

Cuddalore Floods – Land Restoration Work -- Site Visit Report by Sripriya Natarajan (AID Seattle)

On Sunday, April 3rd, 2016 my Father in Law Shri. R Srinivasan and I visited the villages in which INSPIRE was working to restore lands affected by the floods in the Cuddalore District. We left from early in the morning at 5 AM. Half way through the city, we saw the sun rising!



The rains occurred in November 2015 and had caused a huge amount of destruction. The villages were visited by Revathi and the INSPIRE team and they gained an understanding of the entire scope of the damages. We had begun working with them since December. The purpose of the visit is to understand the damage and see it first hand and review the progress of the work done so far. Once we entered the villages, it was beautiful to see the vast acres of land with cashew trees and jackfruit trees.



Every village has a “sacred grove” which is left untouched. Serves as a sanctorium for the birds. Reminded me of “Marma Desam” ☺.



I visited Maaligampattu, Thalampattu, Visur, and a couple of other villages. It was interesting to see the above board in many of the villages. Many of the villagers had small holdings (<1 acre) and some had 4-6

acres.



The sand was completely foreign to the land. The rains had brought in sand from the mines of the neighboring Neyveli Lignite Corporation. The pattern of destruction was chaotic. Some pieces of land were completely left untouched but others had severe damage. The lands I visited had paddy, urad dal, cashew trees and jackfruit trees. Cashew trees take several years (3-5) to start giving returns. Unfortunately, all the hardwork of the farmers had been drained away during the floods. Many of the farmers had left the lands for the city since they felt nothing can be done about it (it had been turned into a desert).



This farmer and his wife had taken a loan of 7 lakhs to start his animal husbandry unit and grow his business. He had bought chickens and had laid out a huge shed. The rains had washed away almost all of his chickens ☹️. The bank had given him a 6 month deferral but had said they can't do anything else about it and expected him to start paying his loans immediately after that. He stands to show how much water they had during the floods. In early April, the heat was excruciating. My camera/camcorder would not stay on for a long time and I lost many videos because of this.





Here was a piece of land they had cleared. Notice the amount of sand that had to be cleared. It was much taller than me and I had to stand on a platform to get a picture. Behind, you see a green patch. The farmers had started growing sesame as soon as the land was reclaimed. Many of the farmers were not waiting for anything else. They only needed the lands cleared and they were very happy to go back to work.





Below is an area where it was actually a very dense forest a couple of decades ago. The forest department cleared the forest away since they felt they needed to get some revenue. They planted eucalyptus which is not native to this land and requires a lot more water. Smt. Revathi pointed this out because if the forest had been around, the rushing water could have also been stopped from entering the villages.





More of the effects of deforestation. This land is pretty much turning into a desert.



I was looking forward to going to Visur, which was the first village AID and INSPIRE started working in December 2015. I wanted to gain an understanding of how the villagers were settling back in.







Some lands had been reclaimed and they started growing sesame. We were travelling in a tractor at this time because the lands that we were going to see were not accessible by a car. The next picture is actually a waterway but almost become a plain because of multiple reasons: the waterways and canals not being desilted by the Public Works Department; the sands brought in by the rains etc.



We had an hour long discussion with 3-4 farmers as to the importance of sustainable farming and why its important, what the next steps are etc. Just the previous day, 100s of farmers had gathered and voiced their support and interest towards forming a producer cooperative so that the farmers can earn a better share.

Conclusive thoughts

The visit gave me a good grounding and understanding about the basics of the work that we do in AID. Sustainable development is not rocket science. It is listening to the needs of the people and providing timely support. I felt happy that we were able to play a small role in restoring the lands of the farmers so they can carry on with their livelihood when no one else had come forward to do it. It needs to happen at a much larger scale and faster too. It also left me nervous as to how we would be able to help all these farmers, what kind of support would be required, at what scale will we be able to help out and several other thoughts. But we will have to take small consistent strides in order to make big leaps. Hats off to the team on the ground led by Ms. Revathi -- to understand the underlying forces that caused the destruction; to have confidence that change is possible dealing with various adversaries as they occur; to be able to have a vision in mind and communicate it to the various stakeholders such as government functionaries, industrialists who have the capacity to help make the change; to be able to communicate to the farmers hope, promise and techniques.