

Conversations Today

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In an increasingly interconnected world facing unprecedented challenges, the concept of individual social responsibility has emerged as a powerful catalyst for progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 global goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, encompass a diverse range of targets aimed at eradicating poverty, promoting environmental sustainability, ensuring quality education, and fostering inclusive and just societies. While governments, organisations, and institutions play vital roles in advancing these goals, the active participation of individuals is equally indispensable in realising a sustainable future.

Every action, no matter how small, has a ripple effect that contributes to the collective well-being of society and the environment. Each choice we make, from the products we consume to the way we use resources, impacts not only our immediate surroundings but also resonates globally. Individuals, as consumers, have the power to influence industries by demanding eco-friendly products, supporting ethical practices, and advocating for sustainable policies.

One of the hallmarks of the SDGs is their universality — they apply to all countries and communities, regardless of their level of development. Individuals possess a unique advantage in understanding the specific needs and challenges of their local communities. By actively engaging in community-driven initiatives, individuals can help address pressing issues such as poverty, inadequate healthcare, and lack of education. Through volunteer work, charitable contributions, and collaboration with local organisations, individuals can play an essential role in creating meaningful change from the grassroots level upwards.

Individuals are not passive bystanders in the pursuit of sustainable development; they are active agents of change with the potential to shape the world for the better. Embracing individual social responsibility involves recognising the inter-connectedness of our actions and their impact on broader societal and environmental contexts.

In today's digital age, individuals have unprecedented opportunities to raise awareness and drive positive change. By aligning our choices with the values of the SDGs, we can collectively build a more just, equitable, and sustainable future.

CSIM has developed a SDG LAB App which is available on Play Store as well as iStore. Suggestive actions for each SDG and short videos are available on this App. Please download and start posting your individual acts of kindness and get to know the SDGs they are aligned to.

Each individual contribution, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is a step towards realising the vision of a world where prosperity is shared by all, and the planet's resources are preserved for generations to come.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

Navigating the Information Revolution



Around 550 years ago, Johannes Gutenberg was responsible for the first information revolution. He invented the printing press and inspired the world by printing books. At first, he started printing 50 books per week and produced a total of 180 Bibles. Over a period of 50 years, mass production of books made education reach the masses. The first mass-published printed newspaper that emerged from Gutenberg's printing press in Antwerp in 1605 was called "Relation." The growth of using telephones, telegraphs, and obtaining information at lower prices fueled the first information revolution.

Gerald W. Brock described the present phase as the second information revolution, with its roots tracing back to World War II. From the nineteenth century until today, the emergence of information technology, the growth of computers, the advent of the World Wide Web, and the expansion of internet usage led to digitisation across the globe.

During the early 2000s, Orkut, LinkedIn, and Myspace were popular social networking platforms. In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg and his team founded Facebook, which became the largest social networking platform. Now, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and many other platforms dominate the social networking space.

Social media promotes self-expression. People started sharing their diaries with friends and anyone who loved to read them. This trend of communication potentially influences human behavior. The convergence of technologies transformed information creation, production, and dissemination.

While Gutenberg opened the magical door of libraries and designed the world of knowledge in the form of books, journals, newspapers, etc., Zuckerberg widened the door of social networking. Typing shuffled the alphabets while emojis became the human face. Information sharing became simpler, cheaper, and faster than ever before. Social media contributed to the widespread dissemination of information and democratized access to information. It allowed the opportunity to create, consume, reproduce, and share information in the digital space.



Gutenberg and Zuckerberg left a mark in the field of journalism. Traditional media, such as print media, television, and radio, had a dedicated news production desk. The news desk had an Editor-in-Chief, sub-editors, reporters, camera persons, and visual editors who verified all received information and prevented the spread of false and misleading content. This process of verifying information before broadcasting is called gatekeeping.

This is the gap we find among social media journalists. The spread of misinformation is very high on social media. There are no gatekeepers to check for facts before publication. Information producers and consumers have the responsibility to safeguard the freedom of expression, which needs to be self-regulated.

The journey from Gutenberg to Zuckerberg showcases the immense potential of human ingenuity to reshape the way we communicate and connect. As we stand at the crossroads of the information age, the lessons of the past and the challenges of the present remind us of the importance of ethical information sharing. It is our collective duty to uphold the values of accuracy, authenticity, and accountability, so that the legacy of the information revolutions remains one of progress, understanding, and enlightenment for generations to come.

A.Arulselvi

Harmonizing Growth: A Journey from Tech to Earth

Organic Farming is a family of processes that nurtures the soil and crops in every step. Ensuring that the land is cared for every day, through every process, keeping it potent for current for future yields is at the heart of regenerative farming. “That is my favorite word in the context of agriculture. Even leaves that store the excess nutrients fall down as manure for the next cycle of crop. Hence the significance of intercropping. Organic farming is so integrated that you naturally discuss one process after another,” says Mr. Rahul, an industrial engineer turned organic farmer from Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu.

Hailing from a textile family, he was literally forced into farming by his father. “I studied Electrical Engineering from Coimbatore and then moved to Germany to study Industrial Engineering. He studied in German medium and worked there for over 18 months. I simply flew down for a vacation in 2021 and that is when my father gave me the responsibility to do farming in the land he had purchased in Pudukottai,” recalls Rahul.

From 30 acres his farm now stretches to about 42 acres, but the growth and transition was not as rough and difficult as he had anticipated. “All hypes post the pandemic actually convinced me easily,” he laughs. Rahul and his father were very clear about doing only organic farming. “For some reason my father could just not think of producing crops with chemicals and I stood by it. As the pandemic too made us conscious of what we consumed as food, this decision was not a hard thought one but very timely and born out of concern,” adds Rahul, who wanted to earnestly prepare himself for this new role.

He first attended a class at Isha in Coimbatore and followed all leads and connections from here to learn organic farming. He had travelled up to Pune, Nasik to meet organic farmers and learn their practices. “This is when I understood why experiential learning was important in agriculture. Every piece of land, every crop and every farmer is different. All processes must be adapted to allow these diversities to complement each other. That is the beauty of farming as I learnt from visiting over 100 farms,” he says. It took three months for Rahul to prepare his land as it was covered by thorny bushes. He then planted 1300 coconut saplings followed by fruits like guava, amla, fig and mango.

Soon a lead from Theni encouraged him to explore moringa plantation on scale. He attended a training at Periyakulam University and undertook



technical support to more than 100 organic farmers to follow integrated farming on their lands. “When we say integrated, it is a model where every element contributes to another while also allowing the farmer to earn from multiple sources through the year. So, a small pond with fish and a shed above it housing ducks and chickens is a wonderful system where the birds’ waste feed fish and the ammonia waste from fish can be converted into nitrate for the plants,” he elaborates.

While promoting banana wine in various stalls, Rahul was approached by a Malaysian firm with whom two memoranda have been signed for collaboration. With more exporting and marketing plans in mind, he insists that organic farming needs patience and passion. “We cannot push nature to walk faster. Land has to recover and get ready for crop cycles. It is this testing period that we must pass successfully. After that there is no looking back. Since I started with the motive of organic farming as the main end there was no diversion and my explorations kept me hooked. I could channel income from more than one source while my plantations may take two more years to give me that. Yes, it takes time initially but in the long run input costs fall drastically and yields are steady or increasing,” assures Rahul.

However, he also warns that some organic farmers are themselves not fully aware of the complete food chain. His father, who passionately urged him to take on organic farming continued buying vegetables for their household from a regular green grocer while Rahul had to intervene and regularise purchases from an organic store. “Farmers are very much part of the demand cycle too,” he adds. While economically organic farming could be a tough call, it is totally worth it for the sake of our children. Working out to be cheaper, sustainable and friendly to the land, soil, Rahul quantifies that two cows are enough to produce all organic farm inputs for 7-10 acres of land. And mulching, is his favorite process allowing him to appreciate the play of all natural elements on a small piece of land.

The techie in Rahul was also alive in these months and he co-founded the Renquark, solar energy solutions company in Tiruppur, with his friend from Germany that provides solar energy installation, management and regulatory services in the domestic and industrial spheres. “Sun is a big ball of energy. It amused me as a student and now, as an organic farmer I am in awe of its potential in building all forms of life,” says a content Rahul.

Shanmuga Priya.T

moringa plantation immediately. The leaves were processed into powder, tablets, soups and flavored teas. Dedicating almost nine acres for moringa, he followed another lead in Theni and formed an FPO (Farmer Producer Organisation) with three more farmers, to further explore opportunities in moringa plantation, value addition and marketing.

Rahul thoroughly enjoyed the processes on his land because by now he was fully aware of the benefits he would reap sooner and this encouraged him to continue exploring. Inspired by a video on you tube, he interacted with a renowned farmer from Chittoor, Mr Shanmuga Sundaram and co-founded the Integrated Banana Growers Federation in Erode to promote integrated farming and value added products from banana. With over 300 farmers associated with this federation, Rahul and team have been providing



The Saturday Squad: Never too old to make a difference

Every Saturday afternoon, the sound of music, the smell of delicious food and a smattering of various dialects waft through Lengkok Bahru neighbourhood.

It's not your run-of-the-mill party, but a free weekly lunch for friends and neighbours in one of Singapore's oldest neighbourhoods. These gatherings act as both the draw and the glue that get the elderly to socialise and remind each other that they are not alone. Yet another community-led effort but with a twist – to take care of your own. That's what The Saturday Movement is about.

According to Raymond Khoo, founder of this initiative, the majority of the elderly living in the area are lonely. Aged 65 and above, mostly retired, some supported by their families, some barely managing on their own. Raymond and his team look out precisely for that.

Started in 2011, the non-profit organisation with over 100 volunteers distributes dry rations and food coupons. They manage to reach about 300 households weekly across eight blocks in the Lengkok Bahru neighbourhood.

About 500 people receive help from The Saturday Movement, with an additional 80 households hoping to get on the list as well. Each person will get eight coupons, and each coupon allows them to redeem a hot meal at The Saturday Movement's community kitchen, which is a stone's throw away for the residents. The kitchen, called S17 Community Kitchen, serves *nasi padang*, rice with an assortment of side dishes, with residents getting a choice of meat (beef, chicken or fish) and two sides of vegetables, which typically adds up to around SGD\$7.00 (USD\$4.50).

"I've seen the quality of free food that floats around in Singapore, I think it's mediocre." For Raymond, that was the impetus to do better, give better. "If it's something that we wouldn't eat ourselves, we shouldn't be giving it to others."



Raymond made a promise both to himself and to the people of Lengkok Bahru – serving *nasi padang* that is delicious, which has them coming back for more.

The kitchen serves an estimated 4,000 free meals every month. The team also caters free lunches for the residents of Lengkok Bahru every Saturday and on special occasions like Christmas, Chinese New Year and Hari Raya.

Raymond believes in serving more than just meals – he creates a space for them to talk, laugh and eat a meal together – ingredients that are often not abundant when you are isolated.

Right now, The Saturday Movement is Raymond's pet project with a majority of the funds coming out of his own pocket.

There are the occasional one-time donations from organisations too. Clearly not an easy situation for him to manage.

"Funding is a major issue, we don't have consistent funding."

To support the next phase of operations, Raymond hopes to reach a stage where the initiative will be able to be more sustainable financially, to continue getting the elderly the support that they need.

To achieve that, Raymond believes that the solution comes in the form of corporate catering. "We are asking for organisations to come, to at least order once a month. It can be a bento, or we do a nice nasi ambeng and everything else."

"That's all we're asking."



ABOUT THE SATURDAY MOVEMENT

The Saturday Movement is a non-profit charity organisation set up in 2011 by Raymond Khoo, that aims to assist the elderly and poor in low income areas in Lengkok Bahru by providing free meals, dry rations and social support.

A story by Our Better World – the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore

International Foundation (www.ourbetterworld.org)

Flames of Knowledge

In a small hamlet near Guduvancherry, nestled amidst the lush greenery of the surrounding landscape, lived Kasi and his family. They were part of the Irular community, a vibrant group with a deep connection to the land and forests. The community was known for their traditional knowledge of herbal medicine and their harmonious way of living with nature.

Every morning, as the sun's golden rays gently illuminated the hamlet, Kasi's day began. His responsibilities were far from typical for a boy his age. Instead of attending school like most children, Kasi would join his parents in their daily quest for firewood. The forest was their classroom, and the lessons were rooted in the rhythms of nature.

Their mornings were dedicated to collecting firewood, a necessity for cooking and heating their humble abode. The Irular community had always relied on the forest's bounty for their needs, but the struggle was real. As deforestation encroached on their surroundings, the journey to find suitable firewood became longer and more arduous.

Kasi's eyes sparkled with curiosity whenever he watched the children from nearby villages heading to school in their crisp uniforms, carrying bags filled with books and dreams. He dreamt of learning to read and write, of discovering the world beyond the forest, and of someday becoming a healer like his grandmother. Yet, reality painted a different picture.

With each bundle of firewood he collected, Kasi's dreams seemed to flicker, just like the flames he ignited at home. Education was a luxury his family couldn't afford. Every piece of firewood was a piece of his potential, sacrificed to meet their basic needs.

His father, a daily wage labourer, toiled relentlessly to make ends meet. Yet, the meagre income rarely stretched beyond essentials. The whispers of government programs meant to uplift families like Kasi's reached their hamlet, but the benefits remained elusive. The promises of scholarships and educational assistance seemed distant as the forest that



"My days used to be filled with collecting firewood. But now, thanks to the support of our community and initiatives that reached us, I am a student. and Dreamer."

surrounded them.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon and cast a warm glow over the hamlet, Kasi's grandmother sat with him around a crackling fire. She spoke of the importance of preserving their heritage, of passing down the wisdom of the Irular community, and of hope for a brighter future. In his wrinkled hands, she held the ember of possibility.

Word spread of a community-driven initiative aimed at addressing the challenges faced by the Irular community. Local volunteers, inspired by

the resilience of the families, rallied together. They worked tirelessly to bridge the gap between government programs and the hamlet, ensuring that the promised benefits reached those who needed them most.

Scholarships were secured for the children, allowing them to attend school without worrying about the financial burden. Kasi's spark of hope reignited, and he eagerly joined his peers on their journey to knowledge.

As the seasons changed, so did the story of the hamlet. Kasi's mornings were no longer solely dedicated to firewood collection; they now encompassed the joy of learning. The forest still held its secrets, but the school opened doors to a world of possibilities.

Kasi, with his determination and the support of his community, broke the cycle of firewood and embraced the fire of knowledge. He realised that his education was a flame that couldn't be extinguished, a beacon of hope for the entire Irular community.

In the heart of that hamlet, a new story was written—a story of empowerment, resilience, and the transformational power of education. And as the community moved forward, Kasi's journey became an inspiration for generations to come, reminding them that with unity and perseverance, even the densest forest of challenges could be overcome.

Marie Banu Rodriguez



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS). It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship.

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. www.csim.in

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Information is Power



In the vast expanse of India's agricultural landscape, where the livelihoods of millions are intertwined with the rhythm of the land, Krishi Jagran stands as a testament to the power of information dissemination in catalyzing growth, innovation, and sustainability within the farming community. With its roots deeply embedded in the soil of rural India, the agricultural magazine has emerged as a vital resource, bridging the gap between traditional farming practices and modern advancements.

"I belong to a farming family and a farmer's son. So, it was quite natural for me to feel connected with agriculture more than with anything else so easily," says MC Dominic, founder and editor-in-chief at Krishi Jagran, "Though I tried

treading different paths in life, I guess I eventually found my calling in agriculture and realized there're various desks in media houses – be it entertainment, sports, or business but never agriculture per se! That's the gap I thought I was born to fill. So, I started this business in 1996 and the rest as they say is history!"

Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy, providing livelihoods to a significant portion of its population. However, the sector faces challenges, ranging from outdated farming practices and lack of access to modern technologies to volatile market conditions and the adverse impacts of climate change. In this context, Krishi Jagran helps disseminate information, best practices, and success stories that empower farmers to overcome

challenges and embrace opportunities.

By his own admission, Dominic started the magazine because there was a dearth of media when it came to agriculture. Years back, I was sitting in a government office and saw all sorts of magazines but didn't find a single copy on agriculture, and that really hit me," he says, "We're an agrarian economy and when I didn't get to see any hardcore agriculture magazine there, I realized that this is one occupation where the majority of our population is involved but isn't properly covered or informed due to no proper journals, for a simple economical reason — they might not be profitable."

He adds: "All this weighed in on my mind and made me not only launch Krishi Jagran in Hindi in 1996, but continue with

the launch of 23 editions in 12 languages in the years to come. This also got us featured in the 'Limca Book of Records' for being the largest agri-rural magazine."

The magazine covers a diverse range of topics relevant to the agricultural community. From innovative farming techniques and sustainable practices to updates on government policies and advancements in agricultural technology, Krishi Jagran serves as a one-stop platform for farmers, agronomists, researchers, and agricultural enthusiasts. It equips its readers with the tools they need to make informed decisions and optimize their agricultural endeavors.

According to Dominic, reaching out to as many readers as possible, was always part of the plan. "Given our diverse



country, bringing local content in local news was the only option that I thought could help our farmers," he says, "Even now, we are planning to expand the magazine's circulation to foreign languages as well, since knowledge knows no boundaries."

Circulation of Krishi Jagran though, didn't happen overnight. The team kept brainstorming on various ways to ensure delivery in 28 states. "With the digital world we live in today, social media is helping us take our stories all the more deeper in villages across the country," Dominic adds.

One of Krishi Jagran's noteworthy achievements is its ability to bridge the gap between traditional wisdom and modern advancements. The magazine acts as a conduit, facilitating the exchange of ideas between experienced farmers and experts in various fields. This amalgamation of tradition and innovation has the potential to revolutionize farming, ensuring higher yields, reduced environmental impact, and improved livelihoods.

As the world grapples with the challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation, sustainable farming practices have gained prominence. The publication takes a proactive stance in promoting such practices that balance productivity with ecological conservation.

Through its articles, features, and case studies, the magazine educates its readers about techniques like organic farming, precision agriculture, water conservation, and



crop rotation. By doing so, it not only contributes to the well-being of the farming community but also addresses broader global concerns related to food security and environmental sustainability.

Krishi Jagran goes beyond being a mere source of information; it is also a catalyst for rural entrepreneurship. The magazine features stories of individuals who have transformed their passion for farming into successful agribusiness ventures. These stories inspire readers to think creatively, explore innovative ideas, and consider value addition beyond traditional cultivation. By showcasing the journeys of these rural entrepreneurs, Krishi Jagran instills a sense of possibility and optimism in its readers, encouraging them to explore new avenues for growth.

In an era marked by digital transformation, the magazine has embraced technology to extend its reach and impact. Through its online presence, including a website and social media platforms, the magazine ensures that its content reaches even the remotest corners of the country. This digital approach not only

widens its readership but also fosters a sense of community among farmers who can connect, share experiences, and seek advice in virtual spaces.

Dominic points out that in a print edition, the magazine's circulation was a few lakhs. However, the "curiosity" displayed by farmers, in seeking out information, has propelled Krishi Jagran's social media reach to hit crores. "Our programme, FTJ or Farmer the Journalist, has seen us train more

than 1,500 farmers who now report on their farming-related issues via videos they make using their phones for our YouTube Channel," says Dominic, "So, digital channels have given us the opportunity to reach, where we couldn't have reached or would have taken too long to reach, in no time."

Krishi Jagran stands as a testament to the power of knowledge in transforming lives and communities. Through its commitment to disseminating accurate, practical, and forward-looking information, the magazine has become an invaluable companion to farmers and agricultural stakeholders across India. In a sector that constantly evolves, its role in facilitating this evolution is commendable. As it continues to inspire, educate, and connect, the magazine contributes significantly to the growth of Indian agriculture, fostering a future where the nation's farmers thrive in harmony with the land and its resources.

Rahul Philip

Fastening the seat-belt

Studies conducted over the past three years by private companies from insurance and HR solutions industries have reported high stress rates in Indian professionals, quoting figures ranging from 55% to 70%. Despite considering differentiating factors like the pandemic period or dissimilar methods of measurement, such statistics do indicate that stress is increasingly a matter of concern.

The words used to define mechanical stress in *The Britannica* emphasise the negative feeling that the word induces, stating that “stress is a physical quantity that describes forces present during deformation.”

The World Health Organisation has a milder take on this, saying “Everyone experiences stress to some degree.” Strong terms are used to define stress, “A state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation.” The subsequent phrase used is “It is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives.”

Like the WHO, science classes from school level teach that positive stress can strengthen the immune system, enhance memory and learning, and improve decision-making skills. However, experiences and information demonstrate that high stress levels are causing serious repercussions in society and the workplace.

For an individual it becomes important to assess not only levels of stress but the reasons behind it. To understand the potential impact on mental or physiological health, boost the survival instinct or let it remain as low-level noise in the background.

Micro-stress or major stress

The Institute of Social Works and Research (iswr.in) has a list of twenty challenges faced by social sector professionals in India, ranging from personal to societal. Comprehensive though the list is, there is one more category that I would like to add: micro-stress, which is caused by minor day-to-day situations that cause discomfort.

Bigger events are easily recognised as stressful situations, such as a continued series of layoffs in the organisation or a stressful exchange with a moody boss every day. However, less obvious interactions like regular requests to alter personal schedules or lack of responsiveness from a team-member are often overlooked, though they can also significantly impact overall well-being.



Assessing stress levels

In that context, it is useful to understand causes of micro-stress at a personal level. This is more difficult than it seems.

For one thing, people react in different ways to similar circumstances. Secondly, conditioning, either by ourselves or societal expectations, tends to make us press the mute button on such issues.

A third aspect is the old story of someone putting a frog in a pan and slowly heating the water. The poor frog does not even realise when the water is boiling till it is too late. People who have busy, exhausting schedules may face early burn-out or breakdown.

In this Information Age, there are many guidelines online to assess whether one is stressed, both qualitative and quantitative. The extent and ease of these means one must use judgement, personal or professional, to avoid the risks of undue alarm as well as to avoid missing an early warning signal. Extended periods of affected sleep or feelings of nausea could be indicators of stress build-up; they could also be the body taking its time to recover strength or an allergic reaction.

Questionnaires that relate to observed reactions may provide

another perspective. One such instrument is Cohen’s Perceived Stress Scale which derives a stress score from ten responses about experiences in the previous month.

Identifying the causes

Stress is generally big and visible, best dealt with by medical professionals, counsellors and social organisations whether online and in person. A non-profit organisation in Delhi, Sanjivini, is an institution I came to know of when a friend’s family was given help. The essential support at a time when they had no other recourse earned everlasting, deep gratitude of the patient and the family.

Micro-stressors, on the other hand, by their very nature might need to be determined through more informal means. One method to find these out is to remember situations that caused a niggling discomfort and identify the underlying concern. Was there a conflict with ethical value systems? A feeling of guilt at feeling reluctant to help out, despite the situation affecting personal time? A constant drain on emotional reserves?

At work, such circumstances may unfortunately involve a manager regularly being rude to a junior colleague, a boss who habitually

passes on other people’s work or a team-mate with little consideration for deadlines.

Not just at work, others can also cause micro-stress without realising. It can be a friend or family-member and it can also turn out to be oneself. Feet shuffling in embarrassment, I realise that my tendency to procrastination in medical matters does cause me low-level tension.

Using a personal compass

Khalil Gibran said, “Faith is a knowledge within the heart, beyond the reach of proof.” While outside help is always an option, it may be easier or more comfortable to use personal values, opinions and needs as an internal compass. Incidents which come to mind can be examined at leisure and weighed in the balance of individual preferences.

There are other routes, too, and for me reading creates one such opportunity to get input and absorb in solitude. My favourite humour and mystery genre books are a regular source of unexpected insights on human behaviour.

What next?

Establishing causes of micro-stress, whether through self-reflection or conversation, makes it easier to think about how to remove them. The low-hanging fruit is removing discomfort that comes from personal habits, such as by cleaning up personal clutter or setting up a system to meet committed timelines.

Addressing micro-stress caused by other people or external circumstances might involve difficult choices.

A straight conversation, pointing out a behaviour that may not have been realised, works in some cases. Bigger decisions like moving away from the individual or situation, creating physical or emotional distance, may also need to be done.

There is often a reluctance to cause disruption or conflict, even if on a smaller scale. At the same time, our days are filled with pursuits relating to family, work, health, friends, entertainment and so on.

Are these considerations impacting well-being? If so, identifying micro-stress could provide the impetus to take a next step.

As it is important to remember while in an aeroplane, please fasten your own seat-belt first.

Karuna Luthar

Empowering Communities:

A Journey of Strategic Collaboration and Lasting Impact



Focusing on communities has evolved to be strategic and effective in delivering long term impacts. Working with communities ensures alignment with local contexts and also sensitivity to region's dynamics, thus enhancing responsiveness from all sides. "This is very true for us in Nagaland because communities here are not only close knit but face unique challenges.

While development issues like inadequate access to education could be common across the nation the challenges in addressing them are diverse. And what actually works the way is the marriage of perspectives, responsiveness and the urge to see the change," says Ms. Alemla Longchar, Program Coordinator at Nagaland Centre for Human Development and Information Technology (NCHD-IT) in Dimapur, Nagaland.

When like-minded young women working in different organisations came together, they wanted to develop programs that could benefit women, children, especially the school drop outs in Nagaland. The team's strength was the diversity in experiences and perspectives, that gave them enough room to work on a suitable and sustainable program. "We were all learning to view situations from a variety of contexts and that allowed us to check every assumption and challenge while developing our programs," she adds.

Kipheri is an over populated yet underdeveloped district in the northern part of Nagaland. When NCHD-IT began in 2013, they started work with women farmer groups and school dropouts simultaneously. Women farmers were organised into self-help groups and linked with banking agencies to facilitate the credit processes. They were also

introduced to the cultivation of new, varied crops through study trips to places like Sikkim so that they could earn additional income from their own land. Training in income generation activities were received very positively by the community and many drop outs, especially girls found this as an avenue to start their micro enterprise initiatives. Soon, the team saw women, who were usually neglected, become self-reliant and contribute positively to their families and communities.

As part of their livelihood interventions, NCHD-IT collaborated with NABARD and SIDBI to form 300 Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) to promote the use of unused land for economic prosperity. Successful in about five districts, both short and long term crops have been explored. In Kipheri district, over 300 hectares of land are covered under cardamom cultivation. "When we give all the technical and knowledge support, community members feel secure and guarded to try something new. Once the fear of unknown is overcome, it is easier for them to try newer things," says Almela. As part of program planning, NCHD-IT team made sure that every project gathered a group of volunteers from the community, who would eventually take up the project's work so that the impact chain remained unhindered, irrespective of fund flow from agencies. While this gathered human resource for the project's sustainability, promotion of income generating activities also laid the foundation to allow fund flow into these projects.

NCHD-IT went on to tie up with institutions like Wipro to build the capacities of local schools. Alongside, the team wanted to introduce the method of joyful teaching-learning in primary



classes. "We felt this was important to tap into a child's intrinsic motivation so that they do not drop out when they grow up. Joyful learning not only fosters creativity and critical thinking, but also develops a positive attitude towards education," she clarifies. Having reached out to more than three villages in Dimapur, NCHD-IT has also simultaneously established the Vibrant Library centres in these schools, where children get to explore a picture or concept through talk, fishbowl discussions, recitals, storytelling, etc. Outside the schools, drop outs are identified and mainstreamed in schools with community's participation. Children are encouraged in many ways like distribution of free school aids, uniforms, etc and young graduates are also referred to higher education institutions to facilitate completion of post-graduation.

NCHD-IT has also implemented

projects in collaboration with NIIT Foundation, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Nagaland) and NGOs like IDEa-the ant in Assam. All the reach across three verticals has been strongly backed by a sound theory of change where the team has worked out every possible risk and assumption, using experience and inputs from the community.

"Communities are aware of their priorities. Involving communities as partners in development work is a powerful approach that acknowledges their agency, dignity, and capacity to drive their own development. Having come from different backgrounds, we were united by our conviction in working with communities. And as we look back at our journey, we are really glad we invested in our communities," claims Alemla.

Shanmuga Priya.T

This woman is helping acid attack survivors heal their trauma

While survivors of acid attacks carry visible marks of their fight, Sushma (name changed) carries the scars within her. In 2016, Sushma got married, hoping for a bright future. Unfortunately, her hopes were shattered as her husband turned out to be an alcoholic and subjected her to domestic violence. Despite the tremendous challenges, she chose to remain married. After the birth of their baby boy, the couple decided to relocate from their hometown to Delhi, seeking a fresh start. However, the change in location did not bring the change she had hoped for. One day after an intense argument, her husband reached for a bottle of acid and forced her to drink it. With each gulp, the searing pain caused by the acid spread through Sushma's body. The sensation was beyond excruciating. The acid damaged her food pipe completely. She could not eat or drink without external assistance. "I lost my will to live after the attack," she tells HerStory. However, her distress did not end there. After the accident, she shifted to her hometown where her husband attempted to harm her again. After navigating through multiple hospital shifts and enduring three years of extensive treatment, along with significant financial expenditure, she finally found a home in "Apna Ghar" located in Delhi. Apna Ghar is a shelter home run by Brave Soul Foundation that serves as a secure haven for survivors of acid attacks who have been abandoned by their families. It was started in 2021 by Shaheen Malik, an acid attack survivor who has been working on the issues of acid attack and gender-based violence since 2013. The shelter home provides the survivors with medical intervention, therapy, skill development and legal aid alongside offering food and shelter. "After two years of treatment, I had already exhausted a lot of money. Then I got to know about Brave Soul Foundation and Apna Ghar. After I shifted to the shelter home, my treatment and medication were arranged by the NGO. I also received 3 lakh in compensation from the government," Sushma says.

While she is still fighting the case against her husband the shelter home takes care of Sushma's food and medication. She is also taking English and basic Computer classes. "This shelter home has given me a will to live and a place to call home," she tells HerStory.

Scarred for life

Malik was pursuing an MBA from Punjab Technical College while working as a student counsellor. In 2009, she was leaving the premises, when she was attacked by a man sent by her employer. "Initially I thought someone was playing some prank on me. But seconds later, I could feel my skin burning. I shouted and people gathered around and started to pour water on my face. Each drop of water felt like needles going into my skin," she



describes. As of now, she has undergone a total of 25 surgical procedures. After the attack, she completely lost vision in one of her eyes, while retaining partial sight in the other.

"I hid myself after the attack. I was depressed and hopeless. My face had been my identity which I lost because of the attack and that was extremely painful. Seeing myself in the mirror every day, carrying those scars, I felt like a lost cause," she shares. However, in 2013, Malik decided to step out and start working because of the increased financial burden. As such, she joined an organisation working for acid attack survivors. She further explains that for an acid attack survivor, apart from the physical and emotional damage, financial burden becomes a big challenge. She says that acid attack survivors require lifelong treatment and care. They live on medication for a lifetime and undergo around 10 to 15 surgeries or more and each surgery costs around a lakh. Their immune system and general health are also affected.

Additionally, there is a huge increase in expenses coupled with the loss of employment due to disability. "Victims become a financial burden on the family and in many cases, they are abandoned by their own families," she says. Even when employers hire victims of acid attacks, they expect them to work like the others, forgetting about their physical challenges. Moreover, the trials take a long time, and the survivors cannot move on with their lives, Malik explains. "Survivors often

grapple with a profound loss of identity in the aftermath of such incidents. The lifelong disabilities and visible scars are a constant reminder of the violation of their bodily integrity. Moreover, the reactions of others, ranging from startled children to individuals who consciously or subconsciously fail to hide their gaze from survivors, further magnify the emotional turmoil. This societal discrimination can sometimes escalate to the extent of untouchability. Survivors can very often feel suicidal," the founder adds. The realisation that India lacks resources and rehabilitation centres for victims of acid attacks pushed Malik to start Brave Soul Foundation and Apna Ghar.

Building blocks of life

The shelter home provides food, medical assistance, and legal aid to the survivors. In the last two years, it has helped in conducting over 50 reconstructive surgeries for which the NGO has tied up with four hospitals in NCR. Malik has so far helped around 200 acid attack survivors. People from Bihar, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh have been a part of Apna Ghar. The shelter home offers basic English and Computer classes to the women. Simultaneously, they provide assistance in procuring compensation from the government, as well as guiding survivors through the process of filing legal cases and transferring their petitions from other states to Delhi. Since most girls are teenagers, the NGO also offers them the opportunity to complete their education at

open schools and colleges. Women who do not stay at the shelter home are provided with a monthly supply of groceries and medication. They also are given financial assistance of Rs 4,000 to Rs 5,000 as per their needs.

The NGO receives funding from its partners and also through donations. Malik believes that in the aftermath of the acid attack, most survivors suffer from social withdrawal, social isolation, and depression. She says that at this time support is vital for the proper and complete rehabilitation of acid burn victims. "Acid attacks come with some form of disability for most people. It becomes very difficult to accept this new reality," she adds.

As such the NGO also offers psychological therapy to each survivor for their overall rehabilitation. So far the NGO has one centre in Delhi and one in Kolkata. However, Malik's vision for Apna Ghar encompasses a nationwide expansion, aiming to establish its presence in every state across the country. She also advocates for a ban on the retail sale of acid. Furthermore, Malik wishes that the world becomes more sensitive towards such people and provides more employment opportunities that empower them to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society. "We cannot change what happened in the past but we can surely help in creating a better and more hopeful future for the survivors," Malik says.

Simran Sharma
Source: Yourstory.com

Green Gratuity

I was checking out the price of tomatoes the other day on a home-delivery app, and it showed 69 rupees per kg. But at other times over the past couple of years, the per kg price of tomatoes has ranged from as low as 8 rupees a kg to as high as 160 a kg. One aspect to it is that even when the price is very high, it's not the farmer who makes a big profit, but the middlemen, and when the price is low, one shudders to think what happens to the farmer. But even if we keep this aspect aside for the moment, this whole price fluctuation cycle does present a conundrum that needs thinking about; how is a tomato farmer supposed to earn his livelihood when multiple factors, most of which are out of his control, dictate his earnings or the lack thereof?

Some of the organic shops or supply to in Chennai maintain a standard pricing policy - whatever the price in the open market, the customers pay a standard price for an item and the farmers receive the corresponding standard price too. But this solution is a consumer-side solution, and it takes very enlightened and committed consumers to make it work. So what is a producer-side solution?

Yes, you guessed it, it's that the farmer should multi-crop - grow a whole lot of fruits, vegetables, greens, herbs, and never have to depend on a single crop. Essentially, there shouldn't exist anyone who can be called a 'tomato farmer'. No one should have to tie their fate to the prices of a particular item.

Here's how the economics of multi-cropping works. We grow fruit trees such as coconut, mango, jackfruit, sapota, pomegranate, sweet lime, lemon, 'khichlikai' (custard apple), citron and others according to the climate and soil conditions as long-term crops. These trees take between six to ten years to mature and start bearing fruit, but once they reach fruit-bearing age, many of them keep going for sixty to hundred years. After the first few years, the amount of care and watering they need keeps coming down, while the number and quality of fruit that they yield keeps going



up. Imagine how well this works for the farmer! Assuming he or she planted the tree in their twenties, when they are in their senior years, these trees keep giving them returns while demanding very little hard labour, except for harvesting. This is exactly like a really nice pension plan or a gratuity amount that keeps

increasing season on season. And this is in addition to these old friends also providing us with shade and coolness, oxygen and mulch, and so much beauty.

Of course, a multi-cropping farmer does not wait for six to ten years to see the first income from his work. Instead what he or she does is, along with the long-term yielding trees, he also plants medium-term crops like banana, papaya, sweet potato, bamboo, sugarcane, turmeric, etc, and intersperses them with short-term yielders like greens, paddy, millets, radish, mustard, watermelon, muskmelon etc. The medium-term crops bring in revenue at intervals, while the short-term crops bring in the everyday turnover that is required.

This is how multicropping supports a farmer's short-term, midterm as well as long-term financial needs.

The added beauty of it is that, so much of the water, inputs and labour are common across these three sets of crops with varying return times. And the land is common too, as most of the medium term and all the short term crops can be grown under and around the long-term trees growing in the farm.

Looking at this basket of produce from an end-consumer's point of view, we see that having all this variety available for sale from a single farmer makes things easier, more convenient and also most cost effective for the buyer too. They need not go to different places to source safe food for their family - food which is bound to come from all the three different kinds of crops that the multicropping farmer is growing. This is therefore a win-win situation, with the farmer gaining a better price because he sells to the end-consumer, the end-consumer paying less than, say a supermarket, the farmer not needing to go long distances with the precious produce, worrying about shelf-life all the way, and the consumer getting fresh and safe food for their family everyday.

There is however one catch - how is an urban consumer going to ever come across a multicropping farmer from whom he can buy everything he needs fresh, and achieve this happy win-win situation? One way is for the farmer to be willing and able to connect digitally and socially to the nearest community and fulfill all their needs locally. For a multicropping farmer, this is not an impossible task. It may take a bit of planning, and maybe getting together with other farmers, but it's definitely possible. The other way is for the urban consumer to become a little more aware of where food comes from, and in the interests of their own health, and the health of the planet, become willing to travel to the nearest farmlands, and gather everything they need from the producers.

I like to imagine a future where instead of poor monocropping farmers outside the city, and sick, pollution-scarred consumers inside the city, we could have smaller, healthier, safer communities centered around the places and people who produce the food we need to survive on. I like to imagine multicropping farms all around us, from where we could get our food fresh and tasty, and also get to breathe fresh air the plants so kindly give us. A self-sustaining and thriving community with less middlemen, less poverty, less ill-health. And a whole lot more stability in the price of tomatoes!

Ramashree Paranandi



The author Ramashree Paranandi is a partner in The Organic Farm, located near Nedumaram, TN. She consults on all aspects of the farm and often stays over for long stretches to enjoy pollution-free days with the other farm creatures. When in Chennai, she writes, teaches and sings. She can be reached at aramashree@eltconsultancy.org



"The reach and impact of vetiver grass technology and its applications have truly spread like wildfire."

Haridas shares with Marie Banu his experience in introducing Vetiver in tea plantations

Mr. P. Haridas was the coordinator of the India Vetiver Network until recently. He has been working as Scientist at Research & Development Department of Tata Tea Limited, Munnar, Kerala since 1984. He was actively involved in establishing R&D Centre of Tata Tea at Munnar. He served as Head of R&D, KDHP Co. (P) Ltd., which is the new company after restructuring of plantation operations of Tata Tea at Munnar and retired in December 2007.

Prior to joining Tata Tea, he worked at UPASI Scientific Department from 1969 to 1983, first as Assistant Botanist till 1975 and then as Advisory Officer at Munnar. He was responsible for introducing Vetiver in tea plantations in South India for soil and moisture conservation. Implementation of the Vetiver System Technology in all Estates of Tata Tea is one of his important contributions.

In an exclusive interview, Mr. Haridas shares with Marie Banu his experience in introducing Vetiver in Tea plantations.

Can you tell us about yourself and your background in agriculture?

Tea cultivation in southern India, particularly in hilly regions, often beset with challenges like soil erosion and landslides. I introduced Vetiver in plantations of Tata Tea.

In mid 1980s the company had initiated a Medicinal & Aromatic Project in which Vetiver was included. I observed that certain obnoxious grass weeds, such as Ginger grass (*Panicum repens*) Kikyu grass (*Pennisetum clandestinum*) etc. were unable to creep into Vetiver plot due its thick roots of Vetiver. This observation proved beneficial for organic tea cultivation as grass weeds were not invading the Vetiver boundary and tea fields. We planted Vetiver along the periphery of tea fields to prevent soil erosion and landslides.

Tata Tea's enthusiasm for Vetiver grew further. The Company preferred Vetiver hedges to contour stone walls to combat soil erosion. Constructing contour stone walls was very expensive requiring 300 workers for one hectare for constructing contour stone wall at strategic locations. In contrast, establishing Vetiver hedges could be carried out with only 90 workers. Encouraged by this, Tata Tea decided to implement Vetiver planting in all their estates in South India.

From mid 1980s Tata Tea decided to replant low yielding fields. Instead of constructing stone revetments, we embraced Vetiver by planting it as hedge.

It may be noted that the first ever reference to Vetiver in Tea, dates back to the 1940s. A Tea Scientist, Dr. T Eden, who worked in Ceylon and Kenya, experimented with various grasses, including Vetiver, to counter soil erosion. Among the various grasses tested, Vetiver emerged as the most effective in preventing soil erosion. Eden's historical finding unfortunately went unnoticed and did not receive due attention. In essence, my deep interest in Vetiver developed from its strategic advantages in tackling various challenges, and over time, it evolved into a passionate pursuit.



What inspired you to introduce Vetiver Systems in tea plantations for soil and moisture conservation?

We utilised Vetiver by cutting it for mulching. Mulching with Vetiver brought forth numerous benefits. Firstly, it effectively prevented erosion. Secondly, it retained moisture in the soil. This also prevented weed growth. Eventually the mulch gets decomposed and helped in improving organic matter of the soil. This application of Vetiver proved to be of great significance.

I had the opportunity to interact with Mr. Richard Grimshaw from early 1990s. On seeing my interest, he proposed the idea of organising a National workshop on Vetiver and sponsored by The Vetiver International. (TVNI) We organised the workshop at Cochin in February 2008, drawing Vetiver experts around the world who presented their research papers.

I was presented with the 'Certificate of Technical Excellence' by Mr. Grimshaw himself. TVNI had begun awarding certificates of excellence. In 2005, I received the Class 3 certificate. It's worth noting that these certificates come in three classes: Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3. In fact, I was honoured to be the first recipient from India class Class 3. During the National Workshop I was awarded Certificate of Excellence under Class 1.

I was able to identify different cultivars of South Indian Vetiver such as VS-1, VS-2, VS-3, VS-4 etc. Among these, VS-1 stood out due to its vigorous growth and the superior quality of oil.

It's important to mention that globally and within India, two main types of Vetiver exist: North Indian Vetiver and South Indian Vetiver. The root system of North Indian vetiver is shallow, rendering it unsuitable for environmental protection. On the other hand, South Indian Vetiver is deep-rooted, with roots penetrating up to 2 to 3 meters. South Indian Vetiver doesn't produce viable seeds; hence it is propagated vegetatively using tillers / slips. In contrast, North Indian Vetiver can produce viable seeds, leading to the potential for it to become a weed thus causing problems to the farmer. In light of TATA Tea's

successful implementation of Vetiver in Munnar and Anaimalais, other tea companies followed suit. Today, when you visit Anaimalais, Munnar, or Nilgiris, you'll find Vetiver plantings to combat soil erosion and land slides.

Have you noticed any other positive environmental impacts from implementing Vetiver System beyond soil and moisture conservation?

One of the most significant applications of Vetiver lies in its ability to enhance water quality. In our country, we have a multitude of water bodies ranging from small ponds to vast lakes, but the water often remains polluted and unfit for consumption.

Let me delve into the underlying reasons. Invasion of Algal growth in water bodies like ponds, lakes is mainly due to presence of pollutants and residues reaching water bodies from farmers' fields. These residues contain significant amount of substances like nitrate, phosphate, and sulphate. Interestingly, when Vetiver is floated in water, it exhibits a remarkable capacity to absorb nitrate, phosphate, and sulphate far more effectively than any other plant. By absorbing these substances, Vetiver effectively starves the algae, leading to water purification.

Undoubtedly, this marks a crucial and impactful application of Vetiver contributing to the purification of water bodies and significantly improving water quality.

What advice would you give to other tea plantation owners or agriculturalists interested in adopting Vetiver Systems for conservation purposes?

The reach and impact of Vetiver grass technology and its applications have truly spread like wildfire, extending beyond the borders of India to numerous other countries. Presently, there are over 25 diverse applications for this remarkable grass. One striking example is the handicraft industry in Thailand, where handicrafts are crafted not from the root, but from Vetiver leaves. This industry has grown substantially and contributes significantly to the local economy.

Interestingly, the tender foliage of Vetiver serves as an excellent fodder for cattle, proving to be a boon for farmers. The distinctive aspect here is that mature leaves will not attract cattle, but they readily consume the tender leaves. Numerous scientific publications have highlighted the nutrient values and benefits of using Vetiver as fodder.

Can you share some specific results or success stories that demonstrate the positive impact of Vetiver Systems on soil and moisture conservation?

A farmer planted rows of bananas. Adjacent to these rows, another set of banana plants was cultivated, with Vetiver planted nearby. Surprisingly, the row with Vetiver led to the early flowering and fruiting of the adjacent banana plants by nearly a month compared to the untreated control. The yield also notably increased in the presence of vetiver.

Researchers observed that Vetiver roots exhibited a tendency to interact with banana roots, enhancing moisture levels at the root zone. Furthermore, scientists in Thailand discovered that Vetiver has the ability to foster the growth of beneficial microorganisms at the root zone. This characteristic allows Vetiver to thrive in various soil conditions, irrespective of soil fertility.