

REPPER

RESEAU D'ECHANGE DE PROJETS ET DE PROGRAMMES EN FAVEUR DES ENFANTS DE LA RUE

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As you will have been able to see from Bulletin No. 13, agricultural experiences are many and varied. Since we cannot go into everything in detail, we have chosen to mention those already existing for some time, thus providing the means of showing results, and drawing consequences and perspectives. We shall begin with the Ashalayam farm near Calcutta. In future Bulletins we shall refer to other experiences on other continents. Your suggestions are welcome. Martine Berge Simenel.

THE ASHALAYAM FARM FOR THE STREET YOUTH OF CALCUTTA

WHY A FARM FOR STREET CHILDREN?

A great many street children have fled from villages, they are not yet used to town life and feel better in the country. Life is much less expensive and it is easy to "settle in". Conditions for children in towns are particularly difficult during the monsoon and winter. The temptation of prostitution is great and they often catch infectious diseases. In summer, pollution is a scourge for organisms undermined by privation. Encouraging young people to return to the country helps, be it ever so humbly, in the struggle against overpopulation in towns. The farm provides a "pure" environment for these young people eager to rebuild their lives.

Agricultural training is an easy option for young people who have neither the ability nor the will to undertake educational or technical training. It gives a chance to young people much scarred by their past (drugs, delinquency) in an environment advantageous to further fulfilment. Situated in Kalyani, a large village (in India, a village has thousands of inhabitants) 65 kms from Calcutta, the Ashalayam farm covers about 5 hectares. This year, 25 young people aged between 14 and 18 are working there and preparing for their future. They live in four little houses around the farm land where they are independent, although under the responsibility of educators. Two other homes, built on the same land, shelter younger boys and girls (from 5 to 12 years old) who go to school. They also do small jobs around the farm during their spare time. They make the place more lively, preventing the isolation of the older children and the creation of a "juvenile delinquent" community that might make them feel excluded. They all live together, play together, help each other (the older ones play the part of older brothers) which creates a family atmosphere.

(contact with animals). Most of the young people working on the farm had not taken to life in one of the Ashalayam homes where the training imposes too many constraints and where they are far from keen on the studious atmosphere!

For the same reasons, a group of young people with learning disabilities has been set up, enabling them to learn about agriculture and manage a mini-exploitation.

The Don Bosco Ashalayam Association, which has been in existence for 15 years, looks after 365 children in its 18 homes and more than 1,600 young people benefit from constant follow-up in the street (reading/writing, night refuges, medical attention, etc.). In 1997 Ashalayam created a farm for young people unable to undertake traditional or technical studies. This project should allow them to re-integrate into society and give them a roof under which to shelter a future family.

They young people learn to cultivate and harvest rice, wheat and various basic vegetables required for food, and to produce fruit, the sale of which provides a source of regular income. Those unable to cope with sales to the outside are taught how to harvest and transform certain products: husking rice, milling wheat into flour and grinding spices into powder, pressing fruit juices, making sauces (tomato, chili), dehydrating vegetables. Two agricultural students train the young people in these different areas.

Cattle and farmyard husbandry and fish farming are also on the programme with the help of the University of Bengal which also gives advice on fish conservation.

Various productions provide both the opportunity for training and sources of monetary income.

The principal crops are rice and wheat (the latest harvest provided 5 tonnes of rice).

There are also, however, 18 varieties of vegetable (tapioca, potatoes, tomatoes, peas, beans, pumpkins, cabbage and cauliflower and local varieties), 15 kinds of fruit tree (banana, guava, papaya, mango and numerous local varieties) and a mushroom patch.

There are also 350 hens and a few ducks for eggs and meat, some cows for milk, and fish farming has begun with a pond (500 cubic metres of water) for 600 fish.

There is also a freeze-drying unit in operation where snack foods are manufactured (tapioca and potato crisps), and ground spices, freeze-dried vegetables (cabbage, cauliflower), and a unit for producing and bottling fruit juice, spicy sauces and tomato sauces.

Supplementary training deriving from the project

Two young people have already learned to drive a little tractor donated by the British Consulate and are working both on the farm and for neighbouring farmers.

The labels for the sale of freeze-dried produce and bottled fruit juice are printed in the Ashalayam work shop.

One of the homes on the farm is more roomy and welcomes, on a rota basis, during the holidays, children from other homes in Calcutta or Howrah. These groups thus benefit, for a week, not only from a "plunge" into proper countryside, but also initiation into farm work and appreciation of the idea of settling in future in a village rather than in town.

Profits

Part of the harvest supplies all of the Ashalayam homes with rice, potatoes, vegetables, eggs, and makes it possible to economize between 2,500 and 5,000 francs per month. The rest is sold on the local market.

Freeze-drying vegetables makes it possible to sell them at a higher price when there is a dearth on the local market.

Although quantities are not yet large, crisps, ground spices, fruit juice and sauces are offered for sale (with a foodstuff handling licence) in hotels in Calcutta, schools and shops.

Renting out the tractor to local farmers provides funds for the project and for the young people who drive it.

Educational principles

The young people are housed in little groups of 5 or 6 so that they can be looked after individually. They live in a little community, are independent and much freer than they would be if they were in a traditional home. They are autonomous, cooking their own

meals and are responsible for keeping their house clean. They live in simple conditions, similar to those of the surrounding villagers, just as they will be living in the future.

The main goal: creating conditions to make a future possible.

A young person may always choose, after having "settled down", thanks to the farm, to return to the city and take up another job. A third of the profit from the sale of goods is put into a bank account for the young person or persons who have worked on these sales, and, for some of the produce cultivated, they are paid by the hour. For those choosing to remain in agriculture, this money saved, and a

subsidy from Ashalayam, provides them with the means of building a house and buying land (less than 0.5 hectare) so that they can live on their own crops. Within three and a half years, many young people have already profited from a period of re-integration on the farm: 45 of them have their own land, 32 have built their own house and 22 have married.

The team

Uncle William, retired, initiator and coordinator of the project, devotes 100% of his time free of charge to Ashalayam. He has wide experience in agriculture and accounting. An Indian volunteer and a local farmer paid by Ashalayam provide agricultural training for the young people.

Two educators provide educational follow-up.

Two specialists from West Bengal Province (attached to the Government), one in agriculture, the other in fish breeding, provide their advice free of charge. Moreover, they obtain from local partners gifts or reduced prices on the purchase of seeds, fish.

Farmers from neighbouring villages are employed seasonally during heavy work periods. They are also a source of information and socialization for the young people.

Ashalayam wishes us to express its thanks to the Scelles Foundation, Solidev, REV, the Cible students association, West France Solidarity, and to the City of Rennes, for their trust and their major contribution to this farm project.

NETWORK NEWS

La Belle Etoile (Cameroun) has taken in over two years about one hundred children full time and a similar number part time either during the day or by night. Around a thousand meals are served each month. *"We must, however, beware of figures,"* writes Yves Lescanne, *"each child is a whole, of infinite worth, and infinities can't be added up (...). The sense of sharing is often amazingly developed in our children and we discover that it is not only us who teach them but also they who teach us, transform us, encourage us to share"*. B.P. 49 MAROUA.

CAS (Catholic Action for Street Children) (Ghana) estimates at 30% the number of children on the street because of poverty, and 70% because of family problems. CAS suggests that family advisory groups be created in the various churches in all quarters. *"This will require no additional expenditure and will prevent lots of children ending up on the street. (...) Educating children on the street corner requires training: if each educator uses his or her personal method, the children will be perplexed and may not receive coherent information. We have thus been obliged to organize a simple "teaching" in two parts (hygiene and health on the one hand, reading/writing and behaviour on the other) which can be helpful to all educators whatever their training or their position in CAS. (...) It is not enough for a child to say "I want to get off the streets", the child must be helped to prepare itself. Many of them do not know what they want to do or aren't ready to give up their freedom to do it. CAS wants to help them to learn a trade or to go back to school provided they take the initiative."* Brother Jos van Dinther, CAS, P.O. Box 709 Madina.

NEPAL ENFANCE ET LUMIERE (Nepal Childhood and Enlightenment) *"The association is reaching a crucial time, for we must now think about the professional future of "our" children. Some could go on to the SLC (equivalent to high school graduation) and go into higher education, but which will guarantee them work? To find apprenticeships, the route is long and difficult, for this society is based on an oral tradition. Nothing in writing, no list of existing apprenticeships and how they operate. (...) The problems increase when we attack the outlets before the SLC. (...) In this society where girls are mothers at 14 - 15, work must be found for them before they succumb to the family and social pressure of marriage, before they tire of their studies and successive failures"*. 54 Route de Coulangis, 18000 Bourges.

CAJED (Committee for the Aid of Young People in Difficulty - in Togo) *"There are now 70 young people off the street earning or starting to earn their living by means of the trade we've enabled them to acquire. The apprenticeship programme has thus proved its effectiveness. But the future is extremely bleak: I have absolutely no idea what our budget will be for the year 2002. (...) I am feverishly seeking possible solutions, I am sending files all over the place, so far without the slightest success. Thank you in advance to any one who may be able to give me some ideas."* Yves Marguerat, 13 rue Léon Bloy, 92260 Fontenay aux Roses.

THE NEXT REPPER MEETING

will be on Saturday, 16 March 2002
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