



Dishaa

THE QUARTERLY
NEWSLETTER OF
THE ASSOCIATION
FOR INDIA'S
DEVELOPMENT

When people lead...

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Issue 59, April 2010

While sustainability and biodiversity have become recent buzzwords in conversations all over the world, they have been a feature of AID's initiatives since inception. Challenging contemporarily accepted notions of development and innovation that erode the planet's resources, AID has consistently helped provide a platform for the revitalization of sustainable traditional methods and wisdom.

In this edition of Dishaa, we bring you stories of some of our recent efforts. Even as the challenges of ushering in a plastic-free world force a rethink of our everyday activities, from our clothes to our baby's clothes, the Vellore Hill Restoration Project dreams to do more, while greening and cooling the barren Vellore Hills. We also showcase the community kitchens that feed the most vulnerable of the Cyclone-Aila ravaged Sunderban's populace, while taking a critical look at the Indian regulator's tryst with biodiversity, one that reveals some and conceals more.

Greening the Vellore Hills

The 'Vellore hill restoration' project is a joint initiative of Exnora Green Cross, Vellore, the Tamilnadu Forest Department, and AID. Part of a larger initiative by Exnora Green Cross, the aim is to increase the water table, bring down the average temperature in Vellore, recover the green on the hills, and provide sustainable eco-friendly solutions for waste management.

Spread over one lakh hectares and comprising 22 hill ranges, the Vellore Forest Division is a part of the Eastern Ghats and home to several unique flora and fauna. Frequent forest fires have rendered the hills barren, increasing the temperature significantly.



Restoring the greenery to the barren hills of Vellore *Photo Credit: C. Srinivasan*

The greening of the hills will eventually reduce the average temperature by about 5°C over 12 years. The restoration process includes digging percolation ponds, strengthening soil bunds, protecting the hills from fire, and collecting and planting native seeds to attract birds and animals.

A seven member team, including a supervisor appointed for each hill, scans the area for forest fires, collects seeds from the native plants, and spreads awareness amongst the people who visit the hills every day. The operations have already begun in three ranges, and recruitment is ongoing for the fourth one. The Government of Tamilnadu will sponsor Rs. 55 lakh for seeds, tools and accessories for

digging the percolation ponds, tents and camping equipments, and publicity materials. Five AID chapters are jointly supporting the effort to cover six hill ranges. In the long term, the project plans to support itself through the eco-tourism in places such as Vellore Fort and zoo, and cattle shelters integrated with the Zero-Waste Management system.

The District Forest Officer of Vellore agrees that apart from alternate livelihood generation, the project has also brought about significant changes in the mindset of the people, and enhanced the forest cover. AID has been a proud partner of the Exnora Green Cross for almost 5 years.

Anirban Hazra and Ganesh Vijayakumar volunteer for AID at Penn State.

Community Kitchens Fight Hunger

Cyclone Aila flooded the islands in Sunderbans, West Bengal, with saline water in May 2009, devastating agriculture, the main source of livelihood in the region. This calamity, coupled with the rising food prices and lack of local food production, has forced thousands of families to reduce their food intake significantly. Worst affected are the old and infirm who become the first people to be deprived.

AID volunteers and our partners Baikanthapur Tarun Sangha (BTS) and Mukti started five community kitchens in the most deprived parts of the Aila affected areas, to ensure a healthy cooked meal once a day for the most vulnerable



Community-run kitchens in Baradanagar *Photo Credit: Somnath Mukherji*

sections of the community. The expenses for the food are supported by AID while the members take turns in cooking and collecting scarce fuel. The participatory aspect was inspired by AID Srikakulam's *Nirupedalu* (old age home) which has been running successfully for the past two years.

The kitchens exist thanks to the generosity of the villagers who have offered their homesteads for its running. In some kitchens, volunteers have prepared adjacent plots to grow community gardens. It hasn't rained in the Sunderbans since October 2009. The first rain will see the planting of the community gardens.

Eighty people spread over the different islands are part of the kitchens. AID hopes to run these kitchens at least till the end of 2010 when a new harvest might improve the overall conditions.

Somnath Mukherji is an engineer and volunteers for AID in Boston.

Plastic-Free Living

Jivika products, an AID fair-trade initiative, have brought employment to rural artisans including spinners, weavers, bamboo and jute workers. The products - *khaadi* garments, bamboo and jute household items - are beautifully earthy, require little or no electricity in production, and create no waste. Yet huge subsidies to the petroleum industry make plastic and polyester cheaper than their eco-friendly alternatives.

For every conscientious urban consumer who supports the green rural economy, perhaps hundreds of rural consumers are shifting away from self-reliant traditions and instead buying products of polluting industries. In Ponduru (AP), at the base of the mountains that are quarried, are mountains of trash, bearing labels of global corporations, full of plastic and other disposable products that have replaced reusable cloth items.

Eco-friendly hygiene products like cloth diapers or cloth menstrual pads have a vibrant fan base, as hundreds of websites attest. But in rural India where these have been the norm forever, they are disparaged by ubiquitous ads



Jivika *khaadi* drawstring bags are great for bagging fruits and vegetables. The bag weighs so little, you can put it on the scale at the check-out counter. Say NO to disposable plastic bags!

Photo Credit: Aravinda Pillalamarri

proclaiming the disposable versions to be cleaner, more enjoyable, and a mark of the modern successful family. About their cost, a popular advertisement suggests, "For my family prestige, I don't mind."

However, the tremendous consumption of trees and water for their manufacturing and their unsanitary disposal adversely impacts the environment and public and personal health. For the majority of users, cost as well as space is an issue affecting the frequency of changing disposable sanitary products. Plastic diapers are often left on even after baby has used them since the wetness poses no problem to anyone or anything outside the baby. Manufacturers advertising that their absorbency reduces the need for changing, and that this is healthier than cloth which gets wet each time babies urinate, fail to point out that babies whose cloths are changed each time they pass urine retain awareness of hygiene needs. They make a smooth transition to toilet use, unlike those who are trained to ignore nature's call and must later learn to attend to it.

Like almost every step we take to reduce, reuse and recycle, eliminating disposable plastic improves our quality of life as well as the environment.

Aravinda Pillalamarri is an AID Jeevansathi, and works on fair trade and sustainable livelihoods, maternal and child health and empowerment, and other issues.

Biodiversity: Caught in the Legal Web

Mid 2009: The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) resurges to electoral power, and its new government gets on with its agenda. Many proposed laws are revived, new restructuring is ordered, and all those looking out are left in mere attempts of grasping the shadows of speed. I am not here to look at the plethora of changes that present themselves in the environment and agricultural context. I only attempt a shy or perhaps sly look at where India's biological diversity and related traditional knowledge finds itself in the legal tangles today.



Saathi Kanchi Kohli

Many hailed the decision on the moratorium of Bt Brinjal, a genetically engineered (GE) crop set to be introduced on to India's fields. GE, as many of us are aware, stands completely antithetical to biodiversity, and in this case was out to threaten several indigenous brinjal varieties, of which India is a centre of origin. It was said that this was a historic decision following a truly democratic process. While I don't take away the relevance and importance of the decision, there isn't much reason to celebrate. The report of the Minister of State, Jairam Ramesh, seeks that biotechnology be promoted in public sector agricultural universities where

experiments are on full swing on GE Okra, Papaya and even millets like Sorghum. Proposals to take decisions on GE away from the domain of the Ministry of Environment and Forests are also on the anvil with the proposed Biotechnology Regulatory Authority Bill (BRAI), 2009. Not that the GE regulatory world within the MoEF was any better, but it is reported that the MoEF has objected to this power shift to the Department of Biotechnology. Of course they refuse to share the reasons, even if one tries to find out through a Right to Information process.

2010 has also been declared as the International Year of Biodiversity. One would think that biodiversity (species and living habitats) conservation would be foremost on the government's agenda. But perhaps the trade related "growth" processes are too deep rooted to allow for it. On 23rd April, India's National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) organised a so called consultation for a three-in-one discussion on topics of deep complexity. These topics included determining guidelines for what kind of benefit-sharing mechanisms should be developed when biodiversity or traditional knowledge is accessed, long awaited amendments to India's biodiversity law, and a discussion on the rules for traditional knowledge access and protection. Some of us refused to be part of the mock game; but many did, and now NBA has a consultation with civil society on its records.

As one witnesses biodiversity, related knowledges and livelihoods being more and more regulated through legal webs, one just knows there is much more left to unfold. Our government is way ahead in its closed door deliberations, and we've only just begun catching up.

Kanchi Kobli is an AID Saathi, and a social and environmental activist who has been working for many years on environment & forest clearance issues and their impact on the local communities and the biodiversity of the affected area.

In the Wake of the Floods: A Flood-Relief Update from Karnataka

The disaster and immediate relief: Late September last year, days of heavy rainfall in Andhra Pradesh and northern Karnataka caused devastating floods, claiming hundreds of lives and severely affecting millions in the loss of homes, agricultural land, livestock, means of livelihood, and other basic needs. In the ensuing weeks, AID worked with various partners to facilitate relief and rehabilitation work. In northern Karnataka, AID worked with a long-time partner, *Jagrutha Mahila Sangathan* (JMS) - a dalit women's agricultural union which operates in more than 40 villages in Raichur district; AID helped raise Rs.10,20,000 to provide relief to the hundreds of villagers who were affected by the floods, and bring back the knowledge from the grassroots to the wider mainstream audience. Six months later - a season having given way to another - the villagers at JMS have achieved significant milestones in the process of recovery,

and in taking sustainable measures for their future.

During the initial weeks of recovery, JMS used relief funds to distribute rice and grain to villages in need. Over the next few months, these funds were used to partly compensate the terracotta, neem and herbal medicine livelihood units that had lost their raw and finished goods in the flood, to



People of Hulagunchi village in makeshift shelters after the flood. Photo Credit: JMS

restart the flood-affected office base in the village of Pothnal. A small portion was also used to construct a bamboo-shed classroom to aid the revival of the Chilipili school for child laborers.

Long-term sustainable rehabilitation work: The *sanchalakis*, village women who run the project across their villages, recommended JMS to use the remainder of the relief budget to provide villagers with practical, eco-friendly means to sustain themselves and also to prepare for similar emergencies in the future. 370 families received portable fuel/firewood-efficient biomass stoves called *chulikās*, certified by the Indian Institute of Science as being favorable for the health of the users, owing to low smoke emissions. 70 additional *chulikās* were given to the village of Huligunchi, which had been completely devastated in the floods; these villagers continue to live in tents along the road, as they wait for the government to fulfill their promise of relocation. These portable, eco-friendly *chulikās* provide a means for the women to continue to feed and nourish their families, even as they recover from losing everything.

Ironically, in spite of the floods, Raichur is a drought-prone region where rainwater is a precious commodity. Even as the JMS office in Pothnal underwent repairs, novel efforts were made to develop a model rooftop rainwater-harvesting unit, as a means of collecting clean drinking water. Such efforts will enable the villagers of this region to attain self-sufficiency with minimum external assistance.

Partnering with the Government: Despite rampant corruption dogging the government's flood compensation measures, wherever possible, the *sanchalakis* strove hard to collaborate with local government agencies. Together with the health officials and other JMS core volunteers, they were able to implement proper sanitation measures and minimize the incidence of air and water-borne diseases following the floods. The *sanchalakis* have also been engaged in correcting government surveys in 30 villages, petitioning for work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in all villages, petitioning for rectification of

compensation from the government, and convening large public meetings for the people to air grievances to the local medical, revenue, health, police and *panchayat* officials. Additionally, they have played a key role in identifying families in need of further assistance, and in linking them to NGOs and agencies that can offer such help; in one instance, approximately 70 families were linked to a Bangalore-based NGO that provided them with tin sheets and iron anglers to reconstruct their roofs.

AID is proud to be affiliated with JMS, and we thank our donors for their generous and timely response to our flood relief appeal in 2009. We also thank all the AID volunteers who worked ceaselessly to raise funds for flood relief in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

Amrita Balachandran is a graduate student in molecular biology, and volunteers for AID in Pittsburgh.

Recently Approved Projects

Seva Mandir Udaipur, Udaipur & Rajsamand, Rajasthan (\$3,318): Community leaders will participate in a fellowship program to gear toward taking responsibility for community development in their villages.

Kalpavriksh (\$2,765): To publish the Protected Area (PA) Update newsletter, advocating wildlife conservation efforts and highlighting issues of marginalized communities dependent on these areas for their livelihood.

Utthan Gender Program, Bhavnagar, Amreli, Dahod & Panchmahals, Gujarat (\$7,963): Women will attend conferences, workshops and counseling sessions to learn about development-focused issues.

Millet Initiative, Anantpur, Andhra Pradesh (\$8,848): 180 farmers, spanning 12 villages participate in a program to increase millet cultivation in southern A.P.

International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh (\$2,986): Survivors of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy will receive compensation for food, transportation and organizationa support, as they stage a 2-month long *dharna* (sit-in) in New Delhi, in support of the Empowered Commission on Bhopal proposal.

Science Activity Center at Surodi, Ahmednagar, Maharashtra (\$7,037): A primary school in Surodi will start a science activity center to teach students science through

Destination Seattle. Over 120 AID volunteers from different chapters across the US and other parts of the globe, will congregate in Seattle during the Memorial Day weekend, for the 2010 Annual AID-US Conference (May 28-31).

Discussions stemming from keynote talks by our long-term grassroots partners will help AID sharpen its focus on reaching the most marginalized communities affected by unsustainable agricultural policies, acute malnutrition, violent conflict and displacement.

We hope that our attempts at putting together a green conference, will energize a larger number of us into making lifestyle choices congruent with the kind of sustainable development we wish to see in the world. We would like to cordially invite our donors and supporters to participate in the conference. For more information, please visit <http://conference.aidindia.org/2010>

interactive and activity-based techniques.

School for Displaced Children, Murshidabad, West Bengal (\$4,424): Children of families displaced during the partition of Bengal will attend pre-primary school, and then link to the formal education system.

Asha Jyoti Palliative Care, Koppal, Karnataka (\$4,048): Support for a 10-bed facility, to provide services for people living with HIV, for those who are in acute symptomatic stages or in the terminal stages.

Koya Relief Project, Warangal, Andhra Pradesh (\$3,020): Children of displaced families of the Koya tribe, who fled from state violence in Chattisgarh, and now live in Bhadrachalam, A.P., will receive support for nutrition.

CEHAT/ASHA, Thane, Nandurbar, Amravati, Gadchiroli, Nashik, Maharashtra (\$3,251): Community health workers will train to improve access to first contact care and public health facilities in *adivasi* communities.

Events on the Horizon

June 19 & 20, 2010: Play for India. Carrom and Chess Tournaments, Peacock Event Hall, Fremont, CA. bayarea.aidindia.org/pfi2010

June 2010: Turning The Tide. Saathi Revathy tours US chapters spreading the word on Organic Farming. Attend a talk near you. www.aidboston.org/RevathyUSTour2010/

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