Introduction

This was the second year that Foodlink did educational projects in schools with funding from SAIIER. The project implemented by Priya of Buddha Garden and teachers from respective schools has been quite successful in promoting awareness among school children about growing local food. We realized that having committed teachers as resource people in the schools is key to ensuring successful implementation of the project. In each school the practical work was organised by Priya with the help of Rajan from Buddha Garden. Others involved in the project included Rajan and Ravikrishna from Udavi School, and Mahavir and Honor from Deepanam School. These schools that we have worked with are interested in continuing such projects.

Originally three Auroville schools – Deepanam, New Era Secondary School (NESS), and Udavi School – were going to be involved in this project. It was planned to set up a range of different activities in each school that would help students learn about practical food growing and the wider issues related to food security. The ‘earth-to-eating’ website created by Priya two years ago would be reorganised so that the information and resources from this project (books, posters and recipes) would be made available to anyone interested in setting up similar projects. Subsequently NESS school dropped out because they did not have the resources necessary within the school for this extra activity. This report therefore describes what happened in Deepanam and Udavi School, and the reorganisation of the website.

The overall aim of the project was to educate children in organic agriculture issues by setting up practical growing activities in the school. Objectives were to:

1. Help children understand where their food comes from and the resources (soil, water, plants, animals, energy, human activity) needed to grow the food and get it onto the plate.
2. Help children to understand about food security and helping to ensure their own future food security by providing them with knowledge and skills to grow their own food.
3. Reorganise the ‘earth-to-eating’ website to share and spread the word about the projects and make available resources – books, posters and recipes – to educators elsewhere interested in setting up similar projects.

Udavi School

This was our second project at Udavi School and the work we carried out built on the work that we completed last year. At that time we set up two vegetable beds, and this year we set up two more in the same location. We worked with the same group of children that we had worked with at the end of last year. As we made these new beds, it was very evident how well the students had learnt the practical skills.

There were some challenges with working with this group. A lot of the time they seemed to be very unfocused and unwilling to work together unless they were in particular friendship groups. Relations between boys and girls were difficult and they often refused to work with each other. Presumably this had something to do with their age: 12-13 years old. Despite the seeming chaos of some of the lessons, by the end of every class it was clear that they had carried out the needed work. Gratifyingly their work was rewarded with many more vegetables grown than last year (ladies finger, beans, maize, brinjal, tomatoes, and chilli), a result not only of their work but also the soil improvements that had built up in the soil since last year.

It was noticeable for some of these students the food growing session was perceived as a time when they didn’t have to focus or bother about learning anything. The students were very unwilling to do anything outside the session such as completing worksheets. This improved when it was
decided to organise the session as an ordinary class and to include a number of other activities that were related to the gardening work. One of the most popular activities was to make mandalas on the soil using the weeds that they had taken from the beds. They continued to do this spontaneously for many weeks after the first time, displaying a lot original ideas in the process.

Half way through the year we had another group of students who were more self-determined than the first group. Perhaps because they were a bit older: 13-14 years. They soon formed themselves into four stable groups, each one being responsible for one of the beds. Activities expanded to growing seedlings from seed (seedlings had earlier always come from Buddha Garden) and building climbing frames for the first tomato plants.

Towards the end of the year, Ravikrishna from Udavi School joined the team and we decided to set up a permanent garden. This is something we had often thought about doing, but it is only possible if someone from the school is willing to take responsibility for it. With the help of the students we measured the area and plan to set up at least eight vegetable beds and plant a fruit orchard. As well as the weekly food growing session we plan to have an after-school activity once a week.

Deepanam School

At Deepanam School a group of students told us that they would like to learn more about rice growing. We developed a project that consisted of:

- Weekly classes with a number of sessions about food growing in general and rice/cereal growing in Auroville.
- Two visits to Annapurna farm to watch rice planting and rice harvesting.
- Growing a small patch of rice and a small patch of kambu in the school garden to compare how they grow.

A range of material was created for the classroom work which included different kinds of worksheets as well as posters and information sheets which will eventually be transformed into a book.

The two trips to Annapurna were thoroughly enjoyed and apparently students still talk about these visits. During the first trip they watched rice planting and learnt about how the cow herd was integrated into the rice growing process. During the second they watched rice harvesting and some post harvesting processes. They also learned how the failed monsoon and subsequent unseasonal rain impacted the rice harvesting process.

Based on this experience, for the next year we plan to focus more on practical work. For ten weeks a small group of students will come to Buddha Garden and join in with the early morning farm work. This will give them a structured opportunity to learn practically how to grow food on a working organic farm. We will repeat the two trips to Annapurna farm to watch the planting and harvesting. Students will be encouraged to make their own examples of what they have learnt using writing, posters or digital media like videos and animations. This will be organised by Mahavir at Deepanam in separate classroom sessions.

‘Earth-to-eating’ website

This website, set up two years ago by Priya, is about “all things related to growing, eating and cooking local food”. There is a downloadable book and poster which shows what things are available in different seasons as well as a range of recipes. It was decided to reorganise the website to include a range of educational material and to give it a more universal appeal in India and beyond. Priya has created a number of educational resources based on the material that she has used in the above teaching projects. This includes a book for students about how to grow food, and a number of posters about cereal growing and other relevant topics. These are in the process of being edited and will be uploaded to the website before the new school year starts.