

Adoption of new technologies in sustainable usage of the natural ecosystem to prevent land degradation and promotion of organic farming systems had yielded successful results in villages in the eastern province.

Six villages in the Addalaichenai DS division of the Ampara District were selected as suitable areas for this project.

Maramalarchy Social Elevation Organisation Chairman U.A.M. Hassan told The Island Financial Review Yesterday that the said areas have the potential for the production of fruits and vegetable crops.

"We obtain water for cultivation from the irrigation channels of the Gal Oya Scheme the source being the gigantic tank the Senanayake Samudraya. The extensive use of agrochemicals in the surrounding area are washed into the irrigation channels and seep into the agricultural and paddy lands and affect the ground water table contaminating the wells of the area as well," he said.

He says this in turn increases the sulphate content of the soil resulting in acidic soils causing 'root rot' of the paddy. Many paddy lands have been abandoned owing to this situation.

Paddy cultivation takes place in both seasons in this area which is termed the 'rice bowl' of the country. Yet the irrigation channels were not providing waters to their full potential for paddy cultivation owing to the heavy clogging by the blooms of water hyacinth. As a result micro nutrient deficiencies occur in paddies becoming more susceptible to pest and diseases.

Human health too is affected as the malaria larvae thrive in the matted vegetation of the water weeds while the rotting vegetation affects the drinking water quality causing gastrointestinal diseases.

The people here have been badly affected by the long drawn out ethnic conflict and armed violence.

In 2004 they were victims of the devastating Tsunami. However, they have gone on with very basic levels of assistance for resettlement which included agricultural tools. Twenty five per cent of the total requirement of fruits and vegetables of the DS division come from these villages. They are unaware of food security and safety or the detrimental effects of agro chemical usage.

Addressing the problem of clearing the irrigation channels of water hyacinth and using this micro nutrient rich vegetation for the manufacture of compost was proposed by the Maramallarchy Social Elevation Organisation. The Organisations Chief Hassan works with all three communities Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese in the Addalachenai DS division, Amapara. Seven compost sites were to be constructed in cement with the dimensions of 5m x10mx1.3m.

The compost would include Water Hyacinth, cow dung, chicken droppings, and other leguminous leaf ingredients such as Grilicidia, Cassava and Margosa leaves.

He says 25000 metric tons of straw harvested from paddy cultivation in the area is not utilized and burnt by the farmers causing a serious environmental hazard. Straw too was to be collected and used for compost solving that problem as well. It was also decided to raise the bunds of the drainage and irrigation channels to six feet in height to make them more resistant to floods.

One hundred and twenty farmers from the six villages were trained in organic agriculture methods and manufacture and use of compost as fertilizer. GEF/SGP of UNDP assisted the NGO to implement this project.

Water hyacinth clearing work was done in the Kudakare West, Kuakare East, Kudakare North, Konaowatta channels with the assistance of the farmer organizations of the area.

Five farmer organizations - 80 Muslim (Kudakarai), 20 Sinhalese (Deeegawapiya – women farmers' organisation) and 20 Tamil (Thiraikeni) a total of 120 people were selected for the project.

A two-day training program was conducted for the 120 selected farmers (each person had to have 1/2 acre of high land with water access to cultivate) in the two languages of Sinhala and Tamil. A total of 170 people were trained as 50 A/L students were also added to this training. The theme was on an organized solution to land degradation by the application of locally available material. Resource persons were from the Department of Agriculture, Pelawatte Sugar Corporation and the UNDP Disaster Management Unit. Five workshops were held on organic farming.

Three in the Agriculture Training Centre, Addalachenai near Olluvil harbour and the other two in Pelawatte and Deegavapiya. An instruction leaflet was printed and distributed to the participants.

Five Compost tanks were constructed for the Kudakari Cultivation committee, Deegavapiya Women Farmer's Organisation, Alim Nagar cultivation committee, Kachenai cultivation committee and Thiraikenai Cultivation Committee. And the other two are now under construction.

Now people are happy with the prices and the ready markets for the better quality organically grown produce from their lands and the increased paddy cultivation and the healthy paddies make them committed to keep the canals clean and use the cheaper, better fertilizer for both paddy and their home cultivations. The cows received from USAID will give an added incentive for compost production.

M.N. Samsudeen's who is a project beneficiary is an Adult education officer and his program includes his leanings from this project while his home garden is used as the model garden for field visits for his students. He has already trained around 2000 farmers in coastal areas. More requests are coming for training.

Farmer organizations that are not direct beneficiaries helped in clearing the canals and want to continue to do so. The request for a two wheel tractor has been met by the project to continue this activity.

Affiliation with the UNDP funded Agriculture Training Institute where two day residential training programs for 40 can be held at any one time helps train farmers, other NGOs, school kids and Samurdhi beneficiaries about organic home gardens and their value.

Generally four trainings of 160 people are trained in one month. Hearing about his work and the project Dr PA Piyasiri, Director General of Tertiary and Vocational Commission, Narahenpita, has invited Hassan to the Hardy Institute Ampara to help formulate a syllabus on non formal agriculture to train the students.

~ island.lk ~ by Ifham Nizam