



Dishaa

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The Association for India's Development (AID) Newsletter

Conf-2001 commemorates ten years of AID

The annual AID-US conference was held this year on May 26-28, 2001, at College Park, MD. Radhika and Uday (AID-Atlanta) report on the conference. Here are some excerpts. The full report, more photos and other post-conference updates are available at the conference web-site www.aidindia.org/conf2001/

AID Conf-2001 on the tenth year of AID brought together volunteers from all over the US, featured inspiring talks by guest speakers, and reaffirmed our commitment to our goals. The two facets of the conference were: understanding issues key to India's development, and planning ways of increasing our involvement with grassroots development.

The conference began in with the planting of the "Tree of Unity" followed by the sharing of bread and singing of songs., in Dr. Bhagat's house. The opening session "Ten years of AID" traced the evolution of AID, and explored new paths for the future, including non-monetary support activities such as theme-wise study groups, by which AID volunteers can be resource persons on various development related issues



Noted journalist P. Sainath delivers the keynote address on the agricultural crisis in India, at the AID Conf-2001.

Eminent journalist and author of *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, P. Sainath, who has been covering rural poverty for the past 15 years, gave a powerful lecture on the distress among the small farmers and the landless in India marked by increased impoverishment and an alarming trend of suicides. Armed with precise information, he highlighted the grim (**Contd. on Pg. 2**)

Long-term rehabilitation efforts in quake-hit Gujarat

In the aftermath of the disastrous earthquake in Gujarat, AID had supported immediate relief work of several NGOs like Spandan -- a makeshift hospital which sprung up in place of the collapsed Civil Hospital in Bhuj, and SEWA. We are now actively working on supporting long-term rehabilitation efforts. Field visits to the quake-hit areas of Gujarat over the past few months by AID volunteers from Mumbai, Minnesota, Pune and Charlotte who met and observed various groups involved in the relief and reconstruction work, have provided us valuable inputs about the efforts undertaken by these NGO's. Gautam Desai (AID-Charlotte) will be spending the rest of the year volunteering in Gujarat, of which the initial three months will be in Kutchh where volunteers are in greater need. The field visits show that there are many small, genuine NGOs across the Surendranagar, Rajkot, Jamnagar, Bhavnagar, Kutch and Ahmedabad districts whose needs remain substantially unmet because of their lack of communication, human resources and networks to reach out to groups like AID. Gramya Vikas Trust (GVT) is one such NGO involved in rural development work to reduce the spread of salinity, and is also putting in brave efforts to mobilize people against land acquisition for an MNC run free port. Another is Ganatar which is at the forefront of the campaign against child labour, and is involved in the education of children of migrant laborers. Mahiti and Pravah work in providing drinking water to drought affected areas, while SWATI and WGWI are women's rights groups. We have identified many such NGOs to undertake infrastructure repair and livelihood generation projects in the coming months. We selected these NGOs based on their capabilities (**Contd. on Pg.3**)

Conf-2001 (Contd. from page 1).

irony in the failure of the Indian government to distribute its declared “45 million ton food-grain surplus” to the millions of hungry and malnourished poor, while much of that surplus rots away in rat-infested outdoor storage areas. He described the tragedy of thousands of small farmers in A.P committing suicide – a direct consequence of globalization. He questioned government policies that removed import restrictions, thus exposing our farmers to unfair competition. The Q&A session covered many other issues including WTO, democracy, land reforms and how the media does not find space for poverty. He urged all concerned citizens to participate in existing protests, and to sensitize ourselves to poverty.

P. Sainath's talk on the effects of the government policies and globalization on Indian farmers stimulated considerable interest on this topic. A compilation of links to articles on this subject, including some of Sainath's own articles, is available at the web-site www.wam.umd.edu/~nagini/IndianAg.htm

Dr. Sundararaman of Tamil Nadu Science Forum led a key discussion on the Hundred Block Plan. He gave a crisp overview of People's Science Movements and explained the block-level development initiatives in building sustainable models in education, community health, enterprise, small savings and agriculture. He used health care as an example to show how goals would be set and the results measured at the block level. He emphasized the non-financial aspects by which AID could support these programs including thematic study groups, advocacy, developing software, being resource-persons for school science education.

Dr. Thelma Narayan of Community Health Cell (Bangalore) reported on the Peoples Health Assembly (PHA) held at Dhaka in Dec. 2000, which was motivated by the failure of organizations such as WHO, World Bank and national governments in the campaign for 'Health for all by 2000'. A network of movements joined forces at the PHA, to recognize health care as a fundamental human right and adopted the People's Health Charter, an expression of common concerns. Dr. Narayan screened a video showing health activists traveling on 'people's health trains', spreading the message at stations along the way, towards the national assembly at Calcutta, and from there to the Dhaka. Mallika Dutt, lawyer and founder of Sakhi, NY, spoke about violence against women in India as an extreme manifestation of more subtle forms of discrimination and gender based power structures. The talk was interspersed with moving snippets of lyrics and video from her recent production, "Mann ke Manjeere".



Dr. Sundararaman (AIPSN) explains the need for block level development programs during the session on Hundred Block plan

There were updates on the activities of AID-India, including the NGO conference at Panchgani and setting up of the eco-shop at Mumbai. We also discussed the setting up of an AID corpus and endowment fund. The General Body Meeting, and AID-USA chapter updates concluded the first day's sessions. The second day began with the Saathi Program session which highlighted the activities of some of our Saathis and Jeevan-Saathis. At the session on alternative technologies several initiatives including the Bijli-Bike, solar thermal concentrator-receiver system, micro-hydel project and a novel wind turbine were presented. This energized some volunteers to form a study group devoted to this important area.

Former AID Pilot Fellow Venkatesh Iyer gave outlined a new way of understanding “development” as a war against subsistence, commons and diversity. In the “Reversing the Brain Drain” discussion, we examined opportunities to work in India against the backdrop of such concerns as pollution, women's status and lower income. The third day began with the screening of “India and Free-Trade: A Closer Look at Bhopal”, an award-winning film by AID volunteer Pavithra Narayanan, followed by a spirited discussion on globalization and a session on social and environmental responsibility. The Emergency Relief session highlighted ways in which AID can be better prepared to handle emergency disaster situations. Gautam Desai who recently visited the quake-hit Gujarat gave an overview of the magnitude of the relief work and the importance of identifying and working with individuals and small organizations who take initiative without any outside support.

To reflect the development ideals in our own lives, the entire conference was a ‘zero waste event’, using only one-sided paper for notes, no food was wasted, and no disposable cutlery or paper napkins were used. Led by Dr. Bhagat, we opened a campaign for individuals to pledge to “Eliminate Corruption At All Levels” (ECAAL) symbolized by an ingeniously designed Zero Rupee note.

The "Saathi" Fellowship Program in AID

Over the last 10 years of grass root work in India, AID has realized that in order to achieve a significant social change, it is not only important that an NGO has a good project plan, but also that it has a dedicated set of people to implement the plan. The idea that investing in motivated and talented people is key to gaining grass root contacts led AID to initiate the Fellowship program, that would encourage AID volunteers from amongst us, to go back to India and work as full-time AID volunteers (aka 'Jeevan Saathis'). The success of this program led AID to expand its vision of 'supporting the right individuals' in India, by starting its 'Saathi' program in the year 2000. Frequently, we come across people who have already done significant work at the grass-roots level, at their own initiative. This program will identify and support such dedicated individuals in the field. Our support in the form of a fellowship would provide them the freedom to pursue their grass-roots level work full-time without being burdened by the need to hold a job to support themselves. This award of 'saathiship' is for a finite period of time in which they can establish their work.

We will seek people by closely interacting with them over an extended period of time, and invite them to become "Saathis" of AID for a while so that we all benefit by this scheme. The spectrum of Saathis is likely to be very wide and quite varied. These collaborators can be identified by existing AID fellows, NGO coordinators of repute with whom AID has a long standing relationship, AID volunteers in the US through their long interaction with people in the field, or they could directly approach AID. Volunteers in AID US, UK and Australia expect to learn a lot from our Saathis. There is no substitute for the wisdom that one can imbibe from the people actually involved in the fields of India. Eventually, we expect to create a network of Saathis of various ages, experiences, and expertise, encompassing as many districts/blocks as we can support in collaboration with AID India. The recent focus towards the Hundred Block Program in AID also needs AID's support towards investing in people, and will draw upon this Saathi program.

The Saathi program is divided into Senior and Junior saathiship, depending upon the field-level experience and accomplishments of the individuals. 1) Senior Saathis: Thus fellowship will support social workers of repute who have already spent a few years establishing rapport with the villagers and already have a planned course of action. The senior saathiship would be an award in recognition of their contribution as well as enable them to pursue their work on a full-time basis. 2) Junior Saathis: This part of the program will identify motivated people who are keen to pursue social work and would not be mere employees. The Saathi program would give a boost to their activities and help them establish their work in the field.

In the past one year, AID has awarded Senior Saathiships to noted environmentalist Leo Saldanah (Environment Support Group, Bangalore), Aruna Ratnam (Tamil Nadu Science Foundation) and Michael and Swati (Paryavaran Suraksha samiti, Narmada Valley). We will describe the work of these Saathis in greater detail in the following editions of our monthly newsletter.

--- *Vaijayanti Gupta, AID-San Diego.*

Gujarat Relief Efforts (Contd. from Pg. 1)

and needs through a triple review process by SAVE/VIKAS, the Janpath Citizens' Initiative (JCI, Janpath-Janvikas coordination committee for earthquake rehabilitation), a coalition of several NGO's and HIVOS, a Dutch agency doing disaster relief and rehabilitation work. We have also received proposals from the Trust for Reaching the Unreached (TRU), for training local health workers from over 26 remote villages in Kutch, followed by a phased withdrawal, but with continued monitoring and support. NCPDP, an NGO that has been working in the Latur earthquake affected areas for 6 years, is also assisting villagers in some of the worst affected but least attended regions, strengthening the technical capabilities of other NGOs and influencing the Government by providing technical inputs. This group is also involved in retrofitting schools and other buildings in various districts.

Our approach is to evaluate the proposals from these NGOs as well as others like SEWA, PSS (Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti), and Utthan, with whom AID has built a good association over the past years by supporting existing initiatives. We will discuss all support issues (monetary and otherwise) with the monitoring agencies wherever relevant and directly with the NGOs. Further, apart from monetary support, SEWA suggested that we could help them substantially by finding markets for their handicraft products like decorative soft furnishings (cushion covers, sheets, drapes) purses, pouches, etc. We have successfully sold some of these products at our recent fund-raiser events and our annual AID conference. The JCI welcomes volunteers with commitment of a minimum of 3 months, but preferably for 6 to 12 months. We will keep you updated on our efforts over the next few months.

-- *Pushpa (AID-India)*

Whose Economy?

The Center for Social Justice in Canada organized a meeting of social activists from all over Canada in Toronto to take a look at the effects of globalization on the Canadian economy. Delegates to the conference, which raised the question, "Whose Economy?" came from all over Canada, and a few people from the United States. Medha Patkar, leader of the National Alliance of People's Movements in India was the keynote speaker at the conference. Her address provided an international view on the same issues that the rest of the conference discussed with respect to Canada. The conference examined the effects, both positive and negative, of Canada's economic policy on the common people. Plenary sessions and workshops covered a range of issues from taxation to people's movements. There was also a reflection on the recent anti-FTAA protest in Quebec.

--- Nigamanth, AID-Columbus

RECENTLY APPROVED PROJECTS:

- Deepam Savings Program in the Madurai district, Tamil Nadu – seed money to start 40 savings group of 20 women each. (Blacksburg/Maryland).
- Continuation of training 16 tribal women in Hirechiwadi (Karjat taluka, Maharashtra) in bamboo crafts for one year. (San-Diego).
- Shelter and health care for the Gujarat earthquake victims in 30 villages in the Rapar and Bhachau taluka by the NGO TRU (San-Diego/Austin).
- North-East Network Proposal: Health care programs in West Bengal (Maryland).
- West Bengal flood relief by the NGO Usha Gram Trust (Blacksburg/Bay-Area).
- Divine Spirit Center for the Disabled: residential school for the mentally challenged (Boston).

Newsletters on the Web:

You can read previous editions of our newsletters on the web at: www.aidindia.org/hq/publications/

Get involved with AID-India!

Would you or your family and friends in India like to work with AID India, or make a donation in Rupees? Please contact Balaji Sampath (kb@eth.net), or send a check payable to AID India to:

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From our Video desk.

AID-Bay Area has recently added the following two talks to its video collection.

1. **'Grassroots democracy and political empowerment for women':** A talk by Dr. Mohini Giri, ex-chairperson of the National Commission for Women and noted human rights activist, at Stanford University, CA. May 2001. Dr. Giri covered a broad spectrum of issues related to women in India, including the changes in the structure of our society that are essential for the empowerment of women, women's participation in Panchayati raj, and the need for 33% reservation for women in the parliament.
2. **"Globalization, Environment and Freedom, An Indian Perspective".** A talk by AID Saathi Leo Saldanha, noted environmental researcher and activist from the Environment Support Group, Bangalore, India at Bay Area, CA. He shares his experiences and struggles and raises concerns about the physical and social costs of large-scale industrialization in environmentally sensitive regions of the State. He covers the campaign to save Kudremukh National Park the Congetrix project, the Bangalore Mysore Infrastructure corridor and other large projects, and their effects on livelihoods of people in the region and environment.

To get copies of either of these two videos, please contact Savita Kini at savitakini@yahoo.com.

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