

Utilisation of village level institutional mechanism to undertake sustainable development and participatory conservation - A case study at Ritigala

Ritigala Community Based Development and Environmental Management Foundation (RITICOE) was an outcome of a community based conservation initiative. RITICOE instituted a sustainable development programme which included participatory conservation of biodiversity in the Ritigala Strict Nature Reserve and its surroundings.

To implement its programmes RITICOE embarked on establishing a village level institutional mechanism. Initially, a series of community level discussions and workshops were conducted for CBO leaders and the broader village community, to discuss the importance of forming village level institutions named Grama Sanwardane Sabhas (GSSs). Using internal and external professional facilitation, village communities were encouraged to form GSSs to undertake programmes initiated by RITICOE. Community leaders were assigned the task of GSS formation, and this task was fulfilled by house-to-house visits, discussions with CBOs and finally facilitating the formation of GSS in a public village meeting.

As a result of the mobilisation process, the broader community inclined towards sustainable development, CBOs expressed their willingness to form GSSs, and a core-group of community leaders capable of serving as a vanguard in GSS formation and managing participatory conservation development programs, emerged. The community group completed the formation of 12 GSS at the beginning of year 2000 and initiated preparation and implementation of sustainable development plans in a few GSS. This also contributed to a reduction in the unauthorised exploitation of the RSNR.

While the success of participatory conservation programmes is ensured by coupling the programmes with the integrated development process of the villages, the process itself could be replicated in other situations where such programmes have failed. However, to ensure success these programmes will have to be exclusively planned and implemented by community owned village level institutions which genuinely represents the whole village.