



Global Voices: Celebrating International Development Week 2008

Participation, Empowerment and Decentralization

By Save A Family Plan

Thirty-two partners in 32 South Indian villages are working with Canadian NGO Save a Family Plan (SAFP) toward integrated development in vulnerable watershed areas. Sangham members from the Kuttimoola village in the Wayanad District, Kerala, South India produce a social resource map using participatory rural appraisal tools through facilitation by SAFP. Maps like this are used to define the needs of Integrated Watershed Development Programs and are made by the active participation of the entire community, including the local government.

In Kuttimoola village in Wayanad District, Kerala, South India, a highlands area with significant indigenous tribal populations, rice paddy cultivation first diminished when local demand shrunk due to cheaper imported rice. Rice paddies were replaced with less labour-intensive and higher-yield crops such as bananas. Pesticide use in banana production has increased costs, compromised the health of consumers, and damaged the land. Local demand for bananas has thus decreased. With the disappearance of the rice paddy fields, natural water conservation has been affected and has led to water scarcity in the region. Job opportunities are also scarce, and indebtedness among farmers has led to a high number of suicides.

A historical timeline produced by local villagers in a Participatory Rural Assessment, with the facilitation of SAFP partner Mananthavady Diocesan Social Service Society, revealed that original settlers of this watershed area cultivated paddy for their daily food and never experienced water scarcity. Only when paddy was replaced with other crops did problems arise.

An early cadastral map showed this particular watershed area to have once had 13 acres of wetland. As of 2006, over 70 per cent of this had been converted to other use, only 3.45 acres remain. In all of Wayanad District, over half of the 50,000 acres of paddy fields have been converted to banana and areca nut cultivation, and other use.

Awareness training for community Sangham members has enabled people to realize the need for protection of wetlands, and with financial support of SAFP, a group of farmers has converted land back to rice paddies. It is expected that the promotion of paddy cultivation will lead to groundwater recharge, since these fields are natural water reservoirs. Ideally, Kuttimoola village will provide a model for other watershed areas in Wayanad District, showing that it is possible to restore the ecological balance of damaged land, and if managed responsibly, the same land can continue to support the sustainable livelihoods of residents.