

## EDITORIAL

### REPORT OF THE WORKSHOP ON “PRO-POOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT”

On 29<sup>th</sup> June 2013, VRI (Volunteers for Rural India) and INTAF (International Task Force for the Rural Poor) jointly organised an afternoon workshop in Harrow.

This was a follow-up to a two-day seminar held in Amarpurkashi village, India on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> March where Mukat Singh, founder of the project at Amarpurkashi, told those present about his ideas for a new programme to help the rural poor.

The aim of the London workshop was threefold: to share ideas, to get feedback and suggestions and to offer participants the opportunity to make some contribution

The workshop began with an exercise which required participants to look at the current schemes for the poor that are run by the central and state governments in India. They had to put them into one of four categories – relief, welfare, development or sustainable development. The results were revealing. Out of ten schemes, five were identified as relief programmes, three as welfare, one as politically motivated and one as moving towards sustainable development.

Mukat Singh then summed up the disturbing reality of the government's pro-poor programmes, namely, that they do not enhance the strengths of the poor, they do not empower them or help them to stand on their own feet, they are not sustainable and they create a culture of dependency on government hand-outs.

Jyoti Singh, International Convenor of INTAF, continued by describing the state of government schools and the education they provide. The current education system does not equip students with the skills to lead productive lives, it does not teach good habits or attitudes, it adds to the rapidly growing army of unemployed and it creates unrealistic expectations.

Mukat Singh then told of recent trends among students. They do not attend classes, they study the bare minimum to scrape through the exams, they don't do practical work even when

it is part of their course, they take no responsibility for their actions and they have no idea how to think logically or rationally.

Thus the challenge is to find a way to encourage in them a genuine love for work, to teach skills that will enable them to be productive and entrepreneurial skills that will require forward-thinking and risk-taking as well as promote a respect for the environment and an understanding of the importance of sustainability.

He outlined the basis of his new project, namely, to create an enabling and supportive environment with workplaces where young people can learn while working; to set up models of success; to demolish the culture of paper qualification; and to encourage the values of experience, zeal and commitment.

This is not something that the government is likely to do for it requires a change in attitude and changing people's attitudes is a long, slow process. However, at Amarpurkashi, pro-poor development programmes have been going on for over forty years. Indeed, it is through the experience, successes and failures of the last forty years, that those working at Amarpurkashi have come to realise the importance of sustainable farming and sustainable livelihoods for landless and small landholders. This also needs to include experiments in saving and storing water, using solar energy, composting, mixed organic farming and agro-forestry.

Finally, Mukat Singh distributed details of the new project. It will use land on which a brick kiln has been running unsuccessfully. This land is very dry, sandy and uneven and not suitable for standard farming. Initially, the plan is to plant fast-growing trees such as poplars and new varieties of eucalyptus with small plants and grazing areas in between. Organic fertilisers and compost will be used as well as water saving and conservation devices. This will become a model for local students and farmers to replicate in their own small plots of land.

There will also be a revolving loan scheme of goats and cows which will help the landless and give employment to village women. Landless labourers will be employed to look after the goats and cows that the project will

keep and will learn improved practices in the care of these animals.

Participants took a keen interest in these ideas and made many valuable comments and suggestions. In answer to their queries about getting students who would be interested in such a practical course, Mukat Singh explained that in the beginning, he would invite those who had either failed their exams or dropped out of studies and would offer them free training in return for help on the project. He said that he hoped that this would evolve into a new kind of university where more research on sustainability would be carried out and students would learn productive, useful, relevant and entrepreneurial skills that would equip them for life.

Participants pointed out the importance of linking with relevant research and similar projects in other parts of India. They were also keen to contribute in some way themselves.

In the past, overseas supporters have helped the Campaign against Pollution and the problems of primary education in rural government schools by sending letters of concern to the Chief Minister of the state and other officials. These letters have made a significant difference. It was therefore agreed that something similar should be done to attract the attention of local government functionaries and encourage them to visit the new project and support it in any way they can. The afternoon concluded with a talk by Dr Chitra Singh from Uttar Pradesh. She is a yoga teacher and environmentalist. She took part in the first workshop in Amarpurkashi and supports the new project wholeheartedly.

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