

**Minutes of Asha Fellows conference call  
Thursday October 16, 2008.**

Attended by: Sanjeev (Bangalore), Ajoy, Sanketh, Meenakshi (UFlorida), Srikanth (Dallas), Sabita, Dinesh, Vinod (SV).

**[1] Discussion on Meenakshi's fellowship:**

<http://data.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Focusgroups/Fellowships/Proposals/Pending/Meenakshi/>

Sanjeev gave a background on Puvudham, and Meenakshi's role in it. Talked about the issue of migration problem, and the reason behind the hostel and the alternative education school. Meenakshi wants to address the larger problem of consistent migration, by addressing the employment needs of the local people.

Details on Puvudham itself, and its organic ventures, as well as the alternative education school etc. is all at: <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=578>

Previous meeting minutes on the discussion on Meenakshi's fellowship is all at:

[http://data.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Focusgroups/Fellowships/Conversations/General\\_Asha\\_Fellows\\_group/AshaFellows\\_minutes\\_08Aug2008.pdf](http://data.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Focusgroups/Fellowships/Conversations/General_Asha_Fellows_group/AshaFellows_minutes_08Aug2008.pdf)

Update on call with Meenakshi answering questions from the previous discussions.

- Current status of the project is that the organic nursery has been started. Children from 5th and 6th grade (the ones Meenakshi teaches) have done a survey in one village, and 20 farmers are very interested in pursuing organic farming.
- Next step is to train the farmers on what to do, the methods etc. Also train the children on how to assess, and do farm visits etc.
- According to this plan, they will initiate getting involved around November, and planting season starts in December.
- For this first experiment, there wont be any new employees. The children will help in the planting etc. Since it is only one village.
- The same 5th/6th grade kids will be involved, and Meenakshi sees this as a positive impact on them, since they will get experienced in organic farming methods, mulching etc.
- The primary idea is to get the farmers to have a trial plot where they will do organic farming, and a regular cropping plot. The children will help them maintain separate accounts for both. Manual labor is most likely going to be very similar on both plots. It might even be true that the yield on the organic plot is lower than the yield on the regular (chemical/fertilizer/pesticide) plot. But the comparison is on the total input-output costs, and actual profits made, and this number is expected to be higher for the organic plot [We seen this to be true in most case studies of Nammalvar's work, as well.]. This way the farmers are not pushed into organic farming, but they actually get to see that this would make more economical sense. Meenakshi will help in supplying materials etc.
- Also, it is not entirely profit-based comparison -- also have to include extent of soil erosion etc., since this is a very ecologically sensitive point in that area.

- Another point to note is that the Dharmapuri area is prone to severe natural weather conditions. So this whole project is sort of dependent on whether they get stuck in a severe drought situation or not. But that should be the only uncertainty here.
- Regarding Meenakshi's time at the hostel -- there are 70 kids now. A new girl named Sembagam has joined and has taken on very well and the kids also have a very good rapport with her. Even now, Meenakshi is not spending much time with the hostel except occasional advise regarding someone's health issue etc. Since the hostel is also 1.5kms away from the house, Meenakshi's involvement already is remote, over the phone mostly. Meenakshi thinks that as long as Sembagam and the lady who cooks stay on, there wont be any issue with the hostel, and this project will not take her time away to the extent that it will impact the smooth functioning of the hostel.
- Regarding time to be spent on the organic farming project, Meenakshi thinks to start with for the first few months, it might be about 1 day every week. Her plan is that there should be a self help group of the farmers for this program. If the farmers can contribute some little amount every month into a bank account, then Puvudham can match that contribution as well and help them build a resource. In such a scheme, Puvudham's support is also to the entire group, and not to any one individual. So that eventually, she expects that someone from this participating group will take up the task of keeping the program going, and eventually this collective resource will be able to pay for the time of this person. Meenakshi's idea is that if we get an external person to run this program (even in the long run), then the program will run as long as there is this external person, and the best thing to do would be to get the farmers collective to run it themselves.
- All the above is for farmers with land holdings. The idea of bamboo was primarily for the migrant laborers, so that eventually when the bamboo is ready, it can provide employment and reduce migration. Meenakshi still expects the men to migrate, but if the women stay back then the children will not be left uncared for. Currently the hostel is running at full capacity with such children, and they have had to refuse a few kids as well since they could not handle more. Also, bamboo and other such plants help in land regeneration and prevent degradation of soil.

Discussion on project-coord vs. fellowship. Due to auditing issues, it wont be possible to fund Meenakshi through Puvudham. Which is why Meenakshi is currently not paid for coordinating the school and the hostel at Puvudham. However, Meenakshi's proposed work will only overlap to certain extent with the current work.

**Vote:** Asha fellowship group votes to support Meenakshi's fellowship. **Approved.**

*Sabita:* We already support Puvudham and I vote for this.

*Meenakshi, Sanketh:* abstain

*Sanjeev:* Vote for this since we should already be supporting her for what she does at the hostel and school, apart from this proposal with organic farming, etc.

*Srikanth:* Vote for this since there are many unique aspects to this, including getting the children to work with the farmers and accounting etc.

*Ajoy:* favor

*Vinod:* Vote for this, agree with Srikanth on many unique features including the children working with organic methods. The challenge will be when this needs to be scaled to more farmers and more villages.

**[2] Update on the status of finding stewards/chapters for current fellowships:**

Asha Berkeley is discussing Sanju Kumar's fellowship.

Asha NYC/NJ is interested in Rajarethinam's fellowship.

Asha UFlorida is interested in stewarding, however do not have the finances to do so.

Asha SV to look at Meenakshi's fellowship since Asha SV is already supporting Puvudham.

If chapters are willing to steward and money is a constraint – may not really work if the chapter cannot come up with the funds.

**[3] Organizing the fellows conference:**

Have started a doc at: [http://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=ddbc6978\\_130hmnp4sgs](http://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=ddbc6978_130hmnp4sgs)

Please write in your notes there or on the list.

Discussed the possibility of scheduling at a different time, well staggered from Asha India conference. Decided that this should be considered only if there are overlaps, and there will be fellows who will not be able to attend either of those conferences because of their proximity.

Also, discussed following up on travel reimbursements from the previous conference. Srikanth and Vinod to follow up with all stewards and make sure this is done. A possibility is to get this done at the conference venue itself this year, so that it won't be a hassle.

Next step is to get in touch with all fellows and finding out if Jan 8/9/10/11 at Mehdiganj works for them. Agenda for the conference to be decided once we know who is attending, and once we have feedback from all attendees of previous conference.

**[4] Asha Hyderabad still trying to find funding for PCR's support:**

One possibility is to check if they have any funds donated on the website as Asha-US funds. Sanjeev to check and close the loop with them. No US chapter is currently supporting NICE.