**Table S1. Illustrative examples**

G = Galgamuwa site; S = Serupitiya site. NI = Narrative Interview; KSI = Key-stakeholder Interview; FG = Focus Group; O = Observation; D= Document analysis; FW = Feedback workshop.

| Quote | Site | Data type | Verbatim Quote |
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| **A.** | G | NI | In the past, when the buffaloes were browsing people had no work. They set fire to the forest which had dried in the dry season without a reason. I'm talking about our last generation. They didn't think about that stuff as much as our ancients. Actually, our contemporaries are the same. Look, there was a huge tree belt around our tank, but now it's lost. Buffaloes rested under those trees. Actually, now this kind of problem is also here. The tree belt is being destroyed. Everyone goes, cuts and bring. I think money can change the people's attitudes under the high living costs. |
| **B.** | G | NI | In the past, people worked whole paddy lands together like a *sharamadana* [collective maintenance of Wäwa] or they shared buffaloes with each other. People were so cooperative those days. |
| **C.** | | KSI | Rural agriculture has become commercialised quickly. Marketing is a key issue now. Adaptations by farmers are interconnected responses to markets and climate. The colonial legacy left an institutional gap in customary institutions such as tank management. |
| **D.** | G | FG | "There was a good school a few years ago, but this year the school shifted to the town from the village because of the travel difficulty. Now our children have to pass a long way to the school. It's very dangerous because there are wild elephants. There is only one bus running through the village. In this place wild elephants are also a major problem to our crops after the drought." |
| **E.** | | KSI | Agro wells have been very successful. They were led by government initially. Shallow ground water for regolith aquifers compete with tanks. Catchments have been degraded due to hybrid maize cultivation such as *Chena* cultivation. |
| **F.** | | KSI | The government has attempted to shift away from shifting agriculture by using perennial crops, conservation agriculture, and agroforestry, but it has not been very successful. The question remains, how to create the incentives for farmers to choose integrated sustainable/productive systems? |
| **G.** | S | FG | "Here all the hillslope lands are owned by the government but people are doing their farming there, like Chena cultivation. This is a protected area and because of that the government does not 100% ownership of the land to people"… "Here people have a lot of environmental resources. In 1988 three major areas were nominated as protected area from the government. People lost their livelihoods, sand mining and brick making were prohibited. This resources are enough for these people but are not accessible to them. However the Wildlife department people are cutting trees from here"... "I made bricks before during a drought but now I cannot do that because of the protected area." |
| **H.** | G | NI | "Few people have agro wells for their cultivation purposes. Most of the people have to make do with rain water for *Maha* [great harvest] season and tank water for *Yala* [little harvest] season. There was an agro-well project called 'Maarga'. It provided 12 agro wells to the whole division by covering all the people who are doing agriculture). Five farmers got one agro well, and then it was built in a person's land. But the new situation is worse because only the land owners use the wells and others are complaining on the inequity. Tube wells cannot be seen in Nochchiya. People commented on tube wells as; they should be dug more than 100 feet, and then it will cause to decrease the water table." |

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| **I.** | S | FG | "We saw the bio fences [EbA measure] all over the mountains. Most of the people saw its benefits and all the people are now following that. There is a proper scientific method to build that fence. There is a special frame called an "A – Frame"; its in the AGA office. Now people they create an "A – Frame" with local materials, like sticks. The frame should be there otherwise we can't protect the soil. For the other villages they gave the technique, but now with the practice they can do the fencing without A – Frame." |
| **J.** | S | FG | "Before there was a woman's organization but it wasn't functioned well. With the UNDP project Renuka miss gave the idea of starting the organization in 2011/11/30. From 2011 we keep the organization with increasing benefits. Renuka done a great job, she taught us all the things from the kitchen to paddy fields. Now most of the woman having money in their banks. We mainly practiced how to save money and how to spend money carefully. We practiced home gardening, composting for home gardening, wise water management from the project and the organizations. Normally women are a major component in the house. Not like men, women are having problems with earning money. Now most of the women in this society earning money and deposited their money in their own bank accounts. To create a force from woman side mainly we started this. We are getting loans from the organization and doing Chena cultivation and Home gardening. Then we pay back the loan. The most important thing is the home gardening. We spend this money for our children's education and for buying things for our homes. UNDP project gave some fruit plants for us, but still we didn't have sufficient yield for selling." |
| **K.** | G | KSI | "And farmers further emphasized to do just only tank repairing including reconstruction of the bund and increasing the tank inside capacity. And they asked to remove the meadow and use the soil under the meadow layer for reconstruction of the bund. The project proposed to put soil from the outside of the bund, but farmers disagreed with that. And farmers asked to repair the sluice and spillway instead of doing the ecological restoration. And they also asked for repairing the broken bridge between *Nochchiya wewa* and *Ambagaha wewa*" |
| **L.** | S | FG | "This season we got huge losses because of the drought, rain was late. UNDP gave some aids for some people, some fruit trees, but it was not enough for all. |
| **M.** | G | KSI | "In the middle of the project there were many problems, so fewer people engaged with project, not the whole community. Most of the problems were occurred by the people who are not engage with the project. People in the village having the traditional knowledge not the technical knowledge, because of that there is a conflict between ideas. In this area there are some knowledgeable people, but all of them are not engaging with the project. Only few people were engaged with the project and others are waiting for mistake to criticize". |
| **N.** | G | KSI | "How to preserve the catchment? Forcing people who live in the catchment will be very difficult. Instead we have to work with them. Analyse land cover in the system. In these tanks the Katukaduwa and Gasgomana are degraded. How to improve catchment characteristics through 'revival'? towards a different type of agricultural system. Finding a balance between scientific and traditional knowledge. This means a demand-led approach for Ecosystem services, organic agriculture. However organic agriculture is limited by yield gap in transitioning state as soil improves. Organic veg market is very vulnerable. Powerful players could disrupt it if becomes too big. It needs links to private sector but they need to see the profit margin. Contract-based farming faces resistance since community has bad experiences. Similarly the *Elangawa* system supplies so many ecosystem services that are unrecognised. Is it a question of how these systems are framed? |

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| **O.** | G | NI | "In the past there were lots of trees in the *Kattakaduwa* [an ecological component of the Elangawa] and the island in the middle of the tank. We also planted *Neem* trees on the tank bund. But when the project came here all the neem trees were cut by the forest department and taken away. Then they took that tree too. Those trees were planted by ourselves. We requested a tree for a use in our temple but forest department said that all the trees belong to them and we don't have any right to cut the trees in the island in the middle of the tank. They also filled the tank bund from its inside, so the capacity was not increased. Now project people and some officers come here and saying we want to plant trees. We will never give them a space to plant trees again. If we planted trees they will again do that thing to us." |
| **P.** | | D | *Pa. FAO, on the- Operation and maintenance of minor irrigation tanks – Dr. Giuseppe Bronzoni:*<br>"We need to understand across different scales, how the tank system contributes to hydrological balance of the country, and the impact of tank restoration on this balance. We must recognise the functionality of the tank networks as water conservation structures with a climate change adaptation function."<br>Pb. UNDP Technical director: "The project focusses on the Mee Oya (river) basin. Aim to restore cascade hydrology, reduce human-elephant conflicts. Introduce tree girdles, reed beds, organic home gardening. Reduce siltation and soil erosion. Our aim is restoration of the tank ecosystem, including through controlling encroachment and changing land-use patterns. We will restore water spread areas, and raise awareness on environmental considerations during construction (importance of restoring e.g bunds, tree girdle)." |
| **Q.** | | | "The project introduced livestock for milk farming ---a livelihood choice that was uncommon among the villagers pre-project, but consequently became the most popular one. Cows and training sessions were initially provided by the project and further supported by the government's local veterinarians and MILCO the country's largest manufacturer for milk products. The farmers received training in technical, business and operational know-how, were organized into local groups and thereafter," |
| **R.** | | | Assessor #2 "Awareness raising on land degradation to beneficiaries has been completed. Soil conservation practices such as SALT, stone hedges, LOCK and spill drains have been introduced with advice from the NRMC". |
| **S.** | S | FG | A. Women's group discussion session: Question: How is the life if we consider last 10 years? "In the past it's somewhat ok, but now it's totally different, the price of the goods are very high. If we take 1000rs from the labour work from a day and take to the shop, we can buy only few goods when shopping". |
| **T.** | S | NI | B Farmer: "Our main livelihood is paddy farming and vegetable farming. We have vegetables if there is rain. This time we got rain unexpectedly. Most of the vegetables were destroyed. We are farming vegetables mainly from the rain. We have no any threats like landslides and floods. There are no big difference between last season yield and this year yield. When we weren't getting enough water most of the people were migrate for the town area for jobs." |
| **U.** | | KSI | National-level stakeholder #2: "misfit between ecological and administrative barriers" means that a birds eye view of the integrity of the system of the scales is value from an ecological perspective, at least in terms of coordination, networking facilitating particular actions in particular places. . |
| **V.** | | KSI | National-level stakeholder #1: 'As a small island it makes most sense to organise adaptation from the top-down"; |
| **W.** | S | NI | Community member: "In the election time most of the ministers come to ask the votes from us. Only those faces we see in the election times". |

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| **X.** | G | O | Key project stakeholder: “Our actions include strengthen Village-development planning, environmental sensitivities awareness, strengthening citizen institutions and mobilizing the community. We have conducted a validation of the vulnerability and impacts assessment. There have been participation activities, and citizen-led planning” |
| **Y.** | S | D | Lessons learned policy brief, P61: “The objective of this Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) Project was to increase the villagers’ resilience to climate change impacts through awareness-raising and capacity building activities in sustainable land management (SLM). Built on traditional knowledge and using a participatory approach, several community consultations, multi-stakeholder meetings and Vulnerability Reduction Assessment (VRA) workshops brought people together in taking action and responsibility for their own development, and in this case, to decrease their vulnerability.<br>*Coping with Climate Change and Variability: lessons from Sri Lankan communities. 2016 UNDP Global Environment Facility/Small Grants Programme (UNDP, GEF/SGP)* |