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## Good news trickles in from Vidarbha

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FOR a long time there has been a drought of good news from Vidarbha, India's suicide stretch of 11 districts where the most suicides by farmers take place.

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau confirm this trend. The crop, which has failed farmers every time, is cotton.

Gaigaon village of Akola district, Vidarbha, is a classic case. Villagers, including panchayat members, say malnutrition and hunger are extremely high among farmers and farm workers and that less than 5 per cent get a regular, adequate diet of cereals, pulses and vegetables with some milk. Almost all farmers are deeply in debt.

But finally a ray of hope is dawning in a few hundred villages, thanks to a project called the Integrated Sustainable Agricultural Programme (INSAP) being implemented by Yuva-Rural (Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action) with the help of Swiss-Aid India.

According to Nitin Maate, a coordinator of INSAP, in 200 villages a majority of farmers have started practising low-cost, sustainable agriculture with environment friendly technologies. This switchover is giving new hope to farmers by reducing costs, debts and economic tension.

Originally INSAP had intended to work in only 36 villages. According to Datta Patil, the project's impact has already spread to over 600 villages,

INSAP has been promoting environment-friendly technologies like composting, plant based pesticides and watershed management. Since most farmers are in debt, a lot of emphasis has been made on using village resources like cattle-dung, cow urine and tree-leaves. Earlier such farm waste was being wasted, Now it has become an important building block for an alternative farming system which could rescue Vidarbha's farmers.

This project is being implemented in selected villages in five districts - Buldhana, Washim, Akola, Amravati and Wardha. In the villages of Washim and Akola districts, farmers happily talked in detail about the improving viability of their farms and that too in sustainable environment friendly ways.



They also said giving up indiscriminate use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and replacing these with compost and tree-leaf based pest-control has proved helpful for those insects and birds who are known to be friends of farmers.

Thoughts of depression and suicide seemed far from their minds as they talked cheerfully about their innovations including cheap implements for water-conservation, bio-gas plants, kitchen gardens and manure mixtures most nourishing for crops and soil.

Sanjay Bhagat, a farmer of Washim district and a co-ordinator of INSAP and the local farmers' organisation, said before he joined this project he had given up all hope in life and was seriously contemplating suicide. The reason was that his family was deep in debt.

He said during his father's days farming had been economically viable. His father took care to keep costs low. But when he and his brothers inherited land, they fell prey to shady dealers who sold new, expensive seeds and dubious pesticides. The dealers made all kinds of false claims.

Several farmers like Sanjay fell into their trap and invested heavily in seeds and inputs which turned out to be quite useless. So their costs spiraled but their yield did not increase. The weather also let farmers down. Crops failed often and they went deeper and deeper into debt.

Things deteriorated so fast that even a 10-acre farmer like Sanjay and his wife had to start working

on the fields of others for a measly wage. Their self-respect was so badly hurt they thought seriously of suicide but the thought of who will look after their children stopped them from taking this drastic step.

It was at this stage that Sanjay came to know about INSAP and decided to give it a try. His first agricultural experiments with the INSAP technology proved so successful that he adopted it wholeheartedly and became an enthusiastic messenger for spreading this idea to more villages. Now his wife complains smilingly that he comes home only for meals, such is his enthusiasm.

That this is not an isolated example is confirmed in a recent study.

This study using a sample of 90 farmers found that irrespective of farm size, INSAP technology has proved highly cost-effective compared to earlier technologies being used.

Nearly 88 per cent of farmers, who adopted sustainable farming techniques, said they wanted to continue to farm since they had regained their confidence. On the other hand, 67 per cent of farmers practising earlier techniques said that farming was increasing their debts and they would prefer to quit if an alternative livelihood was made available.

The respondents who have taken up sustainable farming said that they feel at peace since they are eating healthier food, there is growing cooperation among villagers to implement the new ideas and there is more self-reliance.

It is also interesting to note that only 55 per cent of farmers who practised earlier techniques were willing to wed their daughters into farming families. But, among INSAP farmers nearly 95 per cent are willing to arrange the marriage of their daughters into farmer families. This indicates their growing confidence in the sustainability and economic viability of their traditional livelihoods.

Yet, for INSAP and Vidarbha's farmers there are many hurdles ahead. These have to do with global trends like WTO rules, local policies such as the low price of cotton imports and unpredictable weather caused by global warming. INSAP is emphasising a farmers' cooperative movement, diversification of rural livelihoods and self-help groups.