

AID Conference 2004

*Minutes for Session Named **Balaji's Corner***

Date: May 29, 2004

Time From: 10:05 a.m.

To: 11:15 a.m.

Minutes Taken By: Gayathri

Number of attendees: 45

Audio/Visual Component? No

Speaker/Panelist Names:

1. Balaji Sampath

What they are speaking about:

Talk about AID

Main Presentation:

Balaji's focus for this talk was to review where AID stands after 13 years.

Looking back at the Hundred Block Plan, it has come a long way since 2002, when the plan was first discussed at AID Boston. Today after 4 years, it HBP covers 1000 villages in Tamil Nadu in a big way.

AID has indeed come a long way since its inception. Today one of the most interesting things underway is the expansion of AID India. There are now 40 members in AID Chennai.

Many projects in Tamil Nadu are done with the involvement of the AID Chennai team. We have 5 people going to villages doing the training by going to villages on projects on health, education. A dedicated team is working on material creation in AID Chennai. Balaji showed some materials - VCD and pamphlets, stories. Thousands of copies have been distributed to villages. This is possible because of the AID chapter in Chennai – to do the central co-ordination..AID Bangalore is trying tie up with peoples movement

Balaji then moved on to discuss AID's strengths and weaknesses. With active feedback from the audience, the main strengths of AID were listed as

- 500 active volunteers
- Funds – \$600,000 per year

- Working with People's Movements
- Focus on the disadvantaged sections of society
- Focus on projects – especially site visits and periodic reviews
- An understanding of the holistic nature of the problem
- Links and support within NRI community in the US

The first project AID took up was building a well somewhere in Orissa. Today we fund about 75 projects every year. Is it natural and easy to say that that a new chapter can start and raise funds and support projects. It is so today. But it was not so when AID started – even after 3 years of AID's inception.

AID learnt the importance of monitoring through project visits before approval. This idea is critical for undertaking good projects. Now the idea is taken for granted, but this was not obvious when AID started out. Working with people's movements also started much later, once AID developed a deeper level of understanding on issues.

Then Balaji raised the question where AID should ideally be in 2010. The suggestions that came up were:

- Have more chapters in India. AID-India is a key strength to AID. The conference t-shirt is printed by AID Chennai. So we can "outsource" work to AID India.
- Diverse volunteer base and networking with other organizations like ASAH, ILP and other US organizations.
- Have more SEED villages, Saathis and Jeevan-Saathis.
- Better organized.
- More successful with our advocacy with the government.

All these ideas are based on the fundamental need that people working in India need support.

Consider education as an example. Schools are our partners in India in the field of education. So when we think of supporting people in India, why not work with schools and school teachers. This is not as difficult as it may seem. Ten years ago, we didn't know how to work with an NGO, but we learnt. Is there a way we can work with schools and school teachers.

The first step may go wrong – probably will go wrong. After all, AID's first project didn't wasn't exactly a resounding success – but it helped us understand what we need.

One possibility is to get email contacts of say, 500 science school teachers. There are lots of teachers in India who need support – they have questions but nowhere to go for answers.

We can start by creating resource area of teachers – an email group through which teachers can share ideas they can try out in class.

Another possibility is to create educational brochures and pamphlets and distribute them widely with the goal of reaching, say, 100,000 people – teachers and students. We can also distribute books and toys in this manner.

Working on school and school teachers is not a five day project. It will take several years to develop, but this is an area AID has not tackled yet. By doing this, we are in some way creating an organization within AID.

Another area we haven't touched is to setup an organization to create an NGO resource center. AID Chennai can act as one such resource. It has a set of full time volunteers providing material and support to different groups.

At the end of the day, we need to think beyond just the project. We need to setup co-ordination team in different states so that this can happen. We need to train a bunch of people in India on

using the slides and they can help disseminate the information widely. Issues like communalism need to be more widely discussed than it is being done today. Lots of NGOs have literature on communalism, tribal issues. If we trust some NGOs, we can directly take their material and disseminate to other groups. So we don't necessarily need to create new material in every case.

Question/Answer Session:

Q. We are working in 250 schools in Tamil Nadu. Why do you want to spread yourself so thin? Why not a concentrated effort in 10 schools?

A. The scale provides motivation. When AID Chennai worked in 10 schools, the programme was very ineffective. But as it scaled, more materials started being developed - Your inputs will grow as we have more avenues. Our resource base will grow as we start working on it

Q. What is your experience on children accepting the material?

A. Children do accept it – they even pay to buy it. It gives children something to think about. It might not change their perception completely – but it is a start

Additional Notes/ Observations: