

Study Visit to Kolunji Farm, Part of Kudumbam Organisation

Tamil Nadu, India

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Pheromone trap in a sugarcane field, Farmer Field School

AGRIBI

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Study Visit to Kudumbam Organisation and Kolunji Farm, Tamil Nadu; India

An Approach to Dryland Farming

Background

My aim in visiting Kudumbam and Kolunji Farm was to learn more about the work being carried out towards sustainability and extension work in agriculture in Tamil Nadu. In contact with the Swallows in Lund, Sweden I learnt that the Swallows



Plant nursery, with many different tree species.

has supported organic farming in Tamil Nadu through these organisations for many years.

I am a former plant breeder and have been working for SvalöfWeibull AB, a seed company in southern Sweden. The company also arranges international courses in seed production and technology, and sustainability in farming. I was course director for the latest course: Sustainable Agriculture in an Environmental Perspective, September to October 2001 and am now working as a consultant with assignments from the company and missions for various donors.

For seven weeks during January and February 2002 I visited various projects in India and Sri Lanka. The visits were very useful for my work and provided a major input to my activities.



Small plants in plastic containers.

My mission is *not* in any way to evaluate activities or make proposals for future projects. My personal reflections are presented, sometimes subjective since they are based on limited knowledge.

The LEISA network

The LEISA network consists of grass root NGOs, small-scale farmers, marginal farmers and landless agriculture workers. At present, 2000 farmers are directly involved in conducting field experiments and are practicing organic farming in 9 districts of Tamil Nadu. About 10,000 farmers are indirectly involved in sustainable agricultural practices, thus promoting the LEISA concept on a larger scale.

Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture (LEISA) tries to address various issues within farm management. Field trails and experiments are important in order to give the farmers the right

information. Factors like pest control, soil fertility, seeds and water management are issues addressed.

Kudumbam is a local NGO and is part of the LEISA network committed to understanding the socio-economic problems of the target area for evolving a plan of action. In total there are 82 NGOs involved in the work and Kudumbam coordinates them all.



Discussions in the farm nursery.

Different committees within the network handle various issues such as farming methods including IPM, financing of farming activities, value of products, biodiversity, gender equality and lobbying activities on the political arena.

There are many obstacles to overcome and many questions need solving urgently. Methods used to achieve aims set by the organisation are:

- Participatory rural appraisal
- Training and workshops
- Collective decision, planning and action
- Participatory assessment and review
- Campaigning, lobbying and advocacy
- Training of Trainers (TOT)
- Farmers Field School

Kudumbam publishes a magazine in Tamil that deals with new findings and with their efforts in improving soil fertility, crop yield, pest management, water, crop rotation, intercropping, biodiversity etc.

Kudumbam is involved in two types of activities:

1. Maintenance of ecological agriculture farming
2. Development activities in the village

Kudumbam runs a model farm and training centre, Kolunji at Odugampatty, Keeranur; Pudukottai district, Tamil Nadu.

The Kolunji Farm is managed as an organic farm with cattle and poultry to provide the farm with manure. The cattle and poultry manure is complemented with green manure and compost. The farm also has a nursery to provide neighbours with orchard plants and other useful trees. A great many different species are planted in the nursery as part of the biodiversity idea. Plants are then used in establishing agro forestry at farm level.



Newly planted tree with water harvesting measures.

Some comments from the visitor

My impression of Kolunji Farm and its activities and the role of the farm is very positive. It is important that farmers converting to organic farming have a strong extension service to rely on. The facilities on the farm are good and there exist good opportunities for training quite a number of people. The potential will be even better once the planned kitchen is in use. Since the farm covers many different activities both in practice and theory it plays a fundamental role in making farming more sustainable for the future.



Watering of the Vermi Compost.

In addition to the farming activities, Kudumbam is also involved in establishing self help groups. One example is the collective savings and lending system that frees people from the exploitative money lending system in the area.

There are many ways to avoid pests and diseases and to keep the crop healthy and sound. Seeds are treated with rhizobia for better early vigour, compost is applied to prevent soil moisture from evaporating,

various methods of IPM are used to reduce pest and diseases and Nitrogen fixating crops is used in the crop rotation system etc.

With limited means the Kudumbam organisation and the Kolunji Farm serving a large number of farmers. The impact of the work is good and results are clearly seen in the villages.

There is still much to be done. More plants could be produced or the nurseries could be established closer to the farmers.

Kudumbam recommends old local varieties of agriculture crops since they are said to be more resistant and better yielding than new “hybrid varieties”. First a clarification on hybrids: Varieties of rice are usually not hybrids but offspring from hybrids and selections made from these offspring. The new varieties are often result from breeding programmes at IRRI in the Philippines. These varieties are not adapted to the conditions in Tamil



Roots of turmeric, (Curcuma longa)

Nadu. An intensive breeding programme in order to produce better varieties in the region would benefit agriculture and the farmer. The aim of the breeding programme could include varieties better suited to organic farming and varieties with resistance to diseases and pests.



Paddy field at the farm

Some of my own Reflections on Sustainable Agriculture

The high input agriculture that dominates the developed part of the world and even developing countries cannot be regarded as sustainable. Negative side effects, such as polluted ground water, accumulation of pesticides and alga blooming in lakes and the sea, are critical. Agriculture is also highly dependent on fossil fuel, a limited source of energy. Many farmers have begun to adopt alternative practices and are moving towards sustainability. The objective of sustainable agriculture is to sustain and enhance, rather than reduce and simplify the biological interactions on which production in agriculture depends. Alternative agriculture is not a single system of farm practices, but encompasses

many farming systems called organic, biological, ecological, balanced, low input, regenerative or sustainable systems. Such systems emphasise management practises as well as biological relationships between organisms. In addition they take advantage of naturally occurring processes such as nitrogen fixation. Adapting a more sustainable agriculture method might, in some cases give a lower yield that should be compensated by lower input costs and a higher product price.



The new children's home under construction.

If food is to be provided for everyone during the coming decades then sustainable production must increase. Food security is a must but factors like unfair distribution and policies in the world are heavy constraints to achieve equity in food supply. Food safety is also a must and can only be achieved with more environmental agricultural methods. Basic knowledge of ecology, agro-ecology and the human role in ecology must be understood by decision-makers at all levels.

After the first green revolution in the sixties, with

a boost in harvests, it is time to move towards a more sustainable method of producing food. It is an enormous challenge we face to turn farming to a less resource demanding and a more environmental conscious attitude.

With these reflections I am sure that the work at Kudumbam is heading the farmers in the right direction and hopefully many others will take the opportunity to visit Kudumbam and the Kolinji Farm to learn about organic farming and other sustainable approaches towards a sustainable living.

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