

Fairtrade Premium COVID-19 Relief Programs of Small Organic Farmers' Association; FLO ID :558 by
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Our organization Small Organic Farmers' Association has been Fairtrade certified for more than 21 years. We work with and support more than 3700 farmer families to produce organic raw products: - tea, spices, coconut etc. as per the International Organic and Fairtrade standards.

We started receiving information of COVID –19 through the media since January 2020. The first case of COVID-19 was reported on March, and a nation-wide curfew was declared by the Govt. of Sri Lanka from 20th March onwards with the exceptions of agriculture activities. The public were advised by the health authorities to contribute their part in controlling the spread of the infection by staying indoors and being safe.

As a Small Producer Organization, we understood the severity of the situation. We discussed with our farmer leaders on how to continue our purchasing and other Agri-activities by adhering to all the restrictions and regulations imposed by the government and the health authorities.

As the President of the Organization, I was authorized by the Annual General Assembly members of all the branch societies to take appropriate decisions to mitigate the risk for the SPO and its implementation. After my meeting with the farmer leaders we decided to continue our purchasing activity even during the curfew hours by obtaining the curfew passes from the relevant authorities.

A few years back, we had created an emergency fund for each of the branch societies to be utilized for crisis of this nature to support our farmers. Since the situation in the country became more critical, we discussed internally and provided guidelines to our members on how to use the emergency fund appropriately and effectively.

While we continue our agricultural activities, our focus is on 06 major programs to benefit our officers and farmers under the current situation.

1. Opportunity for women members to earn an additional source of income during the crisis

We have provided an opportunity for our women members to earn an additional source of income by encouraging them to sew cloth masks with organic raw materials. The priority was given to members who had previously started their own self-employment projects such as dress making under the assistance and support of SOFA. Other women members who had the required skills were also invited to join the initiative. The masks were procured by SOFA and distributed to our farmer members and their families.

2. Providing economic stability to our farmer members is also important during this challenging times.

Since the government has allowed the farmers to continue their farming activities the organization continues to buy the organic green leaf produced by the tea farmers and supply it to a private conventional factory. Due to our regular organic factory Ethical Teas Pvt Ltd. being temporarily closed due to the current pandemic, the SPOs are unable to get the organic price/differential they used to get before the onset of COVID 19. To mitigate the impact of the reduced price on their farmers, SOFA has promised that they would pay the organic price/ differential to them at the earliest. Most of the factories remain closed due to workers not reporting to work owing to the fear arising from the pandemic, and we had to face few problems in supplying the crop to the processing factories.

Most of our spice farmers in the Matale region had no financial issues as they managed to sell their crops before the pre-traditional new year in April. Some of them have even dried their crop for selling it to SOFA in the future. However, two of our spice farmer societies had difficulties selling their products during the curfew hours, therefore we have distributed essential food items to support them.

With no restriction on production, the SPO is making every effort to revive the supply chain at the earliest, but for the product to be sent for processing, the processors are dependent on firm orders and permission from authorities to commence its operations and exports.

3. The Health and Safety of our officers and farmer members is our prime priority

The government has provided many health facilities for the people during the COVID – 19 out- break. In order to ensure the protection of the health of our farmer members and officers who are involved in in the purchasing and agriculture activities, the face masks bought by the organization from the female members were distributed freely among them. All the farmer members were given informative and instructional pamphlets to keep themselves safe whilst carrying out the agriculture activities and selling their crops. They are advised to strictly maintain social distancing and to make use of sanitizing facilities available in their purchasing centers. We have nominated 50% of the total staff to provide necessary administrative guidelines to ensure social distancing measures are observed in and around the plantation and surrounding facilities. Further, we have distributed medicine for non-communicable diseases where necessary.

4. Distribution of food and medical essentials: -

Essential food items were provided for focused community members who live in the rural areas with limited access to food and medical essentials. We have planned to organize a program to motivate the farmers involved in organic vegetable cultivation to produce vegetables for their own consumption by providing them necessary seeds and sacks to tide over this period. Due to multiple challenges such as shortage of seeds and limited availability of sacks due to its manufacturing unit being located at a high-risk area of COVID19, we have postponed the program for a while.

5. Child Development Programs

The children have been staying at home for a long time due to the current lockdown. While the government has implemented several programs for children such as films festival, educational programs, etc. through the media, SOFA has also planned various development programs to minimize the stress for the children and to keep them engaged and occupied during the crisis.

- **Drawing competition for children below 10 years**

To raise awareness of the prevailing virus, they organized a drawing competition for children under 10 years of age with the theme of COVID 19. 134 students participated from Gampola region, Matale region and High grown regions. The drawings were assessed by a qualified art instructor and 18 drawings from different grades were selected. The winners were awarded gifts and they hope to include several drawings in our Annual Progress Review Report.

- **Distribution of essential school supplies**

SOFA identified that the government provides scholarships to students who pass the examination in Grade 5, but they lacked access to educational supplies. Therefore, they supported the children by

distributing essential school supplies such as stationeries, modal papers etc. through the premium amount.

After the students pass the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level (O-level) exam- a General Certificate of Education (GCE) qualification in Sri Lanka, conducted by the Department of Examinations of the Ministry of Education, they take up Advanced classes to prepare for the University. As such their parents are compelled to meet many expenses such as fees for additional classes and other amenities. To minimize their expenses, SOFA provided them with stationaries and other suitable facilities. Once these students qualify for the University, they are also provided with necessary assistance from SOFA to support their educational activities. The organization has been implementing this program since 1999 and 937 students have been provided with financial assistance from 2015 and ongoing.

In addition to the above, every child belonging to the focused community in two villages are provided with stationeries to encourage them in their educational activities, which is available for both (**members and non-members**) in the organization.

- **Fairtrade Premium Pre- School Facilities for Children:**

According to the free education system in Sri Lanka every child is required to go to school. However, SOFA noted that some children of their farmer members in several branch societies have no pre-school facilities in the area. The parents must take their children to the pre-schools which are located at a far-off distance from their villages. This creates an additional burden and expenses for them such as transport fees for school buses, vans, etc. The safety of the children also becomes a concern. As per the request made by their farmer members and the villagers, the SPO established three preschools in the community centres, with the support of Fairtrade premium amount. This has not only benefitted the children of their farmer members but also the children in the surrounding villages. This development program has greatly minimized the expenses for the parents while ensuring the safety of their children.

In addition, SOFA has aided in organizing annual ceremonies of other preschools situated in certain areas in the region. To further encourage the children to expand their knowledge they have established a Children's Library in the Central region and provided music instruments for a preschool band to hone their skills.

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