Social Cohesion Trumps Agrofuels in Andhra Pradesh…but only after three year losses bring communities to their knees.

This is a short account of the plight of several villages battling against legislation associated with meeting biofuel targets in the Nalgonda district of Andra Pradesh in South East India

I met with Anthra, a prominent NGO, working with other NGOs, to support pastoral communities in retaining their sustainable livelihoods in Hyderabad, in late October 2009. Sagari Ramdas, Director of Anthra spoke of the loss of food sovereignty and financial hardship experienced in all of the communities who accepted the government incentivised scheme to dedicate land to agrofuels. Agricultural support workers also present at the Anthra offices spoke about the failed government promises and failed agrofuel crops.

The next day with the support of Anthra field staff we made a 5:30am start to drive 150 km to visit the Theryala Village in Nalgonda where the community, part of the Neelagiri network of 11 NGOs in Nalgonda district met with us in a basic but cool community room. My father, a retired GP now living in India, joined me on this trip, bringing a keen concern for human welfare to the discussions. Those who joined us from the community were mostly middle aged or older; concerned and weary faces, male and female, all eager to participate. Krishna, the currently elected community leader welcomed us.

He explained that farmers depended on the government National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) scheme to supplement their income. This historically laudable scheme continues to ensure at least a minimum income, but since 2006, the scheme has demanded agrofuel crops to be planted rather than food. Forty families, each owning an acre of land were given Pongamia* saplings and promised rice support during the three year early growth phase. Some common land was also allocated to the agrofuel crop. But this attempt to cleverly link employment support funding to agrofuel production was having tragic consequences; food production and post-harvest grazing opportunities were simultaneously lost.

Contrary to information received from agricultural officials, the agrofuel crop Pongamia. was not drought tolerant. Whereas previously food crops such as millet, maize and red gram thrived, today's Pongamia crop required irrigation…and 90% of the crop was failing.

Different members of the community began to embellish the story. One farmer mentioned that this year the monsoons only lasted from June 6th to 8th, with no further rain for two months. Another explained that the usual 5cm of rainfall was now down to less than 3cm. Another explained that before Pongamia, the changing monsoon patterns were already forcing farmers to leave some land fallow but at least this still allowed some grazing potential. With Pongamia however, even this grazing opportunity has disappeared. Ironically the increase in drought-fallow land has been cited by agricultural officials and dubbed "private wastelands", a term used to validate its conversion to Pongamia and Jatropha plantations. The twin loss of agriculture and dairy is pushing up food prices and putting additional pressures on land elsewhere. The community is now forced to use cash resources it doesn't have to purchase food at inflated prices.

Krishna then explained that after three years the community has responded by uprooting the Pongamia and replanting with food crops, a statement which brought smiles and some laughter to the group as he spoke. He further explained that it was of some amusement to the community that they were using the NREG funding to do this! This is a fitting response to the misuse of the Rain Shadow Development Department role, set up in Andhra Pradesh in 2007 to focus on rain-deficiency in chronically affected areas but which has been behind the push for biofuels.

Failed Pongamia plantations (left) oxen-ploughed in defiance

In other districts too, bore holes are being dug to irrigate Pongamia and Jatropha, to grow rice as well as compensate for drought. For now this is a solution but as the community leader in Ramchandrapur, in Hyderabad district explained, "our bore holes are getting deeper by the year, the original 200ft wells have increased to 250ft and some close to 300ft." As the water table drops what remains becomes more saline, ultimately bringing survival in these villages to a precipice.

Elsewhere in the Nalgonda District, Jatropha plantations are also failing except where expensive, fossil fuel intensive irrigation systems (the water is brought in by tanker) are used. Understandably the communities are seizing back control. With support from NGOs such as Anthra, SHARP and SHEAD, there have been resolutions passed to replace biofuels with fodder crops and even one incident where women villagers physically stopped biofuel crop saplings from being offloaded from the delivery vehicle, demanding fodder crops instead.

Well-watered Pongamia gardens act as a biofuels 'shop window' outside local government buildings

In other parts of Andra Pradesh, villagers are organising themselves differently to share resources and challenge local government over schemes which threaten food security and disadvantage communities.

Three hundred kilometres away in the village of Ramchandrapur men and women organise themselves into trade groups. There are goat, sheep and other specific livelihood groups with men and women managing their groups independently. One early decision was not to replace food crops with biofuel crops.

The community explained their plans for maintaining an agricultural seed bank of native species. They outlined how the seed bank needs to be replaced each year as the seed deteriorates and had organised a means of achieving this through trade group contributions. Certainly they were determined not to become dependent on agribusiness seed and cited agricultural officers who in the past have discouraged indigenous varieties. One senior member of the group explained that food security was their primary focus and preventing agri-biodiversity losses and retaining local knowledge of how to use these varieties was important to them.

Another success story born from this well-functioning social structure is the women's goat herding groups' opposition to new government regulations to prevent goat grazing in forests. Alongside, the government also stopped inoculation support and goat mortality increased. Herders who wanted to continue grazing were forced to bribe officials on a daily basis. With the help of NGOs, Anthra, Adivasi Aikya Vedika and Yakshi, the women demonstrated to the government that branch cutting for goat-feed was possible, ensuring that saplings wouldn't be destroyed. They also proved that seed dispersal through goat dung actually facilitated forest regrowth. They won their case and herders now carry official documents proving their right to graze goats in forests, invalidating the ongoing attempts by officials to extort bribes.

Men's and women's livelihood groups attending joint meeting, Ramchandrapour

The contrast between the imposition of big agri-business schemes and the self-organising capacity of empowered communities left a strong impression. But as we travelled between villages another concern came to light. Occasional long stretches of metal fencing demarcated the boundary of recently planted eucalyptus plantations. It was explained that large tracts of land are being bought cheaply by private individuals and fenced off. Eucalyptus is already in demand for paper and pulp. However with greater demand for industrial biomass imports in Europe and also if second generation agrofuels become a reality, there will be a lot more demand for such plantations in southern countries. Eucalyptus may appear to be a reliable income generating crop, however biologically sterile eucalyptus monocultures are drying out the soils in may parts of the global South** whilst masquerading as a carbon sink.

* Pongamia is the successor to failed Jatropha plantations in Andhra Pradesh.
www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/docs/anthra_statement.pdf
Under near ideal conditions it yields an oil which serves as a feedstock for biodiesel.

** www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/.../climate_geoengineering_web221208_section5.pdf