

**Reclaiming soil, dignity of farmers, self reliance, sustainable
livelihood and health**

***Initiative to promote Organic Farming, Millet Production, Consumption
and Marketing in Veppur Block, Perambalur district***

Concept Note & Status Report

*Agriculture is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end
contribute most to real wealth, good morals and happiness*

~Thomas Jefferson

Introduction

State Planning Commission (SPC) has used 5 parameters of backwardness namely Poverty (PV), Industrial Backwardness (IBB), Educational Backwardness (EBB), Drought (DPAP) and Health to identify the backward blocks /wards in Tamil Nadu. 7 out of 105 blocks / wards identified are backward in all five parameters of backwardness. Veppur block in Perambalur district is one of the 7 blocks figuring in all 5 parameters of backwardness and is listed as the 385th and last Block. Barefoot Academy of Governance (BA for short) was assigned the task of preparing a Model 5 year perspective plan, by SPC and we submitted our final plan in Jun.2014 after a detailed study. Since then BA has been working in Veppur block.

Agri. Context

Based on our Perspective plan work and further studies, extensive interactions with farmers, we can summarise the agri.context in Veppur block as follows:

Cropping Pattern

Cropping pattern has undergone a complete shift in the last 10-15 years. There is a clear shift from millets and local varieties of corn to HYV / BT varieties. Traditionally farmers used to cultivate *cholam*, *varagu*, *kambu*, *kadalai* (groundnut), *milagai* (chilli), vegetables and *kothamalli*.

However the penetration of cash-economy based agriculture using HYV seeds has resulted in most farmers shifting over to HYV Maize (*muthu cholam*) and BT Cotton in rainfed areas in the southern half of the block; sugar cane, paddy, tapioca, turmeric, vegetables etc are grown in the northern part where Chinnar and Vellar rivers flow and in patches of central part of the block. Tank irrigation is quite prevalent in these areas. Even with these crops, farmers had switched over to seeds/varieties which are considered to be high yielding to fetch more income.

In the rainfed areas, farmers are now mainly cultivating Bt.Cotton (35% of cropped area-ca) and Industrial Maize (41% of ca)¹. More than 75% of the cropped area falls under Bt Cotton & Industrial Maize.

Land Holding & SC farmers²

About 78% of cultivators are marginal farmers having less than 2.5 acres. 15.28% are small farmers having upto 5 acres of land. 6.7% are medium farmers having upto 10 acres and only 0.02% are large farmers having more than 10 acres. About 93% of cultivators are Small & Marginal farmers having less than 5 acres of land.

About 98% of SC farmers own less than 5 acres, of which 88% own less than 2.5 acres of land.

¹ Block G Return Fasli,2011-12

² Source: District HDR 2014

Agri economy

Considering the high percentage of small and marginal farmers in Veppur block, credit availability, accessibility to seeds and other inputs are major factors which influence the choice of crops. Selling of seeds of maize and BT cotton and fertilizers is controlled by local agents in Veppur block who also double up as credit providers.

There is minimal or no proper credit system available with govt. involvement. This makes farmers to get trapped in the vicious cycle of debt.

Moreover, very little processing and value addition happens in Veppur block. Produce is directly sold to Market. Industrial maize is sold to Poultry industry in Namakkal and other areas and Bt. Cotton is sold to cotton industry in Tirppur and other areas.

As the farmers are totally dependent on local money lenders and agents, they are forced to sell their produce at very minimal price.

The havoc created

In the last 10-15 years, Veppur block has become the hub of Bt. Cotton and Industrial Maize. Need for high chemical intensive farming for these crops has spoilt soil, water and bio-diversity in the area. Health is a serious concern as millets are totally thrown out of the food basket. Livelihood of farmers is also in peril.

Sustainable interventions-Explored Possibilities

After extensively studying the agriculture context in Veppur Block, we have visited many successful agriculture based initiatives in Tamil Nadu and other states, which cover the entire chain from production to Marketing and also address the issue of health by promoting consumption of Millets. We have also had extensive interactions with the experts in the

field. Visits included Sittilingi Organic Farmers Association (SOFA)³, Timbaktu Collective, AP⁴, Organic Farmers Market (OFM)⁵ etc.

Progress sofar

Following a two day organic farming conference in Veppur, inaugurated by Sub-Collector in May2015, 22 farmers have volunteered to grow Millets using organic farming methods. But only 10 have gone for sowing.

We have organised trainings on Millets by experienced farmers and experts from 'Siruthaniya Magathuva Maiyam', GoTN and also field trainings on organic inputs etc. We have also made a visit to Sittilingi with farmers to learn how a collective of farmers could succeed not only production but also in marketing.

Our farmers have opted nearly 10 crops in the last Aadi-Avani agriculture season, mainly Varagu and other millets like Thinai, Kudiraivali, Samai, Nattukambu, , Irungu Solam and other crops like Kadalai, Thuvarai & vegetables. In the end of the season out of 5.5 acres, farmers could produce 2232 Kgs of Varagu. Other crops are used for slf consumption. Barefoot Academy of Governance has made arrangements to buy Varagu from farmers @Rs.30/Kg.

We have travelled widely to explore machinery for processing and value addition. We are exploring the possibility of setting up a processing and value addition unit in Veppur block with the participation of women SHG.

Our organic farming initiative was part of a UNDP project addressing 'Water, Food & Agriculture, Sanitation, Livelihood & Bio-diversity securities' in 3 backward block in TN (Veppur), Maharashtra (Mokhada) and Odisha (Muniguda).

³ Collective of 300 organic tribal farmers excelling not only in production but also in marketing

⁴ This Collective works with 100s of tribal farmers in Anantpur district and a very successful model too

⁵ A network of organic shops which helps farmers to directly sell their produce at a better price

In the current season nearly 50 farmers, covering more than 60 acres have volunteered to grow millets like Vargagu, Irugu Solam, Thinai, Kudiraivali etc. Many of them have already gone for sowing.

We have already organized a one-day workshop on Organic farming and Millets and a field training for organic inputs in the month of Aug.2016.

Way Forward

So far we have been able to mobilise farmers and facilitate the process without any major hurdles. We foresee the following broad tasks/commitments ahead of us for the next 3-5 years

1. Evolving an institutional arrangement for the collective

This includes evolving constitution/ MoU/ Framework for functioning; bring in democracy and ownership (Electing representatives). Main agenda is to promote a self-propelled, self-managed and self reliant model leading to a self-sustained collective.

2. Imbibing ideology and enhancing skills whenever necessary

This includes Training and workshops on Zero budget farming & other Sustainable agri. Practices; Possibilities in Seed Production; Possibilities in Processing and Value addition; Possibilities in Marketing; Institution building; Exposure Visits to Deccan Development Society, Timbatktu Collective , OFM, processing units etc.

3. Arrangements for processing and value addition

This includes setting up a processing and value addition unit (To Explore possibilities for soft loans/ grants etc); Intensive training (including from govt. institutions); Involving women

4. Self consumption and reaching out to others (Marketing Linkage)

This includes Promotion of millet based traditional food habit in Veppur Block by organising Traditional Food Festival, workshops

and competitions for women, students etc; identifying a network of organic shops across TN & other states which can buy our produce.

5. Need based association with govt. Institutions

In terms of Production, processing and value addition technology; Soft loans to set up processing and value addition units; Promotion of PuP (Public-Public Partnership)

6. Need based studies

This includes studies on Soil health, Water context, Pests, birds and Agriculture, Impacts of Chemical Intensive farming, Agri. economy etc.

7. Documentation & Dissemination

This includes Documenting on Farmers and Farms, Process, Trainings and Workshops. Dissemination includes creating an FB Page, Writing articles, Publication of small booklets etc; Organising Organic Food Mela etc.

The broad commitments mentioned above are collective commitments and we hope that with the participation and contribution from farmers, government agencies, other support institutions and press, we can realise the objectives we set for ourselves. We only hope that in the long run, farmers and people of Veppur block will lead a self-reliant, sustainable life.

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams

~Eleanor Roosevelt