

FIGHTING DROUGHT WITH PRAWNS

MDF impact stories from Northern Sri Lanka



By **MDF**

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Sri Lanka is battling with a debilitating drought. This means that thousands of vulnerable people are feeling the impact – particularly due to rice shortages caused by a lack of rain (rice is Sri Lanka's essential staple) and a lack of drinking water – all compounded by stifling hot weather.

MDF recently travelled to the North of Sri Lanka on a story-gathering expedition, focusing on partner, Divron Bioventures. Divron is an aquaculture exporter active primarily in the Northern and North Central provinces. The company's specialty is a rare Sri Lankan freshwater species – the giant freshwater prawn (GFWP). With MDF's support, Divron is strengthening its sourcing and supply chain, which is providing benefits to fishing communities, in order to meet export demands, primarily from South-East Asian markets





The giant freshwater prawn -- can grow to almost 600g, in the right conditions.

Exact numbers are not documented, but Sri Lanka is home to thousands of reservoirs, some of which were built as far back as the 3rd century BC. It is an impressively complex irrigation system, as well as a largely underutilised resource. Capitalizing on this abundant resource, Divron stocks close to 60 reservoirs across Sri Lanka with GFWP post-larvae (early-stage prawn), hatched and nurtured in their carefully maintained hatchery. These waters have the ideal conditions for the prawns' growth – and under the right conditions, the prawn can grow up to a massive 600-700g.

According to Sri Lanka's Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development, inland aquaculture accounted for 13% of total annual fish production in 2015, with close to 49,000 inland-fishing-based households in the sector.



The Muganthakulam reservoir is one of the thousands of inland waterbodies that dot the island's landscape.

In Vavuniya, we met 32-year-old Visvakumar Sinnathamby, known to most as Vijayan. Fishers like Vijayan are key players in Divron's sourcing process, as they harvest the adult prawns from the reservoirs. For Vijayan and the others in his village, the drought has led to shortages of water for drinking and other uses, but it has also affected their key livelihood – fishing in the Muganthakulam reservoir.

"During the war, it was hard to step outside, so we used to stay around the reservoir. At that time we made small money...this is the only job I know."

Vijayan is part of a community of around 90 households set around the reservoir. Although the village used to be bigger, the strategic location of the area during Sri Lanka's conflict years meant that the initial 200 or so families dwindled to what it is now. Vijayan and the other fishers lay their nets for fish as well as prawns, but while the fish command enough to meet day-to-day needs, Divron is able to pay almost four to five times as much for GFWP because of the species' sheer size and export value.





The prevailing drought has resulted in the reservoir's water level dropping, which in turn means fish are few. But Divron's stocking ensures a sustainable supply of prawn to supplement the daily catch. It takes almost 8-9 months for a prawn to grow to its full maturity, and it is from a stocking done earlier last year that the fishers are benefitting now. In the absence of fish or agriculture, the giant prawns are helping the fishers battle the drought.





Later, we meet Krishnan and Gemeniganeshan, also part of the Muganthakulam fishing community. The rudimentary well dug in their front yard is completely dry. Gemeniganeshan's son and daughter, plus numerous other family members, mill about the house. Fishing involves the whole household – the women carry out the crucial work of maintaining the fishing nets by cleaning and mending them.

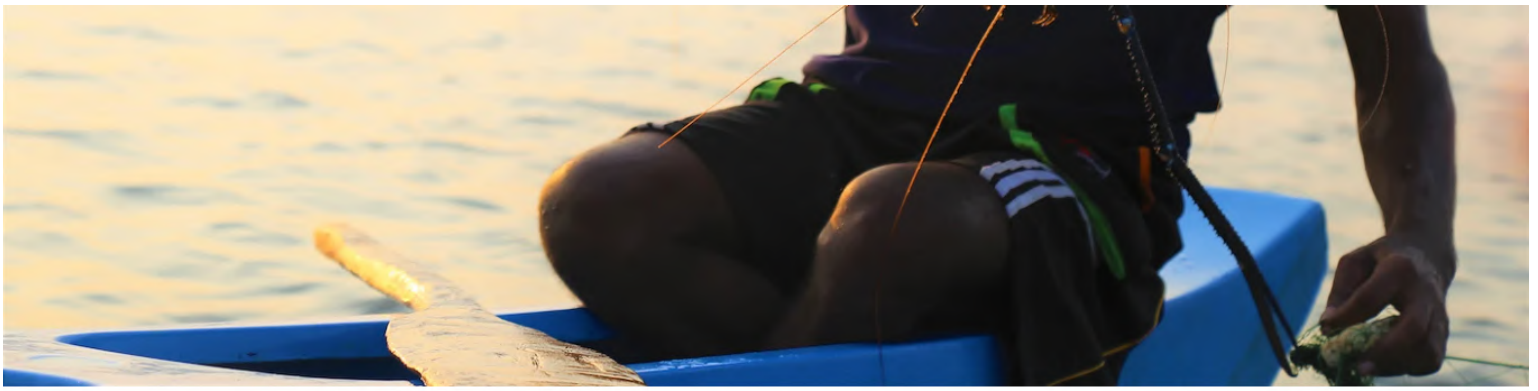
Like Vijayan, these fishermen, too, depend on the giant prawn.

“The catch is low, but the prawn still brings me a substantial income. These days, we only go fishing because of the prawns.”



The fishers set out their nets in the evening and leave them overnight. Some, like Krishnan, camp by the reservoir to play watchman and ensure that the hungry crocodiles that lurk in the muddy waters don't prey on the prawns – and damage the valuable nets. During our visit, the fishers have a small fish catch, but almost everyone catches prawn.





Divron employs a collector for each reservoir to weigh and store the prawns in ice once they are brought to the landing site by the fishers. Divron then buys the prawn, fresh, from the collector after re-weighing and grading the catch.

MDF has supported Divron to establish a regional centre with cold storage facilities to keep the prawn before export. MDF also supported the purchase of several trucks to safely transport the prawn: from the hatchery to the reservoir, from the reservoir to the regional centre, and from the centre to the point of export. These linkages ensure the product meets export-grade freshness requirements and does not get damaged in any way.



Now, Divron is doing more to address one of the key constraints faced by the value chain: prawn mortality. Post-larvae coming from the Divron hatchery have slim chances of survival for various reasons, mostly predation by larger fish. To counter this, Divron has established a nursery in Vavuniya where the post-larvae are sent to grow for a while more. That is, grow until they're too big be preyed upon. In the long run, this will increase the stock of prawns available for harvesting by the fishers – and enable them to earn more. It will also expand Divron's capacity to service growing export demand.

MDF also supported Divron to train fishermen and women in fishing best practices. Months into the venture, Divron took the initiative to provide the fishers with nets that comply with all government regulations. It works closely with local fisher associations to develop strong networks of trust with the fishers, in a bid to minimise side-selling and maintain a resilient supply chain. And with demand for the prawn rising exponentially, Divron's business model is only set to expand.





The prawns that Vijayan fishes out from the water make a long trip. Some end up in Bangkok, where the Sri Lankan prawn is a sought-after dish; others can be found in a select few high-end restaurants in Colombo, where tourists savour that essentially ‘*Sri Lankan*’ taste.

But these do not mean much to Vijayan, Rasaiyah and Gemeniganeshan. For them, the prawns are an escape route – from poverty, from the dry weather, from difficult everyday living. Their message is clear.

“For a half a kilo of fish, I get 50 rupees, for half a kilo of prawns, I get 500 rupees. Stock more prawns! That’s what we want!”



To find out more about Vijayan and the others of his community, as well as Divron’s work in the Muganthakulam reservoir, watch our documentary, *The Life of Prawns*.

