



Combating leprosy and its stigmatisation
Ratnapura, Polonnaruwa and Colombo, Sri Lanka

In cooperation with the national government, FAIRMED is working to combat leprosy and its associated stigmatisation in Sri Lanka. Through active case-finding, people affected by leprosy are identified and are ensured access to the necessary medical treatment. Alongside, the project reduces the discrimination of leprosy patients through awareness-raising activities among the general public.

Background

Every year, more than 200,000 people around the world receive the diagnosis of leprosy. This ancient disease is far from eradicated – especially not in Sri Lanka, where around 2,000 new cases are diagnosed every year. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Sri Lanka is one of the few countries in the world with more than 1,000 cases per year. On this island nation, the regions of Ratnapura, Polonnaruwa and Colombo routinely see the highest numbers of newly registered leprosy diagnoses. Although Sri Lanka has an extensive and free public health system, efforts to combat leprosy face a range of significant obstacles. A lack of knowledge about the first signs of the disease and the severe stigmatisation of patients and their families mean that people rarely submit themselves voluntarily for examination. Against this backdrop, active case finding is required in order to identify cases at an early stage and to minimise the likelihood of the infection from spreading in the respective communities. In addition, many of those affected are unable to afford the cost of travel to the nearest health centre, or the side effects of the medication means that they do not follow the prescribed treatment or stop it altogether. Furthermore, health professionals frequently lack the necessary expertise to diagnose and treat leprosy.

The project

In cooperation with the national government, FAIRMED is combating leprosy and its associated stigmatisation. We coordinate active case-finding in schools, prisons, factories and the military, and conduct door-to-door campaigns in high-risk areas. Alongside, we ensure that health workers are suitably trained in the early detection and treatment of leprosy. Throughout, the project works to reduce the stigma faced by leprosy patients through awareness-raising activities among the general public. Among other measures, we produce educational materials for health workers, create explanatory comics for local newspapers and organise theatre shows for school-children, which playfully explain how leprosy is transmitted and how to identify the first signs of the disease, and emphasise how other complications and consequences can be avoided entirely through early treatment. Taken together, these measures help to ensure that those affected are identified and treated in good time, so that the disease does not result in permanent disabilities. For those already suffering from a disability, we assist in the creation of self-help groups. Throughout, the involvement of the entire community facilitates social integration. In other countries such as India, FAIRMED has already seen exceptional success through the adoption of these kinds of self-help groups.

Objectives and activities

The main objective of the project in Sri Lanka is to contribute to the fight against leprosy and the stigmatisation of its victims. To this end, the project is pursuing three specific aims that are realised through the following activities, among others:

Early detection, active case finding and treatment of leprosy cases

- Important figures in the community (e.g. teachers, local politicians, religious leaders) are informed about leprosy-related issues such as treatment options and early detection.
- Organisation of training for health workers in the early detection and treatment of leprosy.
- Organisation of screening programs: through door-to-door actions, mobile clinics and health camps, people in high-risk areas and vulnerable groups (e.g. schoolchildren) can be identified and examined.
- Awareness-raising campaigns: comics in newspapers and on social media, posters, murals and display boards help to educate the general public about leprosy and its consequences.
- Introduction of an online database system that tracks leprosy cases. At clinics, all patient data is recorded in a database, which supports patient follow-up care and facilitates the prompt treatment of aggravations (e.g. infections).

Prevention of permanent disabilities

- FAIRMED ensures the availability of health services that meet the needs of people with leprosy-related disabilities (e.g. dressing changes, special footwear, etc.). This is to prevent disabilities from becoming irreversible.
- Health centre personnel are trained in working with people with leprosy-related disabilities.

Monitoring

The FAIRMED team in Sri Lanka ensures the implementation of activities as well as the preparation of periodic general reports, progress reports and financial statements. The project is also accompanied by regular monitoring visits by employees of the FAIRMED country office in Colombo, the responsible program managers in Bern as well as local government bodies. Thanks to consistent monitoring and the participation of the respective communities, problems at all levels can be identified in a timely manner, causes can be analysed and, where required, methods and objectives can be adapted. The interim evaluation takes place after the second year and the external final evaluation during the last year of the project.

Sustainability

In a climate of mutual learning and respect, FAIRMED works exclusively with local employees and the participation of local authorities, government and partner organisations. This fosters broad acceptance, and enables the respective authorities to assume responsibility for the continuation of activities once the project is completed.

Beneficiaries

The project provides direct support to all people affected by leprosy within the project area. In addition, family members and approximately 2 million residents in the districts of Ratnapura, Polonnaruwa and Colombo benefit from leprosy prevention measures and the reduced likelihood of the development of leprosy, as well as awareness-raising programs for early detection and treatment.

Budget

The total costs for the project duration from 2017 to 2021 amount to 509 000 Swiss francs.



Djuneida's Story

Curable but forgotten

Djuneida can count herself lucky for a second time. She has just completed her therapy for the treatment of leprosy and is now considered cured. The 45-year-old was diagnosed during a screening campaign and subsequently referred to a clinic for treatment. Her illness was detected at a very early-stage, so she will not suffer any resulting health issues. Over the next three years, Djuneida and her family will be visited regularly by health workers, who will also ensure that no relatives have been infected with leprosy. Because it can sometimes take years for the symptoms of leprosy to become visible, former patients and their families are accompanied over longer period of time.

« The medication did not cause any side effects and I am thrilled that my six-month therapy is now over.»



Our heartfelt thanks for your interest in our work. Since 1959, the Swiss development organisation FAIRMED has been committed to improving the health of people affected by poverty in Africa and Asia. Thanks to the support of our loyal donors, donations from foundations, as well as inheritances and bequests, FAIRMED is able to offer the very poorest a path to basic healthcare.

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