

0624. 2nd Reply to DLDP Queries (23 Mar 1993)

In this 2nd letter, we comment on the strength of the village CSUs, results of the DLDP in Bagepalli, and the objectives of the DLDP (the apparent dualism between Coolie actions and concerns of environmentalists).

Dear Berry:

This is our second, considerably shorter, reply to the first 3 points you have raised on the proposed DLDP. We still haven't received the last 4 pages of your letter of 10 March 1993 and are by now quite apprehensive about the state of our postal services.

STRENGTH OF THE CSUS

In January 1992 we were cautious and did not want to state that the CSUs were strong enough to implement the DLDP. We also felt that our Accounts Admn wing had to be strengthened. We said that we would take a final decision in this regard only by the end of the year.

The next 10 months were spent in making concerted preparations which are elaborated in the project proposal of November 1992 where we state that the pre-project phase is the most important one for an effort like the DLDP. Our letter of 4 June has to be read as a mid term communication of what was happening in the preceding 4 months and not placed as the start date of the process itself.

Today it is well over a year since these preparations are going on. We honestly believe that everything that can possibly be done by way of mental and physical preparation – the politicisation of the programme – has been completed. The progress report we sent you last month suggest some of the arguments for this conviction.

RESULTS IN BAGEPALLI

The very title we chose for the next project we implemented to give an added emphasis to the poorest of the poor and ensure that everyone had sufficient income to live with dignity by enhancing the CCFs, promoting coolie entrepreneurship and making fundamental changes in the culture of the poor – the DLDP 2nd phase – shows the continuity of the dry land development project which was completed in 1989.

Elements of this new emphasis through the DLDP 2nd phase got immediately incorporated into all the “regular” programmes of ADATS. So much so that we opted to not implement a separate DLDP 2nd phase in the Gulur Area of Bagepalli before withdrawing from the taluk. Instead we have merely asked EZE for an adjustment to the sanctioned budget of April 1991 so that savings made in the regular Coolie Sangha Formalisation phase can be used to increase CCF capitals in the GEP Area.

Evidence of this incorporation can even to be found in the Coolie Sangha Formalisation application we submitted to you in January 1992, in the pending DLDP proposal itself, and in the general policy of ADATS/DDS with regard to gender and the wider political economy.

The questions raised in the DLDP Completion Report of December 1989 cannot be outright answered except through long term monitoring which we immediately incorporated into our annual exercise. We can already make an impressionist statement that coolie production is still on the rise, but this could well be due to the increased net volume of crop loans given out in 1992. There still appears to be a sensible balance between food and cash crops, but it is to be seen if this lasts. And the rush to take on at least one off-farm venture suggests that there is a steady diversification in their sources of income.

OBJECTIVES OF THE DLDP

The dualism you suggest between the coolies themselves deciding on what needs to be done and the environmentalist's concern for soundness is not as sharp a divide as all of us quite justifiably imagine it to be. In the narrow perspective we too agree that, given a chance, the coolies would rather cut all the trees in a village to burn brick kilns which will give an immediate income and employment. The other day Bram, Manfred, Julia and we jokingly said that this alone should constitute a sound argument against any mention of NGO withdrawal!

But we still do not believe that such things should be controlled through our unilateral intervention, simply because such interventions cannot be sustained even in the short run. Environmental interventions cannot have start and cut off dates unless undertaken with pedagogic intentions. They are not inputs which, once introduced, will guarantee a continued and sensible balance.

Some argue that the emphasis on personal consciousness and individual choices has been taken to the limit in the north, and that it is now time to see a policy translation of this general consciousness in sectors like industry and agriculture. We agree. But this is not yet the case in countries of the south. And certainly not among the rural poor. For them, populist slogans like "Smoke is Progress" still have a raw appeal due to their being based on immediate aspirations. We would hesitate to add development assistance to the above mentioned sectors where it may be time to see policy translations. We admit to not having fully thought through the implications, and ADATS therefore does not want to take a stand on international campaigns and global pressure tactics.

In spite of a general aversion to any form of sectoral intervention (and a lack of expertise and inclination to ourselves undertake such campaigns), we would still go along with efforts which have an educational and consciousness raising effect.

In our description of prevailing agricultural practices in the extensions, as well as in the role we foresee for the agriculturists, you will find an attempt to reconcile the dilemma in a balanced manner. We have said that agriculturists must commit themselves to accompanying the coolies over a relatively long period, and also enhance their own skill base on viable environment friendly techniques without merely parroting clichés. We will use the services of outside expertise in this regard.

The demonstration plots we have planned will serve to illustrate such alternatives, smokeless *chullas* will be visible expressions of a particular concern toward coolie women, and the planting of fruit, fuel and fodder trees in places where they can be properly looked after are direct results of reflections on problems faced when implementing the DLDP in Bagepalli. In this sense all these activities have token values which cannot be underrated.

We remember a full night session with Peter Goedhart in 1990 when we discussed the topic threadbare and argued that watershed management was a placed and dated technology to capitalise the final frontiers of poor lands in the country. Even at that time we said that its value in steering processes in favour of the poor was zero.

The laws of disproportionate dissemination and the trickle down theory will ensure the very opposite of what you criticise the DLDP for. While the watershed approach invites substantial investment on larger holdings, small patches of adjacent lands belonging to the poor will be meted the same treatment reserved for poor cousins everywhere. It will be ironic for NGOs like us to implement such a programme wherein funds meant for the poor are almost wholly hogged by the rich.

Quite apart from the fact that the concept of watershed approach vitiates that of the Coolie Sangha, we are thoroughly unconvinced about its value as an environmental panacea. It is far too physical and sectoral a solution to sound true.

On the other hand, the DLDP has already proved that when patches of land belonging to the poor see intense development, the neighbouring lands of richer peasants will follow suit to witness matching inputs. There is a definite rise in the overall standard of agriculture in the taluk with off-season practices like land levelling and soil texture improvement becoming more popular in the villages. This is as much because of the introduction of a concept and technology of land development through an activity like the DLDP, as due to common sensibilities which prevent the Ryots to lag behind coolie levels of cultivation!

You have pointed out specific problems like the concentration of erosion, dangers in the cultivation of wastelands, a gradual reduction in soil fertility, etc. We are not prepared to gloss over them by saying that it will not happen. We agree that these are real problems which must be recognised and tackled.

This leads to another point we would like to make at a very personal level. We do not believe that land development can really be done in a single stretch. To us it does not make total sense to implement a 3 year DLDP and then forget it. Were it not for a paucity of funds and various other organisational considerations, we would like to see the re-implementation of the DLDP (perhaps on a smaller scale) after a gap of about 3-5 years when the coolies can tackle new contours which would by then have got etched on their lands. Having actually walked on each and every acre of coolie land in Bagepalli taluk and shared their dreams on what they would like to see their lands become, we are personally convinced that they have the answers and that there are labour based solutions to problems of physical degradation. We did not find these dreams to be either flat or square or even evergreen. Such a people will not spoil their prized possession.

Tomorrow, we are going to Bangalore to meet Dr. Nath who has agreed to accompany the BCS in this crucial period when ADATS will withdraw from Bagepalli taluk. We will send this letter by Speed Post and make yet another effort to contact you by phone to fax us the rest of your letter.

Soon after speaking to you on the phone on 11 March, we explained to all the coolies in the 4 extensions that there would be some delay in starting the DLDP. They took so well, in spite of their obvious disappointment and fears about the coming summer, that it was almost embarrassing! We had all along warned them of this inherent danger in grassroots planning exercises – that our plans may not always materialise when we want them to. A tremendous lot has happened since you last visited us, Berry. You certainly must come again as soon as possible.

With every best wishes from all of us, I remain,
yours sincerely,

Ram Esteves