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**AGRICULTURE**

WE continue to be part of the sustainable agriculture network co-ordinated and led by Service Centre, Kolkata which has partner NGOs in almost all the districts of West Bengal, with their vastly different agro-climatic features but basically same socio-economic-ecological problems. In our past annual reports we wrote in detail about our basic goals and the strategies we follow to reach them. This time we are not mentioning them at all, keeping instead just to what we have done. This, incidentally, is true of our account of activities in all sections.

This year we worked with 136 farmers in 18 groups in 14 villages. The various new things they tried with help from us were mainly of four kinds and a total of 145 agricultural plots of varying sizes were used for them: i) introduction of new crops; this year the two we principally tried for were rice (one perfumed and another, pest-resistant) and the other a smaller than the usual variety of "patal"; ii) sustainable techniques; iii) comparative experiments, this year the crops chosen were rice and potato; iv) integrated farming, in which there were 9 experiments. Our principal target group comprises small, marginal, and landless farmers and we want to reach information to them, and help them take the first step by giving them access to seeds of cereals, legumes, oilseeds, and some covering crops. Under this Small Holdings Improvement Programme, this year there were seven concept camps where 100 farmers shared information and experience.

The number of both camps and participants would have been higher but for the fact that for about 10 weeks most villages were either inaccessible or with no facilities available for holding a meeting, and after survival had been assured we had to alter previous schedules to tackle the post-flood priority of rehabilitation.

Primary trainings are for those who continue to show interest in our work after these concept camps. This year we held eight such trainings for 113 farmers, most of whom had attended concept camps last year. In these, through discussions in which they participate actively and effectively, they learn about data collection, data analysis, identification of area-specific problems, planning solutions, etc. These trainings are not all talk or classroom work, there is enough provision for practical work in the fields. Those who face problems once they begin working according to the strategies determined come for a follow-up training, of which there were 3 with 53 participants. Apart from these graded interactions, our field workers meet members of farmers' groups regularly every month to make sure work is going on smoothly, and that problems are tackled without delay. These semi-formal meetings, with no specific agenda, are called study circles, and this year we had 174 of them with 1818 farmers participating.

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The farmers in our groups have been trying to bypass the market, where good seeds are often difficult to get and usually unreasonably expensive, by gradually building up a seed bank which serves their own needs and in some cases caters to others also. There is a lot more to be done in this regard but the beginning has been good and we are optimistic that in a few years' time it will solve a major constraint in sustainable agriculture.

Our workers meet regularly among themselves and they also visit other districts and NGOs to learn from work there. At Kajla in Midnapore they saw a revival of an old practice. Our workers liked the idea and have tried it in a small scale at Belyakhali. In this, farmers who usually find it difficult to buy foodgrains when their price goes up in the normal course, deposit a part of their own harvest in a sort of grain bank. They can get cash loans against the deposit which they have to repay when they want their grain back. This experiment has created considerable enthusiasm among the people who stand to benefit most from it, and may grow into a large movement in the coming years. Service Centre has given an initial grant to get the programme going.

The floods destroyed standing crops just before they were to be harvested, thus leaving the farmer with no money to buy seeds for the next season, even if he was in a position to plant, with most fields remaining under water for a long time. Service Centre and Oxfam came up with seeds which we distributed in the following way. In many places the usual choice of the winter crop had to be changed under the new circumstances.

Name of seeds	No. of villages	Quantity of seeds	No. of farmers
Rice	16	5147 kg	378
Wheat	10	6534 kg	426
Mustard	12	151 kg	139
Khesari	4	239.5kg	48
Musuri	13	170 kg	52
Mung	1	18 kg	11
Matar	1	28 kg	5
Seeds of 5 vegetables for kitchen gardens	20	116 kg	2612
Saplings of 3 "	" " "	20 45000 saplings	2612

Altogether 3671 families were helped make a new beginning when all seemed to be lost. We keep in constant and close touch with the State's only agricultural university and with the Government agriculture department, particularly its local functionaries. The Agricultural Development Officer of Baduria block has been very kind to us with help in extension work and with material. In February there was an orientation camp on pulses and oilseeds where 86 farmers came and the ADO's cooperation proved to be of immense help. His office also gave

us the following.

What was given	Quantity	No. of farmers to benefit
Groundnut seeds	255 kg	58
Jute seeds	6 kg	10
Potato seeds	10 gm	4
Wheat seeds	30 kg	6
Sugarcane	For 3 acres	10
Coconut saplings	115	4
Soil testing	76 samples	50
Phytonol	41 packets	29

## KITCHEN GARDEN

THIS programme is aimed at persuading households, particularly those with inadequate purchasing power, to utilize all available space in or around the house - the roof, the base of any large tree, around the tubewell - to grow vegetables, particularly greens, using no chemicals at all, as either pesticide or fertilizer, instead depending as much as possible on compost from household waste, and on nature. This takes a lot of skill, to choose the right plant for the right place, and sustained care. Over the years, our workers have been able to convince a number of families - they interact mostly with the women there - about the merits of what they talk about and now such gardens flourish in all the villages where we work. These households are also advised and helped to grow some medicinal herbs. The twin impact of this programme - fresh green vegetables almost round the year, and herbs instead of chemicals as medication for common ailments - has led to a clear improvement in the health, and finances, of the families concerned. Apart from the sectional workers, members of women's self-help groups and of our Kishor Kishori Bahini also propagate the concept and their concerted efforts have resulted in 400 such gardens in our villages. These are grown and nurtured by the household itself, with help from our workers. Of these 400 the appellation "model garden" is given to 29 in 10 villages. These are meant to draw the attention of the neighbour or passer-by who may then feel interested in having one for her own family.

When a number of such interested women is found, we hold a concept camp for them in which the ideas behind the programme are explained. This year we held 7 such camps for 131 women. Those among the participants who then begin work on a garden may soon be faced with problems and to answer their questions stemming from practical work, primary trainings are arranged. This year there were 8 such trainings where 86 women were told in greater detail about their next steps. Follow-up trainings are held so that the women can exchange experience and information, learn from one another, and of course from our workers. This year 59 women attended 4 such camps. Apart from these, there are study circles where our workers

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regularly - maybe as often as twice a month - sit with women trying their hand at growing a garden. These are informal advisory sessions, and this year such study circles met altogether 134 times, with a total participation of 2015.

Our workers need to know the answers to all sorts of questions that a woman can raise as she progresses with her garden. For best results a garden has to take shape following a certain design, which could well be unique to every household as the available space and its features, particularly location in regard to the sun, vary from plot to plot. To be on their toes they constantly exchange information and during the year there were seven workshops where they worked on their own problems.

We would like our Kishor Kishori Bahini to get involved in the work. For this we trained 125 of them in 7 villages on the ways to go about growing a simple garden. They have all set up one in their household grounds and next year we shall discuss with them more complex and productive gardens.

In two villages, Bagjola and Haiderpur, where we do not have workers for either kitchen gardens or health, we sat with 60 mothers of our pre-primary children to discuss the annual problem of sores in the mouth before the onset of winter. Our recommendation that intake of green leafy vegetables would give the children the vitamins to keep the sores away was met with scepticism but was nevertheless followed and gave results.

So many women are now involved in these kitchen gardens, which one must remember also include medicinal herbs, that they must be used for other development work also. We started an experiment with 46 women in three groups at Beliyakhali. Each of them puts aside a fistful of rice every day at home and when they meet for the group meeting once every week, they bring it there and put their week's collection in a central store. This is against the time when there will be want, of supply and/or purchasing power. Most of our women consider this to be a workable guarantee for food security throughout the year and many other villages might soon start a scheme like this.

We have not had to look back in the use of medicinal herbs. Many villagers now need no advice from us on what to use how for what, and those who are not sure can get assistance from our health workers, kitchen garden workers, and also members of our Kishor Kishori Bahini. It is thus impossible to give even approximately the number of persons who were benefited by herbs; all that we have on record is that kitchen garden workers treated 192 persons for 37 problems with 39 herbs. These were documented because there was some novelty factor or the other in them.

After everything had been washed away in the floods we distributed vegetable seeds to many

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families, of which we have written in the agriculture section's report. The vegetables grown from these saved a number of families from malnutrition. In times when the ground was under water innovativeness was of great help; saplings of tomato, eggplant, chilli, kohlrabi, beetroot etc.were grown on rafts, raised beds, stilt-frames, and in baskets.

We constantly try out such new things in our gardens, for example, divergent uses or non-use of mulching, use of water hyacinth as fertilizer, mixed cropping, multi-tiered frames, etc. Every meal with produce from our gardens is not just cheap nutrition, it is also a firm negation of pollution.