

Islands of survival – or more?

One more big international conference: COP 23 in November 2017 in Bonn. Was it successful, was worth all the investment? Depending upon whom you ask, you get different answers. The least we can say is that all the 197 countries agreed that it is now the need of the hour not only to discuss, but to act. Even if the Climate Protocol of Paris were implemented fully, it would not be enough. In Bonn the world community at least agreed upon the Talanoa-Dialogue, which aims at encouraging the countries around the world to act ambitiously in order to achieve more to rescue the climate. “Talanoa” means in Fijian-“Dialogue of all concerned”: Governments, researchers, economists, civil society. Yes, the challenge is tremendous. It cannot be managed by Governments alone; each and everyone can – should - contribute!

Representatives of two civil society organisations – one in Germany, one in Maharashtra/India – discuss their possible contribution to slow down climate change, to save and regenerate natural resources, to restore an ecological balance or to say it very simply: to make a survival on earth possible even for the generations to come. Elvira Greiner, President of ANDHERI HILFE and Arjuna Srinidhi, Senior Researcher on Environmental Science and Climate Change Adaptation for Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR) discuss how their organizations can contribute to combating climate change. Creating islands of survival is achievable. But it is far from being enough.

Elvira Greiner: Arjuna, I'm very glad that you have come over to Bonn to participate in the COP23 – your fourth COP already. What is your impression of this COP?

Arjuna Srinidhi: It is all about preparing the ground, not – like in Paris – where there was a deadline and an agreement to be finalised. It's about discussing how to continue the discussions. But in fact the progress of implementation and goal setting is very slow, much too slow. We simply don't have the time to discuss. We see on the Fidschi Islands how people are losing their land. We see more and more severe weather phenomena: floods and drought and unpredictable monsoon like in our working areas in India. People struggle for survival. Not somewhere in the distant future. Today!

ELVIRA GREINER: And nevertheless you have come over to Bonn for the COP23. Was it worth doing so?

A: For us as at WOTR the side event, in which we participated, was most important. Many international participants shared and discussed their watershed development methods and best practices. E.g. an organisation from Senegal wants to learn from our experience and implement a similar natural resource management project in their

country. We do have the ability to assist other countries with the knowledge gained in our watershed and climate change adaptation projects in India and that sharing and learning at the practical level is vital.

ELVIRA GREINER: Sharing and learning from the success and the failures, the challenges and opportunities is vital for all of us. We do not need to “reinvent the wheel”. WOTR has been working in the field of natural resource management/watershed development right from its beginning almost 25 years back. We at ANDHERI HILFE have been cooperating with WOTR for more than 20 years. There are also many others joining hands. There are so many efforts, so many projects, so many studies. And yet: Even in the “heartland” of WOTR, in Maharashtra, there are still such severe problems. Some districts in Maharashtra have become “famous” for farmer suicides. So we have to ask ourselves, what have we really achieved? Of course I know that WOTR has been able to restore almost 9.000 sq. km of degraded land and that your schemes have directly or indirectly benefitted 1,4 million people. ANDHERI HILFE is supporting about 700.000 people in about 7.000 villages and slums. For all these people a real change for the better is visible – a sustainable change. And yet we have to ask ourselves whether we are able to only create “islands of change” or something more?

Arjuna Srinidhi: There are many aspects related to farmers’ suicides. Agriculture is a difficult occupation with very small margins. The climate is one risk with unpredictable monsoon, droughts and floods. But there are many other factors too like lack of access to loans, indebtedness, lack of access to the market or market crashes. And sometimes farmers are too ambitious, believe big promises. If they invest big money for higher productive crops in a region, which is not suitable for such crops, they may lose everything. Especially if the monsoon fails. For the farmers it is important to recognize that we are all part of an ecosystem and we should not move away from our heritage and traditional crops. These crops are often most suitable for the environment.

ELVIRA GREINER: And yet in our discussions with the farmers we often find that they are attracted by the promise of high yielding cash crops. It is not always easy to promote diverse crops with the priority on food security – nutritious food. But looking at the huge number of malnourished and undernourished children we feel that should be top priority. What can we do?

Arjuna Srinidhi: We have to give importance to communication with women! A farmer may think of the maximum profit from his field. A woman definitely wants to establish food security for her family first. In addition to the agricultural products we also encourage them to develop other sources for an improved nutrition, e.g. backyard poultry. And we should not only think of land and water as assets. The empowerment of women is very important, as it ensures they have a say regarding the use of the agricultural land.

Elvira Greiner: Yes, that is very true. I remember one of my visits in a common WOTR-ANDHERI HILFE project in Madhya Pradesh many years ago: The overall situation in the villages had improved a lot, the income from the fields had increased considerably, the migration stopped to some extent already – and yet there were still too many malnourished children. Together we worked on solutions: by involving the women first of all! During my next visit I was able to see the results already: WOTR had started monitoring the nutrition and growth of each and every child in the project villages systematically: regular growth monitoring had been introduced. The data of each child was collected in individual charts. In addition there was one big chart, showing the situation of all the children in that particular village: How many are well nourished, how many are at the limit, how many are severely malnourished. That helped the villagers to get a clear idea of the situation of all their children. And to see the changes! That was an eye-opener for them.

Arjuna Srinidhi: Yes, WOTR pays a lot of attention to food security, health and nutrition! All the measures for the regeneration of the natural resources aims at protecting the ecosystem and at creating opportunities for survival, for a decent life in that rural area. We believe in a balance of the five capitals – natural, physical, human, social and financial. Only when all these five are in equilibrium with each other can true sustainability be achieved

Elvira Greiner: As we said: Together we try to create models, replicable models, which can be unscaled – not with foreign donations, but first of all by the Indian Government taking up such schemes. How far is that taking place?

Arjuna Srinidhi: Models can attract a lot of attention, but they are just “models” and cannot simply be replicated. The situation from one state to the other – even within one state – differs too much. But what can be replicated are pedagogies and methodologies. These practices can be applied according to the local context and lead to successful replication. We try to do this in our policy advocacy – both at the state level and at the national level. This is how we can influence the Indian government and have a much larger impact. For instance, the success of our work under the Indo-German watershed development influenced the national watershed development guidelines and our advocacy was critical in the setting up of the watershed development fund.

Elvira Greiner: Very true! I remember our experience in Rajasthan. There were two great learnings for us. Number one: WOTR developed a plan not to implement the project directly, but to work via local NGOs, so that the development process, initiated through our project, would be deeply rooted in the local community right from the beginning. Carefully WOTR selected four NGOs, invested a lot in their capacity building, involved them intensively in planning and implementing the process and yet we had to experience that not all of them were really sharing the same values and working in the same spirit. That made the successful project implementation very difficult. And number two: In one village the progress was far from our expectations.

Too many fights among the different communities. I do not know how many meetings and discussions your colleague over there had with the villagers, I too visited them. The point was that it was a mixed community of Rajputs and Dalits, all very poor, because of the lack of water and thus lack of options to use the land. But ultimately the Rajputs were not ready to cooperate with the Dalits in such a way that also the Dalits would have got real chances for development. With deep regret we finally had to give up. However, at the same time villagers from another village had observed the project going on and demanded again and again that their village should be included. Your colleague asked me whether that would be possible. I told him that it was unlikely, because it was a BMZ-co-financed project with a duration of four years and over one year was over already. However, as the villagers insisted so much and I finally visited that village. It was a purely Adivasi village and your colleague had not promised me too much: It was really impressive to see how these villagers were united and how they had already started working, without knowing whether they would get any support, just to show their eagerness and readiness. We agreed and accepted that village and it became a model village indeed!

Arjuna Srinidhi: Yes, these are important learnings for us. And we try to share our learnings with the Government as well. And in fact our voice is being heard. For example we are now beginning to see much success in our climate change adaptation work as well, particularly with agro-advisories, bio-diversity conservation, water management etc. We influence the government through many channels – like submissions to the ministry in its pre-budget consultations, by working with national level institutions like the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD). We have MOUs with these institutes, amongst others, and pilot projects that if successful can be taken up across the country.

Elvira Greiner: WOTR is getting support from different sources: from Indian Government, the German Government, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, to name just the most important supporters. Why do you think the cooperation between WOTR and ANDHERI HILFE is still important?

Arjuna Srinidhi: India has a lot of challenges on many levels. The Indian federal government and the corporates do a lot in order to cover basic needs like education, nutrition and health. But there aren't too many who support large watershed development project, because of the costs, scale and risks involved. Our unique approach lies in our ability to adopt holistic, scientific and participatory approaches to address rural poverty and water scarcity. That needs the courage to try out new approaches and venture into new areas. ANDHERI HILFE has helped us to venture into new areas, and is ready to take risks. For instance, they helped us venture into new areas in Madhya Pradesh in the past and are now supporting us in Jharkhand. Once a project is successful, often the local governments take it over and or support

similar projects at a larger scale across many more villages in the district. Based on success with certain strategic interventions, our national partners like NABARD, IMD etc could also potentially take it up in other regions/states across the country.

Elvira Greiner: ANDHERI HILFE would not “take a risk” with any NGO. Our partnership has grown over more than 20 years and that is a solid basis for our cooperation. Sharing of values is important. Readiness to see what can be done, to also try out new ways. Of course trials can fail, but then it is important to take it as a learning experience. Even donors do understand that not every project is 100 % successful. Most of them appreciate transparency. Trust is being built upon dedication, empathy and trustworthiness.

Elvira Greiner: You submitted a new project proposal for Madhya Pradesh. Compared to our earlier project there, what is new, what would you like to “experiment” there?

Arjuna Srinidhi: We are expanding our presence in Madhya Pradesh. Working in new districts can itself be an experiment since Madhya Pradesh has completely different ecosystems from East to West also concerning population, culture etc. One important aspect is that we want to use climate advisory services on a larger scale. That is not yet widespread in Madhya Pradesh. We have gained a lot of experience in Maharashtra and we do have a well qualified and ambitious team that is eager to establish such services, which are of tremendous help for the farmers, also in Madhya Pradesh. Another important aspect is land-use changes and water management. We will use satellite and remote-sensing technology to monitor land-use changes and water resources like surface and ground water aquifers. This along with rainfall and water usage data will help villagers’ better plan and manage their water resources. This is also an area rich in biodiversity. That is not new as such, but now we want to create better market linkages for these diverse – and organically produced – products. There are lots of ideas!

Elvira Greiner: The Indian government is already showing interest in these climate advisory services, you have established in some areas: small weather stations spread in quite a high density. That is indeed important for an early warning system for the farmers, isn’t it?

Arjuna Srinidhi: Yes, the weather in India is very difficult to predict. South Asian climatic conditions are very different from those in Europe or the US. If your weather report says it will rain between 3 and 5 pm, you will plan a meeting outside between 1 and 2 pm – this is possible in Europe or the US, not in India. People in India joke, that if the newspaper says it will rain, it definitely won’t. This is not a matter of bad technology in the Indian meteorology department. The South Asian weather system is more in vertical kind of zones, which are all very different from the zone next to it. They also interact with each other which make it very difficult to predict the weather. That’s why we do need a high density of weather systems. This is a big challenge in

our country, but one we can handle. WOTR has set up hundreds of small, simple weather stations in Maharashtra in a very small area, because even within a district the conditions are different in different parts. With this high density of weather stations, we are able to have much more accurate predictions and to give better advice to farmers and create more useful weather advisories. That can often save a crop! The Indian Meteorology Department, with whom we have a MOU and a working relationship with our current weather forecasts, is very pleased with the results and now wants to scale the program up to be implemented across the country. We look forward to it and to being knowledge partners in such a large scaling up programme!

Elvira Greiner: For its innovative qualities, WOTR received the “Land for Life Award” of the United Nations. I understand that this award was not only for WOTR’s great achievements in restoring degraded land with sustainable land management, water budgeting, micro irrigation etc. It was also a recognition for WOTR having trained a huge number of people, wasn’t it?

Arjuna Srinidhi: WOTR believes in building capacities. We have a dedicated training center where we offer training programs for different groups: villagers, local government officials, companies interested in Corporate Social Responsibility, researchers and other NGOs across the world. A wide variety of people works and learn in this center and create a sharing community. With Climate Change we face tremendous challenges across all borders and hence learning from each other is very important! So far WOTR has trained already over 380.000 people from India and 63 countries across the world. Out of 365 days in a year, we have occupancy in the training center for around 300-320 days. So it’s quite busy! We believe that the models, we create, are replicable on a large scale and that our work has global relevance, in India, other parts of Asia and also Africa.

Elvira Greiner: We are always very happy when our efforts for regeneration of natural resources result in better survival chances for people, in improved nutrition and health, in better education for the young generation. And at the same time we are wondering what will be the further development in such rural areas. What do you think, as a young Indian: Where do you see the young generation in a few decades? Will they be interested to still live in the rural area or will they rather prefer “an exciting” life in the cities with so many more options?

Arjuna Srinidhi: I think for a long time the aspiration of people was to move to a city, then move to the capital and then move to a developed country, like Germany or the US. But I think slowly a new aspiration is becoming visible, an aspiration to lead a sustainable lifestyle. Expats are giving up careers abroad and returning to the country. People in cities are setting up niche businesses like organic supplies, handicrafts and agri-products for which they are returning to their villages, away from the polluted, crowded cities. It is not yet widespread, but I hope that it will become more popular and make the rural lifestyle with renewable energy and sustainability more attractive to the young generation. Rural areas can be so attractive with

ecotourism, nature, trekking, food and culture festivals etc. – with clean air and water - even for the people from the cities. There should be a movement both ways.

Elvira Greiner: But what will be the job perspectives for young, well educated people in rural India?

Arjuna Srinidhi: With the vastly interconnected world, technology, internet etc, it's going to matter less where you are located. Bangalore, for example, was supposed to be the "IT capital", but now people find that they can have back offices in smaller cities. You don't need to be in a big city. Even in the Himalayas, there are people who have built small offices that for example assist lawyers by converting age-old judgements existing only as hard copies, into soft copies. There are call centers, translation jobs, employment such as blog writers, e-marketing executives etc. So even in those regions, people can easily connect with each other and have white-collar jobs.

Elvira Greiner: Connecting people, sharing responsibility as well as knowledge and experience, joining hands across the globe, that is the need of the hour – and the chance of the hour! And it is much more than creating "islands of survival": It's creating hubs of knowledge and confidence. We can achieve the required sustainable change! Be rest assured: We go ahead together!

About Arjuna:

- From Bangalore
- Position: Senior Researcher on Environmental Science and Climate Change adaptation for Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR) in Pune, India
- First degree as Chemical Engineer, Masters in Environmental Science
- Expert in Climate Change Adaptation, Impact Assessment and Climate Policy
- Has published a book on "Best practice in climate change adaptation India"
- Has participated in the Climate Conferences in Doha, Lima, Paris and Bonn