

## **Save a Family Plan and the Canadian International Development Agency: Working towards environmental sustainability in India**

Responsible management of natural resources leading to environmentally sustainable development is a key component of **SPED II** (Sustainability through Participation, Empowerment and Decentralization), **Save A Family Plan's** (SAFP) current three-year community development program co-funded by the **Canadian International Development Agency**. This aligns with Millennium Development Goal 7, which is an international commitment to ensuring environmental sustainability.

With funding provided for Integrated Watershed Development through SPED II, 32 implementing partners in southern India are working with SAFP in 32 villages located in vulnerable watershed areas. A watershed is a natural topographical unit based on natural drainage and water flow, and consists of three interrelated systems: natural, economic, and socio-political. Effective sustainable development of watershed areas can be realized only with an understanding of these systems, and an integrated approach, such as that taken by SAFP and its partners, involves planning for interventions and activities that will positively impact the biological, physical, sociological, economic, and political conditions of an area.

*In targeted watershed areas biological interventions include measures like plantings, vegetative fencing, and organic farming, and physical interventions include water pits, stone bunds, rainwater harvesting systems, well recharging, and check dams, all aimed at improving biodiversity, soil fertility, reducing soil erosion, and improving the water table. Sociological interventions include education and awareness, promotion of people's participation in local development and gender equality measures, while political interventions are related to ownership and control of natural resources and involve promotion of good governance principles and support for responsible and locally accountable stewardship of natural resources.*

One example of a planned intervention that is proving successful is in Kuttimoola village in Wayanad District, Kerala, a highlands area with significant indigenous tribal populations and historically recognized for its rice paddy fields. Rice paddy cultivation first diminished when local demand shrunk due to cheaper imported rice, and because of the high labour costs and low productivity of rice cultivation. Rice paddies were replaced with less labour-intensive and higher-yield crops such as bananas; however, pesticide use has not only increased costs, but compromised the health of consumers (and hence, demand for the product), and damaged the land. With the disappearance of the paddy fields, natural water conservation has been affected and has led to water scarcity in the region. Other issues are loss of local labour opportunities and indebtedness among farmers leading to a high number of suicides.

A historical time line produced by local villagers in a Participatory Rural Assessment, with the facilitation of Mananthavady Diocesan Social Service Society (a SAFP partner), 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 this become a problem.

An early cadastral map showed this particular watershed area to have once had 13 acres of wetland. As of 2006, 70% of this had been converted to other use, with only 3.45 acres remaining. 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 helped people realize the need for protection of wetlands, and with financial assistance through SPED II, 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.

*Because of the potential implications of all watershed interventions, SAFF/CIDA requires an **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** prior to approval. This looks at each specific activity that is planned, and reports on respective positive factors, negative factors, and mitigation measures. In the case of paddy cultivation and reclamation of wet land, positive factors included:*

*Conservation of paddy fields, protection of wetland, protection of natural water sources, promotion of an eco-friendly lifestyle, and increased income for local people. The singular negative factor identified was the high cost of paddy cultivation, which could be mitigated by more financial support.*