

Protect, Promote & Regenerate through Local Initiatives

At a time when increasing demands of rapidly expanding population have resulted in creation of wastelands due to desertification and soil erosion, a silent revolution is taking place in the Srikakulam district of northeastern Andhra Pradesh. Seven hamlets are engaged in developing micro watershed areas to conserve nature and promote sustainable rural development

Balaiya, a farmer from the remote village of Pogadavalli in northeastern Andhra Pradesh, had been unemployed for a few years. Low rainfall had resulted in sluggish agricultural activity in his village. Seeking better livelihood opportunities, he migrated to Hyderabad a few years ago and started working as a construction worker. He returned in 2009 for the next agricultural season but this time he did not have to go back to the city. He had found work with the ongoing micro-watershed management programme in his village.

“Now I don’t need to go to Hyderabad. There is ample work available in the village now”, says a smiling Balaiya. “NREGS and micro watershed activities under the SOMNEED project have given me plenty of livelihood opportunities within the village itself”, he adds as his fellow farmers call out to him to come and work. It has just rained in Pogadavalli and all are in a hurry to get to work on their farms.

Like Balaiya, many other young men now do not feel the need to move to cities for work.

Micro watershed for macro prosperity

The three watershed areas in the Srikakulam District of Andhra Pradesh offer an ideal terrain to implement a watershed approach to cope with present crisis of degrading natural resources and threatened agriculture.

SOMNEED uses a participatory approach in their watershed management efforts in the region. The project - rightly named Micro Watershed Management with Local Initiatives - was initiated in 2007 by SOMNEED in partnership with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) under the JICA Partnership Programme (JPP).

The project is now being carried out in three different watershed areas consisting of seven hamlets inhabited by 183 households.

SOMNEED believes in integrating the locals in every step of the project right from its inception to its execution. “The people are respected, their knowledge is recognized and their skills are utilized”, says SOMNEED official Mudunuru Ramaraju.

SOMNEED has adopted a five-point approach incorporating partnership building, community based issue analysis, action plan, implementation and monitoring, evaluation and feedback. The community partners have undergone extensive training sessions at the SOMNEED training centre in Borubadhra village in Pathapatnam mandal and in their own villages as well. The interactive sessions provide a platform for the people to

gradually move towards self reliance. “The people are trained to appreciate what they have, to plan and to leverage the resources at hand”, notes Ramaraju.

The tribal village of Godiyapadu is another one of the seven hamlets under the watershed project. The villagers here had started to notice that many of the plant species their elders used to talk about don't exist anymore. This shocking awareness made them come to the decision of preserving the present plant varieties for future generations.

During the training sessions the community was encouraged to document local knowledge of plant resources in the region, their propagation and usage. It took them about a year to survey the area and come up with the plant book containing about 100 species.



Sluice construction in Godiyapadu village/Photo credit: SOMNEED

To carry out the process of regeneration, the villagers with the assistance of SOMNEED took up twelve different activities to check soil erosion, collect rainwater for agriculture and increase soil fertility. When asked about the watershed activities, Gangaiya explains the structures and their locations through detailed illustrations on the blackboard.

Expecting visible results

Both Godiyapadu and Pogadavalli villages are expecting an increase in their harvest.

Regular availability of water and better irrigation - because of the construction of stone bunds that check soil erosion and heavy water flow - has enabled the farmers of Godiyapadu to cultivate more land and carry out mixed farming on their fields. They grow paddy, sunflower or sesame in rotation on the plains and cashew, mango and turmeric on the slopes.

They also grow wild brooms that are sold in the market. “Earlier we used two bushes to make one broom and manufactured about 10,000 brooms a year. But this year because of more soil accumulation we maybe able make a broom with just one bush. We are expecting about 15,000 brooms this year”, answers Uhika Jujaru a village farmer, when asked about the growth in yield.

“Previously, we could not cultivate the land below the tank as there was not sufficient water. Now, land can be irrigated and we are expecting that our harvest will be increased this year”, Gangaiya adds.

Need for a platform

As work in the villages increased people realised the need for a body to administer and coordinate the efforts. Thus, they formed the Grama Chaitanya Sangham in Pogadavalli and Maliyamatha Chaitanya Sangham in Godiyapadu in April and May 2010 respectively.

Both the community based organisations run on a democratic set up with one male and one female from each household as its member. The CBOs have extensive bye-laws written with assistance from SOMNEED and are managed by a president, secretary and a treasurer who are changed every two years.

Maliyamatha Chaitanya Sangham has shared responsibilities among members to monitor the village wells; Gangaiya shows us the records of water level measurements maintained by them for about four months now. With an aim to make Godiyapadu self sufficient in ten years, the members of the village community actively participate in the working of the CBO.

The Grama Chaitanya Sangham, with an executive committee of fifteen members also has goals to achieve. They aim to check migration, to educate the children, to protect common assets and provide pukka houses to each family.

The most noteworthy aspect of the CBO bye-laws is the participation of women. Women in both the villages enthusiastically take part in the functioning of the organisation as per the clauses mentioned in the bye-laws that ensure involvement of women.



Gauramma, Treasurer, Maliyamatha Chaitanya Sangham, CBO of Godiyapadu/ Photo credit: Monisha Khanna/OWSA

“After the formation of the CBOs, the villagers felt a need for basic laws that would govern the organisations. They therefore formed their own laws. We did not ask them to include women. The village folk themselves realised that involvement of women was vital in building a successful and sustainable organisation”, remarks Ramaraju.

A fresh beginning

When asked about the sustainability of the projects and the CBOs Gangaiya replies, “SOMNEED has given us training for more than two years. The maintenance of the forests and watershed structures is now upto us. We will not be dependant on anybody. However, since the organisation has just been formed we will need SOMNED’s inputs for the initial stages. It will take some time.”

Talking about the changes he has seen in the last three years Ramaraju observes, “The people here have developed a boldness to speak out. They are now more confident. And it is most remarkable to see that more and more youth are coming forward to take the lead.”

Even as the micro-watershed project approaches a close it marks the beginning of a new hope-filled future for the people of the seven hamlets covered by it. Even though the villagers are yet to see the results of their efforts, the micro-watershed management programme has empowered them to stand up on their own. “We have learnt how to conserve water and other resources but now we need to preserve them for lifetime”, states J. Padma, Secretary of Grama Chaitanya Sangham, as she shows us a handful of seeds that they had received from Godiyapadu village.

In the words of Nobuaki Wada, CEO SOMNEED, “This micro watershed project is the realisation of our twenty year’s quest”.”



J. Padma, Secretary, Gram Chaitanya Sangha, Pogadavalli village with seeds from Godiyapadu/
Photo credit: Monisha Khanna/OWSA