

KUNO INITIATIVE : AN UPDATE (VI)

Samrakshan Trust, August 2002

Background

With drought affecting large parts of the country, the villages displaced from Kuno sanctuary as a consequence of the lion reintroduction programme are also facing high distress. A combination of livelihood disruption, poor harvest over the past 3 years and absence of an economic buffer in the form of past savings have left their ability to tide over this period severely depleted.

In view of this situation, Samrakshan has initiated a three-pronged drought relief strategy for these villages:

1. Emergency wage works: These wage works, apart from providing immediate relief through enhanced availability of cash and food grains, would also enhance the future income earning prospects of the community through creation of useful community infrastructure.
2. Emergency seed supply and creation of community seed banks: This is aimed at providing seeds to those farmers who lost their crop due to rain failure, as a first step towards creating a community seed bank. This would over time also reduce the dependence of the community on the local moneylender for procuring seeds and other agricultural inputs.
3. Emergency medical relief: This initiative is aimed at filling the gaps in the official medical facilities available to the community, by providing medicines that are in short supply (free of cost and on a doctor's prescription), during the crisis months of July to October.

Wage works for participatory watershed development

The 9 villages that have been selected so far for work are:

Jakhoda, Laddar, Durreddi, Chhoti Khajuri, Khallai, Barred, Chak Parond, Paira Kushwaha, Padri

The approach of the work carried out by Samrakshan has been highly participatory, and the activities undertaken are based entirely on the people's articulation of their needs, and the solutions proposed by them.

Village Selection Criteria

- Of these, Durreddi, Chhoti Khajuri, Khallai, Barred, Chak Parond, Paira Kushwaha and Padri fall within one watershed, and the work that has been undertaken as part of drought relief has been structured such that it will have significantly enhance watershed management in the area.
- Jakhoda has been selected as it has exhibited remarkable ownership, participation, and initiative. The work being carried out in Jakhoda focuses on comprehensive soil and water conservation for the agricultural fields of Jakhoda.
- Laddar has been selected as there was very significant level of distress in this village and it was necessary to provide immediate succour to the people. Here again the activity that has been initiated is likely to substantially improve the water regime of the area.

The Approach

All initiatives that have been undertaken for drought relief have been preceded by a series of meetings that have been in the nature of *gram sabhas*. In a *gram sabha*, at least one representative from each family, including a female member has to be present. A senior villager presides over the meeting, during which the villagers discuss the various possible activities that need to be carried out in order to improve the livelihood opportunities of the entire village. A listing of all such activities is carried out and the activities are prioritized according to need and availability of resources. The modalities for the execution of the activity that receives the highest priority are then worked out. This includes the site of the structure (in case of physical structures), the wage rate, whether persons from outside the village will be permitted to seek employment on the structure, and so on. In case of structures like ponds, the consent of the villagers on whose the land the structure is to be located is also sought.

In addition, the amount of money that the villagers will contribute (by foregoing a part of their wage) is also decided upon. The sabha also selects from within itself one member who is entrusted with the responsibility of monitoring the construction activity, maintain accounts, and pay wages at the end of each workday. All these details are written down by a literate member of the village and read out to the assembly. Each adult villager signs/affixes his/her thumbprint upon this document and only then is the activity deemed to have received the go ahead of the gram sabha.

Once the proposal is accepted by the gram sabha, Samrakshan team members and some villagers survey the site and a map with all the technical details is prepared. The next day a small ceremony is held at the site to invoke the blessings of the almighty and work on the structure begins.

At the outset, the requisite amount of food-grains (as the wages are paid partly in cash and partly in grain) are stored with the person who has been entrusted the task of paying the wages. One Samrakshan team member is assigned to look at the technical details of the structure at least once a day and inspect the accounts of the previous day.

Work Description

Summary: Since 13 July 2002, approximately 2,400 person days of employment have already been generated and six villages have benefited from these works. Community contribution on these wage works has ranged between 15 and 25 per cent. Also, nearly 910 kg of bajra seeds have been procured for distribution in four villages, as a preliminary step towards formation of seed banks. This has assisted nearly 86 families in resuming cultivation that had been disrupted due to rain failure. Moreover, emergency medical relief has been provided to nearly 160 families as part of the health initiative.

Village Jakhoda

1. The second dug out pond in Jakhoda has been completed and this has generated approximately 500 person days of employment. The villagers of Jakhoda, through a unanimous decision agreed to give up a part of their wages and this has significantly reduced the cost of the structure. Thus the community has contributed nearly 23 % to the total cost of the pond.
2. The gram sabha of Jakhoda met on 12-8-2002 and the accounts of the previous structure were made public. The number of days that each villager has worked was read out, along with the total wages he/she received in cash and in the form of food grains. This rapid and effective social audit has enhanced significantly the degree of transparency of the wage works carried out. We are hopeful that such practices would have distinct positive

- spin-offs on other works that would be carried out in future in these villages by various government agencies.
3. The gram sabha also cleared a proposal for the construction of another pond to further benefit the village. The survey and mapping for this are likely to be initiated soon. For the new pond, the community unanimously agreed to raise the level of their contribution to over 25% of the total cost of the structure.
 4. The *gram sabha* also unanimously agreed that school-going children would not be permitted to work on the pond. They should instead continue to attend school as usual. On account of the desperate conditions, frequently all family members, including children have to seek employment in order to provide adequately for the entire family. Thus this decision of the *gram sabha* assumes great significance as the people have themselves demonstrated the importance they attach to the education of their children. It remains to be seen how far the village will collectively implement this decision.

Village Durreedi

1. The pond described in our previous update has now been completed. This has generated approximately 700 person days of employment. The level of community contribution in this case works out to approximately 17% of the total cost of the structure.
2. In a recently convened *gram sabha* in Durreedi village, accounts of the complete structure were publicly read out. Like in the case of Jakhoda, here too details about which individual received how many wages and in what form were made public.
3. Subsequent to the initiation of this pond, there were reports of an individual in Durreedi having consumed liquor and creating trouble in the village. In response to this, the men of the village organised a meeting and pledged not to permit such happenings to disrupt the development of their village. This meeting was held completely at the villagers' own initiative and therefore we are hopeful that the restrictions that the villagers, particularly the men, have imposed upon themselves will hold.

Village Laddar

1. Work on a pond in village Laddar is now at an advanced stage of execution. As reported earlier, this is expected to generate about 700 person days of employment.
2. The work in Laddar has been prolonged on account of certain technical difficulties that the structure has come up against. The villagers of Laddar convened a meeting on 13-8-2002 and with the help of Samrakshan team members have worked out how a methodology to overcome this problem. Significantly, the villagers have volunteered to foot the escalated cost of the structure as a result of the modifications that will have to be effected.

Village Chhoti Khajuri

1. In a *gram sabha* held on 9-8-2002, the villagers of Chhoti Khajuri decided to undertake bunding of their agricultural fields in order to arrest the run off of soil and water and enhance the moisture content of the soil.
2. As a reciprocal commitment to the financial support that Samrakshan would provide to this activity, the villagers agreed to the following points
 - Complete prohibition on liquor.
 - There would be no infighting in the village and the village would collectively ensure that each and every family of village would receive employment on the bunding work.
 - The village would undertake a planning process, whereby all the needs of the village would be listed and prioritized, with special emphasis on the needs of women.

3. On 10th and 11th August, Samrakshan team members, along with local villagers undertook a survey of the fields of Chhoti Khajuri. The assistance of the villagers here was crucial as they have the most accurate information about the direction of slope and water run off, and therefore about the optimal locations for the bunds.
4. On the basis of this survey, a map was prepared that depicts the locations of the bunds and their length. This map was discussed with the community during a meeting held on 13-8-2002 and it was resolved to initiate work on the following day. This activity is also likely to generate approximately 700 person days of employment.

Seed supply and creation of community seed banks

Village Chhoti Khajuri

1. In addition to field bunding, the farmers of Chhoti Khajuri are also being assisted with seeds with which they might be able to salvage a crop if the delayed rains do permit such a possibility. During rain failure, seed prices skyrocket and farmers are forced to purchase seeds at exorbitant rates. This usually is the beginning of the debt trap for the farmer as he is seldom able to clear the arrears. In view of this situation, Samrakshan, using its limited resources has purchased seeds from the market and is making these available to farmers.
2. In Chhoti Khajuri, 220 kg of *bajra* seed has been distributed among the 22 farmers @ 10 kg per farmer. In return for these seeds, Samrakshan has sought a commitment from the farmers that each of them, after the harvest, would contribute 15-kg seed towards the establishment of a community-managed seed bank. These seeds would be stored in the village itself such that the farmers do not have to purchase seeds from middlemen at exorbitant rates.

Village Khallai

1. The intervention in Khallai is so far limited to provision of seeds to all 44 families in this village. Thus in Khallai, 440 kg of *bajra* seed has been distributed. Here again, we hope to be able to establish a community-managed seed bank out of the grain returned by farmers at the end of this agricultural season.

Village Barred

1. All 20 families in Barred have also been assisted with 250 kg of *bajra* seed. Here again a seed bank is envisaged.
2. The villagers of Barred (though not in a *gram sabha*) have expressed a desire, like Chhoti Khajuri to work on bunding their agriculture fields. In view of Samrakshan's extremely limited financial and human resources, preparations for this work have so far not been initiated. As soon as we are able to raise the necessary finances for this work we plan to initiate meetings and surveys for field bunding in Durreddi.

Emergency Medical Relief

In addition to the above-mentioned activities, Samrakshan has also initiated a programme for addressing emergency health needs of its target population. Given the vulnerability of the community to disease during the crucial monsoon months (July-October), we have set up an emergency medical relief facility in partnership with the local primary health centre. Under this

scheme, all needy families are provided free medicines on receipt of a proper prescription from the government doctor who is the officer in charge of the Primary Health Centre at village Agraa. Our attempt is to provide those medicines that are either not available with the PHC, or are of sub-standard quality. As part of this endeavour, over 20 villages are being covered.

So far nearly 160 individuals from the displaced families have benefited from this facility. We are trying to raise resources to further systematize the health initiative and extend it to other villages in the region.