



# EKTHA – UNITY

## Newsletter of SAVE A FAMILY PLAN

Issue 4

**Mission Statement: Partnering with the Poor for a Just World**

**SAVE A FAMILY PLAN (SAFP)** undertakes all its programming with a sensitivity to the local environmental impact. Our approach has been two-fold: In our program implementation SAFP insists on promoting an eco-friendly, low environmental impact approach. As well, through various awareness programs, all partners and participants are provided training to further sensitize them to environmental issues and take up measures to promote sustainable activities. The term that best captures the idea is *"sustainable development"*. This means maintaining a rate of development in which the resource, whether it's farmland, trees, fish, or air can renew itself. In other words, *"We may harvest the milk, but we mustn't kill the cow"*.



Forty women who are Sangham (grassroots community based organizations) leaders, participated in SAFP'S Environmental Training Program. They learned about their local environment and the benefits of keeping clean.

A total of 30,867 men and women participated in 78 projects under SAFP's Environmental Initiatives in our most recently completed program, *"Strengthening Partners for Sustainable Development (SPSD) 2000-2003"*. The activities that took place in the southern Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka included: Construction of drinking water wells and rainwater harvesting tanks, sanitary latrines, organic gardening, vermi composting and environmental awareness training. All of our projects are conducted in accordance with the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (CEAA) and in adherence to the local laws of India.



Mr. Mohandas and his son, who live in Valiyamoola in Kerala, southwest India, stand before the vermi culture unit built with SAFP's help. It produces enough compost to naturally fertilize his small farm, increasing crop yield and decreasing disease & degradation of the soil.

Students in Canadian schools had the opportunity to explore the many issues that are involved in protecting and improving our environment locally and globally by participating in SAFP's Public Engagement Program, *"Growing and Developing Together"*. Through the growth of portable gardens and composting within their school environment, this program enabled the students to learn more about life in developing countries and increased their awareness of the role that Canadians play in the field of international development.



Beena Joy (left, SAFP's India office), and Leslie Savard (right, SAFP's Canada office) join students and their teacher to check on the progress of the "red wiggler worms" at Westmount Public School in London, Ontario

## **Thinking "Environment" in India: What Does It Mean?**

*by Michel Taché*

In the spring of 2002, I travelled to India visiting the SAFF office with the objective of helping with their environmental programming. Basic human needs, such as health education, are considerations that an organization concerned with helping the poor should be addressing as a priority. Environmental concerns in India may sometimes appear secondary to these important issues. This would stand to reason if it was not for the intricate interdependence that exists between environmental health and human condition.

Dr. Sunny, an environmental consultant for SAFF India, and I, spent half a day briefing SAFF's coordinators to provide them with a background on the rudiments of Environmental Assessment (EA). The main objective of the presentation was to demonstrate the pertinence of using EA as a planning tool to integrate environmental and socio-economic considerations in the planning of programs and/or projects. The implementation of projects without considering the potential impacts on the environment may lead to little net value in our interventions and sometimes outright detrimental effects on the beneficiary communities. A classic case of impetuous project implementation without considering environmental impacts, was the ambitious drilling of 4 million tubular wells in Bangladesh where naturally occurring arsenic in water resulted in arsenic contamination of potable water consumed by 57 million people. While the initial intentions were good, the resulting lesions or skin cancers, commonly associated with slow arsenic contamination were not. A well designed EA could have avoided this unfortunate situation and provided appropriate alternatives to addressing water scarcity in that part of the world.

We visited Mananthavady, Mysore and Kottapuram Diocesan Social Service Societies (DSSSs) and discussed with the Sangham members basic environmental issues of relevance to their communities. While they did not always have a clear understanding of what we meant when we used the word "environment", they certainly had a clear and first-hand understanding of environmental components such as water pollution, climate change, heavy chemical agriculture, etc., and how, once degraded, these components impact the well-being of their children and families and negatively influence the economics of their communities.

Farmers in Mananthavady mentioned the difficulties related to soil erosion due to poorly sloped terrain, clear cutting of forested land, mineralization and loss of fertility of soils due to intensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticide contamination of surface drinking water. In Kottapuram the Sangham members explained how all

waste waters are released into the canal where people get their drinking water resulting in an increase level of cholera, typhoid and dysentery. In most Sanghams, members described how the changes in annual precipitation patterns from climate change resulted in shortages of drinking water and the reduction in crop production. Many identified air pollution (diesel burning and kitchen smoke) as a major cause of asthma and other respiratory ailments.



*Women from a Sangham in Ithalar, Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, southeast India, plant 2,000 fruit trees as part of an environmental initiative under SAFF's programming, that stops local soil erosion, helps with reforestation and will provide income generation in the future.*

Thinking "environment" in the context of the developing world is often a challenge. Traditional reflexes dictate that basic human needs for the poor should be addressed first, before the luxury of entertaining ideas about including environmental health in developmental equations. This common almost intuitive wisdom is both erroneous and misleading. Talking to the Sangham members really reinforced my convictions that if social justice, human health, education and financial autonomy provide the four pillars of decent human condition, a healthy and upgraded environment certainly provides the ground upon which these pillars can be sustainably balanced.

There is often a false conception surrounding what constitutes "environmental objectives" especially in agriculturally-based societies. This misconception is rooted in our European "environmental" tradition where the environment equates to saving rare species of birds, roaming wild tigers or protecting pristine mountain prairies.

As water, soil, air and biodiversity are perceived in developing world (as well as in developed ones) as commodities that provide services to society, this "commoditization" of natural resources leads to greedy usage and dulls reflexes of stewardship towards what must indeed be considered as a common good; requiring care, nurturing and continuity. From this perspec-

tive, the "environmental health" approach or ecosystemic approach provides efficient tools to manage water, air and soils in an integrated manner; it provides a framework through which communities can be "stewards" of the environment on which their own health and modes of productions depend.



*As part of SPSS's Local Initiatives, two Sangham members in Punalur, Kerala, southwest India, receive training to build and use a smokeless chulah (cooking stove). These particular stoves provide many benefits, two of which are protection of the environment (decreased wood consumption), and improved health of the family members (less smoke inhalation).*

Efforts towards improving human conditions become a moving target when the backbone (soils, water, clean air, biodiversity) of economic and human health is subjected to practices that lead to its degradation. The natural consequence of this statement is that assisting in the upgrading of environmental conditions will sustain the efforts made to alleviate human suffering.

*Michel Taché is now an Environment Specialist with the Canadian Partnership Branch of the Canadian International Development Agency*



*A Sangham member stands beside her biogas unit in Tamil Nadu, India. Built in partnership with SAFF & CIDA, this unit will provide her family with gas that can be used for lighting, heating and cooking in their home.*

## **Family and Community Development Program Update**

*by Tanja Medos and Leslie Savard*

*Program Support Officers (PSO), SAFF Canada*

SAFF works in partnership with individual North American contributors, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Wild Rose Foundation of Alberta (WRF) to implement our programming in five states of India: Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

In our "Family to Family" program, the monthly subsidy received by 14,815 families provides leverage to access micro credit within their Sangham community. This enables them to undertake an income generating project of their choice, that will earn enough money to provide for their basic human needs. Ongoing training and monitoring will help to ensure its success. At present, 431 families have become self-sufficient in the last four months and 144 families remain waiting for assistance.



*With the help of SAFF, 20 women from a local Sangham in Thamarassery, Kerala, India, construct sanitary double pit latrines under the supervision of an instructor.*

Our new three year program, "Sustainability Through Participation, Empowerment and Decentralization (SPED) 2003—2006", is in the initial stages of implementation. Training workshops have been held in India on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) in preparation for this program. Working in partnership with 38 Diocesan Social Service Societies (DSSS), 3,800 Sanghams (Community based organizations) and 4,500 families, this program is expected to reach approximately 22,000 people.

SAFF's commitment to our earthquake rehabilitation project, "Rising from the Ruins" continues with many planned projects such as income generation, formation of various co-operatives, construction of weaving workshops, a community centre, smokeless chulahs, sanitary latrines and a pipeline for drinking water.

## **A Contributor's Story**

*by Janice Howard-Smith, PSO, SAFP Canada*

Thomas and Doris McKay have been supporters of SAVE A FAMILY PLAN for almost 30 years. When we recently received a donation of \$350 for the purchase of a cow for a poor family in India from their great-grandchildren, we found this story of faith worth sharing.

Thomas and Doris were married in Michigan on August 30, 1934. They were so poor they even borrowed the money to buy their own marriage license! They lived with Thomas' parents for the first two years. When their second child was on the way, they borrowed half the \$100 down payment on a nearby 40-acre farm that had a rundown farmhouse and buildings. They had no furniture, car, or even a horse but they lived by faith.

Thomas and Doris saved enough to purchase 36 chickens and the first winter there they lived off the money raised from the sale of eggs. The second year on the farm they were given a Jersey cow they named, "Crook," because of her crooked spine. This cow provided needed milk for their family and Doris was able to make butter and cottage cheese as well. Through the years their family has grown to nine surviving children, 41 grandchildren and 82 great-grandchildren! Even though there wasn't much money, there was always room for extra guests at the dinner table and a "revolving" door for the constant flow of welcomed visitors.



*The McKay family: Thomas and Doris (front row), their children Joe, Larry, and Tommy (middle row), Bill, Betty, Jim, Virginia, Ray and Gloria (back row).*

When Thomas and Doris retired from farming, they were able to continue giving to SAFP by collecting aluminum from the area and selling it for profit. All the proceeds came to this organization, as they were never ones for restaurants or the theatre.



*Doris McKay (front) with 11 of her 82 great-grandchildren, (clockwise, from Kaylena on Doris' lap): Liliana, Katy, Adam, Nicole, Josh, Zachary, Janelle, Ronnie, Michael and Sasha.*

Sadly, Thomas passed away on October 30, 2001. Through the McKay family, many poor families and communities in India have been helped on the road to self-reliance. From this Michigan family with one cow in 1938 to an Indian family with a brand new cow in 2003, this is indeed an amazing journey of faith!

*If you have a story you would like us to share, please contact us!*



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