

VILLAGE MATTERS



Action Village India Spring Newsletter

Sad News



Alan Leather
1942-2019

Dear Friends and Supporters,

We are very, very sad to be sharing with you that our great friend and a supporter of Action Village India and many community organisations and movements across India and the world has died. Alan was our cherished Chair of trustees from 2016-2018 and an AVI trustee since 2008.

Alan was at the heart of our joint Partners Forum in Hazaribag, Jharkhand just 12 months ago. For him it was a return to Jharkhand and Bihar where nearly fifty years ago he had begun his lifelong commitment to working for more just, equal and fulfilling lives for all.

Alan's warm smile and sparkle in his eyes were an expression of his inspiring, positive, humanity that filled his way of being with and amongst people. This twinned with his lifelong dedication to enabling social and economic justice has led to him touching, changing and even transforming the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in India and across the world.

We will all feel the continuing friendship, warmth and inspiration from Alan in our lives and common work for a more just, equal and inclusive world. Thank you Alan.

On behalf of Action Village India, we have shared our empathy, sympathy and solidarity with Alan's family. We have also shared the sad news with partners in India. We will be bringing together messages, reflections and photos we receive and sharing them with Alan's family in due course. If you would like to include any messages please do [email us](#). If you would like to make a donation to AVI in memory of Alan we will also pass this information to his children.

Alan's family are planning a memorial service on **Saturday 15th June** in London. If you would like to email your RSVP to Action Village India we'll pass it on (this will help the family with the planning of the event).

Moving on from AVI

Anna Griffiths, Executive Director



It is with mixed feelings that I write to let you know that, at the end of March, I will be stepping back from my current role at AVI. This has been a hard decision to take but, after three years, I feel I have led the organisation through an important phase, as Ivan Nutbrown stepped down, and that there is much in place which will stand the organisation in good stead moving forwards. Not least of course we have a great staff team and I am confident that as Esther and Aneeta move into expanded staff roles in April, that, with the support of our excellent trustees, the organisation will continue to be of great benefit to our partners in India.

As we approach the end of the financial year, it has been a time to look back at 2018-19 and realise the successes we have encountered as well as lessons learnt. We have succeeded in raising funds from both loyal AVI funders and also new trusts and foundations and businesses. This gives us reassurance that whilst development funding for India is no longer on the agenda for the UK government, there are many individuals and bodies who remain passionate about continuing to support those in India left behind by the country's economic development.

In this vein, our work is as important as ever. It has been an absolute highlight of my time at AVI, visiting our partners in India and witnessing the impact of their work at the grassroots. Coming together with our partners and other supporters for the Forum in India last March, it was vividly evident what a remarkable organisation AVI is. I can honestly say that, in my twenty four years working in charity and international development, AVI stands out for its deep, authentic relationships with its partners, built on mutual friendship, trust and respect. It is this integrity that also reaches far into our community here in the UK. It has been a privilege to connect with so many of you over the last three years and I want to thank you, on behalf of everyone at AVI, for your time, energy and commitment.

This of course, won't be the end of my relationship with AVI - I will be continuing to work into the summer on our new website launch - watch this space! I will, of course, also continue to follow news, offer support and attend events and I will remain forever passionate about development work in India.

I look forward to staying in touch.
Yours truly, Anna Griffiths

Support the Action Village India Runner!

London Marathon 2019

Sunday 28th April



Action Village India are pleased to announce that we have a charity place in the 2019 London Marathon! Our amazing runner, Krishna, is raising money and awareness for our work...as well as his pulse (marathon training is as hard as fundraising).

We hope you'll support Krishna and Action Village India by sponsoring him via this [link](#).

The money raised by sponsoring Krishna will go towards the AVI Spring Appeal.

We will be launching our Spring Appeal next month for Land Rights and Livelihoods in Chilika Lake, Orissa. This project run by Regional Centre for Development Cooperation (RCDC) in collaboration with Gopinath Juvak Sangha (GJS) aims to reduce rural poverty and landlessness of 1000 families from fishing communities in 30 villages in and around the Chilika lake of Odisha.

Opportunity to Volunteer for AVI

Action Village India is looking for volunteers to work on the AVI information desk at WOMAD Festival 2019. If you're interested in this please [get in touch](#).



Esther's India Update

This year I had the pleasure, once again, of visiting all of our partners in India and to see first-hand the great work they are doing, as well as hearing the experiences of our beneficiaries.

It has been a very exciting project year for AVI with the start of three new projects:

1. Organic Farming (KGSN) project which aims to improve the health and economic situation of below-poverty families in the rural area of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala by creating an organic farming company that enables the farmers to produce, market and certify their own produce of organic fruit and vegetables in a sustainable way.
2. Securing land rights and livelihoods for fisherfolk, Chilika lake, Orissa (RCDC), which aims to reduce poverty of the fisherfolk communities around Chilika lake through alternative livelihood programmes and the sustainable management of natural resources.
3. Dairy-based Livelihoods project (ASSEFA) – which aims to improve the quality of milk and thus increase the income of small dairy producers and prevent adulteration of milk by introducing technology which determines weight, fat, SNF content and price for individually supplied milk.

Besides the great steps our partners have taken this year, it has also been a difficult year for two partners especially, who were affected by natural disasters due to global warming, which are becoming more apparent every year. Whereas India witnessed 32 natural disasters in the 1960s, this has increased to 110 in the current decade. This year, ASSEFA was affected by Cyclone Gaja and Ekta Parishad and KGSN were affected by the floods in Kerala. In any natural calamity on a scale like the flood and the cyclone, it is the poorest and weakest who are most affected.

During my trip I got to see some of the places which were highly affected by the floods and meet some of the people in this area. Talking to the people here, you could still see the fear in their eyes and the fear of something like this happening again. I was struck by the story of a group of women, who told me that they were stuck in one of the few multi story buildings in their village for 3 days before they were rescued. They didn't have water or food, and saw many of their livestock, their income, die in front of their eyes. At the moment, there is still a lot of work going on to rebuild the lives of people affected by the floods but although government programmes are in place, the work of NGOs who ensure that everybody gets reached is so important and truly shows the value of our partners.

Besides visiting the new projects and the disaster-affected areas, I went back to see the girls' education project and our community action project in Jharkhand and Bihar, and I also went back to meet the beneficiaries of the Disability project by CRUSADE in Tamil Nadu. It was definitely heart-warming to hear how these small-scale projects have really made a change to people's lives. One of them is Bhuvaneshwari.

Case-Study: A small house – for my mother

Physical bruises may take time to heal, but insults inflicted rarely disappear. Bhuvaneshwari is petite and exudes warmth. This 19-year old is soft-spoken and is always seen covering her left hand with a towel. She is so conscious that she will pull the towel even if it accidentally moves. Ridiculed in school for her polio-affected leg and hand has left bitter memories in Bhuvaneshwari. “It’s painful; the memories still hurt me – in school everybody avoided me. I mustered courage and completed my 12th standard”, says Bhuvaneshwari overcome with emotion. “She had a high fever when she was eight months, and after that her leg and hand became stiff,” explains her mother. Though Bhuvaneshwari had undergone a surgery, there was no recovery or progress.

With CRUSADE’s help, she receives the monthly allowance of Rs.1000, which is of crucial benefit to this low-income family. With a disability certificate in hand, Bhuvaneshwari can now avail other government benefits as and when they are released. She has recently come out of her shell and found a job as a salesperson in a textile shop. Working has increased her confidence, and she hopes to move progressively from now on. Marriage is not on the cards for me - says this young lady. Her eyes glint with pride every time she speaks about her mother. “My dream is to build a small house for my mother where both of us can go to the terrace, look at the sky in the night and find peace”, says Bhuvaneshwari.



Update on Cyclone Gaja

Account of visit to Alangudi Block of Pudukottai District by Tony Mortlock and Susan Tuckey on Tuesday 12th February 2019

The 16th November 2018 will long be regarded by the population of Alangudi Block as a most inauspicious day, as that was when the area was devastated by the Cyclone Gaja. Fortunately, due to the Government early warning system, only 64 human lives were lost although the animal deaths were countless, and ruin caused to the financial situation of the whole area.

As there had been no exposure in the Western media to this disaster we decided to include a visit to the area as part of a visit to Tamil Nadu which we had already planned.

The plan had been to meet with Loganathan and Kumar at Thanjavur and to visit the area affected by Cyclone Gaja. Sadly Loganathan was unwell and so did not accompany us. Kumar arrived as planned, having that morning come by train from Chennai, following meetings there the previous day. An ASSEFA Jeep had come from Madurai to take us to the Alangudi area which is about 40 kms to the South.

As we were driven towards the area affected by the cyclone we noticed an increasing number of houses, the thatched roofs of which were covered with plastic sheeting. A few coconut palms still standing had no foliage left on them. The roads were clear of fallen trees or branches. We were told that the Government had acted swiftly in employing all the local manpower (thereby enabling it immediately to earn a wage) to clear away the trees and disentangle the electric cables from them and from the fallen and broken electric poles. This work had to be carried out manually as it had not been possible to use machinery until some clearance had been completed.

As we came closer to Pudukottai, we were met by Mr Thiyagarajan, the ASSEFA Regional Manager and Mr Vijayabalan, the Chairperson SMBT - Alangudi, who had come by motorcycle to guide us through the narrow twisty lanes. Although the roads were clear, there were still many fields on which the fallen trees remained and many, many more thatched roofs covered with plastic sheets.

At this stage of the Account it needs to be explained that ASSEFA has been working in this area since 2008, carrying out the usual programme of setting up Women's Self Help Groups, providing primary education where there is no Government School and pursuing the object of encouraging the local population, in particular the women, to become active in the process of local governance.

It was for this reason that ASSEFA was in a position, thanks to its existing staff network, to provide aid to the area more rapidly than the government or any other NGO. An example of this aid was the supply of milk to families with babies and young children during the first few days after the cyclone.

One aspect of the overall project was the provision of a primary school and a building in which to house it, which was completed and the school inaugurated in 2011. Unfortunately, some time subsequently, the Government made a regulation that all schools (one must assume this regulation applies only to rural schools) must stand in an area of 3 acres of land. ASSEFA's school did not stand in the specified area and as the result, had to be closed, and the building has remained unused since that time.

Having had described to us the effects of the cyclone we moved on to the subject of how best to transform a disaster into an advantageous future, (as was done following the tsunami in 2004) this being one of the guiding principles of ASSEFA's ethos.

The Government has provided the means (mainly in the form of plastic sheeting) of repairing damaged houses and grants of compensatory payments but, we were told, this scheme does not apply to everyone, so the first priority for ASSEFA will be to identify those who have, for some reason, been excluded from the Government repair and compensation scheme and to make good such deficiencies. In the slightly longer term ASSEFA has been concerned with the difficulties associated with local water supply. Close to the school building there is a Government stand pipe but it is turned on only once each week and then for only one hour, which is clearly completely inadequate. ASSEFA has had donated by TATA Industries a reverse osmosis water purifying plant (hopefully the first of several more). The plant is installed in the disused school building (and I felt a moment of pathos when I noticed the last lesson still chalked on the school blackboard) and is ready to be connected to a 200 feet deep bore well, only a few metres distant, sunk by ASSEFA. All that remains is the provision of the electricity supply without which the purifying plant cannot operate. Once in operation the plant will produce 1000 litres per hour of purified water which will be sufficient for the needs of 500 families.

The long term project will be to explore and consider the viability of alternative livelihoods for the residents of the area, as it will take years for the staple produce, coconuts and bananas, to recover. It is intended that the school building, as well as housing the water purifier, will become a community centre for exchange of information and ideas and for training in alternative livelihoods.

We were then taken to the district office where we met the other members of the ASSEFA team, Mrs. Paribala, CEO, SMBT - Alangudi, Mrs G Dhanalakshmi, Social Fieldworker, Mrs S Dhanalakshmi, Social Fieldworker and Mrs Bala, Social Fieldworker who have been with ASSEFA for varying periods of up to 20 years. We saw many photos, taken at the time, of the devastation, including one of a complete flock of dead sheep which had panicked and rushed (or had been blown by the cyclone wind?) into a pond and had drowned - one example of the large number of livestock which perished. We were then provided with a splendid lunch in the office, prepared by the members of the team and had time to interview them, ask questions and in turn answer questions raised by them. It was clear that all members of the team are dedicated and committed to the work of ASSEFA and we felt privileged to meet with them.

Finally, we returned to Thanjavur where Kumar left us to go to Madurai to attend meetings the following day.

It is clear that the period of crisis is past and that the long haul back into a situation of

normality is only at its commencement but we left our visit feeling confident that the solid groundwork which has been laid by the ASSEFA team will result, eventually, in a successful conclusion of the abnormal financial straits and social disruption now being experienced by the local population.

We are most grateful to all concerned for having given the time for us to be shown the results of Cyclone Gaja and the efforts being made to rehabilitate the area and its population. Also I must thank my family and friends for their contributions to my personal appeal for financial support for ASSEFA in this moment of crisis.

Tony Mortlock and Susan Tuckey

21 February 2019

Dates for your Diary:

- **Sunday 28th April** - London Marathon in aid of the AVI Spring Appeal
- **Friday 31st May** - Atonement in politics: perspectives from Mahatma Gandhi - Lecture from Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Gopal Gandhi.
- **Saturday 15th June** – Memorial service for Alan Leather (details TBC)
- **Saturday 13th July** - Walk for Women
- **26-28th July** - Madras Cafe and AVI at WOMAD Festival
- **Saturday 28th September** - AGM

On behalf of the AVI staff, trustees, volunteers, and our partners working in India we'd like to offer you a big thank you for your ongoing support.

Action Village India