



CWS

Autumn Story

ACTION AGAINST POVERTY



By Gillian Southey, CWS communications coordinator.

Bangladeshi families remember loved ones lost when Rana Plaza collapsed one year ago. Photo: IndustriALL

Strength in Community

The story needs to be told. For generations fisherfolk of Tamil Nadu have lived and worked on the coast, the foreshore and the seabed. They have shared its bounty and felt its fearsome force in the 2004 tsunami. The men catch fish in big boats and small. The women take over once the catch is landed, cleaning the fish, selling it or turning it into snacks to sell. No one owned the land where they lived but it was shared in common.

Kalaiyarasi is one of these women. Her husband is a fisherman and she used to sell the fish. After complications giving birth to two of her three children, she earns some income through tailoring and helping her mother in law clean fish. The Dalit family works hard to make a living – it is their life.

But times have changed and like many fisherfolk, she is now part of a fierce battle. CWS has supported long term partner Neythal, one of the leaders in trying to protect the coast and the people who depend on it for their survival. After the tsunami, the government moved quickly to make way for "Development". The rapidly growing economy needed more power so coal and nuclear power stations were planned and in some cases built. Tourism and other industry offered the allure of greater profit. The government forced coastal communities to shift their homes back beyond 200 metres of the high tide line. Pollution and the loss of access to the sea for many are making it tough for fisherfolk to earn a living.

As president of the Nagai District Fisherwomen's Federation and the local sangam (association), Kalaiyarasi is a leader in the fight against the planned coal fired Chettinad Power Plant. She has sharpened

skills she learnt selling fish into a voice for her people. They may have little formal education but the fisherfolk know the damage that can come with "Development". The construction of neighbouring gas fired Pillai Perumalnallur Plant in 2001 has increased erosion and blocked their access to the sea. This new plant threatens more.

Neythal and locals have carried out a determined campaign to protect their precious coastline and way of life. They have gained support from the local panchayat (council) and political parties. They have organised rallies, hunger strikes and public protests outside district offices. They have made presentations in public hearings and filed cases in court. So far they are winning – approvals have been suspended, but they are not confident of victory over the long haul.



Kalaiyarasi cleans fish with her colleague. Photo: Neythal



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“I became more courageous and self-assertive. I feel proud that our traditional panchayat has started respecting us as a political body.”



Kalaiyarasi spreads out the catch to dry in the sun. Photo: Neythal

Chettinad is not their only struggle. The sangam is also campaigning against liquor and domestic violence as well as advocating for clean drinking water. With Neythal's help they are exploring other avenues of earning income and building home gardens so they can feed their families. There is a lot on the agenda.

In the beginning Kalaiyarasi was very quiet in meetings, happy to take the lead from Neythal's feisty legal team who first organised the Coastal Action Network. She attributes her new confidence to their training and support, "I became more courageous and self-assertive. I feel proud that our traditional panchayat has started respecting us as a political body."

The same determination can be seen in the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) in Bangladesh. When the Rana Plaza building collapsed on April 24 last year killing 1133 workers and injuring 2500, CWS launched an appeal. Your support meant that we sent \$10,000 to help families who had lost mothers and income earners or workers who were badly injured, and for their campaign to improve the conditions for the people who make our clothes.

NGWF has regularly held rallies in memory of the workers and to demand compensation. In response to international pressure, the government has raised the minimum wage but one year later the affected families have had minimal assistance and the trust fund set up by clothing manufacturers has raised only US\$15

million of its US\$40 million goal. And so NGWF and its membership press on demanding compensation for the victims and a living wage for some of the lowest paid clothing workers in the world.

Please support our Autumn Appeal so that we can continue funding our partners to make sure poor people get what they deserve – food, a fair deal and the respect that belongs to all people. For many that support makes the difference between despair and the hope found in a community looking after its own.

Want to know more?

We want to tell you more about the amazing work our partners are doing. If you would like to get a brief monthly e-mailed update, please send Emma your email at cws@cws.org.nz and ask to join the Update list.

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Autumn 2014

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