

International Newsletter on Sustainable Local Development

Newsletter #60 - July 1st, 2009

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Message from the Editorial Team

In this issue, we wish to share the very significant progress achieved in recent years by the Association for Serva Seva Farms (ASSEFA) of India. This development highlights the potential for increased and better quality alternatives and growth implemented by a territory over time. In this case, the villages are the basis of this initiative or mechanism. But these villages are not withdrawn, these communities are connected by a global project and a bank adapted to their needs, which acts at the regional and national level, allowing solidarity to be organized more broadly and solidly.

We have already introduced this association in Newsletters #4 (2003) and #12 (2005) available on the website listed below. In August 2002, Yvon was the guest of ASSEFA as part of an international delegation. At that time, the association consisted of approximately 3,500 villages. Six (6) years later, they were 9,800 villages! From Yvon's perspective, this is still a most inspiring association to be acknowledged.

In the coming months, we shall explore with you the path of our Newsletter in regards to the outcome of the meeting in Luxembourg (see previous issue). The awareness that accompanies ongoing crises, particularly the announced end of cheap oil will undoubtedly have tremendous impact. A large number of analyses predict the return of the territory, the "local" level to the place of (re)composition of human activities and management of natural resources and monitoring of ecosystemic resilience. The time has come to put all our human energy at the service of peaceful alternatives to the global macroeconomic model which relied on exploiting with disregard natural resources that we thought inexhaustible. "It is too late to be pessimistic", as says Arthus-Bertrand in the documentary Home.

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ASSEFA : 40 years of community development in India

In celebration of its 40th anniversary, the Association for Serva Seva Farms (ASSEFA) of India published a collection of various articles about its activities in a book with a revealing title: Silent March of the Invisible Force.

In March 2008, this Gandhian inspired movement was composed of 9,766 villages in 8 different states of India. Altogether there are 803,000 families, over 3.5 million people, who benefit from the many activities of ASSEFA. By 2010, it is expected that over 1 million families will be involved in the movement.

In this article it is not possible to describe in detail all the activities ASSEFA. We are presenting a set of elements that give an idea of the work which has been accomplished since 2002, when Yvon Poirier first conducted a site visit. We wish to invite readers to consult Newsletters #4 and 12 to get a better idea what has been achieved in the past 7 years.

Vision: A Holistic Approach

At the beginning in 1968, the purpose was to help the landless to create villages on land obtained by the Gandhi movement. In the beginning, ASSEFA worked for the villagers. In the next step ASSEFA worked with everyone, including the poor. For the past 15 years, it is more appropriate to speak of development by the people, in which the association is involved with planning and support. This approach is holistic and aims to create self-sufficient and sustainable villages.

The concept of trustee is at the heart of the principles that prevail. « Everyone should live on this Mother Earth as a Trustee with all that he has and acquires for the benefit of the community in which he lives.” Therefore, ASSEFA puts its trust in the community and the villagers. They are free to organize themselves, manage money and material resources in order to obtain mutual benefit, and if possible to benefit the nearby villages.

Micro-finance: an empowerment tool for women

The organization of villages rests largely on women's self-help groups (SHGs). In March 2008, there were 32,000 SHGs bringing together 500,000 women in 113 Sarvodaya Mutual Benefit Trusts (SMBT). In 1996, SMBT became owners of Sarvodaya Nano Finance Limited, a financial institution recognized by the Bank of India. Therefore, micro-finance has been the property of women since 1998. It is managed by them, with the help from ASSEFA professionals. In 2008, there were 172,000 women who received loans. The repayment rate was 99.66%!

In this holistic approach, ASSEFA ensures that villages can meet their needs: health, education, housing, income-generating activities (such as milk production, small businesses, direct sales of agricultural products in markets, etc.).

Building social cohesion

A major emphasis is the building of peace in the communities. As we stated in 2005, ASSEFA with the contributions of organizations in Europe and the support of various Nobel Peace Prize recipients, including the Dalai Lama of Tibet, Mairead Corrigan Maguire of Ireland and Aug San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, has obtained that the UN General Assembly declare “2001-2010 International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World.” This training is integrated into the ASSEFA school curriculum.

Community weddings are another important activity that has been introduced in recent years. In India, marriage remains an important institution. Beyond the two people, it is a sacred rite that unites two families. However, most marriages are arranged. Although this is a festive event, for many poor families it is a financial disaster. Even if bringing a dowry has been illegal since 1961 in India, it remains the norm. Therefore community marriages, which simultaneously unite Hindu, Muslim and Christian couples do not just promote respect among religions but also strengthen the community and the fight against poverty. With the assistance of WSHGs organizing such marriages reduces the cost to concerned families by 50%. In January and February, 2006 in 7 villages of Tamil Nadu (a state in southern India), 340 couples were married and 49,000 people attended the celebrations. Involving the villagers puts in place the conditions to help the newlyweds, if needed. « In short, the community wedding becomes a potent tool to build social cohesion and self-help villages.»

Prospects for the next 40 years

The priority remains to achieve social and economic justice, and create prosperous villages. Even if the “empowerment of the most vulnerable is a «work in progress» in every society, while sustainability is no longer just a matter of the survival of projects and organisations but must be a global concern; and our ability to understand the implication of inter-dependence may be the key factor in determining whether humanity survives the next century”.

Globalization worsens the gap between rich and poor worldwide and within each country. “The post-petroleum economy opens new opportunities but will create dislocations and real pain for many people. Without effective means to manage the global economy and ensure that people’s basic needs are met, including adjusting to changes in our environment, a secure future for humanity is at risk.”

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Silent March of The Invisible Force
Sarvodaya Action Research Centre, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, September 2008, 248 p*

Newsletters available on the WEB:

<http://local-development.blogspot.com/>

www.apreis.org/

Special thanks to our translators:

Éveline Poirier (Canada) for translation to English

Brunilda Rafael (France) for translation to Spanish

Michel Colin (Brazil) for translation to Portuguese

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