

Questions and answers from Asha volunteers about the resource center.

a) Not clear why they need to buy land, instead of getting it from the govt.

- 1) The government does not just give away land to NGOs even if it is for the benefit of the people. The only kind of land we have managed to get for the people is dwelling land and even this takes 2-3 yrs. Even organizations working on charity model do not always get land where they need it and end up buying the land.
- 2) There is no govt land available in this area that would meet our requirement.
- 3) There are times when we work with the government, but there are also times when we need to question the govt and stand for the people's rights. In case if we get into a situation where we are part of a govt policy it is used as a leverage against the struggle and to keep us quiet. In the past, some govt officials have tried to threaten us saying they will take away the FCRA clearance, etc to make us abandon the people, but we have stayed firm. Please note that using govt schemes for an NGO is different from enrolling ppl into govt policies that are meant for them. This is certainly encouraged and part of the idea of the resource center is to understand these schemes better to allow the people to use them.

b) Why does it cost so much?

There is no uniform price of land across India. The price of land is determined by at least three factors:

- 1) Location of land
- 2) Quality - ground water other irrigation sources
- 3) Classification of land - what kind of soil, whether it is wetland or dryland. (Wetland implies that the land is fertilized and is cultivable depending on rains)

The community being served are presently 20 villages a total population of around 2000.

When we initially started we had identified a land of around Rs. 60,000/acre with Shanmuga. This was a dry land where we could not experiment cash crops, it was away from the community we

were still open for it. However, we had no funds and the land was sold to someone else.

The present land is close to the community so they can participate and experiment here. The advantages are:

- 1) wetland, redsoil – good for cultivation
- 2) Ground water is good (not only in this land, but in this area in general). One side has hills and rain water is accumulated at the bottom of the hill and seeps in slowly creating a good water table. There is also a small river that runs next to the land making it possible to experiment non rain dependent harvesting.
- 3) The owner has already spent the time to level many parts of the land to make it useable for cultivation. He was also able to cultivate a reasonable % of the land showing that it is useable.
- 4) It is very close to the community being served.
- 5) Land prices are around 1.5 lakhs/acre+ tax in this area. He also has installed borewell and electricity. Electricity meant for agriculture is very difficult to find in TN. The land is available to us for 1.2 lakhs/acre and is quite reasonable.
- 6) There is entry from this land to forest land that has been depleted, but we are hopeful that we can work with the govt to renew and refresh the earlier forest.

c) Apparently bonded laborers an acre per family and there are 300 families, cant we use some of that land towards this.

For the 200 people who were released from bonded labor who are living around this area the govt has provided 5 acres of dwelling land. The above information is incorrect. Each person is provided 3 cents of land i.e. around a acre for 30 ppl.

There are different kinds of lands that is available to the government:

- Dwelling land: for building houses, electricity and drainage could be provided. You are not supposed to use this for cultivation.
- Grazing land: meant for cattle to graze. Most of this land has been illegally claimed by landlords and is only available on paper.

- Pond land
- Forest land
- Popu land: This was meant for cattle sheds, etc. This is non existant.
- Temple land: Allocated to temples, mosques and other establishment. We have managed to get some of this land in the past from temples working with the government in another area.

c) Some people wanted to know what background Siddamma had to start something like this.

Siddamma was brought up in a village and her household occupation is farming. She has the personal experience of helping her family in the process for the first 20 yrs of her life.

Over the years she has observed how the agriculture system is vanishing and over her work with the grassroots communities over the last 20 yrs there is a clear need from the people to be able to develop sustainable communities.

She has been working with the Sarvodaya group which is part of the Gandhi resource center, Dindukal district, TN and has learnt much through the interaction.

She has also spent some time at Auroville, Pondicherry to learn about their techniques.

d) Who are the other resource people.

- 1) Namalwar - Agricultural scientist from the National Agricultural Institute. He has committed to spend 50% of his time here.
- 2) Lakshmi - Has put in agricultural efforts in the Kancheepuram area.

However, we want many resource ppl to come from the communities, to study the techniques used and find out what works and what does not. This can only be done through questioning all techniques and experimenting them.

Over the last many years it has become clear that the generically modified seeds (that only last one harvest), that require pesticides and fertilizer are a heavy investment for farmers (over 50% of their profits) and any year that fails plummets them into debt. The small land owners are becoming poorer and poorer. The complete failure of the present system is leading us to explore others.

e) Why do they use bullock carts and ox and not tractors? Why do we try to stop even that amount of modernization?

We are not averse to either progress or technology. Appropriate technology will be used.

Tractors are very expensive. The initial investment is around 5 lakhs. They are very heavy and give terrible mileage (5 km/liter). They are very difficult to maneuver in small pieces of land. Due to their poor mileage they are not very useable for transportation. It is not always good to use them - e.g.

- 1) They can be technically used to harvest paddy, the machine now only pulls out the paddy but also trashes it and saves the grain in one part and the "waste" straw in a less relevant compartment. This straw is used by the cows as fodder, but during the cutting it gets mixed with the grease that makes the fodder inconsumable for cows and is wasted.
- 2) Tractors are very heavy and packs the soil too close closing the air pores. Extended use of tractors over the years has been observed to yield bad results for this reason. This has been documented by the NAI.

The same investment can be used to purchase 20 cows. Cows are very useful, nothing is wasted, it eats fodder provides the muscle for cultivation, is also used by many people to travel, provides manure for crops, provides fuel to the people.

If the bottleneck are people and how much we benefit depends on how much land can be used then large machines are useful. If on the other hand you have a lot of people who are willing to do manual labor and have small areas of land that they can manage, you need to adapt to be effective.

One needs to carefully analyze the pros and cons and ground realities.

f) There are many govt funded groups that do seed diversity preservation and things like that

Forest development dept - gives out some saplings to grow, we try to work with the agriculture dept when possible. But, while there is a bit on paper not much has reached the people.

One possibility so far with the resource center is working with the energy department on renewable energy sources. They have promised to play an active part, but not much can be said at the moment. We keep in touch with the different govt departments and see how things turn out.

g) Why do we want to keep them undeveloped and preserve their stuff, can't we integrate them into mainstream.

This has been the attempt of the govt and of many groups so far. So far around 1-2 ppl from each village have been integrated into the mainstream. These people have left the villages and gone to the cities. The mainstream is 30% of the population in India what happens to the rest?

The education system is not meant to prepare children for their life, only for the next step in the ladder. They have no real life skills after 12 yrs of studies and there are many educated youth in the villages who don't have a job, who do not have a skill and who do not have the confidence to make their lives.

It is important to consider what the defn of development should be and whether it has actually benefited all the people (not a few selected ones, but all the people). If it hasn't, why call it development? If people are living in worse conditions even as far as basic requirements of food are concerned, why call it development?

h) Provide a year-by-year or a 3-yr or 5-yr plan on what will be achieved and done.

Stage 1

- 1) Identifying the resources and document local knowledge that is available in the community. Make a detailed survey about all the communities in the area.
- 2) 2-3 acre start agriculture
- 3) With the help of govt plant trees in the earlier forest land
- 4) Work with the govt to train ppl about rain harvesting
- 5) Identify key ppl
- 6) Identify children who can benefit from the school.
- 7) Syllabus construction based on teaching techniques that the children can relate to.
- 8) Build shelter to allow ppl to stay and keep materials
- 10) Relationship with the communities and interact with them and make them aware of the resource center.

Stage 2

- 1) Start the schools
- 2) Demonstration of agricultural techniques
- 3) Documentation of techniques and funds used for every area so people are aware of the alternatives and the successes and failures.
- 4) Sell vegetables in local markets
- 5) Slowly add on other skills and experiment with them.

Stage 3

- 1) Present what is there to the villages by inviting them over in events.
- 2) Based on success in the schools start involving the teachers of govt schools to study the techniques and encourage them to use the same in school.

Stage 4

Production center with the communities and get them to take ownership of the center for experimenting and use what they want in their villages.

i) Why should Asha support something like this?

Asha has been around for over 14 years and has a deep understanding that meaningful education is empowering in providing choices. The volunteers work for the underprivileged and have the motivation to work on schemes that are inclusive and not exclusive like most top down approaches are.