

**Water/Utilities sector case study
on good corporate practice related to disaster risk reduction**

Company

Practical Action South Asia

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<http://practicalaction.org>

http://practicalaction.org/?id=rainwater_case_study

Overview

Practical Action South Asia is a regional division of Practical Action which is registered as a UK company limited by guarantee and as a charity. Its mission is:

“to build the technical skills of poor people in developing countries enabling them to improve the quality of their lives and that of future generations.”

In a drought stricken “dry zone” of southern Sri Lanka, they have assisted the villagers of Muthukandiya to secure more sustainable water supplies:

“In 1998, communities in the district discussed water problems with Practical Action South Asia. What followed was a drought mitigation initiative based on a low-cost ‘rainwater harvesting’ technology already used in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the region. It uses tanks to collect and store rain channelled by gutters and pipes as it runs off the roofs of houses.”

Not only was the Government not able to provide reliable water services to this community, but its approach to technologies were also inappropriate. The sustainability of Practical Action’s initiative was a much due to its approach to introducing the technology within the community as it was due to the technology itself:

“Government and other programmes have ... been top-down in their conception and application, installing tanks free of charge without providing training in the skills needed to build and maintain them properly. Practical Action South Asia’s project deliberately took a different approach, aiming to build up a local skills base among builders and users of the tanks, and to create structures

and systems so that communities can manage their own rainwater harvesting schemes.”

By adopting a local skills-based, micro-enterprise strategy, Project Action has improved the sustainability of water for nearly 40 families in the community. These families have more water and cleaner water throughout the year round and during times of drought they have significantly more water than their neighbours.

Insights

Community-based micro-enterprise initiatives such as this one can be successful in reducing disaster risk. However, there are significant start up costs to getting such a programme underway which cannot easily be covered by the economic benefits of the programme. Furthermore, the maintenance and repairs of the infrastructure over time remains a continuing challenge.

Clearly technological solutions on their own are not sustainable. In this case, the major sustainability challenges are financial, operational and organisational. Improving these aspects of this micro-enterprise model will be a prerequisite to any attempt to scale up the programme and role it out to other communities in Sri Lanka and to communities in other areas. Nevertheless, Project Action South Asia has made an important first step in designing and implementing an innovative approach to reducing disaster risk through community-based micro-enterprise.