work and the other was not a good match for the project). They now have six full-time staff members.

LRWHF thinks a grant-making process should ideally run for six months from the issue of the RFP to releasing the first tranche of money. The grant should factor-in time and more resources for up-front planning and organizational capacity building (supported by the grant). LRWHF would like to connect with other USAID grantees globally. For example, if USAID grantees are doing housing/building projects, LRWHF would like to encourage these grantees to adopt rainwater harvesting methods.

LRWHF has passion and a sincere commitment to its cause. Thanks to the tireless outreach work by its founder director, LRWHF is supported by scientists, researchers, teachers and high-up government officials like the current Minister for Water Supply and Drainage. However, after the post-Tsunami slump, LRWHF needed to spend more time re-building its organization. The DGP grant allows SLR 55,000 to be spent on training the staff on financial reporting. But this is not enough for LRWHF to rebuild its organizational structure and to develop its internal financial management, human resources, monitoring and evaluation, fund-raising capacities. The visit to the LRWHF field office in Vavuniya confirms LRWHF's need for general management improvements. These issues could be easily resolved by through customized technical assistance provided by an external organizational capacity development specialist. There would also need to be adjustments to current targets.