

## **SEEDLINGS INTO TREES: THE ROLE OF NURSERIES** **The Experiences of YCO in Andhra Pradesh, India**

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The concept of local participation and control in social forestry has gained centre stage in forestry development issues. It has come to prominence because demand for forest products has risen dramatically with increasing populations, with environmental change and industrial development. Together these changes have reduced thousands of acres of bush and forests to degraded land. Participatory social forestry has also arisen because the top-down approach used in forestry project design has not worked. Social forestry for local community development has come to mean more than simply changing the local resident from an invisible being to someone who is a pawn in someone else's game.

No longer are forestry projects confined to dense stands of trees; now they are directed to the planting and management of many different associations of trees, shrubs and crops. Trees are integrated into indigenous agricultural systems where villagers are responsible for the care and management of these trees. Hence the role of the forester has also changed: in general foresters are now offering technical support and advice to villagers. The greater part of the new forestry agent's time will no longer be confined solely to management control and rule enforcement, instead villagers have become central to resource management. The purpose of this reorientation of social forestry has been to help local people gain control over solutions to resource problems. This new approach is undoubtedly more difficult and time consuming to design and execute than the former blueprint approach. Villagers must be informed of the options and encouraged to participate in deciding what is appropriate and affordable within their economic and social environments.

Using these concepts the educated unemployed youth of Yellamanchili founded Youth for Wastelands Development (YCO) to promote participatory forms of social forestry.

### **Beginnings**

From 1981 YCO has worked as a catalyst with poor people to help them to identify solutions to their resource needs. Villagers wanted to plant trees on their own land and so YCO approached the Forest Department for a supply of seedlings. Farmers used their own transport to take seedlings from government nurseries and planted them on their own land. Although only a small number of farmers were initially involved in the programme the survival rate of the seedlings was very high, and showed that farmers were prepared to invest large amounts of time and labour in collecting and nurturing the seedlings.

From these small beginnings YCO learnt several lessons:

1. People needed nurseries close to their villages.
2. Seedlings must be ready in time for the monsoon and the peak planting period.
3. The government nurseries did not supply the types of seedlings that farmers required, because farmers had not been asked about their tree-based priorities.

## **YCO Nurseries**

### **a. Centralised Nurseries**

These lessons led YCO to establish their own nurseries. A central nursery was established on one acre of revenue land given by the government. The District Rural Development Agency provided the necessary infrastructure and capital investment under the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP). However, although the project raised the seedlings with the help of unemployed and destitute labour it was not possible to distribute the seedlings to poor farmers. At this time the project had to work through the local government structures which led to the allotment of seedlings to wealthy and politically influential farmers.

This experience led to YCO delinking their seedling distribution service from government agents. The YCO instituted a survey of 30 villages to assess their requirements for tree planting. From the results of this survey the project decided to establish decentralised nurseries in 12 villages.

### **b. Decentralised People's Nurseries**

Financial assistance for the establishment of these nurseries was obtained from the National Wastelands Development Board. Local people were involved in the construction of the nurseries and the selection of species to be raised. As opposed to previous experience seedlings were lifted on time and were distributed to poor farmers.

YCO has also worked in conjunction with the Forest Department to establish other nurseries with low caste families.

## **From Nursery to Tree-Planting**

In 1981 YCO applied to the revenue authorities to lease 30 acres of land in Maribanda village. But it was not until four years later even with good contacts in the revenue department that YCO was able to complete all the necessary formalities. Initially the land was given to YCO on lease but the project decided it would be

better to give Pattas to 30 destitute and landless families who had recently been resettled in the locality. The land was planted up six months after the pattas had been handed over to the families. The villagers used indigenous soil and moisture conservation practices to ensure the protection of the seedlings. Intercropping systems were also introduced by the participants. The sale of vegetables and cashew nuts has realised a large income, of which half has been reinvested by the project to improve the programme, and the remaining money has been used to establish a community fund. From this fund the 30 participating families have been able to take out interest free loans to purchase livestock and other assets.

The experiences of YCO indicate the importance of learning by doing. It is also apparent from this description of their work that YCO has a vital role to play as a mediator between government services and villagers.