

MSSRF initiatives with farmer suicide affected families in Vidarbha

Following the field visit of the National Commission on Farmers under the chairmanship of Professor Swaminathan to the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra in October 2005, it was decided to initiate some activities to help alleviate farmers' distress under the aegis of the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation.

On 1 May, 2006 (Maharashtra Day), programmes for Educational Support of Children and Livelihood Rehabilitation of Widows were launched at a meeting held at the College of Agriculture, Nagpur.

Education Support Programme for Children of Farmers who Committed Suicide

79 children from 39 families spread across the 8 blocks of Wardha district are being supported under the programme. June 2006 was the cut-off date for families considered for coverage under the programme. Accounts have been opened in the names of the mother and child in sub-post offices and the amount is disbursed in three instalments. The amount ranges from Rs.1500/- per annum at the primary school level upto class IV, Rs.2000/- for middle school – classes V-VII, Rs.2500/- for high school – classes VIII-X to Rs.3000/- for higher secondary level – classes XI-XII).

Education in government schools in Maharashtra is free. Under the initiative, the children continue to study in the schools where they have been studying. The support is basically to provide for clothing, footwear, food for the children and instill a sense of hope that we are with them. For children in higher classes, provision has been made for meeting their exam fees and tuition expenses.

Following individual intimation, the mothers and children were called to a function in Wardha on June 29 and the pass books and a certificate that the child's education was being supported by the Foundation given to each.

The work is being coordinated by a local committee with Shri J L Salway, chairman of the Wardha District Land Development Bank as chairperson and Shri Atul Sharma, Project Officer, Community Polytechnic, Pipri, Wardha as Secretary. Periodic visits are undertaken to the families to talk to them and get their feedback. After the disbursement of the second instalment, feedback was also sought from the headmaster/headmistress of the schools on each child's performance, in a prescribed form.

One major concern with regard to the children is about their future after they complete class XII. It is planned to expose the children in high school to vocational training options available.

From the 2008 school session, it is proposed to extend the Education Support Programme to suicide affected families to Yavatmal district, starting with a few blocks in the first phase.

Mahila Kisan SashaktikaranPariyojana

An overnight camp was held on Feb 10-11, 2007 at the Community Polytechnic in Pipri, Wardha, with the mothers of the children being supported under the programme. 24 out of the 37 came. The objective was to have an interaction with them, collect information about them and their families and how they are coping and find out their needs. Faculty members of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai led by Dr. Chhaya Datar, also participated in the camp; information from the women was collected through a questionnaire. This has given us some base information about the women who participated, for future planning on livelihood rehabilitation programmes for the widows.

Individual house visits were undertaken in May and October to build a rapport and better understand their circumstances. The women were also called to participate and voice their needs at meetings in September and October 2007, following which an initiative for women farmers (*Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana*) has been launched to work for their sustainable livelihood security. The plan is to form clusters of women farmers in villages in a phased manner and then move to federate them over a period of time. The starting point is the villages where the mothers of children being covered under the Education Support Programme are located. Other women farmers in the village will be included with them to form the clusters. The work has just commenced with staff at the field level going to the villages and interacting with the women. Few training programmes have also been conducted. Currently ongoing is an attempt with Chetana Vikas, a Wardha based NGO to train women farmers in a model of sustainable agriculture under rainfed conditions.

Financial Inclusion Programme

The Foundation is playing a facilitator role in working with the banks operating in Wardha district to bring the entire population under the formal banking system. Bank of India, with 20 branches is the lead bank in the district and has been requested to take the lead role in steering the process. State Bank of India is the other major presence in the district coming close behind Bank of India with a network of 18 branches. SBI has setup a Financial Inclusion Project Team with a nodal officer in charge to focus on making all the villages in their service area 100 per cent financially inclusive. No-frill accounts with a minimum deposit of rupees fifty are being opened in villages at late night meetings where the team goes with account opening forms and a photographer. It is hoped that the target will be reached by August 2008.