

“Returning to a self-reliant life means moving away from the concept that someone else must dictate the terms of our survival, it allows people to shape their lives with dignity through ethical livelihoods, free from exploitation by wage givers, and aligned with social ethics and environmental protection.” says Vetrichelvi, a writer, social activist, and motivational speaker. She currently serves as the President of the Mannar District Entrepreneur Women Cooperative Society and Secretary of the organization for Women with Disabilities. Her work in nursery farming and home gardening over the last two years under the banner “A garden in every home, a greener future for every village” demonstrates the potential of small-scale initiatives to improve food sovereignty and environmental sustainability.

Mannar, a district long defined by farming, fishing, and multicultural coexistence, continues to face the long-term consequences of war and climate-related disasters. Yet, existing policies do not adequately address these challenges:

- Low local agricultural production and rising vegetable prices have caused a decline in daily nutrition.
- Absence of local seed banks means farmers rely on low-quality shop seeds, which often fail to germinate.
- Middlemen dominate pricing, leaving women producers and smallholders uncompensated for their labor and time – women produce Chilli powder through Mannar district entrepreneur women cooperative society, yet local shops rarely stock products made in Mannar.
- Flood and disaster relief schemes focus on upland crops or home gardens, ignoring seedling producers and other micro-enterprises.
- Lack of recognition for small-scale livelihood sectors in policy frameworks prevents producers from accessing financial support, insurance, or technical assistance.
- Market and value chain support for foods like sun-dried fish and groundnut have strong local demand and supply in Mannar but limited policy-driven market linkages in the regions like Nuwara Eliya as they cannot be cultivated but traditionally grow in Mannar
- No structured programs to revive or adapt traditional storage methods into modern sustainable practices as in the past, farmers used dark storage rooms with hay to protect vegetables like pumpkin for 2–3 months
- Post-harvest processing infrastructure - Lack of small-scale processing units or community-level facilities as in the beginning of this year, jackfruits are being discarded in Kilinochchi, though they could easily be processed into chips, flour, or other value-added products

- Crops in Mannar need open-space cultivation, with irrigation available through the Kattukkarai tank and natural clay-based soil supporting growth. General farming is practiced, but some lands are unsuitable for cultivation. Farmers also face challenges from monkeys and livestock damaging crops, further complicating production.

Vetrichelvi together with her partner Inthunathy named this initiative *VetriNathy* in Adampan Mannar, addresses these gaps and provides well-grown seedlings to inspire interest in gardening. They also supply natural compost, grow bags to protect water sources, and offer proper technical guidance. On average, 50 people purchase 80 seedlings each, including brinjal, tomato, chili, curry chili, mint, beans, okra, bottle gourd, basil, and spinach varieties. Tree saplings are also sold. This initiative generates a monthly financial turnover of approximately 240,000 rupees, promoting both food sovereignty and sustainable livelihoods. Local people purchase directly, while social activists and friends travel from afar. Donation programs target poor villagers, and seedlings are delivered directly. Tree planting projects are also organized, for example, in collaboration with the Mannar District Social Services Office. The initiative provides livelihood to many local women and is inclusive of persons with disabilities, people with mental health challenges, and elderly individuals. So far, they have reached 1200 home garden beneficiaries in two years.

Vetrichelvi's personal journey demonstrates the self reliant and resilient life as a former female combatant and a person with disabilities facing persistent social, economic, and institutional marginalization in the patriarchal social order. Vetrichelvi joined the LTTE at the age of 18. Before that, she had been displaced eleven times internally, including a two-year period in India. She was studious and joined the liberation movement believing that, once the struggle was over, she could continue her education and live peacefully. During the war, she was seriously injured, losing the sight in both eyes and her right hand up to the elbow. After undergoing eye surgery, her vision was partially restored, and she now depends on spectacles. The injury forced her to relearn everyday life from the beginning. She learned to write with her left hand and gradually regained the ability to carry out daily activities, a process that took nearly two to three years of intense physical and emotional effort.

After the war, starting her life from scratch was never easy, she endured trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) while facing neglect and stigma as a former combatant with disabilities. Rigid government structures further complicated access to livelihoods and employment. During and after her time in military detention camps, she began writing and has since published eleven books on post-war experiences, three essay series, and is now writing children's literature. This period marked not just physical rehabilitation, but a profound journey of endurance, adaptation, and determination.

Due to the recent Ditwah cyclone, Vetrichelvi faced significant financial losses, with seedlings worth nearly five hundred thousand rupees destroyed. She had taken loans to bring soil and

raise the land level, but the protective net structures were also damaged. While the Ministry of Agriculture provides flood relief and compensation for upland cultivation and home gardening, the Department of Agriculture does not offer support to seedling producers. Similarly, under the small industries sector, there is no dedicated scheme for livelihood-based seedling production, and applications for assistance must be made under special categories, making access to relief difficult and uncertain.

For war-affected individuals and those coping with PTSD, home gardening offers more than nutritious food it provides therapy, relaxation, and a way to reconnect with nature. It makes the environment productive, saves time and money, and yields fresh, chemical-free produce, while compost and plant matter benefit soil and animals. Surplus produce exchanged with neighbors strengthens community bonds, fostering connection and shared well-being. In this way, self-reliant farming supports both personal healing and collective resilience, she shared.

She emphasized that the urgent need is an ethical awakening of human consciousness in how post-war societies treat those emerging from conflict and oppression. For us, being resilient is not a choice but a necessity, as we endure continuous oppression confronting the patriarchal structures, systemic inequalities and vulgar power disparity that continue to deny us humanity.