

A PERSONAL VIEW OF WHERE WE'VE COME AFTER ONE YEAR WITH PROJET FIR (FRANCO-INDIAN RECONSTRUCTION PROJECT)

By Shyama V. Ramani
 Founder and Coordinator of Project FIR
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Dear Friends,

One year back on the 27th of April 2005, I wrote an intensely personal letter to many friends in India, in an attempt to gather support for the Franco-Indian Reconstruction Project FIR that I had initiated. I blush to think of it now and I am very thankful to my siblings and parents for not having disowned me immediately afterwards (I wasn't worried about my husband...wives are too indispensable for cooking, cleaning, childminding, entertaining, shopping!!) Well, the project has come a very long way since then and though it's been a roller-coaster ride, we've landed safely and apart from some hitches, the whole operation has been conducted in an ambience of camaraderie and fun.

Before explaining further, I would first like to thank everyone who has encouraged me in any way and every way. I couldn't have made it here without your moral support!!! I would especially like to thank my parents, and the following relatives and friends on the Indian side who've made this happen (given in alphabetical order): Gita Balakrishnan, Nikhil Khot, M.P. Krishnan, Neela Laxinaryanan, Usha Raja, Aniruddho Sanyal, Lalitha Shankar, Nupur Shankar, Raji Srikant, Vijayanthi Venkataraman and Sangeeta Venkatesh. I would also like to thank the members of the Rotary club in Chennai, Pondicherry and Tiruchirapalli, who will be helping the French students and artistes who will be visiting India in the context of the project.

How have the objectives of the project evolved over the year?

When I started this project I wanted to reconstruct a village or a couple of villages, without having the slightest clue about the costs or how I would be covering them. Fortunately, the Government of India resolved this problem for me by insisting that all reconstruction projects had to be of a minimum of 80 lakhs rupees (approx. 160,000 \$) which I didn't have. **I also discovered what at that time seemed to be embarrassing: the Tsunami hadn't introduced any new problems; it had just made the old ones that existed before even worse. And it wasn't clear if all the flurry of reconstruction work was going to touch the heart of the old problems.**

So I started announcing that the project would initiate actions that contribute to "sustainable development". Now, this must be among the catchiest phrases of today. It is being used so widely that it could mean a lot of different things to different people in different contexts. So how is one to choose? Thankfully, I was introduced by a colleague to the millennium project. And I discovered a simple set of goals which I decided to take as the indicators of sustainable development in the case of our project. These are 8 simple goals enunciated by the UN in 1990, in terms of income security, basic sanitation and health standards, gender equality and security for children. Take a look: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

These indicators are very useful because they give us a yardstick in terms of selection of projects. When someone makes a proposal, then we can check, how many of the millennium goals does this project achieve? How can it be formulated to get the maximum synergy between the different kinds of efforts needed to achieve the different goals?

Now my ambitious idea is that even though as an individual I am unable to bring about even the most basic changes in my own life (ex. reduce my tummy, run for more than 3 minutes or sit down and write that best seller!!), **I can with your help, contribute significantly to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals in three villages: the dalit zones of PMC and CMC and the village of Kameshwaram.**

Introducing the game of FIR and figuring out the players and how they tick....

A game is any situation where what turns out in the end, depends on what everybody involved does, rather than depending on the action of just one person (or one group or one organization). Now, in project FIR, we have initiated a game and the end result is going to depend on what each party does. So who's playing this anyway?

(I am sorry to have to explain things to you this way, but this is just too much of a temptation for me being fond of game theory!!)

The stake holders, that means you and me.....

First, there's you (and me) the donors: As the donors we play a double edged role. We don't control much and yet the whole project would fall without us. What is the payoff for the donors? It's the good feeling that they have contributed to making the world a better and cleaner place and therefore a safer place for our children. Hopefully, you will also get a better understanding of the development process in marginalized zones through my news letters. **But the biggest advantage from participating in a project like this, for you as donors, is that you know what's happening and how your money's being used.** The project is definitely not a black box like the big national and international charities. That's because I'm here as a coordinator to interact with all parties including donors. And, comments from donors have also helped me greatly.

Then there's me as the coordinator: What am I doing? Well, it is mainly administration and management and fund raising, which amounts to five major activities:

- writing zillions of emails every week (including to all of you from time to time);
- speaking in public or just about to anyone who's willing to listen on this project;
- managing a variety of (unpaid) volunteers by finding out what they like to do and seeing how their investment in the project can promote their life goals (in France, and generally speaking in the West, it's a part of the local culture to do some volunteer work every month and so I'm having help; however, I desperately seek more volunteers on the Indian side....).
- More recently, writing out grant applications with French volunteers for the project.
- Evolving and constructing a strategy for the project. Here, I must bring to your notice two of our constraints as a donor group, which I am trying to manage in the interests of our project:

We are in competition with our other donor groups to help the villagers: Don't think we're the only ones wanting to do good to the villagers. Our competitors here are political parties, religious groups, NGOs, self-styled do-gooders, clubs.....and you will understand by the end of the letter, that we are certainly not the most attractive donor group for the villagers. Our representatives with the villagers are in turn the NGOs that we are working with.

We are in competition with our other financial agencies for the services of the NGOs: As a business opportunity, we are not the most attractive clients for our NGO friends. Since, we are working with NGOs with a good track record, we are competing with established with national and international donor agencies for their services.

For both reasons, it is necessary for me to communicate well with our NGO collaborators so that the project goes where we want it to go in an ambience of trust and friendship.

What have I got from having initiated this game? What are my payoffs? First, I got this “indecible good feeling” from reaching out to help the needy, in addition to fulfilling my duties to the family and professional set-up. Second, I got small time glory, in the way of thank you's from people I didn't know and a terrific dose of tolerance from my family for my blaring shortcomings and complete engagement in the project. Even my most critical aunt had a good word to say about me when I visited her and I consider this as one of my lifetime achievements!!!! Third, I've really made a lot of new friends and renewed contact with so many old ones and that's really been a lot of fun. Fourth, in order to be more effective, I have made the question of “*how to attain the millennium goals in marginalized and isolated zones through collective actions*”, as one of my topics of research and I find that there's a lot of scope for getting good work done on this issue and so it's exciting intellectually as well. **I would be happy to share ideas on this project with anyone who's interested.**

But, there has been a definite cost paid also, by myself and the family. The kids of course were the first to protest. They got tired of hearing about the project or having me work on it and told me so very frankly. Then, my mother-in-law began to find television documentaries on mummification methods in ancient Egypt more interesting than hearing me. The final straw came, when my husband, a quiet and reserved engineer, whose greatest virtue is his near-infinite capacity to endure my prattle, began to request: “Talk about anything Shyama, but not project FIR”. Then finally it got to me too. The sheer boredom and time consumed in administering and managing the different parties and raising funds began to bother me. I also began to worry as my sisters, mother, and girl friends had forewarned me: was I starting to neglect my own family? or stretching myself too thin? And of course, “leaving the project” was not an action in my strategy space. So now that the initial big investment has been made, I am managing my time better. So the cost for me is the strain of having to practise strict discipline and stick to my time allocations, so that I have time for myself and I don't neglect my duties to my family and friends (though I must confess that my sisters are complaining that my letters are still too boring and only full of instructions for them for project FIR!!!)

Second, there are the NGOs....They come in a lot of varieties. Foreign, Indian, religious based, spirituality based, international organization based and political party

based...by base I mean that's where they get their money from. NGOs also seem to be an "in-thing" among academics today. While social science departments do not create start-ups in India, a number of them run NGOs, providing complementary consultancy fees to academics. An NGO basically runs like a consultancy company and there is an enormous heterogeneity among the NGOs in terms of their internal structures, mode of governance, pay scales, fees charges and fund base. There are very rich NGOs and there are very poor NGOs. In short, it's a wild world out there, and there is the good, the bad and the very ugly. Let me now give you the good news: we're with some nice and cute NGOs.

So we have 3 NGOs who are putting the money raised in this project into use. The first is SCOPE which specializes in eco-sanitary low cost toilets. It has been building these toilets and achieving other developmental goals in the framework of a number of contracts from national and international agencies (ex. CARE (US), World Bank (US), Water aid (India), DFID (UK), Wastewise (Netherlands)). The second is Auro-Annam, located in the international eco-friendly-village Auroville, whose creation and functioning is based on the spiritual teachings of Shri Aurobindo and the Mother. Auro-Annam runs classes on organic farming and the use of effective micro-organisms and given the extensive internal and international network of Auroville, they are effective players in the market for grants. Third, there is FEED, the Indian subsidiary of the French Association INDES, supported by one of the major charity NGOs of France, called Secours Populaires, which in turn is the charity-child of the French communist party. FEED has distinguished itself in fighting against child labour in the dalit zones of PMC and CMC near Pondicherry.

Why am I telling you all this? Just so that you get the point that as an individual supported by a group of individual, we are very small fry clients for these NGOs. This also means that it was very important to make sure that we vibe, that there weren't major differences in views, that they willing to accept my interference and requests and experiments. Because money is not the factor by which I can control or influence the manner in which this project will be implemented. The money involved is too small. It is just good will and friendship and trust. **Why are they working with us?** Because we present another business opportunity for them to put into practise their competencies, a lot more people will get to know about their work and of course, because of my great smile!!

What impressed me about the NGOs that we are working with is that not only do they have a good track record, but also the following:

- They are on the field. These chaps really go to the isolated and marginalized zones. This was important for me, because many of the NGO people I had talked with earlier, sit in an office and send a peon equivalent to the zone, because it's too hot to leave their air-conditioned rooms or too dangerous to go to these areas. Our Ngo chaps are out in the field and they know first hand the people they want to help. I've been there with them and as we all know you can't fake relationships.
- The margins they ask for their own services on top of the project cost are very low (unlike some of the others that were proposed to me during my NGO-scouting period).
- They have a light shining in their eyes and enthusiasm and hope for rural development. This point has really struck me. When I come to India, of course I first yak-yak with my family and friends. And there is the usual round of

complaints about India, which I complement a 100% with complaints about France and the sorrows of being a foreign professional here (those riots and strikes in France weren't a joke). Then I set out to meet these NGOs and they zap me with their enthusiasm for the poor in India, how things are moving, all the good things that are happening, the progress made and the light in the people's eyes and smiles. I come back humbled and with a strong resolution never to complain about anything or anyone, which of course sort of lasts a couple of weeks... ..

Third, the beneficiaries, that means the villagers.....

Imagine yourself in their place.

What would you want most in the world? **First**, You would want **more money** rather than anything else in the world. Any economics student learns in the first year, that the best way to help out people is to give them money. For instance, if you gave someone pizza, while he preferred Idli and sambar, his utility would not be as high, as when you gave him money and he could do whatever he wanted with it.

Second, you would want **a stable source of money (=a job) and face less risk**. So they want a job that gives them stable money.

Third, with television, villagers have a great awareness of the outside world, and by the same logic, of what they don't have. The world seems very unfair (and of course that's true), the dice seems totally loaded against them, improvement seems very uncertain so much so that the villagers **don't have much incentive to invest in projects that do not yield immediate returns**. For instance, why clean up? So cleaning up, improves health, decreases sick leave, increases income....but all these arguments are so convoluted and futuristic that they would rather forget it and switch on the TV so as to not miss the next sitcom.

Fourth, they have a choice between various donor agencies and it is in their interests to choose the donor agency that gives them the least disutility. There is a lot of competition out there to aid the poor. Again, we are certainly not the most attractive option for the villagers. First, there are various political parties, who are willing to give free whiskey, put up roads, give shoes, uniforms etc. And it's all free for the poor, in return for the vote. Second, there are a number of religious groups. Especially around cosmopolitan towns like Pondicherry, there are a variety of church groups of different congregations, mainly financed by funds from abroad. If one goes to their prayer meetings, one is assured of a minimal financial net. So why not? Third, there are NGOs and various self-styled-do-gooders. Many of them offer aid to the villagers on a pure charity basis. Just attend the school, we'll give you food. Do you need a house? We'll build it for you. You need garbage cans....let us give these to you, of course it's free...you don't have to do anything except use it. **Then, how do we compete with other do-gooders to get the attention of the villagers?**

Finally, you wouldn't want anybody interfering with your life, your cultural norms (ex. dowry, blowing up money on festivals, keeping women indoors), your sanitary and

hygiene practises or your drinking habits. And of course, that's absolutely normal. How would you like it if someone told you to live differently?

The last player: Nature or the context or the things you can't change for a long time.... A good chunk of people we are helping live at the precipice of absolute poverty. Incomes of most families are not only low but also very variable. In these villages, permanent infrastructures for drinking water and sanitation as well as energy and transport networks are minimal. On top of that given the history of Tamil Nadu, even within a small geographical zone, the people are separated spatially in distinct streets according to caste. The villagers also told me that even among the fishermen and dalits there are lot of sub-castes and they don't mix.

Being huddled together has its advantages and problems. There is a sense of social security and at the same time there is an intense social pressure on each family to maintain its social position. That means women (who are far more status-conscious than men) scrape, save or borrow to spend *like the neighbours* on temple festivals and weddings and dowries. Cultural norms also impede females from being educated as much as the males. They are also discouraged from seeking job opportunities that could take them outside of their close knit community. In short, it's simply the opposite of the way we (now) encourage girls in big cities all over the world to become self-reliant.

Two businesses that however thrive in these marginalized zones are: alcohol shops and money lending. The thriving profit of the alcohol stores is a good indicator of the resources which if diverted could surely yield higher long term benefits. Money lenders must be making a pretty pie too. They charge from 5% to 15% per month on petty loans. Any biotech or software start-up in India would simply die under such harsh interest rates.

<p>The equilibrium of the first round of the game....or what we got done the first year....</p>
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In the context of the above game, the end results of the first year of reconstruction effort are as follows:

For the Reconstruction

- *Developmental projects have been identified and ranked for Kameshwaram.*
- *A fish market place has been built in Kameshwaram. Reciprocally, the villagers put up the roof of the fish market place through own funds, agreed to maintain it for 5 years and engaged a woman of little means to clean up. This has resulted in income and employment augmentation in the village.*
- *The young women of Kameshwaram were taken to a university in Trichy and collaboration has been initiated with Bharati Dasan University to explore livelihood options for the women of Kameshwaram.*
- *Plans are finalized for an exposure trip of farmers and fishermen of Kameshwaram to make them aware of ways in which their productivity can be increased. They will be carried out in the months of May and June.*
- *Very slow progress on project formulation for PMC and CMC due to lack of convergence of ideas. Now plans initiated for the building of toilets.*

- *FIR team has formulated and submitted a project proposal to a French funding agency for a solar fish drier for Kameshwaram.*
- *FIR team will be formulating and submitting several project proposals to funding agencies in Europe for toilet construction in Kameshwaram, PMC et CMC.*

Academic missions associated with FIR

- *An academic project supported by the French ministry of External Affairs and the Region of the Rhone-Alps has been initiated. An extension of the project is being worked upon. The coordinator from the Indian side will be Dr. Byasdeb Dasgupta (Kalyan University, Calcutta).*
- *Two Indian researchers, Dr. Vivekananda Mukherjee (Jadhavpur University) and Dr. Sugata Marjit (Centre for Social Sciences Research, Calcutta) will be visiting France to work on the research project with us.*
- *Three Masters dissertations will be launched in the Department of Women's Studies, Bharati Dasan University, Tiruchirapalli, under the supervision of Dr. Mani Mekalai.*
- *A Ph.D. has been launched in the Department of Social Sciences, Bharati Dasan University, Tiruchirapalli under the supervision of Dr. V. Sethuramanlingam.*
- *Grants (or self-finance) have been obtained for four French students to conduct research on the villages under consideration.*

Cultural Missions associated with FIR

- *An amateur French pop-soft-rock group is to visit India in late 2006 or early 2007. The idea is to give concerts in major Indian cities. The spectators will give Rs 100 as entry ticket cum participation in project FIR. We are now looking for sponsors.*
- *The Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad, the Alliance Francaise in Bangalore and in Pondicherry have agreed in principle to organize the programs.*
- *We are approaching the Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi and the Loyola College in Chennai for concerts in these cities.*
- *The dossier for the regional choir (Rhone-Alpes) for a visit to India is also ready. We are again looking for sponsors.*
- *From India, the dossier for Professor Sugata Marjit, also an excellent musician of the first rank is ready. We are looking for sponsors to bring his accompanists to France. There is also a fellowship available for his sojourn from the academic side.*
- *The French Association, Triveni, under the really dedicated and devoted leadership of Mr. Mohan of the Indian embassy is arranging for 2 concerts in France featuring Indian artistes in 2006 and 2007. The ticketing revenue will be shared 50-50 between artistes and project FIR.*

Hey, that's not so bad..... a lot of things have happened.....

And what about the future? What's going to be the equilibrium of the second, third and fourth rounds?

I see two strategic options:

The low risk-low effort option: Identify projects with the villagers (ex. toilets). Get the money. Give it to the NGOs. Let them do their job, as they've been doing in other places so well. And leave structures behind with the logo of Association Un-Ami on it. Everyone can be happy. But if you're a villager....would it make you a more intelligent

person? Would it teach you a lot? Would it make you more dynamic and take initiatives? Would it give you incentives to launch new projects and experiment?

The high risk-high effort option: Identify projects that give immediate utility. Discuss it with the villagers to make them understand that:

- We are not pursuing the “pure charity” route. We don’t believe that’s the best way to make a population dynamic and take initiatives.
- We are not pursuing “a simple financial participation route” whereby a project is initiated with a minor participation from the beneficiaries. **For me, financial participation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to make a population invest in long term goals.** It’s a necessary condition because it ensures that the structure being offered is useful and will be used, because the beneficiary will need to amortize his/her investment. Otherwise we might be offering them an inappropriate gift. Don’t we accept all presents, and then exchange or get rid of the ones that we don’t like? Therefore, unless financial participation is imposed, a project may be yet another undesired gift and add to the mounds of garbage.
- We want to pursue the “immediate-offer-of-benefit-against-effort-in-long-term development” route. This involves **discussing with the villagers so that clear tradeoffs are identified between the short term benefits given by any of our actions and the investment of the beneficiaries in attaining one of the millennium goals, which may yield returns only after a few years.** Let me give you an example. Suppose we build toilets for them. We can use the process of financing the construction of private toilets as an instrument to attain other developmental goals like better sanitary conditions by requesting the villagers that in return they introduce a waste management program in the village.
- **This demands more efforts on the part of all the actors concerned:**
 - It’s a lot more effort for the villagers. In addition, to the sheer disutility of investment effort in a long term development project, they might feel that such moral pressure is not appropriate. They might feel that we are stepping beyond the line of interference. Then we might lose out to the other sources of aid that are being offered to them, and which come with much less demands on the villagers.
 - It’s a lot more work for the NGO’s because in addition to their jobs, (ex. build the toilets) they have to discuss at length many times, to convince the villagers of this type of exchange. It’s a very delicate process to make the villagers feel absolutely comfortable and yet get them to agree to this principle. And for them also, time is money. So the opportunity cost of spending time on negotiation with the villagers and winning their trust can be quite high for NGOs.
 - It’s a lot more effort for the coordinator too. Instead of just saying to the donors, “we’re going to help build a 100 toilets and I need x Rs. for this”, the coordinator has to convince all parties to take the “high-risk-high-effort option” and discuss it through without spoiling the relations of trust and friendship that have been established. For the coordinator, time spent on project FIR, is time

lost out with the family, sleep or relaxation, and so her energy left to invest on other aspects of her professional and personal life might suffer!!! (and here I'm not even mentioning moods !!)

Guess which one I want to take? Of course, the high risk option. Why? Because you see, it's high risk or low risk only when you're thinking in terms of the short run. Haven't you ever been told (or haven't you ever told someone?) "Don't give up, you'll get what you want sooner or later if you keep on trying!" That's the same with the project. Our choice will depend on how impatient we are to get results and how much it's going to cost us to sit it out and wait. As I see it, it's worth the cost of the wait. **So going on the assumption, that it's a high risk only in the short run, that eventually, in the long run, by just hanging in there, we will get the high returns, I want to go for the high-risk, high-effort, high-long term returns option.** The future will tell if I'm right to do this or not. In the mean time, you are most welcome to give your opinions.

Last, but not least, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the teams of the three NGOs that we are working with: SCOPE, AuroAnnam and FEED, for making our dreams come true. On behalf of all donors, I would also like to give my hearty congratulations to Mr.Subburaman for his latest award in March 2006 (and he has won many others!!) : The Nirmal Gram Puraskar in recognition of his path breaking work on the diffusion of eco-sanitary toilets in rural areas, a type of toilet that is affordable to most of the poor, conserves water and turns solid waste into compost.(for details see website).



On the photo (from left to right) :

- Mr. Subburaman (SCOPE, Managing Trustee),
- Dr. Abdul Kalam (President of India),
- Dr. Raghuvansh Prasad Singh (Minister of Rural Development),
- Mr. A. Narendra (Minister of State for Rural Development),
- Mrs. Rajeswari Subburaman.

With Best wishes to one and all and heart felt thanks for joining this collective effort to make a real change in three villages,

Shyama V. Ramani (shyama_ramani@yahoo.com)

Coordinator Project FIR / A project of Association Un-Ami
<http://www.project-fir-tsunami.org/>