

Southern Revival

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While management of natural resources is crucial, micro finance is a catalyst for achieving sustainable agriculture. The experience of HIH shows how micro finance has played a supportive role in the ecological journey of a large number of farmers in Tamil Nadu.



In the past 100 years or so, the role of the State has been critical to the changes in the ecological chain in India. While rapid urbanization has cast its shadow over traditional water sources and farm lands, the role of the local communities in managing natural resources has decreased. Simultaneously, there has been a growing dependence on surface water and groundwater, and less on rainwater and floodwaters. This has not only led to a decline in groundwater tables and agricultural yields, but led to more areas becoming highly degraded throwing millions of poor farm people out of jobs. Finding ways to harvest and store rain water in rural India as well as to involve communities in the management of natural resources has become the challenge.

The Natural Resource Management Programme (NRM) of Hand in Hand was launched in October 2006 with the major objective of reviving a degraded environment and involving local people in its management. The way to do this was to forge partnerships with government agencies and local organizations to fund projects that would not only protect natural resources and revive agricultural activities, but more importantly, by undertaking the restoration of watersheds, so that the poorest of the poor in rural India would gain employment and improve their living standards. This would check ecological imbalances, promote clean living and green farming and create avenues for new marketing mechanisms.

Today, nine micro watersheds have been taken up for regeneration till now in three districts of Tamil Nadu – Kancheepuram, Thiruvannamalai and Cuddalore – and Chamrajanagar district in Karnataka, directly benefiting over 2,500 poor people, and generating nearly 10,473 man days of work. The NRM activities form a part of the Environment Pillar of Hand in Hand – one of the five Pillars of the organization. The other pillars are Self-Help Groups, Microfinance, Health and Citizen Centers Pillars.

Hand in Hand is working towards the goal of creating 1.3 million jobs to eliminate extreme poverty and strengthen livelihoods among impoverished communities.

Adimoolam, who has a tiny agricultural land in Arapedu, Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu, has benefitted from the integrated watershed management approaches of Hand in Hand. The small loose rock check dams and stone outlets have enabled the retention and proper flow of water in his farms. These structures have also helped increase soil fertility because of the retention of the moisture in the soil and also checked the velocity of water during heavy rains. “*Hand in Hand initiatives have helped recharge wells in the area. We are able to store water almost throughout the year and yields too have gone up,*” says Adimoolam. Today, thousands of poor people such as Adimoolam as well as those who were involved in the watershed restoration activities have reason to smile.

Now, other states too want to be part of the NRM programme. For instance, in Karnataka in collaboration with the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK), a local NGO, watershed programme, and, WADI, an orchard development programme for tribals in Chamrajanagar district are being implemented. Government programmes have often been designed to cover poor populations, but the delivery and scale have not been enough; and in many cases insufficient, not scaled-up enough to cover the vast impoverished populations. The NRM programme attempts to address the gaps that exist in the agricultural and agro-based sectors.

Methods and Approach

The Arapedu watershed comprising four villages and three hamlets covers an area of 1,092 hectares. It was planned at a cost of



Adimoolam on his farm

Rs 96 lakh, with financial assistance of Rs 85 lakh from NABARD, and the remaining amount was mobilized from community contribution. The watershed activities are based on traditional water harvesting technologies pioneered by people for centuries and localized to suit the environment and its inhabitants. For instance, water absorption trenches were constructed along the foothills of the mountains to hold and regulate the flow of water from the hills. And digging ponds, contour trenches and supply channels enabled and augmented the water flow.

The mammoth task involved over 3,200 members who are part of the water associations in four villages, and they take collective decisions to implement the watershed activities. Watershed Associations were formed and they elected members to the Watershed Committee, who are involved in the restoration and management of watershed activities. The Watershed Committee works in close coordination with different stakeholders including the panchayats – village-level democratic institutions. *“The watershed initiatives have had a positive impact on the village,”* says R Rajendran, vice-president of Arapedu village. Crop yields have doubled in the area, he adds.

Financing NRM activities

The organization is also making innovation as the key to widen the scope of its activities. For instance, Hand in Hand has started a revolving fund and gives loans to farmer groups or Self-Help Group (SHG) members so that they take up agricultural or agro-based activity. The dynamics of thousands of SHGs nurtured by Hand in Hand over the years has been such that most farmers have been able to pay back the amount and also improved their livelihood standards. The organization has also started another revolving fund with the help of NABARD, wherein landless farmers become eligible for loans to start any livelihood-based activity.

But the microfinance component is only a way to provide economic mobility. The NRM programme has organized workshops and field training for farmers to take up organic farming and guided them to practice sustainable agriculture. Today, many farmers such as Jayaraman in Murukeri village in Thiruvannamalai district have



Trench-cum-bund with plantation

switched over to organic paddy cultivation. *“Earlier, our input cost was high because of the use of pesticides and fertilizers. But after switching over to organic farming, we use less expensive (natural) inputs. This has increased the net profit,”* says Jayaraman.

Evolving a marketing mechanism to make such products viable in different markets is in the process. Simultaneously, several confidence-building measures to motivate poor farmers were undertaken. It took a six acre degraded land about 80 km from Kancheepuram on a five-year lease in December 2008. Here, it has constructed two ponds in the area and leveled the fields to do horticulture plantation.

In the adjoining villages it has adopted different approaches in the reclamation of land. In Murukkeri for instance – a tiny hamlet located in Thiruvannamalai district – local people got involved in the clearing of *Prosopis juliflora*, a wild weed and used machines in leveling the land and promoted agricultural activities. In Vilangadu village in the same district, this strategy has reclaimed over 100 acres of degraded lands. The NRM activities of Hand in Hand connect us to the ecological journey ahead of us, one of the ways to realize the potential of our poor rich planet.

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