

Sri Lanka: Feeding the Hungry, Communally

Wednesday 1 June 2022, by [ADITTIYA Shailendree Wickrama](#) (Date first published: 31 May 2022).

First Community Kitchen to be held in Panchikawatte today

As Sri Lanka's food crisis worsens, communities across the country, especially low-income families, are finding it difficult to have a single filling or balanced meal a day, let alone three. In response to this, the concept of community kitchens has been proposed, and Singularity Sri Lanka along with Sarvodaya will be holding the first initiative of their Community Kitchen Project today (1).

According to Singularity Sri Lanka Founding Member Manju Nishshanka, the project will provide a hot meal to low-income families in select areas. The first Community Kitchen will be held today in Panchikawatte, and will provide dinner to 1,000-1,500 persons.

The programme will be held in Panchikawatte every Wednesday going forward, as well as in Wellampitiya on Saturdays, and Grandpass on Mondays. Meals will be provided from 6 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. on these days.

"Studies and discussions found that there is a large number of low-income families in these areas - Panchikawatte, Maradana, Maligawatte, Grandpass, and Wellampitiya," Nishshanka said, explaining that they will scale up depending on the response and support the initial programmes receive.

The project targets low-income families, pregnant persons, those over the age of 55, and children between ages five and 15. The community kitchens in Panchikawatte, Grandpass, and Wellampitiya will be held in places of worship, where the religious leaders and congregation attached to them can select persons who are most deserving of a meal.

"When implementing the Community Kitchen Project, people asked us why we don't just distribute food to people and send them off instead of providing a space for them to have the meal at the centre itself," Nishshanka said. However, he explained that this project is also expected to create a sense of community and unity among people, especially since the current situation in the country has created a sense of uneasiness in society.

According to Nishshanka, Sarvodaya is already carrying out similar programmes across the island, with Singularity Sri Lanka joining them for this project. He added that they hope to expand the programme across the island in a three- to six-month period.

Sarvodaya President Dr. Vinya S. Ariyaratne, meanwhile, said that food security is becoming a key concern in Sri Lanka, especially since many State-supported programmes providing food or financial assistance to low-income families have been suspended.

"This social crisis can transform into a humanitarian crisis in a few weeks or within a month," he warned.

With the Community Kitchen Project, people will receive a balanced meal. At first, the project will depend on the support of persons with funds, but will later be sustained by the people within the

communities.

In order to better understand the concept of community kitchen, Brunch reached out to Kaushalya Herath, who has been quite vocal about the concept on social media.

Herath is from Nelibewa, a remote village in Sri Lanka, and her Master's research focused on this village. For her PhD, which she is currently pursuing at the University of Dundee in the UK, she is focusing on how women build communities in Pettah. Herath said her research has shown her the importance of food in building communities. Her focus is on sustainable community development and how women transform spaces.

She has also read literature on community kitchens in other countries.

What are community kitchens?

According to Herath, community kitchens can take different forms depending on the community. However, she explained that the key idea behind the concept is the solidarity among community members.

"There are no donors and beneficiaries in a community kitchen. Community kitchens only have volunteers, facilitators, and participants. Each community member can find their own way to contribute through labour, raw materials, and skills," she said.

The "bring what you can" method is seen in some community kitchens, with members of the community contributing what they have at home. Another model is known as "pay what you can", and here, a community fund is used to purchase goods.

In the membership model, a membership fee can be charged and members can work in the kitchen on a shift basis. When a member misses their shift, they may be required to pay a fine. "This is a familiar model in Sri Lanka. Most of the 'samithis', or community organisations, in Sri Lanka operate on this model," Herath said.

Growing your own food is another model, and a network can be built between such community kitchens to swap produce of which there is a surplus. Other types of community kitchens are the commercialised model and spill-over community kitchens.

"Every community kitchen will grow by tackling new challenges and harnessing every new opportunity as they go. Community kitchens should not be imposed on people from the top. It is a ground-up approach," Herath said, adding that every community can adopt the concept and familiarise it according to their needs, resources, capacities, and challenges.

She added: "If there is a strong community organisation such as a 'maranadhaara samithi' (benevolent funerary society), they may already have the resources to feed the entire neighbourhood."

In Sri Lanka, we are already seeing community kitchens in practice.

"'Bûth samithi' is a way of community food sharing. 'Maranadhaara samithi' may also play a big role in this regard in some villages. We also have 'dansal'. This is why I say we should start from what is on the ground. We have a culture of sharing food. Let's build on that without importing and imposing concepts," Herath explained.

Will community kitchens help Sri Lanka?

Herath spoke about the food crisis in Sri Lanka and how community kitchens can help. “When there is no gas to cook, people come up with charcoal cookers and biogas – more individualised yet innovative solutions. What shall we do when there is no food?”

She said that we may think we can survive individually, but most marginalised groups in our communities will suffer. This is why a collective approach is needed.

When implementing community kitchens in Sri Lanka, Herath said it must begin within communities. She explained that everyone has their own role in community projects. According to Herath, religious institutions can play a big role in providing spaces, facilities and guidance, while community leaders and organisations can bring people together.

“Donors and NGOs (non-governmental organisations) can provide equipment to the communities that are in need. Media can take the word to people. If you have volunteered and already developed a pilot project, you can share your experience with the others. The power is in collectivism, not in persons, so there will not be leaders, but facilitators, in making this a wider campaign,” she said.

There are also key factors that go into sustaining such an initiative. Firstly, there must be a strong community base, with clear objectives and shared values. All members of the community must also play a role in the community kitchen, with a balanced input and output, depending on the model.

In addition to this, every community should establish their own ways of holding those in charge of finances and resources accountable.

Health and hygiene are very important factors as well.

Since Herath has been active on social media, promoting the concept of community kitchens and sharing resources, we inquired about the response she has received thus far.

“Most people have embraced the idea, it seems. Pathum Egodawatta and Kasun Indi were two of my friends with whom I had the first conversation about community kitchens. The first write-up that I wrote as a result of that conversation became viral on social media. Kasun even mentioned that when they went to a Colombo apartment and talked about the community kitchen concept, some had already seen that write-up,” she said.

Herath added that there are a couple of groups of volunteers who are already working on establishing community kitchens, as well as similar models like sharing dry food and essential items. “Fascinatingly, Sri Lankan expats in Dundee, Scotland also started a meal-sharing programme after the community kitchen and ‘bûth samithi’ idea became viral,” Herath went on to say.

She shared that she is hopeful that community kitchens will be a successful community initiative that will help us collectively face the looming food crisis.

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