

Vikalp Sangam

15th April, 2016

Organic Agricultural Production in Sham Area: Challenges and Opportunities

A one-day Vikalp Sangam was organized by the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT), the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG) and Kalpavriksh in the Sham valley. Residents of nine villages of western Ladakh gathered at the village of Hemis-Shukpachan on 15th April, 2016 to interact with agricultural experts and NGOs and exchange thoughts about future prospects and current challenges in organic agriculture of the region. The event saw representation from the villages of Tia, Likir, Ulley, Saspotsey, Yangthang, Ang, Tarutse and Hemis-shukpachan.



Apart from Dr. Tsewang Namgail, Director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT) and Mr. Lobzang Tsultim, Director of the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), Mr. Zubair Ahmed of Ladakh Organic Farmer's Foundation (LoFF) was also present to share experiences with the villagers gathered.

The event commenced with one of the residents, Mr. Tsering Murup, welcoming the organisers and participants, as well as the experts, and thanking all residents of Hemis-shukpachan for hosting this first-of-a-kind event.



Dr. Tsewang Namgail, Direct SLC-IT

Dr. Tsewang Namgail addressed the farmers next. He spoke about the importance of finding and adopting sustainable ways to develop an agro-community, while ensuring minimal impact on the fragile environment of Ladakh. While farming and rearing livestock form the core of livelihoods of the region, the scenario has changed drastically in the past 15-20 years with the influx of military and tourists in Ladakh, he pointed

out. There has been a rapid decline in agriculture production and other traditional income sources, while reliance on outside sources has increased (for example, tourism). Although a short season for tourists, the increase in vehicular movement has already begun to have a detrimental and irreversible impact on the environment of the region.

Another concern that he flagged was the decline in the quality of food that locals are now consuming. While the typical Ladakhi diet earlier revolved around locally produced *toma* (dried Potentilla roots), *phating* (dried apricot), *churpe* (dried cheese), the region has rapidly been moving towards consumption of processed foods such as wafers, maggi noodles and biscuits, all of which contain unnatural preservatives, excessive salt,



sugar and fats, which do more harm than good. Apart from not being healthy, processed foods are also leading to an exponential increase in plastic and other non-biodegradable waste in the form of wrappers and packets/sachets. Since the region does not have a waste management facility, this is becoming a growing concern, especially as the population is increasing as well.

Dr. Namgail further stressed on the need to pass on knowledge and wisdom of farming activities from the elders to the current new generation of young adults. Citing Hemis-shukpachan village as an example, he remarked about the great potential that this village holds for agriculture, since it is blessed with many streams and a continuous flow of water from glaciers.

Mr. Lobzang Tsultim, Director LEDeG

As the villagers listened intently, Mr. Tsultim of LEDeG took over stage with a loud and clear message that this workshop was not to teach villagers about agriculture, but to learn from their knowledge and experiences and document it to ensure traditional knowledge is not lost. He stressed that given the rapid pace of development, it is important to stop, step back and think about how to continue to adopt sustainable ways of farming. Due to change in lifestyle and eating habits, diseases such as cancer which were unheard of in the region, are now beginning to rear their ugly heads. Use of artificial fertilizers and externally procured seeds must be switched over with locally available seeds and home-made manures, essentially urging all to adopt organic farming. So far, Ladakh has been a largely self-sufficient

region. But young populations migrating to Leh town, and their moving away from traditional sources of income such as agriculture towards professions such as taxi driving and hotels, has led to agriculture taking a back seat and thus very little progress in the field. This is leading to more dependency on external states and regions to meet the needs of the local population.



Mr. Tsewang Norboo, resident of Ulley village

Mr. Tsewang Norboo, a resident of Ulley village, then took the opportunity to walk everyone down memory lane, recollecting how the use of local manures produced fantastic crops in the days of yore. While commenting on the increased use of chemical fertilizers, which do more harm than good, he advocated the benefits of organic farming and produce. He reminded everyone that community farming in the past helped everyone grow together. However, locals have off late been employing farm labour, which leads to lower returns from agriculture, making it less attractive as a livelihood option. Apart from ignoring traditional farming practices, he also lamented about how Ladakhis talent in making handicrafts is slowly disappearing, as the new generation is reluctant to learn about the traditional arts and crafts.

Although not educated in a formal way, these words of wisdom came from his long association with NGOs, whose advice he has been putting into practice.

Mr. Zubair Ahmed, Agricultural Entrepreneur, LOFF (Ladakh Organic Farmer's Foundation)

Zubair Ahmed, a young agricultural entrepreneur from Chushot village addressed the villagers, with a brief background about himself. Coming from a poor agricultural family with little exposure to the outside world, he shared his inspirational story about how his background never became a stumbling block while choosing a career in agriculture, which his peers try to avoid. He envisions the future of Ladakh revolve around agriculture, and hence he searched for opportunities in this field to hone his skills. After obtaining training from various reputed institutes such as IVRI, CSIR, ICFRE, FRI and HFRI, his belief that organic farming is indeed the way forward for Ladakh has been doubly reinforced. He suggested that the practice of integrated farming needs to be adopted too to ensure maximum returns largely due to the paucity of cultivable land in the region.



Another potential opportunity that is waiting to be tapped is in the field of medicinal plants, he called out. Plants such as *Aconitum*, *Rheum*, *Arnebia*, *Physochlaina* etc., and a variety of mushrooms and herbal tea such as Rosa are very much in demand. However, the villagers will need to be trained to market these products effectively. Citing Sikkim as an example, which has now become the first completely organic state of India, he encouraged the villagers to use local manures and spoke about simple decomposition techniques to make Ladakh pathogen-free.

Subsequently, Mr. Tashi Namgail, LEDeG addressed the gathering as well, urging all to use locally procured seeds, while Aba Dorjay, a retired official of the agricultural department from Hemis-Shukpachan recommended to the villagers to test their soil in a laboratory in order to understand the soil composition, which can help them in determining the type of plants to grow.

All the conversations led to everyone building up a strong appetite for lunch, which followed soon after. A delicious array of local dishes such as *Tagi*, *Kabra*, *Ten-Ten*, *Tapu*, *Chu-Tai*, *Paba*, *Tangtur*, *Sranma*, etc. Prepared by the women of Lehdo were on the menu.

After a hearty meal, Dr. Tsewang Namgail referred to the high nutrition in the just concluded lunch and made a case for organic farming again. He pointed that we all like packed/processed food because we have acquired taste for it over a period of time. If we start consuming local produce, we will also acquire a taste for it and will begin to seek it. He gave the example of Hunza valley, where the average lifespan of residents used to be 100 years until three decades ago, because they eat local produce that is grown without the use of artificial fertilizers and chemical pesticides. But all that changed once processed food started coming to the region from the plains of Pakistan in the 1970s.

Finally, the event wound up with an activity that engaged all the villagers in a “pair-wise ranking” of all the crops that they grow to find out the most important crop for their sustenance. The villagers were directed to compare crops that they grow and rank them according to their importance. This exercise revealed that the most important crop was local vegetables in almost all the villages, followed by barley, wheat, mustard and green pea.

A final vote of thanks by the village headman brought the proceedings to an end.