

Friends of H.O.P.E and the Coronavirus Impact.

The Friends of H.O.P.E currently have five programmes in the Nilgiris, amongst tribal and non-tribal peoples, one of which the schools eco club programme has been mothballed until later in the year, but most probably next. Below, we describe the steps we are taking to adapt to the present circumstances caused by the threat of corona virus and the lockdown which has been put in place to prevent the spread of disease. These circumstances pose great hardship to an already poor population for whom only minimal health services exist. They present enormous challenges to our capacity and our existing *modus operandi* and we are seeking to address these.

Traditional Health Service Programme (RTTMP)

The long-term aim of this programme is to strengthen the health support in villages by establishing a project run by the people for the people by collecting, using and preserving the healing knowledge of traditional medical systems (primarily Ayurveda and Siddha). Fifteen village women have been empowered and trained to deliver a health service to SIXTY remote tribal villages. They deal with a range of cases from minor episodes to chronic long-term health conditions among a population of over seven thousand. In the last year, in conjunction with a research program from Bangalore TDU, they have been treating severely anaemic patients using a traditional diet plan and medicines, with measurable success.

This programme now faces threats:

- Restrictions on movement mean that regular patient and village visits have ceased. Only a third of villages are within walking distance.
- Communication of health information is difficult; remote areas lack internet and phone connections. Our newsletters cannot be delivered.
- Rural poverty impacts on the ability of villagers to sustain hygienic practices.
- The programme's health workers lack public health training, supplies and protective equipment.
- The Ayurvedic TDU Hospital has closed removing an important resource for anaemic patients and also impacting capacity building, certainly this year.

Our priorities now:

We must ensure the safety of the health service team and the communities they serve. While lockdown is in place, we are planning for the support of VHO's as frontline health workers. They are an important entry point into the community to convey information. They have been active participants in this process initiating suggestions as to how they can maintain prevention and hygiene in their work. As women they find it easy to approach other women and girls who carry responsibility for household cleanliness.

- VHO's are learning the essentials of preventing infection, handwashing and social distancing and with adequate protection, will explain the principles in those villages which remain accessible.
- Teaching villagers how to make protective masks – usually from dhoti cloth.

- Demonstrating the preparation of simple accredited traditional remedies to boost immunity, using plants that are available locally.
- Encouraging the use of easily available cleaning materials with disinfectant properties, like turmeric and neem.
- Recommending Agnihotra, the ancient Vedic practice of twice daily purification of the home and surroundings, using smoke and ghee.
- Training of VHO's towards certification as traditional practitioners is an objective of the programme and this has been augmented to include training in standard public health measures with input from Bangalore Public Health Department.

Organic Farming Programme.

A policy initiative at State level to make the Nilgiris a region of organic farming, reinforced an important aim that FOH has been promoting for twenty-two years. The dangerously high level of chemical and pesticide residues found in the regions produce is evidence of the need to change farming practices. The shift to organics is of great importance to the Nilgiris Biosphere, preventing soil erosion, and rebuilding soil structures. At Thambatty Model Farm, this work was already underway, the objective being to serve as a test bed for the small farmers who make up most cultivators in the region. We have various stories to hand and the value of chemical free vegetables and fruits evidenced by the organic potato being used in a TB vaccine (BCG) endorses this essential programme.

The impact of COVID -19 on our programme has been immediate:

- Only one person remains on site to manage the model farm
- Produce cannot be harvested or taken to market
- Many farm workers in the region will be unable to work through lockdown
- Farm maintenance against damage by predators cannot be carried out.

Our priorities now:

Planning must continue. Despite COVID-19 and the postponement of farming change, policy drafting based upon our previously agreed 'Five-Year Road Map' supported by Tamil Nadu's Department of Horticulture and embraced by the Collector, can still go ahead.

- FOH will continue to work on a draft policy submission to the Tamil Nadu government, as this is now at a crucial stage. Much of this work can be completed in the UK.
- FOH's partner in the Garden of Hope Trust are co-leaders in the processes of farming marketing and distribution and despite staff shortages will continue to plan their involvement with the region-wide project.
- Nutrition will be severely compromised by the poverty and unemployment following lockdown, therefore providing good nutrition is essential and organic farming will provide a safe foundation. Our plan is to maintain it on the Thambatty site.

Programme for People Living with HIV/AIDS

The aim of this programme is to respond to the needs of a neglected and marginalised group as individuals and families. These people have suffered great discrimination and it is rare for them to experience non-judgemental acceptance. Both physical and mental well-being are affected by their condition. Our objectives have been to offer counselling support, to combat the stigma associated with the disease in health care settings and to provide access to suitable treatment. The programme currently provides support by home visits, group and family therapy, children's groups and nutritional assistance.

The impact of COVID 19 on this project and on patients has been severe.

- Monthly groupings, which offer counselling to over 100 patients and families are postponed.
- Home based counselling cannot take place
- Government centres for ART drugs are closed
- Many of our patients, landless day labourers, have no work therefore no income.
- Nutritional support groups which provide information and distribute organic produce and supplements, have had to close.

Our priorities now:

To use technology to overcome distancing; to link with government agencies to secure necessities for our patients. The most pressing issues have been to obtain income support for patients and families, to obtain the necessary drugs and to maintain supportive counselling links. The key worker has:

- Set up a daily voice and video calling service for the most vulnerable patients. Resources are extremely limited but are being used to the full. This depends on good connectivity in what is a mountainous environment, so this is difficult for many.
- Using video and voice-calling links to relay information on COVID-19 safety practices – hand washing and social distancing. Again, there are practicalities but associated with internet and mobile connectivity.
- Contacted and successfully pressured government health departments to maintain access to ART drugs. As a result, it has been agreed that the drugs should be made available in *tuluk* (district) hospitals and to some local health workers for distribution. The need remains pressing.
- Meeting with government officials and helping applicants to apply and receive a small government pension; this is done on a one-to-one basis as there is no official system in place.

Sustainable Village project

This focuses on several elements – a water conservation strategy for three villages, helping farmers with measures that will mitigate severe drought, helping farmers change to Organic farming and establishing a supply chain along the Polachi to Coimbatore Road linking farmer , with logistics carrier and Buyer. At farmer level ,work on constructing ditches, earthen bunds has ground to a halt, the logistics operation planned for introduction in march has been held up due to the lockdown.

Conclusion

The COVID -19 pandemic has impacted severely upon the population that we serve in the Nilgiris. Our efforts are curtailed, but where possible we have adapted our methods to deal with the new situation and continue to use the time to plan future developments in training and implementation of our goals.

We still need funds to support our widows and single parent support, bursary support programmes and any unrestricted funds we do receive may be allocated to this.

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