



CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

Impact in environmental sustainability

Anoja Wickramasinghe



Professor Anoja Wickramasinghe was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 1980, to study a PhD in Forest Ecology at the University of Sheffield, where she had previously completed an MSc in Applied Geomorphology and Natural Resources. Anoja is currently an Emeritus Professor at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, and is an expert on social forestry and gender. She coordinates the National Network on Gender and Energy (NANEGE), and is a member of the Committee of Biomass Energy, through which she provides advocacy services to the energy sector. Her specific angle is currently covering the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from the perspectives of gender, natural resource management, and biomass development.

Anoja's long-term influence

Upon completion of her PhD, Anoja immediately became a specialist expert in the Department of Geography, and the faculty as a whole, at the University of Peradeniya. She was able to introduce new courses at the University in natural resource management, group forestry, and gender and development, for which she developed the entire curriculum. Anoja was Head of the Postgraduate Unit in the Faculty of Arts for five years, and was responsible for developing all curricula for the faculty. Additionally, she restructured the faculty by implementing a streamlined approach to sound research practices, which had not previously been in place.

Anoja has played a significant role in bringing social community perspectives into the technical forestry and energy profession in Sri Lanka. Since the 1980s, her name consistently appears in publications related to the subject area. She was also heavily involved in community engagement with forestry issues in Sri Lanka as, at the time, local communities were involved in forestry more than the state. Anoja was able to work very closely with local communities and provide guidance on forestry matters. She empowered them to think broadly and enabled them to work openly with state agencies. She also eliminated alienation of the local community from forestry-related participation, which has previously been the situation in Sri Lanka. By working on both sides, she was able to bridge the gap between the government and local people.

Anoja's expertise has also been used for other regional projects funded by various donor agencies, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Forestry/Fuelwood Research and Development Project in Asia (F/FRED), and the British Overseas Development Agency (ODA), now DFID.

In the 1990s, Anoja became a specialist on women in forestry and their role in the whole sector. She was invited to a Commonwealth symposium to make a presentation on this topic. She has also worked in the areas of watershed management, biodiversity, and agroforestry, in which she conducted nationwide studies on home garden development.

Throughout her career, Anoja has established partnerships between the University of Peradeniya and UK universities, such as the University of Aberdeen. She was also involved in regional collaborative research networks funded by the British Council, through which she travelled to Nepal and Bangladesh to identify and train researchers to support international forestry-related research. Two scholarly books have been published through this, with support from the British Council.

Additionally, during the 1980s and 1990s, Anoja was able to negotiate with donor agencies including the World Bank, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and the Regional Wood Energy Development Programme amongst others, to secure grants that enabled her to support the

work undertaken by her research students. In this way, she was able to provide invaluable opportunities to students working in the field of forestry, as well as the wider areas of environment, development, and gender.

Anoja undertook a training programme for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on environmental management at Yale University, and on community forestry in Asia at Kasetsart University in Thailand. Upon completion of the programme, she returned to Sri Lanka and became a senior trainer on environmental management.

Anoja engages in a variety of voluntary work, including environmental advocacy, community mobilisation projects, and tree-planting and reforestation programmes.

‘I empowered local people to negotiate with the government and use their experience to aid government officials to think about local communities as partners in forestry management.’

Impact of the Commonwealth award

In regard to the impact of the Commonwealth scholarship on her career development, Anoja asserted that it was necessary to obtain a PhD from a foreign university in order to get promotions and become qualified to apply for the next steps in her career. It was also necessary in order to undertake research, apply for grants and supervise students. Furthermore, the award enabled her to be perceived as a qualified academic in her native country of Sri Lanka, as well as provide specific research methodologies that then allowed her to build up her own students’ capacities within the University of Peradeniya.

Upon completion of her PhD, Anoja was immediately promoted to a senior lecturer position, which would have been far more difficult without the Commonwealth award. Her reputation and progress led to her contributing to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and Commission on Sustainable Development, drawing attention to grassroots issues in these areas.

Benefits of the Commonwealth award

Through attainment of the Commonwealth award, Anoja was able to become engaged with scientific investigations in the area of soil science and land identification and on modelling forest and tree growth, which she had previously not been exposed to, and was also able to conduct in-depth lab analyses during her award. Additionally, she attended many workshops and took part in both formal and informal discussions, which all contributed to building up technical capacity, something that was not available in Sri Lanka at the time.

Reputational benefits were also an advantage according to Anoja. She noted that having the Commonwealth

Scholarship served to enhance her opportunities in gaining positions at the University of Amsterdam and the University of British Columbia, in Canada.

Anoja still maintains contact with her supervisor and colleagues she met whilst on award. Through networking, she was able to develop new contacts through connections she made at the University of Sheffield. “I was able to expand my relationships, and I now know more than a dozen good academics in the UK.”

Anoja asserted that she appreciated the work environment in the UK, as she felt her supervisors and professors were very supportive and allowed her to make her own choices and decisions, whereas this kind of student-teacher relationship did not exist in Sri Lanka at the time.

Anoja stated that studying at the University of Sheffield fostered a creative environment that enabled her to develop her own ideas with proper support and guidance. “UK universities encourage you to think very broadly and individually, and to decide for yourself, make judgements according to the situation, and develop your own capacities. I really appreciate this system.”

‘[The award allows] you to prove your capacities to a very high standard amongst the university community. You are recognised as a capable person so people do not have any doubts in giving you grants.’

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