

**News published in "Times of India" on June 11, 2009.**

**The empowering face of rural development in Tamil Nadu**

In the last few years, rural development in Tamil Nadu has been synonymous with investment in rural infrastructure as well as in human capital. Programmes like the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme in Tamil Nadu have been awarded for three consecutive years for successful implementation. Tamil Nadu's stellar Self Help Group programme has benefited almost five million rural people, as many as 12,618 villages are covered through rural infrastructure development schemes.

'We will live and show the world how to', that perhaps defines the spirit of the Vazhdhu Kaattuvom programme in force across rural Tamil Nadu since November 2005. The remarkable success of this government sponsored initiative speaks for itself, its keyword, empowerment of the poor.

Says Thiru.M.K.Stalin, Honorable Deputy Chief Minister and the driving force behind this programme, "The vision of this Government is to empower the poor and the marginalized, give them a voice and enable them to lead a life of dignity - Vazhdhu Kaattuvom Project has been successful in translating this vision into reality."

The current initiative, in four phases, envelopes 2517 village panchayats, in 70 backward blocks in 15 districts of the State.

The initiative has helped 2000 community organizations for the poor, and promoted 10,161 Self Help Groups (SHGs) among the poor and the vulnerable. Almost 97,000 disabled and physically challenged people have been brought under the umbrella of social benefits, 50% of the aged have been brought under social security net. However, the qualitative impact of the programme goes much beyond the numbers.

A mid-term evaluation has shown that the practice of borrowing from moneylenders at very high interest rate has fallen from 45% to 17% in villages where the Vazhdhu Kaattuvom programme operates. The livelihood promotion activities have led to more than 20% increase in the incomes of 50% of all the households covered. Its job training and skill building initiatives have helped nearly 38,000 youth secure gainful employment.

Dairy farming, tailoring, vermi-compost making, textile and garment making skills, setting up small shops and businesses, training in drivering, are some of

the programme's initiatives that have helped thousands of poor become entrepreneurs. This has raised the overall standard of living for thousands of rural families.

A remarkable innovation in the project has been the transfer of experience gained by the village level workers from one village to another and building training capacity within the districts – this has helped in scaling up the programme in a short span of time.

- Ashok Kumar from Usilampatti could not continue further studies after Class 12, due to poverty. Thanks to a Vazhndhu Kaattuvom scheme, he was trained as a mason and now earns Rs 9000 a month.
- Yet another success story is that of Tamiraiselvi. She and her husband were sent for industrial tailoring training, through their village Kottamangalam's poverty reduction committee. Now their son goes to an English medium school.
- Saranraj, a school dropout has been trained at a Nokia plant, thanks to a Vazhndhu Kaattuvom initiative.

The six year old project has a funding of Rs 717 crore. Following a mid-term evaluation done in February 2009, the programme has received accolades from the World Bank. "The mid term results of the project have been exemplary and have surpassed the targets set by the World Bank which is a strong commentary on the capacity of the project and the State Government to deliver results in the field" says Thiru.K.Ashok Vardhan Shetty, Principal Secretary to Tamil Nadu Government, Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj.

Now the Tamil Nadu government has sought an additional Rs 950 crore from the World Bank to extend the outreach of the programme.