

## 0630. 6<sup>th</sup> Reply to DLDP Queries (13 Jan 1994)

*ADATS avers that we are in total agreement with comments made by Peter Laban after making a desk study of the DLDP correspondence.*

Dear Berry:

Thank you very much for your fax dated 10 January 1994 regarding the Dry Land Development Project. Before proceeding to comment and elaborate on the individual points, we would like to inform you that we are in total agreement with Mr. Peter Laban's observations on both, the watershed approach, as well as on technical issues.

### THE WATERSHED APPROACH

As we had explained in our letter dated 15 October 1993, there are very few cases of coolies having scattered holdings which are not next to each other's patches of dry land. In fact we could not find a single village where this was the general phenomenon. Instead, what we found was that in quite a few villages with CSU membership strengths of 30-40 families, there were 3-4 coolies whose lands were not next to those belonging to the remaining.

A variety of factors have contributed to this. Sometimes it is because they have defied their ethnic groups and joined the village CSU in spite of "caste directives" to the contrary. In other cases it is because they have obtained these lands through prolonged struggle and court litigations. Mr. Laban's observation that working on these lands will have very little or even negative impact is true. Our reactions are therefore as under:

- i. We are reasonably confident of being able to convince the CSUs (and especially those unfortunate members whose holdings are not adjacent to their peers') on the reasons for not implementing the DLDP on such lands. This will naturally lead to membership problems in some CSUs, but we suppose we have to face that.
- ii. Very few coolies own lands down slope with the up slope lands belonging to non-coolies. As a general rule of thumb, the lands farthest away from the villages and highest in elevation are coolie lands.

But the other problem mentioned by Mr. Laban –of indirectly benefiting richer landholders down slope below coolie lands- is an obvious and highly visible one. There will be less water gushing down onto their lands, groundwater recharge will be higher, etc. All we can hope for is that village CSUs will be able to use this factor to neutralise such landholders, create divisions in the Ryot class, and earn a semblance of peace during the implementation of the DLDP which, as we have experienced at Bagepalli, is not without petty jealousies and squabbles leading to major struggles.

- iii. A related problem that Mr. Laban just could not have anticipated (since he is not aware of day to day Coolie Sangha functioning) is caused by fluctuating membership. Due to the rather strict adherence to formality and discipline, and because of the simultaneous carrying out of multifarious activities by village CSUs, membership tends to fluctuate between Normal, Suspended and Cancelled.

Had the DLDP been a top-down scheme, independent of and blind to all other facets of village life, we could have stubbornly gone ahead and worked on all the lands, one after the other, without considering the owner's standing in the village. But this is not the case. And from the very planning stage of the DLDP in the later half of 1992, our field staff have been

trying to grope with this problem which will create breaks in the contiguity of coolie land holdings.<sup>1</sup>

This is why, in our letter of 23 March 1993, we said, “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.” But for some reason you got upset with us and thought we were being dismissive.

Just to get the project sanctioned, we are not going to claim being closer to a universal solution. But as mentioned in our letter of 4 May 1993, we are confident of being able to find it. We request you to please trust us to deal with this particular socio-technical problem which we are definitely going to face, on a case by case basis. Surely you will agree that we have a thorough enough and intimate familiarity with each individual village CSU and family.

- iv. Our final comment on Mr. Laban’s observations on the watershed approach is that we fully agree that complex interactions exist between different parts of a watershed. We also know that it is impossible for us to be intuitively aware of all these connections and interactions, however well meaning we may be or however exhaustive we think our “field experience” is. This is way we have always insisted that there is a role for expertise during the implementation of the DLDP.

What we want to assure you, Berry, is that just as you have your organisational compulsions to want technical advice in the pre-sanction phase, we want it even more so during the implementation phase.

## TECHNICAL ISSUES

Once again we are in complete agreement with all of Mr. Laban’s observations.

1. I do not precisely remember Anantapur district any more, after more than 16 years. But if my memory serves me right, the soils and slopes in the Extension areas are not as bad as the Kalyandrug/Kambadur region where RDT works in. An added advantages with coolie lands in our regions is that we do not have the same monoculture groundnut onslaught that most of Anantapur district has fallen victim to. Coolies as well as middle/big peasants still believe in multiple cropping, growing their own pulses, and the cropping patterns can best be described as leaning to subsistence farming. But of course, we look forward to Mr. Laban advising us more on these aspects when he visits us between 14-17 March.
2. In spite of our earlier failure with planting grasses on the contour bunds in Bagepalli, we feel we will have a better success now for 2 reasons. Firstly, the University of Agricultural Sciences has, in the meantime, reported a better success in the choice of techniques as well as species. And secondly because we intend involving the coolies far more in the selection of grass variety.

But we would still not rule out the planting of trees and shrubs on the bunds. The Bagepalli lands now show us, about 5 years after the DLDP has been completed, that simply not ploughing the bunds and trenches has resulted in very good natural regeneration of certain

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<sup>1</sup> We have faced similar problems in the children’s programme (even during the ActionAid supported sponsorship programme). A child is selected by the CSU (now by the Mahila Meeting), gets all physical benefits, but then cannot attend the evening Balakendra because her parents get suspended or cancelled from the CSU. In all 4 Extensions the Mahila Meetings have decided that even if the family is cancelled in the middle of the year, the child will continue to get Balakendra attention for the remaining part of the school year. But in the case of the DLDP the solution is not quite so simple. There is no way that the CSUs will agree to work on the lands of coolies who have got suspended or cancelled for cross-voting, allying with the “enemy”, deliberately not repaying their CCF loan, not attending meetings, or any one of a horde of fairly serious reasons.

extremely beneficial species. Planting these same species may help speed up the natural regeneration process. We look forward to discussing the advise given by Shri. Panduranga Hegde in this regard with Mr. Laban when he visits us.

3. We have never constructed mud bunds which, in any case, are popularly associated with shoddy work done by soil conservation department contractors. During the Bagepalli DLDP, only stone (boulders packed with pebbles) bunds were built in the first year and the digging of trenches and earth packing was delayed till these stone bunds had already trapped wash off soil.

One thing we can proudly claim is that none of our bunds in Bagepalli have disappeared even after almost 5 years, and small damages have immediately been repaired by the landowners. What now needs to be done (as we showed you during our long walk in G. Maddepalli village) is that these rock bunds have to be raised since natural filling has already raised the upper terraces to bund height.

4. We agree that text book formulae propagated by the University of Agricultural Sciences should be balanced with on-field research and coolie knowledge. We certainly will not be going in for the traditional "recommended dosage of chemical bombardment" or an abandonment of traditional food crops.
5. We are aware of the harmful effects of removing all the stones and boulders from the fields. This has to be judiciously done, and such stones and boulders should be used to build the bunds immediately down slope and not just cast away. We will also avoid excessive removal of pebbles since this can well lead to exposure of fractured sheet rock underneath (in lands with very thin or practically no soil cover). Moreover, crops like groundnut fare quite comparably on pebbled lands.

Moreover, stubborn patches of boulders and stones will be left intact and trees like Tamarind and Neem will be planted to break them and eventually create soil. Apart from helping in the greening process, this will also be a sensible choice with the limited persondays that will be available to work on each acre under the DLDP.

6. In spite of their abhorrence to work on non-coolie lands, activities like the plugging of ravines, the building of rock walls along the foot of steep hills, and the digging of diversion trenches have always been carried out across the terrain. These and the clearing of cart tracks to their fields are the most popular "common works" referred to in the DLDP Completion Report. You saw examples of all these in G. Maddepalli village.

Normally such "common works" are carried out by the entire village (members as well as non-member coolies) under the leadership of the CSU and without any wages from the DLDP. But in a few CSUs they allot only 4½ months of works to be done on coolie lands every year and reserve 15 days work under the DLDP for these common works.

7. We admit that in Bagepalli the coolies have trusted their traditional and intuitive knowledge to find the contours, construct bunds, etc. But in the proposed DLDP for the Extensions, we have envisaged a far greater role for qualified Agriculturists.<sup>2</sup> Mario has drawn up a fairly rigorous programme for the further exposure and conceptual/skill training of the Agriculturists and we are sure that they will turn out to be top notch professionals.

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to inform you in this regard that we have just appointed 3 Agriculturists - we had already appointed 1 in early 1993 and he has been working as an Extension Worker (CCF) in Siddalaghatta. They are all M.Sc.(Agronomy), technically very competent, but expect far higher salaries (Rs 3,500 - 4,000) than we had projected in the budget. Please let us know if this is okay.

8. Earlier we had explained that this was not an easy task and we were against making any advance claims. But we are now in a position to share with you that the CSUs are already making very serious efforts through *Panchayats* done in CSU and Mahila Meetings. In all but a few extremely contentious cases, they will be able to consolidate scattered coolie holdings into single plots.

Though each individual landowner will continue to decide on the specific works to be carried out on her holding, the Agriculturists will guide and coordinate these choices so that, after the completion of DLDP works on adjacent holdings, the casual observer will not be able to detect the individual approach any more (the contour bunds, for example, will run continuous, ravines and gullies will be plugged their entire length, and the terraces will look more or less uniform). This is already a far larger role we envisage for the Agriculturists than what they had in Bagepalli.

9. The Mahila Meetings chose *Seema jali* mainly because it is drought resistant, will grow very fast even on very degraded wastelands, and has no commercial value which the men can exploit and once again deprive them of fuel (as has happened in most government sponsored social forestry schemes). It is also an excellent fencing material used on the borders of holdings to prevent cattle from straying onto cropped lands. Moreover, coolie women have seen its success in solving the fuel problem throughout Rayalaseema, A.P. But we expect that the choice of fuel varieties will now increase with the knowledge input of the newly appointed Agriculturists.

The July/August rains are very erratic and unreliable in most of these regions. This is the reason why planting has been envisaged for September/October. Planting saplings with the crops also ensures greater moisture and attention. But it must be noted that the individual family surveys have already been completed to determine the choice of species in each CSU, and nurseries are soon going to be raised at the Cluster level.

10. Asbestos is part of the government package for smokeless chullas. But we quite agree that we should instead use oven baked earthen pipes or some other material even if it is a little costlier.

#### START DATE OF THE DLDP

We do so wish that you had been able to agree to start the DLDP from 1 March 1993 since we are certain that there are not going to be any irresolvable differences between us on the technical or any other front. We view the visit of experts like Mr. Laban as an on-going process which will continue to enrich the DLDP long after it is sanctioned.

With every best wishes, I remain,  
yours sincerely,

**Ram Esteves**