



Community Initiative Triggers Group Action in the Coconut Sector

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Introduction

Community initiative and voluntary involvement of the potential beneficiaries are the basic requirements for the success of any development initiative for rural progress. One of the operational measures for satisfying this requirement is the formation of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) by the people themselves for taking lead in identifying the local needs and stimulating self-help and community effort for satisfying them. The CBOs as representative bodies of the people are expected to be in the forefront of all initiatives introduced by different agencies for the improvement of rural life. One such CBO highlighted in this paper is 'Arookutty Farmer's Club', a newly registered organization, which has already taken lead in introducing novel activities with people's participation for the progress of the local community in general and of the coconut farming community in particular.

Features of Coconut Farming in Arookkutty Panchayat

Arookutty Panchayat falls within the Thycattussery Block, Alappuzha district in Kerala. It is basically an

agricultural village with coconut farming constituting the major source of livelihood for the local people. Although coconut occupies an area of 210 ha, which is about 90% of the total garden land area, adoption of appropriate cropping and farming systems in the holdings and coconut-based income generating enterprises both at the farm-household and community levels is yet to become popular. The palms are also attacked by various pests and diseases and there is no organized approach to promote plant protection measures or replanting of badly infected as well as senile and unproductive palms. Consequently, the present productivity is below 40 nuts per palm per year. Farmer's organizations in the coconut sector for upholding the interests of farmers are also not available in the Panchayat.

Arookkutty Farmer's Club

The coconut farmers of Arookkutty Panchayat have recognized the importance of having a community based organization (CBO) to represent them in all development projects introduced by different agencies and to initiate and execute specific programmes in accordance

Integrated development of coconut industry at the level of village panchayat has special significance in a state like Kerala where majority of the rural population depends on coconut farming and product utilization for sustenance. The development strategies introduced in the coconut sector will exhibit the desired level of success only when the targeted beneficiaries are fully involved in decision making at different levels

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with the expressed needs of the community members. Accordingly, the Arookkuty Farmer's Club (AFC) was formed and registered on 28 April, 2010 with the objectives of (1) promoting intensive integrated agriculture in coconut holdings to generate multiple sources of food, income and employment for the dependent farm-households, (2) organizing marketing channels for the surplus farm produces available with the farmers, (3) encouraging post-harvest processing at the farm-household and community levels for value addition and employment generation, and (4) introducing skill development initiatives for the benefit of the local youth possessing entrepreneurial aptitude. During the short period since its establishment the CBO has undertaken diverse activities for the overall benefit of the members. The organization is presently managed by a group of competent members comprising Mr.P.C.Joshy, Mr.M.S.Nazar, Mr.K.Bahuleyan and Mr.K.R.Rajan. A brief sketch of the significant achievements already accomplished by the CBO is presented below:

1. Competition on Coconut-Based Intercropping

The CBO has organized one Panchayat-level competition on intercropping in coconut holdings in order to stimulate interest and competitive spirit in the minds of the coconut farmers in utilizing coconut holdings for growing vegetables and miscellaneous other food crops to strengthen house hold food and nutrition security and to create additional income source. The competition had the participation of 114 farmers including 49 women

representing all the 12 wards of the Panchayat. The crops selected for cultivation by the farmers covered vegetables, root and tuber crops, annual spices and banana. Training in vegetable cultivation was organized for the benefit of the participants and quality seeds, seedlings and organic manures were also made available for facilitating the cultivation. The prizes for the competition were sponsored by Peekay Tree Crops Development Foundation which comprised 12 ward level prizes of Rs.300 each and three Panchayat-level prizes of Rs.1,500 each for the best farmer, the best lady farmer and the best farmer's group respectively.

The field level assessment and the selection of successful competitors were made by expert panels constituted by the local Krishi Bhavan. At the Panchayat level Mr.C.Hariharan, Chandralayam was selected as the best farmer, Ms. Sarojam, Sreesailam as the best woman farmer and Golden Star Self-

Help-Group as the best farmer's group. The prizes for the winners were distributed in a function organized on the Farmer's Day on 17th of August 2010. On this occasion Dr.S.Kalavathy, Senior Scientist, CPCRI, Kayamkulam felicitated both ward level and Panchayat level winners and took a class on intercropping in coconut gardens for the benefit of the farmer participants. The CBO has now decided to conduct such competition every year to sustain the interest of the traditional farmers in intercropping and to attract others to profitable cropping/ farming systems.

2. Opening Marketing Stall under the Aegis of CBO

In general, the major constraint to wider adoption of integrated agriculture in coconut holdings is the lack of dependable market outlets for the sale of surplus farm produce after meeting household requirement. This situation prevailed in the



Community Marketing Stall



Arookkuty panchayat as well which discouraged the local farmers from adopting coconut-based cropping system. As a result, there has been erosion in the availability of protective foods as well as additional source of income at the farm-household level. During interactions with the farmer members the CBO could identify the limitations in promoting coconut-based cropping system in Arookkuty Panchayat. In these interactions one of the expressed needs of the farmers was the establishment of a marketing stall for farm produces under the aegis of Arookkuty Farmer's Club, the CBO created by them. According to this desire of the community members one marketing stall was opened in a central place in the Panchayat in early July 2010 for which the required space for constructing a shed and conducting the business was voluntarily made available by Mr.V.A.Mohamed, Thanveer, Naduvath Nagar, a retired teacher and an enterprising farmer.



Skill development learning

The CBO has made arrangements for the procurement of vegetables, root and tuber crops, banana and eggs from the farmers on a regular basis. Some farmers also bring their surplus farm produce to the stall for sale. The farmers receive reasonable price for their produce and the local consumers are also benefited from the availability of fresh produce at affordable price. The opening of the stall has stimulated the interest of the farmers in intercropping in coconut gardens for household

consumption and also for sale. Thus, the marketing opportunity created by the CBO has contributed to household food and nutrition security and enhanced on-farm income. At present the average daily sales turnover is over Rs.4,000 which is steadily on the increase. On the eve of Onam festival the sales crossed Rs.10,000.

3. Conducting Training Programmes for Skill Development

Arookkuty Farmer's Club gives adequate importance to skill development of the local community members in farming and connected income generating activities. The CBO has already organized specialized training courses in different disciplines and is planning for more such trainings. Those already conducted were on precision farming, pisciculture, coconut-based cropping system and vegetable seed production. The local farming community evinced considerable interest in all the trainings as evidenced by their large participation in each of the sessions.



Multi spices cropping under coconut



Intercropping under coconut

3:1. Training in precision farming

Coconut holdings, either small or large, present significant on-farm as well as palm to palm variability. The traditional farming system fails to take note of this variability and adopts uniform agronomic management strategies for the field as a whole. In any coconut holding the palm population will be comprised of good, medium and poor yielders. These yield groups do not respond equally to uniform levels of nutrients and other management practices. For efficient resource conservation and better productivity agronomic management has to be appropriate to the differential requirements of the three yield groups. Likewise, there may be variability within a field in nutrient status, drainage, soil reaction etc. Under such a situation the management care has to vary in accordance with the field level variability. In coconut farming site specific management, therefore, assumes importance.

Coconut holdings can accommodate diverse combinations of arable crops in the inter- and intra-

row spaces. The farmers who grow such intercrops often experience economic loss due to crop damage consequent on adverse climatic vicissitudes. Enterprising farmers are now evincing interest in green house technology for growing selected crops without being influenced by the light, temperature, air composition, humidity and the nature and composition of growth medium.

The one-day training, organized in association with Rural Technology Training Centre, Aroor, on precision farming including green house technology was attended by selected 25 farmers of Arookkuty Panchayat. The trainer was Dr. P.Suseela, Associate Professor, Kerala Agricultural University, Vellanikkara, Thrissur. Some of the trained farmers have taken initiative in studying further about the technologies and they have visited Bangalore and nearby areas where green house technology has been adopted on a commercial scale. These farmers after having understood the benefits and

technologies of farming under controlled environment have decided to venture into green house farming within the limits of locally available resources.

3:2. Training in ornamental fish culture

The members of the local community expressed interest in ornamental fish culture and to satisfy this need one full day training was organized with the technical support and involvement of 'Matsyafed', the state government organization for the development of fisheries, and the local branch of the State Bank of India. Although the ornamental fish sector in the state is growing steadily, it is still depending on wild collections which require to be replaced with culture-based development. This aspect was focused in the training and also basic requirements for starting fish farm at the farm-household level were highlighted. The training was attended by over 100 registered participants. The success of the training is revealed by the commencement of ornamental fish culture units by some of the participants.

3:3. Training in intercropping, mushroom culture and vermicomposting

A series of trainings have been conducted on intercropping, mushroom culture and vermiculture. Over 100 farmers participated in these trainings and the trainer was Mr.Sajimon Joseph, Assistant Manager of Vegetable and Fruit Promotion Council of Kerala. The trainees were also provided with opportunities to visit model gardens and mushroom production units to



gain practical knowledge. Those who visited the mushroom production unit of Mrs. Shyji Thankachan of Ezhupunna Panchayat could benefit from adequate practical exposure to the production technology adopted on a commercial scale. To facilitate production by the trained farmers arrangements were made for the supply of banana suckers, vegetable seeds and spawn for mushroom culture at the original price. Already vermi-compost tanks have been constructed by 10 farmers, who received training, in their respective holdings for converting household and farm generated wastes into valuable organic manure. The technology adopted by Mrs. Shyni Thankachan in vermicomposting of wastes generated in the mushroom production unit has evoked interest in the minds of the trainees.

4. New Activities Planned

The new activities planned include conducting three-day

agricultural exhibition and seminar in April 2011, creating one seed production facility on commercial scale for different crops, organizing coconut-based processing units under the aegis of women's Self-Help-Groups, strengthening and expanding the marketing facility already established, promoting intensive integrated agriculture in coconut holdings and organizing competitions on an annual basis, facilitating the establishment of community-owned production units for processing locally available raw-material resource, and promoting appropriate farming and land use strategies focusing on climate change mitigation and adaptation. In all these activities the CBO will have the involvement and support of Peekay Tree Crops Development Foundation.

Conclusion

Integrated development of coconut industry at the level of village panchayat has special significance in a state like Kerala

where majority of the rural population depends on coconut farming and product utilization for sustenance. The development strategies introduced in the coconut sector will exhibit the desired level of success only when the targeted beneficiaries are fully involved in decision making at different levels. This becomes possible by encouraging the local communities to form community-based organizations (CBOs) for identifying common needs and addressing them through self-help and community effort and also for representing the members in all development initiatives introduced by different agencies. The development departments shall conduct periodical trainings for capacity building of the CBOs in areas of participatory research, programme planning and implementation. It will also prove beneficial if the involvement of reputed NGOs is also enlisted in the formation of CBOs and in the related operational fields.

Coconut delight

In Vietnam, the Mekong Delta province of Ben Tre is famous for the abundance of coconuts that grow there. The flesh of the fruit is sweet and tasty while the coconut milk inside is refreshing. The fruit is used in oriental medicine because the milk is rich in nutrients, Vitamin B and minerals. It is also believed to act as a diuretic, fight fever, promote good health and stop bleeding. Coconut can also be used to help with sunburn, vomiting and nosebleeds. Meanwhile, drinking coconut milk on a regular basis is good for the heart; it can also help with worms. Coconut milk is often drunk by people suffering from diarrhea because it is rich in magnesium and potassium. Young coconuts contain enzymes that aid digestion and the milk from a six to seven-week-old coconut is the most nutritious. Coconut flesh can be used to stop any tendon or bone pain, stomach ulcers, hepatitis, dysentery, hemorrhoids, diabetes and colitis. Coconut root helps with nosebleeds, vomiting, cholera and bleeding. Coconut is also a beauty fruit contributing to smooth skin and shiny hair.

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