

New Earth Team

Ammapettai, near Tiruchirappalli

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Project: Economic empowerment through sustainable agriculture and alternate crops.

We reached the Ammapettai bus stand and a volunteer picked us up and dropped us at the village of Mathur. This is one of the villages where the project was executed. Mr. Natarajan, the head of NET, had passed away a couple of weeks before my visit. Ms. Sumathi, the next head of NET received us along with some of the beneficiaries at the building of the government kindergarten. After this, we went to the NET office in ammapettai village where we met with more beneficiaries. We also visited the widow and children of Mr. P. Natarajan.

The project we funded had the following elements:

- Revolving fund for buying floriculture grafts
- Training on making organic fertilizers
- Social awareness programs

We talked to the villagers to learn about how they benefitted with our project and the challenges they are currently facing in earning a livelihood. My sister and I asked questions to several individuals (asked them to describe their family's livelihood). We gathered most of the day through these discussions.

Most of them were upbeat how jasmine flowers are providing a good supplementary income. While a lot of crops / vegetables are being grown in this area, only few plants / crops yield for more than 1 harvest.

We also visited the fields where we found Jasmine, Sunflower, maize, corn, dal varieties, oilseeds and a lot more crops. We got to see what they meant by inter-crops, how jasmine shrubs grow.

Government funding in the villages:

- 100 day guaranteed income for each family (NREGS)
- Infrastructure for improving agriculture
 - Platform for drying the freshly reaped crops until the grains separate out
 - Decent roads (maintained through NREGS)
- The efficiency of fund distribution depends on the village panchayat

Economic conditions:

- Construction industry in nearby Trichy and Pudukottai districts are a good source of income to male members.
- Jasmine flowers are providing year round supplementary income
 - Actual income depends on the festival seasons
 - Women / children help out flower collection in the morning
- There are a couple of colleges nearby that also employ some of the villagers

Status of agriculture:

- Water enough for agriculture for about 6 – 9 months
- Water table becoming very salty in summer.
 - It is impossible to start any crops when water is salty.
- Wells are shared by 3 – 4 fields / families.
- Land ownership was in many forms
 - Some owned a few acres of land (inheritance)
 - Some owned less than 1 acre (their house is in the same place, usually)
- Tractors and other machines are used
- Organic fertilizers are also prepared and used

How floriculture works here:

- A couple of them travel to Kanyakumari district to buy jasmine grafts in bulk
 - When Mr. Natarjan was doing it, he would buy and bring it in himself
- The fields are prepared a few weeks ahead of time
- Water level in the wells are usually good enough for planting the jasmine grafts
- They plant the grafts few feet apart from each other (2 together)
- In the gap between the shrubs, they plant some vegetables (kitchen gardening)
 - This can be done only till the jasmine plant is small
- A good percentage of these grafts service if they take good care of it (like watering, pruning, fertilizers etc...)
- Each plant flowers for about 5- 7 years
- Jasmine plants seem to grow very well in salt water!
- Every day, the women and kids pluck these flowers and take them to the nearby market in Trichy by afternoon

Things I heard about (I couldn't see for myself):

- Preparing organic fertilizer, vermi-composting etc...
- Awareness trainings

Other projects underway:

- HEKS Limited

- An experimental project to find out ways to tap into government funds for employment guarantee
 - Employs 4 fulltime employees

Challenges in the site visit:

- Talk to people without NET volunteers involved
- Ms. Sumathi didn't have all the details of the projects that "New Earth Team" has executed in the recent past. as she had just taken over. She was very well aware of the dynamics in the village.

Items of concern:

- Ms. Sumathi is new to NET. Mr. Natarajan didn't leave the information with others. She is trying to gather all information from beneficiaries, proposal writer and board members.
- Micro-credit loans don't seem to work very well. It is hard to get money back from people.

Photos:







