

A team of Farmers' Dialogue International (FDI) at Asia Plateau

Panchgani (India) - 13th to 22nd of January 2018

Convening from Mumbai airport to Panchgani, the FDI group was invited with multiple aims: to take part in the celebrations of the 50 years of Asia Plateau, to have a chance to strengthen the teamwork of FDI, to gain full inspiration from Initiatives of Change (IofC) and to think of the future of our initiative aiming to help farmers in their task of feeding the world.



This occasion has been greatly helped by a generous grant from the Mustard Seed Trust. The Annual General Assembly of FDI was included in the program.

Saturday 13th – First meeting with those in charge of Grampari, the Training Centre for Rural development (attached to Asia Plateau), and there was preparation of the Farm visits taking place the next day.

Sunday 14th (Day 1) - Farm visits and inspiring encounters meeting with the people of a village where Grampari has conducted local and rural development projects. Another farmer from a neighbouring village said that this village has become an example, because of the unity created by 2 groups in the village. They showed us many improvements brought into the village: cleaning rubbish, hygienic sewage disposal system, composting cow dung and other waste products, ... Most of this work has been run by the young people who wanted to improve their village. One of them has started a small organic farm. What was really inspiring is that the development was



not the consequence of big organizational plans, but of a decision to unite, work together and see what the needs were. Grampari has of course played a great part in it, through its training courses, its accompaniment of the process and the continuing care to individuals. Obviously, personal change and commitment have a real effect on rural development!

After lunch were taken to an organic strawberry farm operated by a young farmer and his family. Using integrated crops and watering schemes, his strawberries were very tasty and were sought after in the Panchgani market. Other products grown on the farm included melons, tomatoes and

beans.

Monday 15th Day 2 – Team meetings between Farmers' Dialogue International (FDI) committee members: getting to know each other better and preparation for the FDI AGM. The first point helped us realize the wealth of experiences, commitment and vision among us, but also the number of challenges and hardships encountered and overcome. Each one expressed his/her calling to help farmers, through Farmers' Dialogue!



Tuesday 16th (Day 3) - Dhananjay and Krishna, working for Grampari, took us to Baramati (2 hours drive from Panchgani), where Abhay Shaha, a FDI Committee member, had prepared visits to local farms: a small "zero budget" organic farm growing sugar cane with onions, ginger, tomatoes and then a bigger farm with 100 milking cows and a sugar cane processing unit crushing, cooking and screening the cane juice to make Jaggery, a raw sugar product. We met a very dynamic and innovative lady farmer who has had the conviction to use her agricultural training to help and serve the farmers around her. She helps them in adopting organic farming and has gathered a group of 200 farmers: training, processing and selling farm

products. She also receives young agricultural students as trainees and we could exchange ideas with them. We also met with the officials of a big sugar factory - a cooperative of 14,000 members. We ended the day with tea in the home of Abhay and his wife Sunita. One meaningful conclusion after the day: how can society forget that the food comes from the farmers who work hard, often without much return nor reward, to feed people?



Wednesday 17th (Day 4) - We joined the inauguration of a renewed building for Grampari, a new kitchen and food preparation rooms were declared open. Grampari, the training centre for rural development (Grampari is a contraction of 2 words: Village - Heaven of Angels). Grampari is demonstrating in a very strong way the link between personal change / commitment and rural development: a very inspiring initiative for us in Farmers' Dialogue. We then continued our team meetings, with other participants joining: Veuk Chum, one of the organizers of the Cambodian Dialogue in November 2016 and Shashika Madushan de Silva, from Sri Lanka. After some time in silence, one member of the team expressed the need to transform his attitude to farmers from a business approach to a caring one. Another stressed the fact that farmers should not be pushed into a situation of competing, but of solving the needs for food. We also talked about Farmers' Dialogue with friends from Korea and Japan.

We took part in the main event of the day: the launch of the 50 years celebrations: a very inspiring and moving time, an occasion to remember the pioneers of this centre, to rejoice about the many success stories having taken place in Asia Plateau or from here, but also to think of the future. Change is as needed today in the world as 50 years ago, and each one can decide to be a messenger of change, through one's own change and dedication to the world. For Phil who in 1966, had seen the bare ground where the accommodation buildings, theatre and dining room now stand, Asia Plateau is a living testimonial to the inspiration and foresight of the people who had the vision of a complex that has had a major and positive contribution to Indian society.



Thursday 18th (Day 5) – An inspiring introduction to the Quiet Time, one of the basic elements of IofC, was followed by a chance for everyone to experiment it before breakfast. Then, we had a number of presentations of what Asia Plateau has stimulated in the country, including Grampari. We heard very inspiring initiatives and real reasons for hope, rooted in the dynamics of personal change. We have had a lively meal with the Korean delegation, to discuss further about their proposal to hold an international Farmers' Dialogue next October. A time of silence at the end of the meal led to a unanimous support for the idea. This is just one of the projects that may crystallize in the course of the next days, with the aim to help farmers in their mission, confronting so many challenges: lack of support from authorities, climate change, economical pressures, suicide rate, low returns for their produce, Of course, we cannot solve everything, but we can help farmers to keep hope and develop solutions, through exchanges, sharing of experiences and care to each other.

Friday 19th and Saturday 20th (Days 6 and 7) - Full days and thought-provoking sessions and exchanges! After having celebrated the last 50 years, the session is searching for the challenges ahead for the IofC family and Asia Plateau's role. Rajmohan Gandhi, one of the main initiators, Russi Lalla, R.D. Mathur and David Young were also part of Asia Plateau, called for effort and initiatives to create a "humane society", free of violence and pressure, where care, empathy and justice will be the main expressions of relations between people. The FDI group continued to meet and search for the future initiatives: Kenya and DR Congo, Caux Dialogue on Land and Security, Korea, Cameroun, South Sudan, developments in Nigeria... They were all endorsed in the AGM held Saturday afternoon. New members were elected in the Committee, in order to consolidate the active and dynamic participation in our FD work. We received a message from a Canadian farmer who was in Asia Plateau 50 years ago at the opening of the centre. Today, with our group present, it could be a new chapter opening for FDI in its efforts to help farmers to answer today's needs: food, protection of the environment (air, water, soil), hope and trust that they can work and get appreciation and fair return.



Sunday 21st and Monday 22nd Days 8 and 9: Departure Days from Panchgani. We are all extremely grateful for this time in Asia Plateau. It enabled us to reflect together, to create a stronger team and find the inspiration in the IofC spirit. We return home, with a sense of common calling to develop Farmers' Dialogue! There are many possibilities, with a capable team around the world to take on the tasks ahead, and of course, a lot of needs as well. We are committed to respond to the challenges as they arise!

Participants of the FDI Group: Pierre Lokeka (DR Congo) - Rosemary Namatsi (Kenya) - Milton Melingasuk (South Sudan) - Virak Dok & Chum Veuk (Cambodia) - Biplab Mahato and Abhay Shaha (India) - Phil Jefferys (Australia) Yeonyuk Jeong and Dongyeol Lee (Korea) - Jean-Pierre Emeriau and Claude Bourdin (France)

Farmers' Dialogue

