

## EDITORIAL

### “EXPERIENCES OF WORKING WITH THE RURAL POOR” EIGHTH INTAF WORLD CONFERENCE London, 18th June 2011

The Eighth INTAF World Conference was held in Development House, London, with the generous support of AFP (Asian Foundation for Philanthropy). The theme, “Experiences of Working with the Rural Poor”, provided an opportunity for people with different experiences to give their views from a range of interesting perspectives.

The conference was presided over by Jyoti Singh, INTAF International Convenor. The first speaker was **Mukat Singh**, who spoke from a grass-roots perspective as someone who has worked with the rural poor for the last forty years. As well as giving some personal examples of the early days when he struggled to find ways to help poor villagers, he talked frankly about the lessons he has learnt.

The first is that it is only by living and working with the rural poor, sitting with them, talking to them, finding out about their problems, their worries and ambitions and sharing them, that it is possible to get ideas of how to help them. Later experiences also taught him that it is essential to speak in the simple, everyday language of the people, not in the ridiculous mix of literary Hindi and English that government officers and other professionals tend to use.

He told the audience that he felt the greatest obstacle that prevents the rural poor from getting out of the terrible rut of poverty, is the attitude of those who are supposed to help them, an attitude that assumes many things, without actually knowing the truth of any of them. For example, assumptions that villagers don't want to change, that they aren't highly educated so they must be ignorant, that they breed like rabbits, that they are dirty and uncivilised, that they are dishonest, that they are not interested in sending their children to school, that the crime rate in villages is very high and that they are in all respects, inferior to educated urban people.

He pointed out that no qualified doctor in India wants to work in a village, let alone live in one. Even primary school teachers rarely live near the schools they teach in but prefer to commute daily from a town. In recent years,

the Indian government has spent a fortune building primary schools in every village and staffing them with highly paid teachers. Then they have sat back, satisfied that they can confidently declare that now everyone in India has access to education.

No one bothers to look at what kind of education they are getting.

In 2004, the World Bank conducted a comprehensive survey of primary schools in rural India. In 2008, Mukat Singh organised a survey of ten such schools to see if things had changed. They hadn't. The findings supported those of the World Bank - schools that seldom open for the whole of the school day; 20% of teachers absent every day; 25% of assistant teachers absent; teachers never staying for the whole day; teachers moving in and out of school during the day without informing anyone or asking permission; 80% of schools never holding an assembly; pupil/teacher contact only 45%; teachers invariably late arriving; most students arriving at school before any of their teachers; schools never opening at the official time.

He felt that the disrespect townspeople show towards villagers is not borne out by the facts; the lifestyle of rural people is less expensive, less wasteful and more sustainable and does not exploit people. Moreover, rural folk live closer to nature and are much more likely to have a community spirit; statistics tell us that most crime, especially the serious ones, occurs in the towns and cities. Villagers tend to be more law-abiding and have a greater sense of ethics; female foeticide is causing a huge imbalance between males and females. But in villages, the ratio has hardly changed whereas in towns and cities, it has dropped to as low as 810 girls for every 1000 boys; when an election comes, nearly all villagers cast their votes; the percentage is much lower in urban areas; and villagers are proud of their hospitality; they are generous to a fault; no matter how poor a villager is, he will never turn anyone away without giving him food; city people, on the other hand, are often mean and stingy.

There are two striking lessons that he has learnt over the last forty years. The first is that all the policies and programmes devised by the governments to alleviate rural poverty are made by urban-based, highly educated people sitting in offices far, far away from the rural poor. Their ideas are usually theoretical and academic; no one actually consults villagers or goes into the villages to check whether they will work. The second lesson is that when the government makes a policy or scheme, they only make one for the whole country. It is implemented nationwide without any modification or variation. No one thinks, for example, that what will work well in Gujarat or Maharashtra will not be practical in U.P. or Bihar. India is a huge country; every state is different; it's not just obvious differences such as language, food and style of dress; it includes crucial differences in attitudes and ways of working. This failure to tailor programmes to cater for the specific needs of different areas has meant that many schemes were totally unsuccessful in some parts while doing well in others.

His experiences have also shown him that if you have some ideas for helping the rural poor, then you must implement them yourself; you should not expect others to. He has also realised that the current education system in India does not help the rural poor in any way. In fact, the more highly educated a person becomes the less humane and sympathetic he is. Educated people need to be de-educated. Although it is not easy, it is possible, with the right education, to bring about a change in people's attitudes.

The last important lesson his experiences have taught him is that rural development is not a one-way process. The truth is that for those who come in contact with the rural poor, who live and work with and among them, even for just a short period of time, the benefits are very much two-way. He has seen this with volunteers from abroad as well as with project staff. Thus, if anyone is fortunate enough to be able to go out and help the rural poor, they will be surprised at how much they too will benefit from the experience.

The next two speakers, who gave a joint presentation, were **Dr Kamal Taori** from India, Chairman of the Rural Business Hub and **Irmel Marla**, originally from Germany but now living in India and Chair of the International Institute for Holistic Research and Voluntary

Action, a joint India/Germany establishment. Their talk was lively and entertaining but made a number of serious points. They emphasized the importance of a holistic approach and of finding holistic solutions to the challenges of our time. Dr Taori spoke of reducing costs by "marketing the unmarketed" and networking, both of which are particularly important in view of the indifference of the bureaucracy in India. Irmel Marla pointed out that despite claims of having reduced poverty significantly, the true situation is that in rural areas, 50% fall in or near the "Below Poverty Line". Unfortunately, current systems of grants and subsidies have killed the spirit of entrepreneurship. One of the worst examples of this is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Indeed, the main obstacles in the way of sustainable development are the bureaucracy and the attitude of government agencies and politicians. The bitter truth is that it is in their interests to keep the poor poor.

Dr Taori mentioned a forum for IAS performers that he has set up to fight the bureaucracy. Politicians, ministers and bureaucrats tell the poor that they are there to solve all their problems. This is simply not possible. Rather, we should be:

Exploring the unexplored

Selling the unsold

Realising the unrealised

Using the used-less

All of these come under the general heading "Marketing the unmarketed."

Both speakers urged self-realisation without exploitation as a realistic solution and made it clear that there was nothing wrong with profit as long as it did not exploit anyone. People should not depend on others but should be interdependent. A vibrant model of rural development would include redefining success parameters. It should not be based on welfare schemes or grants. People must become leaders of their own destinies.

Dr Taori went on to suggest a number of ways of releasing unused potential, for example, retired NRIs who could enjoy a much better retirement in the country of their birth and could make use of their excellent entrepreneurial skills and bring much-needed business and business approaches with them. He offered a model for replication:

Public

Private

Panchayat

Profitable

Progressive  
Partnership

He later added four more 'ps' – poor, press, politics and public resources. This model would involve the public and private sectors working together, as well as the Panchayat. The latter could make use of the land owned by village councils. Irmel described the vast number of buildings lying vacant which could also be used profitably.

Thus there must be a shift from charity to creativity, capacity, competency and confidence. Furthermore, development activities must no longer be compartmentalised. This makes it very difficult to monitor them. Instead, we need a holistic approach with convergence of all the 'ps' given above. And this applies to international aid too, for that also does not help the undeveloped but rather, keeps them exactly where they are.

There was a complete change of perspective from the next speaker, **Stephen McClelland**, who is Head of European Programmes at DFID (Dept. for International Development). He spoke in a personal capacity, drawing on his knowledge of the way the government works. He told the audience that the U.K. government was determined to reach its aid target of 0.7% and that it had also been actively urging other European countries to deliver their commitments. This was not an easy task in the present economic climate. How does one persuade Greece or Portugal to meet their aid targets when they are unable to deliver public services at home?

He also pointed out that the U.K. aid budget has been increasing steadily and is now around £7.5 billion. However, the administrative budget for administering the aid budget has not increased at all.

**Hari Dhanoo**, from Trinidad, whose ancestors came originally from Eastern U.P., then spoke from the perspective of an individual donor. He had wanted to help the poor since the 1970s and began with sponsorship through Action Aid who have a branch in Andhra Pradesh. In 1982, he joined VRI, or IVCS as it was then known, and visited Amarpurkashi for the first time in 1985. That visit enlightened him to the needs of the many who are not able to access government services such as health care and education. He was elated to see the efforts of those working at APK in various areas – schools, farming, animal husbandry and trades

such as television and tractor repair and tailoring.

In recent years he has been delighted to see many villagers become self-employed with roadside shops and stalls lining what is now a main highway in front of the village. He has also witnessed two eye camps where the rural poor are operated on for cataracts, enabling them to see after years of blindness – a very moving experience.

As an individual donor, he values the opportunity to see this at first-hand and intends to continue giving his unreserved support for this work. He has seen how his financial contributions to VRI are utilised and consequently urged everyone to give as generously as possible to charities like VRI and help recruit more members.

After a short lunch break, participants watched the film, "Pollute and Prosper" which was made by AFP volunteer, Blossom Carrasco. The audience was totally captivated by the film which shows the extent of the pollution at Amarpurkashi and surrounding areas, caused by the paper factory.

**Bala Thakrar** spoke next of her experiences in India. She first went there as a young graduate with the aim of backpacking around the sub-continent. Her father thought she was mad and refused to support her in any way. But this trip fired her deep love and concern for India. It paved the way for a remarkable career that culminated in the successful establishment of her own organisation, the Asian Foundation for Philanthropy of which Bala is founder and director. She has set up links with a wide range of NGOs working in different parts of India and visits projects regularly. Here in the UK, she devised a pioneering scheme for people of Indian origin to volunteer in India as well as other innovative programmes such as Gyan Yatra. Hearing of her achievements was an inspiring experience.

The next speaker, **Jasber Singh**, brought the perspective of a researcher. He had spent a year in four different districts of Andhra Pradesh, carrying out research into biofuels and the experiences of the rural people who had grown biofuel crops. He told the audience that India has a biofuel policy which includes the target of 20% blending by 2017, an extremely ambitious aim. The Government supports biofuel by setting a minimum

purchasing price, giving tax relief and using the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to help plant biofuel crops. The Government is actively encouraging farmers to grow these plants on the assumption that this will help reduce poverty, in particular poor Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribals.

All plants produce oils. For biofuel, the idea is to grow plants on a mass scale and then extract oil from them. In other countries, land which had formerly been used to grow food crops was commandeered for biofuel plantations. However, the Indian government did not want to do this and so decided to use non-agricultural, non-irrigated land and so-called "wastelands".

The researchers decided not to follow the traditional research path of simply extracting the maximum amount of information from people but instead to use this opportunity to learn with them, share ideas, listen to them and find out how to help them. This approach meant that they learnt what really happened.

There are organisations in Andhra Pradesh who do outreach work among tribals and *dalits* and they told farmers about biofuels. For this, they targeted only men. They never went to women. Moreover, they only told the men about the positive side of biofuel cultivation. They didn't mention anything negative.

What they did not know or bother to find out was that the so-called wastelands were being used for food crops and that they were cultivated by women. Because the biofuel project sounded so good, men started cultivating these plants and the women were displaced, their knowledge disregarded and their status in their families and communities destroyed. Furthermore, these lands had previously also been used for grazing, under an amicable agreement between farmers and pastoralists. Grazing was no longer allowed as the livestock would have eaten the plants and thus a long-standing relationship was destroyed.

Finally, it turned out that what happens in a laboratory is not necessarily what will happen in the field. Farmers found that biofuels needed a great deal more water than they had been led to believe and that the yield was much lower than they had been assured of.

Two years later, farmers began uprooting the biofuel plants and returning to food production.

Here you see the powerful fuel industry on the one side and the most disempowered people on the other. Cultivating biofuels is not the answer to rural poverty. It might help us in the West who would like to think we are driving environmentally friendly cars but it does nothing for the people who produce it. As one *dalit* said to Jasber, "All we want to do is grow food". Why then, can't we have policies that support people like *dalits* and tribals?

The final speakers for the day had all gone to India as volunteers. The first was **Nayan Shukla**, who went to Amarpurkashi in 1988, as a fresh new graduate. He felt there was more to life than just getting a job and joining the glum faces on the tube every day. He wasn't ready yet to be part of the rat race. At that time, however, it was very unusual for young people of Indian origin to volunteer to spend six months in a village in India. For most, it was all about getting a job and earning loads of money! Fortunately, his parents and family all supported him. It was only his friends who thought he was daft. Ironically, the university friend who was most scathing about his plans later took a career break and did exactly the same thing and now is Chairperson of VRI.

Nayan has seen tremendous differences since then. At that time, the Lonely Planet was barely half an inch thick and APK was very remote. There were no phone booths and calls abroad were outrageously expensive. There were no mobile phones, no internet, no emails. Now you can text or call while you're walking in the fields but then, it took ten days just for a letter to get to the U.K. and another ten before you'd get a reply.

During his six months in the project, he became involved in the first ever conference that heralded the birth of INTAF. The topic was "Working with the Rural Poor" and it was held in Amarpurkashi, a deliberate decision to hold it in a village among the rural poor rather than in the protective shell of a five-star hotel, as was commonly done at that time. For Nayan, it was a great way to work with the staff of the project and local people and an amazing bonding experience with both local staff and other development workers/NGOs.

One thing he noticed then was how the rural poor were treated. For example, on a visit to a

bank in Bilari, he was told by the cashier that he enjoyed working at the bank – but all the customers (rural people) kept disturbing him!

He always knew he would return and he has – about nine times! He has stayed involved with both the project and VRI. It is easy to forget your experiences when you get back home but important to remember the things you saw and felt and what better way to do that than join VRI (or IVCS as it then was). Being a trustee for VRI he has been able to use his strengths to help the project much more effectively and this is the case for all volunteers. They can do far more to support rural development by fundraising, raising awareness, raising support or providing professional skills and services.

Nayan finished his fascinating talk by commenting that it is “a funny world we live in when a 120 young Indians ride around a go-track in London for a day – and 6 months later a health centre is built. Or 100 people meet on a Saturday night and do 1940s swing dancing and a classroom gets built in India.”

**Sophie Bray** was a volunteer in October 2010 and was able to help with the Science Fair and enjoy Diwali in the village. She enjoyed these experiences and later returned to APK for a wedding.

The final speaker, **Aditi Shah**, went to APK in March 2011. She applied because she wanted to work in a developing country. Aditi had grown up and lived in India for 8 years but had never been to a village, let alone experienced village life so volunteering with VRI seemed the perfect opportunity to do so.

She and the other volunteer, Ellie, spent a lot of time teaching in the primary school. Her first day at the school was something she can't forget. The children began singing '*tumhi ho mata, pita tumhi ho*' in the morning assembly, followed by the national anthem which Aditi remembered doing when she went to primary school in Delhi. Ellie and Aditi took their own class on the first day and found that whenever they asked the children a question, they were too shy to reply and would just stare at the two volunteers with a look of fascination on their faces.

She also visited the pollution site. To see it first hand was horrendous and the stench was even worse. It had rained the day before so there wasn't much ash in the air but she was

told that in the summer it is very bad and has caused a lot of suffering. Sonu, one of the boys on campus, showed them the extent of the damage to the river by dropping a brick into it, causing a tar-like substance to splash everywhere and send up an unbearable stench.

There was also the opportunity to go to Rajasthan for a wedding and visit a bird sanctuary at Bharatpur as well as attend several weddings near APK. Then Ellie and Aditi were asked to do a project in the primary school and the next few days kept them busy getting Years 4 and 5 to produce a piece of written work and a piece of creative work for an international school in Budapest, Hungary who were keen to find out about education in a rural village. This experience showed the volunteers how limited education is for rural primary school children. It took a long time to get them to understand that they were free to paint or draw what they liked, but eventually, the children began to enjoy the work and then it became great fun for all.

Another highlight was painting wall murals, including a huge *Om* on the wall behind the dining table which got many people involved – even Lalaji, the cook, did his bit! Aditi intended to celebrate Holi while in India but her flight was on the day of the festival. However, she was able to play with the school children one day early and had a wonderful time, as the audience could see from the photos she showed.

This marked the formal end of the conference. There was an amazing 'buzz' among participants who had been moved and inspired by the talks they'd heard and were eager to ask questions, network with others and find out what they could do to help the rural poor.

Our heartfelt thanks go to AFP for hosting this event and for all the hard work they put into it, to all our speakers and to our very appreciative audience.

**INTAF General Assembly  
19<sup>th</sup> June 2011  
at the VRI office, Harrow, Middlesex U.K.**

The Eighth General Assembly built on the positive atmosphere of the previous day's conference. Discussion was informal but enthusiastic. In the last three years, INTAF has focused chiefly on the publication of the

International Journal of Rural Studies, a twice-yearly publication. INTAF has also supported two important campaigns – the campaign against pollution in and around Amarpurkashi and the national campaign against corruption in India. The campaign against pollution included protest marches, a one-day fast and over 500 postcards of complaints sent by local farmers and villagers. In support of the campaign against corruption, a march and a fast were organised in Bilari in solidarity with Anna Hazare's fast in Delhi.

The Assembly discussed at length the election of convenors for INTAF. It was finally agreed that Dr Kamal Taori (India), Irmel Marla (Germany), Hari Dhanoo (Trinidad), Nayan Shukla (England), Mukat Singh (India) and Jyoti Singh (England/Australia) would work as a collective leadership, rather than elect individual convenors. Jyoti Singh agreed to do all the necessary administrative work.

The Assembly felt strongly that the next conference should be held in two years' time and should take place in India. A number of venues were considered but it was agreed that the most suitable venue would be Amarpurkashi in Uttar Pradesh. It was also decided that Nayan Shukla and Dr Kamal Taori would prepare draft proposals for this conference which would then be circulated among all six members of the collective

leadership. After receiving feedback from them, a final draft would be prepared.

There was unanimous agreement that the theme for the next conference should cover pollution and the environment in relation to the rural poor. As Nayan Shukla pointed out, the rural poor pollute the least yet suffer the most.

### **Feedback**

"Passion and commitment" were two words that came up frequently in the feedback from participants to the conference. They appreciated the enthusiasm and energy generated at the meeting and the opportunity for hearing different views, for example, getting "an insight into the government's position on aid to India" and hearing the fascinating stories that speakers told of their experiences. The film about pollution had a great impact. Participants agreed that "the conference was brilliantly organised and in an ideal, comfortable venue". It was generally felt to be a "stimulating and fun" day. Recommendations for future conferences included some interactive element to involve the audience and more time to network. Perhaps the best feedback came from one participant who said that it was "very informative, didn't over-run and wasn't at all boring (as most conferences tend to be!)"