

Bharathi Trust Resource Center : Discussion on long term vision

Attendees : Bhaskar, Gaurav, Murali, Savitha, Siddamma.

Duration : 2 hrs

The call was organized to address the issue :

What is the long term plan for the Resource Center?

Vision for 5 yrs? Vision after 10 yrs?

Where would Asha's involvement stop?

Resource center's vision was to spread the awareness about the sustainability of organic farming. This process was started on a barren piece of land four years ago. At this point, the center has started growing crops like rice, sunflower, ragi, jowar, fruits and vegetables. A large number of farmers have been trained by the resource center and around 10 have started cultivation of crops using the organic farming principles.

However, at this point resource center is not fully sustainable and has been depending on Asha Austin for support. They hope to achieve sustainability in the next three to four years. They are actively looking to find support at the government level and have been able to sell some seeds to the government. They also plan to sell the crops grown at the resource center to various organizations.

Detailed minutes:

1. What is the plan for the resource center going from here?

Changing a whole community to be aware and completely convert to use organic farming practices a long term process (about 10 to 15 yrs), but is very important to the society. Namalvaar has been involved in such a effort for more than 35 yrs now. There are number of campaigns going on in India against chemical fertilizer companies like Monosato. This task is a challenging and time consuming one and apart from convincing farmers themselves, especially in Tamil Nadu, where political lobbying by chemical fertilizer companies is very high.

Resource center was started around 4 years ago. The land which was given to us was not barely cultivatable(only 30%) Asha-Austin funded initially with structures like the cowshed and check dams. Over the period of these four years, a large amount of land has been brought under cultivation. The resource center grows paddy, jowar, vegetables and fruits.

Most of the expenses are coming from the land and not dependent on external funding. There are 8 people involved full time at the center.

- we are in the process of increasing cultivable land
- trying to grow more green leaves

- watering
- growing fruit
- leaves around fruit plant
- lot of people come in the morn and leave in the even
- all the methods used here needs to reach the community, so far that's what is going on
- lot of people are aware of organic farm being there
- need to involve more farmers and help them practice the farm
- organic farm needs green lives and cow
- trying to get govt dept in the farm, so that they can support the farmer, meeting agricultural dept regularly
- sell the seeds to the govt so that other farmers can use it
- govt needs to support organic farming, in kerala govt is already doing it - want to bring animals
- TN Agriculture department just bought Rs20000 worth of seeds from resource center
- 3 years for self sustainability/govt support is what we are targeting
- community mobilization is very key

2. There were retention issues at the center, what steps have been taken to resolve these?

There have been quite a few people who have stuck around the resource center since the beginning. Although, The resource center has had issues with retaining people it has not stopped the work from getting done.

This was due to the following issues:

1. Originally, we were trying to develop this as a center to support the released bonded laborers. Although this seemed to be a good idea in the beginning, a lot of them did not believe in the concept of organic cultivation. So they would work for a few months and then leave.
2. A lot of the farmers are also in habit of drinking which was not encouraged at the resource center.
3. Lot of farmers can get better wages outside, so we need to keep increasing wages

We have worked on rectifying these issues:

1. The resource center has started hiring people who really believe in there philosophy and are no longer restricted to bonded labourers of the Irula community. Its easy to identify people who don't believe in the philosophy most of the time, sometimes it takes a few months. People who are not convinced leave after some time. Resource center is not to rehabilitate, but to spread the message for organic farming.
2. We are hiring upto 50% women, they tend not to drink and are more committed

3. Allowing the farmers to work outside apart from the resource center so that they can increase their income. At this point we have hired a person called Arogya Mary, who works at the center full time.

3. Why does the resource center need money for cowshed?

The cowshed was built four years ago and has broken down. It was built with thatch instead of tiles since tiles lead to heating which is not good for the cows during the summer months. The idea is to redo this every 3-4 years. Some cows are sick due to water leaking in the rain into the shed. Communicable diseases spread quickly under these situations, local govt helped in this situation to help the cows.

4. What does one need to setup an organic farm from scratch?

- 1 cow
- 1 cow shed which is covered
- compost pit
- ~10000 Rs
- cow fodder which can be grown surrounding the growing area
- organic farming cannot be used on cash crops like sugarcane
- The first year the farmer will be losing the crops since the land needs to start sustaining itself
- there are some new ways which we can use to remove the chemical salts from the land, but still they will lose some land in the first year at this point 10 farmers in the area have taken this up:
- RC supports them for manure, since they have no cow
- currently in the process of involving govt, they have responsibility and resources
- long term the resource center cannot keep providing this, since its not sustainable
- If govt will not come in, this will not work...the way to do that is to convince a lot of people

5. Can RC sell the manure to the farmers at some nominal rate?

- farmers have been volunteering instead of providing money
- for eg, waste fish and leaves were brought from outside for making manure
- need to allow them to try so that it spreads

6. How far away are u targeting to spread organic farming?

- 15 to 20 km
- can cover up to 50-60 km

7. How many farmers have benefited from the resource center?

In the past 4-5 years, first 2 years went for cultivating...next few years went in training..what is the stage at this point?

- not keeping track of the farmers, since not many of the farmers@RC knew how to read/write
- only recently we have been keeping track of people
- many people realise that organic farming is important
- met some TN agricultural department officer and are trying to tap resources
- farmers have to setup their own manure center, trying to see if they can do it together
- panchayat has decided to setup separate organic farm markets
- local farmers need support for another 3 years, will be sustainable after that
- many farmers will start practicing and help each other to develop this