

## **Mutual Cooperation**

### **Many Hands Make Light Work**

Many complexities affect a farmer's life in Anantapur, given the poverty, drought, inequities, etc. Balaraju, a farmer in Sanapa village, Anantapur District explains this accurately. *"During the sowing season, marginal and small farmers like us, experience shortage of labourers, agricultural implements and lack the necessary cash to pay the hired labour. By the time we can arrange all these, the moisture in the soil might have evaporated and the sowing season might be lost."* Like Balaraju, about 80% of farmers out of about 7 lakh in Anantapur are small and marginal farmers. They own 1 to 5 acres of land and face similar problems. Small land holdings, cultivating rain-fed crops and belonging to the socially disadvantaged communities of SC/ST/BC/ single women make them even more vulnerable to debt and poverty.

Sowing season, usually between June– July, is a very critical and busy season for all farmers. Even when there is a good rain, the moisture in the soil stays only for a small window of 3 to 4 days before it evaporates. In this region where the rainfall is very low and dry spells are very long, it is all the more important for farmers to complete sowing within a very short period of 3-4 days. If there are no further rains during the season, there is little hope for a good crop, especially when the agriculture is entirely rain-fed with no irrigation facilities. Not only at the time of sowing, but the same of kind of pressure is evident during weeding and harvesting operations, particularly for small farmers who are starved of cash, implements and bullocks. In modern agriculture economies of scale is important. It is easy for large landholders to obtain economies of scale because of the large holdings, irrigation facilities, tractors, capital, etc., but in case of small farmers, diseconomies of scale affect them negatively. Therefore, synergizing their meagre resources at a small group level enhances their efficiency in agricultural operations and also reduces the need for cash.

In order to ease the pressure to such disadvantaged farmers, Accion Fraternal (AF) came up with an initiative for enhancing mutual cooperation among farmers. The main objectives of this initiative are: 1) minimizing

disruption in agriculture due to lack of cash implements or labour; 2) sharing of resources such as labour, implements, bullocks, groundwater, etc. among the families; 3) crop protection through water sharing; 4) preventing over exploitation of groundwater through deep bore wells; and 5) strengthening self-help in the community and the Community Based Organisations (CBO).

Under mutual cooperation farmers can form themselves into need-based task-teams to share and/or exchange labour, agricultural implements and irrigation facilities among themselves. This will save them the costs, effort, time and stress. This is similar to a barter system where goods and services are exchanged for similar value of goods and services.

AF has formed CBOs called Sasya Mitra Groups (SMG) of 25 families each at the village level. Within SMGs there are subgroups of 5 families each. Usually within each family there are 2 or 3 adults who normally work in their own fields and/or as agricultural labourers during the season. Rain-fed agriculture, especially for small farmers is labour-intensive. During the critical periods of sowing, weeding and harvesting, a few families can come together and work in each other's fields. Thus, they can insulate these stressful times with mutual cooperation. Lakkamma, in Sanapa village, explains, *"We form into a group of 10-20 members and sow in one of the group member's field. Next we go to the other member's field and sow there. Like this we take turns to work in each other's fields until we complete sowing in all the group members' fields. This is not limited to sowing alone, but we also work together in weeding, harvesting and other agricultural activities."* She further adds *"It doesn't matter if I have only one acre and my neighbour has 3 acres. We adjust the number of members required among ourselves so as to get the work done. Sometimes we pay cash for the extra hours worked, but only if the member wants it."* There are many advantages to working collectively as Narayana points out, *"Sometimes we are short of cash but at the same time we need more hands to finish the job quickly. This way we are able to help each other and get more work done, without having to pay cash for labour. If the women work on daily wages they usually start around 8am; but if they work in each other's fields they start as early as 6am. It takes them only 3 hours to sow one acre, so they are able to work in each other's fields all through the day to complete sowing."* Both weeding

and harvesting groundnut crop are intensive manual operations. If the crop is not harvested at the right time, the pod might germinate and the farmer risks losing the entire crop. To avoid this, again the families within SMGs come together and help each other in weeding and harvesting operations.

Mutual cooperation among families extends to agricultural implements and bullocks as well. If a farmer has bullocks, he may use them hardly for 10 days in a year. By letting other farmers use the bullocks, he will be using them optimally. If a farmer lends his bullocks (average cost Rs.1,000 per day) five women might work in his field for a day, assuming daily wages are Rs.200 per day. Some farmers have tractors which they normally rent out during the season. Under mutual cooperation if a farmer gives his tractor rent-free for use in other farmers' fields, a few of the other farmers will work in his field in return. Mutual cooperation works include ploughing the land and spraying pesticides, etc. So this exchange benefits both parties. There is a monetary value attached to each kind of service they exchange; for example, daily wages are valued at Rs.150-200; but there is no cash exchange in most cases.

What is remarkable in mutual cooperation is that farmers are willing to share their precious resource – water - with their neighbours. Savitamma in Ayyavaripalli tells her story, *“We sowed groundnut in two plots of land. One plot was close to my neighbour’s bore well and the other one was quite far away. Our crop was drying due to lack of rain. Fortunately my neighbour was kind enough to give us some water from his bore well for my crop. This plot yielded a decent quantity of groundnut but the other plot was a total washout due to lack of irrigation. My neighbour didn’t want any money for his water, but I didn’t want to take his water for free. So as a return I worked in his field for a few days.”*In some other cases the recipients of water paid some amount of cash for electricity and repairs of the bore well engine, but in most cases they exchanged labour. One water provider wanted redgram in exchange for water after crop was harvested.

Not everybody is as generous as Savitamma’s neighbour with their water resources. Venkateswarulu, an owner of a bore well in a different village, admits *“Initially I was reluctant to share my water as I had sowed groundnut*

*and my crop requires irrigation too. What will happen to my crop if this sharing depletes water levels in my well? But the AF coordinator said that if I don't share the water, my neighbour might drill a bore well in his field, which will certainly cause the water level to go down in my well. If the number of bore wells in the area increase, some bore wells dry up. And when more wells use electricity, it might cause fluctuations in the electricity supply, and might impair the functioning of the engine. So it is better to share water with others after meeting my requirements. After hearing this, I realized that it is better to share water than to have too many bore wells in the same area."* This shift in thinking helps stopover exploitation of groundwater resources. Like Savitamma, many people do not like to take things for free; they would like to repay the favour some time, in some form or the other.

Although in Indian culture helping neighbours is not a new concept, due to the formation of nuclear families and other social changes slowly the social bonding in communities is declining. Helping each other in agricultural activities fosters a bond among the families which may very well extend beyond agriculture. They can support and cooperate with each other in good and bad times. For example, they can help each other during events such as weddings or health emergencies by sharing the workload or by providing moral support or monetary support. A person feels safe and secure in an environment where there is social support and cooperation.

The important benefits of mutual cooperation are: 1) It reduces cost of cultivation greatly by not having to pay (or pay minimum) cash for labour and/or implements. 2) It saves small farmers from borrowing money at high interest rates from exploitative moneylenders and big farmers. 3) It alleviates the stress of not having enough manpower during critical periods. 4) It builds social bonding and solidarity within the farmer community.

AF is advocating and encouraging the farmers in all the 230 villages it works with covering about 30,000 families and about 800 Sasya Mitra Groups to adopt mutual cooperation. Many farmers are already implementing this initiative and realizing the collective benefits. By sharing available resources among themselves, agriculture becomes more viable and cost effective. The sharing can further extend to equipment such as drip system, sprinklers, oil

engines, etc, in the future. Many informal exchanges may take place within the community that will make it strong in the long run. However, care has to be taken to avoid disputes and misunderstandings among farmers in exchanging the services. That is where the role of SMG comes in to resolve any differences and disputes. Mutual cooperation works on mutual trust and it builds goodwill among the farmers. This is an unquantifiable benefit but the impact can be seen over a period of time. A group has more power than an individual. Cohesiveness in the group will help in their financial, social and institutional development and pave the way for progress!