Tamil Nadu Floods
Relief and Rehabilitation

Chennai and neighboring districts of Cuddalore, Kanchipuram, Pondicherry and Tiruvallur were deluged by unprecedented rains in December 2015. This epic downpour, a record in the last hundred years, resulted in large scale devastation of homes, livelihoods, loss of hundreds of lives and displacement of a large population.

AID Eureka team started relief work immediately, using rafts to reach flood survivors in interior hamlets and slums in Chennai. Volunteers waded through knee deep stagnant water mixed with sewage and debris, to distribute tokens, to ensure relief reached all those affected.

With a strong grassroots presence in affected areas, the AID Eureka team facilitated a door-to-door outreach with relief materials in the flooded areas.

Flood survivors in the affected villages and slums were predominantly daily-wage laborers and small scale farmers, who had lost all they had and their livelihoods. Once immediate needs were addressed, AID focused on long-term rebuilding through Eureka Homes Project, working with flood survivors as active partners. Villagers in Koovathur village in Kanchipuram district agreed that among the worst affected people were Selvi, a daily-wage worker, and her husband Kuman, suffering from epilepsy. The villagers all contributed shramadan (donation of labor) to help rebuild their home in sixteen days. To date, fifty homes have been constructed. For his efforts in coordinating this work, AID volunteer Selva Ganapathy received the Indian of the Year Award from CNN-News18 on behalf of the people of Chennai.

Radha Aravamudhan studies education at San Jose State University and volunteers for AID in the Bay Area.

Cuddalore: Reviving Farmlands

The heavy rains in Tamil Nadu in 2015 came just ten days before harvest time. Crops were destroyed and farms were covered in 5-7 feet of sand. Some farmers spent up to Rs. 30,000 to recover their lands and gave up; some decided to move to cities for work, some contemplated taking their own life. The government told farmers it could do nothing for them. (see page 2, column 2)
In March 2016, the Safai Karmachari Kavalu Samiti or Safai Karmachari Watchdog Committee organized a series of rallies from Kolar to Bangalore over ten days, calling for the proper implementation of 2013 Manual Scavenging act. In Tumkur the District Collector held a separate meeting with the workers’ unions to plan how to implement the Act.

Karthik Ranganathan, a volunteer from AID-Dallas chapter, now lives in Bangalore and visits Thamate regularly.

AID volunteers learned about the struggle of the Safai Karmacharis at the 2016 annual AID conference, from Obalesh Bhemappa, a keynote speaker. We were also inspired by Medha Patkar, who told us about the struggles of the adivasis of the Narmada valley. Over 200 volunteers travelled from all over the US and beyond to attend, and returned energized to their chapters.

Reviving Farmlands (contd. from page 1):

AID contacted INSPIRE, founded and directed by Revathi M., an organic farmer and partner of AID for over a decade. The INSPIRE team visited Cuddalore and, starting with the worst affected village, Visur, began working with the local government departments and the farmers. The team convinced them of their approach to remove debris and sand from the fields and restore organic content. The Collector offered his full support; the Agriculture Engineering department decided to subsidize some of the heavy machines and deploy some of their best engineers to help on the field. With financial support from AID, the machines arrived and farmers moved the sand from their lands, cleared the debris, and began to see their top soil again. In 15 days the entire village of Visur was recovered.

Thanks to the efforts of INSPIRE, thousands of farmers in 17 villages have converted to sustainable agri-cultural practices. Forty percent of the farmers have started cultivating in this season. Others are sowing soil-fixing seeds to build soil fertility and prepare to convert to sustainable practices in the next season. In Visur and Melirippu villages, 4000 farmers want to form producer companies and the INSPIRE team is exploring options with the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).

Revathi is visiting the U.S from September 15th to December 6th. She plans to visit following AID chapters: Austin, Bay Area, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnatti, Colorado, Columbus, Dallas, New Jersey, Salt Lake, Seattle, and Washington DC. Contact dishaa@aidindia.org for details.

Arun Gopalan, an IT Director in Malvern, volunteers with AID in Philadelphia and is part of the Central Relief and Rehabilitation Team.
From the Editors’ Desk

Holistic Vision of Development

Starting with a simple idea that problems are interconnected, so must be the solutions, AID grew as people came together to be part of the solution. What have AID volunteers learned from the grassroots about the meaning of development and the meaning of India?

25 years ago AID started supporting non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in underserved areas. Some NGOs ran schools or health camps, dug wells, or trained youth in vocational skills. Adapting some of their effective practices, AID initiated efforts in other needy villages, supplying ragi to malnourished children, promoting kitchen gardens and in the process, getting to know the priorities of people living in poverty.

When we asked why the wells were dry, why the poor were hungry, or why they spent more on illness than the non-poor did, we found injustice behind every answer. Organizations concerned about poverty in the villages had to decide: should they fight these injustices so that people could obtain services by right and have a voice in their own development? Or should they provide services?

We found that the stand taken by the most effective, mass-based groups was to link the two, both on principle and as a matter of strategy. Organizations that provided services worked in solidarity with those that trained people to monitor and advocate for public services, and also questioned the policies and practices that led to denial of rights to basic needs such as food, water, health, education, land and livelihood. Movements questioning unjust policies and paradigms of development supported efforts to practice alternatives and demonstrate models that the government could adopt at a large scale. Creating alternatives, known as Nirman, went hand in hand with challenging injustice, known as Sangharsh.

In these approaches, the poor, marginalized and oppressed people are not passive beneficiaries but active agents of change whose results will benefit society as a whole. The non-oppressed who join hands in struggle learn to speak truth to power, even if it means asking uncomfortable questions about their own role in social, economic and ecological system.

This leads to the third component of holistic development: responsible living, known as Seva. Reaching beyond its conventional meaning of service to the needy, seva is the act of taking personal responsibility for the social and environmental impact of our everyday actions and choices. In other words, through seva, we serve our need to be part of a fair society and healthy planet.

While opposing deforestation or expressing solidarity with farmers in crisis, are we eating foods harvested sustainably, with fair wages paid, and without wasteful packaging? Or are we consuming the fruits of destructive development? Never underestimating the role of thoughtful personal actions, AID volunteers have supported one another in the effort to be the change: conserving water, avoiding disposables and packaged goods, questioning caste, class and gender injustice and striving to practice equality.

Even when one achieves success it may appear to be "a drop in the ocean." By working in a spirit of unity, we can make our efforts, our solidarity, and our commitment represent, as the poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi once said, "the mighty ocean in the drop."

LS Aravinda is a Development Coordinator of AID.

Ctrl-Alt-Del: reboot@25

T-shirts have played a major role in AID. Twenty-three years ago, what is now our logo was submitted by a cartoonist at the University of Maryland student newspaper as a T-shirt design entry. Students at the University of Maryland began to recognize AID's name because of its first Taj Mahal T-shirt which became a big hit. This was crucial in launching AID with tabling events in the Indian community in the Washington DC area and making it grow.

Today in the 25th year of AID, we are hoping to use the new People Reboot T-shirt as a springboard to think deeper about launching AID's non-profit shop. We are thinking of ways to involve young AIDers - a young homeschooler in Mumbai came up with the Ctrl-Alt-Del idea. Volunteers pondered and completed the idea to "People Reboot". A volunteer from AID-Atlanta responded by suggesting the T-shirts can be printed by a group he founded in India that provides livelihood in tailoring and T-shirt making to survivors of sex trafficking. Order your own T-shirt today at shop.aidindia.org. Happy Independence Day!
Recently Approved Projects


Bal va Mahila Chetana Samiti: Short Stay Shelter for Survivors of Violence. Bhilwara, Rajasthan. ($12900, Los Angeles and Boston). Women survivors of rape, domestic violence and other brutality are provided a safe space and legal services.

Adivasi Dalit Women Empowerment Study Center: Snehibhavan Home. Kottayam, Kerala. ($14280, Lewisburg). Girls from tribal and dalit communities study and gain job skills.

Institute of Pioneers for Rejuvenating Earth (INSPIRE): Skill development Center: Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu. ($24020, DC Metro, Seattle). Farmers learn integrated and sustainable farming techniques and get help to establish micro enterprises for fruits, vegetable and dairy products and animal husbandry units.

Bombay Sarvodaya Friendship Center: Soil and Water conservation. Narmada, Gujarat. ($3291, Dallas). 800 farmers in 11 villages manage watersheds and conserve soil to improve yield of paddy, which has suffered due to low rainfall.

Development Research Communication & Services Center: Seed Conservation, South 24 Paraganas, West Bengal ($8231, Boston): Small and marginal farmers preserve local varieties of seeds.

Organic Farmers’ Market in Kolkata

You will not forget the taste of Chaiti Moong Daal grown organically by the farmers of Sunderbans.

Why organic? Many of us know it is good for our health. Working with farmers in Sunderbans since Cyclone Aila devastated agriculture in 2009, we are learning that sustainable agriculture is better for the livelihoods and health of the farming families who feed us everyday as much as it is priceless for the ecology. And don't forget the taste!

Today AID volunteers are working with 3 outlets in Kolkata so that the farmers of Sunderbans are able to sell their organically grown produce directly in the cities. Starting with 50 kg a week earlier in the year, the farmers are sending 350 kg of fresh vegetables which are selling out within an hour.

There is increased awareness and demand in the urban population to eat healthy and ensure a fair livelihood for the farmers. We cannot eat better unless everyone eats and lives better from the farm to the plate. Visit AID Kolkata’s facebook page for updates.

Somnath is a Development Coordinator for AID, and has worked with Sunderban farmers since 2009.

Many students and faculty of Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics are choosing to eat organic produce grown by the farmers of Sunderbans.