

A Field Worker's Diary _ Part 51

Old habits die hard!

"No matter how useful the alternatives are, it is not always possible to shift from the habitual ones to the alternatives. I understood once again that it's not easy to bring about behavioral change."

The December 26, 2004 Tsunami had caused mayhem along the coastal regions in the country. Even though the loss of lives or property due to the tsunami was not high in the Guntur district, the fishermen, who were quite scared after witnessing the disaster, did not dare to venture into the sea for fishing for several days. Many government departments and NGOs had come forward to implement various relief programs for the fishermen.

To do its bit to help, NEDCAP (now NREDCAP - New & Renewable Energy Development Corporation), the Department of Non-Conventional Energy Resources, also distributed solar photovoltaic lanterns free of charge to fishermen.

As the fisherman who go for deep sea fishing have to stay for many days at sea, they take kerosene lanterns with them. These solar lanterns will help the fishermen, who lost out on their income due to not going for fishing, save a little money on fuel expenditure. To identify the eligible beneficiaries from among the fishermen and to distribute the lanterns to them, our superiors had sent directions to us to form a committee with Satyanarayana Garu from NEDCAP and myself from AP Rural Poverty Reduction Project.

Only a few fishing villages in Nizampatnam and Repalle mandals of Guntur district are under our project. Beneficiaries in those villages were to be selected through the respective Village Organisation (VO), the federation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of a village. We had to organise meetings with women's SHGs and VOs, explain about the help given by NEDCAP to the women, and make them choose the best persons to give those SPV lanterns to. It was not an easy thing to do. As it was a free benefit, everyone would ask for the lanterns to be given to them whether they needed it or not. If the leaders of these women's groups select a few beneficiaries, the rest of the village will clash with them later. Though it was a small assistance, we had to be very carefully to do the job. Satyanarayana Garu had no experience working with these groups. So, he put the responsibility on me.

Meetings were held for hours in each village. Thinking that it would be create problems for the women with the rest of the villagers if we decided the beneficiaries in the meetings alone, we

invited the husbands of the members of the groups, the elders of the village and the members of the Panchayat to the meetings and selected the beneficiaries in everybody's presence on the basis of the poor identification survey we had already done. Only I and our Village Organisations' leaders know how many people came and quarreled and how we persuaded each of them to agree with our decision through sitting down for talks.

Finally, with everyone's approval we carried out the distribution of solar lanterns in the presence of the authorities. NEDCAP has the funding and technical expertise to promote the use of non-conventional energy sources. While, our project has an extensive network at the field level. This convergence helped us to make effective use of the strength of the two departments.

Some time later, when I had visited one of those villages, I saw one of those lanterns hanging like a decorative piece in somebody's house, and asked the owner of the house about how much they are using them. Almost none of them were using them when going for fishing.

It was only being used as an emergency light by some people during power outage. All they had to do to use the lantern was to charge the solar panel that comes with the lantern in the sun, and connecting it to the lantern. Instead of doing that, they were using their old kerosene lanterns. "Why aren't you using solar lanterns? It will bring down your expenses, right? I questioned him. To which he replied, "We are used to these kerosene lanterns, no? So we're using them at home.

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