

Sustainability of Village Knowledge Centre

A study in Tamil Nadu



JRD Tata Ecotechnology Centre
M S Swaminathan Research Foundation

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July 2023



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Third Cross Street, Taramani Institutional Area
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Generous financial support of Jamsetji TATA National Virtual Academy (NVA) received by the MSSRF is deeply appreciated in implementation of Village Knowledge Centre programme.

Photo credits

VRCs of Thiruvaiyaru and Pudukottai

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Foreword

Village Resource Centre/Village Knowledge Centre programme initiated in the late 1990s by M S Swaminathan Research Foundation aims to improve the socioeconomic lives of resource poor rural farming and fishing communities through knowledge empowerment using ICT tools. Emphasis is given on social inclusion in access to relevant technology to improve their lives. The community based knowledge centres help two-way communication or knowledge transfer from the experts to common people at the grassroots and from the grassroots to the experts. It emphasises the provision of a broad range of information to enable improvements in livelihood related activities as well as access to general entitlements of rural women and men.

It is heartening to state that the concept of VKC has gained the attention of NGOs, and State Governments across India. National Rice Research Institute (NRRI), Cuttack with the support of the government is running two VKCs in Odisha through Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK). MSSRF provided the standard operating procedure for setting up VKCs and other relevant guidance for the concerned agencies. The VKC model has gained popularity in countries like Tanzania and Sri Lanka. Many partners show interest to replicate this model.

This present report brings out various factors underlying the sustainability of the VKC programme in the districts of Thiuruvaaiyaru and Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu. The challenges faced by the VKC have also been brought out clearly which in some cases compelled the organisation to withdraw the VKC programme.

The experiences presented in the report will surely help to further improve the methodologies adopted in establishing VRCs and VKCs and in making the movement sustainable and user-driven.

I appreciate Dr L Vedavalli for her meticulous chronicling of the important factors contributing for the sustainability of the VKC/VRC programme and also the challenges confronted by the VKCs. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to Dr R Rengalakshmi, Director, JRD Tata Ecotechnology Centre, Dr R Rajakumar, Principal Scientist and the staff of the VRCs of Thiuruvaaiyaru and Pudukottai who have significantly contributed in the effective reach of the programme to the rural communities.



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Sustainability of Village Knowledge Centre

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Interaction with women, men and children from the villages of Vilangudi and Rajendiram in Thiruvaiyaru district; Onangudi and Neduvasal of Pudukottai district; Akkaraipettai in Nagapattinam district and from Manpathai in the district of Tiruchirappalli clearly brought out the outcome of the VKC programme. The spontaneity and clarity with which the people shared their experiences and views helped immensely in understanding the factors responsible for the sustainability of the programme and also the challenges faced by the programme. Heartfelt thanks are due to each and every one of them.

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I Village Knowledge Centre Programme: genesis

It has increasingly been recognised that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has great potential as a tool to promote social and economic development in rural areas. Information and knowledge empowerment is vital to improve the lives of the rural population, particularly the poor. In this context, M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), a non-governmental organisation, has initiated Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres¹ (VKCs)/Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs) programme in 1998 to promote and strengthen knowledge empowerment for rural communities. In order to scale up the VKC programme, the Jamshedji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA) was created in 2003. 'To promote sustainable rural livelihoods through digital empowerment with a pro-poor and pro-women orientation towards choice and dissemination of technology, and human resource development', is the mission of the NVA. This programme envisages bringing together the experts and rural communities in a two-way communication with the objective that knowledge should reach every home across all socio-economic groups.

A Village Resource Centre is usually located at the block level or at the central point of a cluster of villages. Village Knowledge Centres² are generally situated at the *Panchayat* level. Infrastructure facilities such as space and electricity for the VKCs are likely to be provided by a variety of partners³.

Main aspects of the Programme

The National Virtual Academy aims to provide need-based locale-specific, demand driven information content (both dynamic and static- based on a collection of secondary data and a well-planned need assessment), organise training and awareness programmes and build linkages with several leading institutions / organisations for translating the content into field-based applications.

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1. The Interdisciplinary Dialogue in 1992 on "Information Technology: Reaching the Unreached" revealed that the future of food security in the developing world, especially South Asia, may depend less on resource intensive agriculture and more on knowledge intensity. Thus the concept of Village Knowledge Centre was born as a result of the dialogue held in 1992.
 2. In order to ensure access to all, the VKCs are located in public buildings (*Panchayat* building, Self-Help Group(SHG) building, Community Hall, School, Farmers and Fishermen Associations, Community Based Organization, etc.).
 3. For example, elected or traditional village administration, farmers and fishermen associations, milk societies, youth clubs, NGOs, temples and churches, village development council, etc..

The aim of the programme is to empower the largely unskilled, resource-poor rural farming and fishing families to make better choices and achieve better control of their own development through building skills and capacities for enhancing their livelihood opportunities. The knowledge centres facilitate two-way communication or knowledge transfer from the experts to common people at the grassroots and from the grassroots to the experts. VRC/VKC programme envisages a situation where access to ICT will be possible for rural people to improve their socio-economic lives.

Why the present study

The concept of VKC has gained the attention of NGOs, and State Governments across India. For example, National Rice Research Institute (NRRI) with the support of the government is running two VKCs in Odisha; this project is carried out with Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK) located in that area. It may be mentioned here, MSSRF provided the standard operating procedure for setting up VKCs and other relevant guidance for the concerned agencies. Interestingly, other KVKs evince interest in running VKCs in their respective working area. The VKC model has gained popularity in countries like Tanzania and Sri Lanka. The VKC is the basis for CLCs (Common Learning Centre). Many partners want to replicate this model. In this context, this study examines the factors underlying sustainability of VKCs. This is done by studying few VKCs that are functioning well as also a few that are no longer in operation.

This report is thus an attempt to analyse the factors that contribute for the sustainability or closure of the VKC services. VRC/VKC programme initiated in 1998 in Puducherry has been facing various challenges related to the functioning and continuity of the programme during the last several years. VRC/VKC programme was initiated in Thiruvaiyaru during the year 2004 and Pudukottai during 2006-2007. There were eight in Thiruvaiyaru and 12 VKCs in Pudukottai district in 2006 ; today there are only two in Thiruvaiyaru and three in Pudukottai. Major research questions undertaken for this study are (a).What are the factors that contributed for continuity of the programme? (b).What are the challenges confronted by the VKCs? It is important to understand the factors underlying sustainability or otherwise of the VKCs so that the existing centres can be moulded well and the insights gained would also help in the successful running of the VKC programme in future.

This report is organised broadly into four sections. Section I provides a brief introduction to the genesis of the VRC/VKC programme, the purpose of conducting this study followed by Methodology adopted. This section also touches upon the VRC/VKC programme, followed by a discussion on its main components, VKCs and experiences of MSSRF ; Section II talks about the VKC programme in Vilangudi Village of Thiruvaiyaru, Onangudi in Pudukottai district and Manpathai in Tiruchirappalli

district; this section covers various services provided through the VKC programme, role of the Village management Committee (VMC)⁴, the Knowledge Worker and the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru and Pudukottai in the functioning of the VKCs in the concerned villages. Also, reflections of few village women and men on the usefulness of the VKC programme, the expectations of the community and the challenges faced by the VKCs are brought out in brief. Section III briefly analyses factors that resulted in winding up of Village Knowledge Centre Programme with examples from Rajendiram Village in Thiruvaiyaru district and Neduvasal in Pudukottai district; it also briefly touches upon the closure of a VKC in Nagapattinam district; Section IV is the Concluding Remarks.

Methodology

The study was conducted in two parts; during the first part of the study in September 2022 three VKCs that have been functioning fairly well were visited- one VKC in Vilangudi supported and facilitated by the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru, one in Onangudi that is supported and facilitated by the VRC of Pudukottai, and the third one located in Manpathai in Tiruchirappalli district fully managed by the VMC members with the guidance from the VRC of Pudukottai. While the first two were established during 2004-2005 the third one in Manpathai was set up in June 2012 as part of ClimaAdapt project⁵ funded by Norway through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Royal Norwegian Embassy and implemented by MSSRF for a period of four years. After the completion of the project period during May 2016 this VKC was handed over to the VMC/village community. Since then this VKC has been managed by the VMC which takes care of

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4. The VMC is generally comprised of the boundary partner, Knowledge Worker, a representative of the VRC, key individuals from the village including women, school head master, local post master, *Anganwadi* teacher and few strategic partners like the local veterinary hospital/clinic doctor, ANM and so on. The VMC is oriented about their roles and responsibilities in handling or managing the affairs of the VKC, their relations with the various stakeholders such as the VRC, Knowledge Worker, local administration and different department personnel. The VRC takes earnest efforts to empower the members of the VMC to take care of the functioning and maintenance of the VKC. It is important they have clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
 5. The focus of this four-year project-ClimaAdapt project- has been to improve climate change adaptive capacity of agriculture and water sectors in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh to ensure food security. In Tamil Nadu the Water Resource Organisation of the Public Works Department collaborated with Tamil Nadu Agricultural University and MSSRF for implementing the ClimaAdapt Project in Ponnaniar Reservoir System in Tiruchi and Kalingarayan Canal Irrigation System in Erode. Irrigation Management Training Institute, Tiruchi is another agency to take part in capacity building of stakeholders. The project funded by Norway through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Royal Norwegian Embassy was implemented from June 2012 to May 2016. Village Knowledge Centre model is one of the several models adopted to address the issues that affect Indian agriculture because of increasing climate variability; adverse climate impacts would aggravate the problem of food and nutritional security of the increasing population in India.. It may be mentioned here that various extension models are being adopted by different public and private organisations in dissemination of suitable climate resilient technologies and to enhance the preparedness of the farmers. As we have mentioned earlier one such significant models is Village Knowledge Centre programme. It is believed that a strong extension network and appropriate extension methods such as VKCs can help enhance the capability of farmers towards adaptation of climate resilient technologies.

the electricity charges of the Centre and the salary of the Knowledge Worker. It may be pointed out here that these three VKCs have been selected on purpose for our study. Because the VKCs in Vilangudi and Onangudi have been functioning well for more than 17 years and the village community is exceptionally cooperative; the VKC in Manpathai is selected for its uniqueness; unlike the other two VKCs this VKC set up much later, has been handed over to the village community who manages it well with the facilitation and guidance of the VRC of Pudukottai. Second part of the study conducted in December 2022 focused on the factors that caused the closure of VKCs after functioning well for few years. Two VKCs - one in Rajendiram Village, Thiruvaiyaru district set up in 2006 and another one set up in 2009 in Neduvasal Village, Pudukottai district were visited to understand the causes for their closure. Interestingly, the services and activities of these VKCs were well appreciated by the community. Despite the VKCs not being in operation, the VMC members, the Knowledge Workers and the villagers including women from these two villages were willing to talk to us and share their views. The brief discussion on the VKC of Akkaraipettai is based on the information gathered during 2007 -2008.

The primary data were collected by the author through unstructured in-depth interviews with various stakeholders and personal observation. Interviews were carried out in such a manner that people were free to share their experiences and views without any reservations. An attempt was made to collect case studies wherever possible. The information thus generated was of great use in providing insights regarding the usefulness of the programme and the capacity building of the community. We were able to understand the factors that played a major role in the continuity or discontinuity of the VKC programme through this study.

The stakeholders include the Village Management Committee of the VKC, Knowledge Workers, line department staff, the users of the VKC and the VRC staff. It was encouraging to note that each one of them was spontaneous in providing the details concerning various aspects of the functioning of the VKC. The interactions with women and men of different age groups brought out clearly what they think about the VKC programme and in what way this programme has led to improvements in various spheres of the village society. We had opportunities to interact with most of the VMC members of all the VKCs individually as also in groups.

We could gather unfavourable factors that acted against the continuity of the VKC programme; our interactions with the boundary partners, VMC members and some village women and men brought out lack of coordination and cooperation among them (VMC members and the newly elected Village Panchayat Presidents) though they are aware of the utility of the programme. They could not provide a suitable or alternative place to house the VKC when the VKC had to be shifted to another place.

Village Knowledge Centre: main components

VKC is usually set up in a common place with communication accessories for dissemination of information and skill development. It is understood that there are three central components which on the whole play an important role in the effective functioning and continuity of the programme. We can say that they are the three pillars of the VKC programme.

Major players of the VKC programme include the boundary partner; the Knowledge Worker and the physical set up with proper Information and Communication Technology infrastructure, effective internet connectivity and good computers. The centre must be equipped with computers, printers, scanners, photocopiers, and internet connection and the necessary online print information sources. All this should be part of any VKC. Boundary partners are Village *Panchayat*, NGOs and so on. Boundary partners are expected to make arrangements for a rent free building to house the VKC and also bear the electricity charges. It is the responsibility of the boundary partner to identify a person who can serve as the manager of the VKC referred to as Knowledge Worker. Role of Knowledge worker is important. She/he should be in a position to contact the strategic partners in getting the benefits/schemes of different departments to the village society⁶. The VRC/VKC programme recognises institutional building as one of the important components of the capacity building aspect. As part of institution building, a Village Management Committee⁷, a community based organisation is formed by the VRC, in consultation with the villagers, to monitor the activities and services of the VKC and the Knowledge Worker. VMC, is formed to create a sense of ownership and commitment among the members which is important for the sustainability of VKC, even after the project is phased out.

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6. NVA selects Knowledge Workers with the help of local partners for maintaining the VKCs. MSSRF/NVA constantly provides training to Knowledge Workers on aspects such as concept of VKC, methodology of collection and dissemination of need-based content, managing users and visitors, how to maintain the user register, bill books and other records pertaining to VKC, how to build rapport with users and community members, gender concerns, basic hardware and software training, etc. NVA emphasises maintaining user register in the VKC which contains the name of the user, age, education, occupation, what kind of services they get or expect from VRC/VKC, frequently asked questions, etc. Such information helps NVA to continuously fine tune its programmes to the needs of the rural families.
 7. The VMC is generally comprised of the boundary partner, Knowledge Worker, a representative of the VRC, key individuals from the village including women, school head master, local post master, *Anganwadi* teacher and few strategic partners like the local veterinary hospital/clinic doctor, ANM and so on. The VMC is oriented about their roles and responsibilities in handling or managing the affairs of the VKC, their relations with the various stake holders such as the VRC, Knowledge Worker, local administration and different department personnel. The VRC takes earnest efforts to empower the members of the VMC to take care of the functioning and maintenance of the VKC. It is important they have clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Another important component of this programme is its strategic partners⁸ (such as agricultural/horticulture departments, health and so on) who help by providing information on schemes/subsidies; these partners also act as resource persons during training programmes or awareness programmes. Their support and cooperation is vital in taking the benefits of the programme to the rural community. Strategic partners with their expertise help to conduct awareness programmes, training programmes, discussions etc.. Another resource is VRC's committed and efficient staff. For an effective and proper functioning of the VKC programme, dissemination of local specific information and awareness creation on the various aspects (such as agriculture, veterinary, health, education and so on) of day today lives of various section of the village population effective coordination and cooperation of all the stakeholders is necessary. It is learnt that for a smooth and successful functioning of a VKC the above factors are important. Even if one component is weak others get affected or weakened. Appropriate local specific information and relevant services of the VKCs should reach the villagers to meet their requirements at a right time. So the VKC programme places emphasis on institution building at village, block and district level and also interlinking different entities for getting the required information.

VKCs and experiences of MSSRF

MSSRF has been a pioneer in setting up VKCs in the rural areas of Puducherry and Tamil Nadu. VRC/VKC programme initiated by MSSRF during 1998 in Puducherry Union Territory expanded to various districts in Tamil Nadu and Odisha at various periods of time over the years. Normally, setting up of a VKC is considered only when there is a demand or desire from the community for a Knowledge Centre. A set of procedures are adopted to study the feasibility to set up such a Centre. The conventional practice normally include conducting a baseline survey, need assessment, participatory rural appraisal, focus group discussion, holding meetings with Boundary Partners like the village *Panchayat* and important people in the village. As VKC is community oriented it is essential to have the support and encouragement of the Boundary Partner and important persons in the community. In order to identify the general felt need of the community need assessment programmes are conducted with different groups of the village community. Most of the programmes and activities carried out are essentially demand driven. In general, all the services and activities are structured in such a way that they serve the needs of the community. As already mentioned, the VKC and the

8. The VRC/VKC programme encourages VRCs/VKCs to build up partnerships with institutes/organisations (strategic partners) which will be mutually beneficial and helpful in promoting socioeconomic development of the rural community. Partnerships facilitate sharing of knowledge and experiences. So, VRC facilitates and offers help to the VKCs in building partnerships with government departments, NGOS and so on.

Village Management Committee is encouraged to build partnership/linkages with strategic partners for transferring the content into action for village socioeconomic development.

The VRC/VKC programme went through various experiences and challenges while setting up and implementing the programme. Setting up a VKC⁹ involves a long and difficult process; the villagers, particularly the elders, or the *Panchayat* need to be convinced about the purpose of establishing a VKC and the feasibility of establishing one in their village. It is usually quiet a difficult and sensitive task to involve the community in the whole process. It is all the more difficult to explain the modalities or the procedure involved. As we have already pointed out, the boundary partner/village community has to provide rent free building to house the VKC, bear the electricity charges and identify Knowledge Workers to manage the VKC. Constituting Village Management Committee and orienting them on the roles and responsibilities expected of them for sustaining the VKC services is a great challenge. Motivating them to develop a sense of ownership of the VKC and to be active partners in the day today activities of the VKC requires lot of patience and commitment. Only when the above facilities and support are provided by the village community the VKC programme can be implemented effectively. However, it does not guarantee the sustainability of the VKC. It involves combination of factors for the sustainability or discontinuation of the VKCs. In spite of all the necessary efforts and procedures followed carefully by the concern VRC in a district it was compelled to either withdraw or closedown some VKCs completely. Some functioned well for few years but later faced difficulties in continuing the services.

When the VRC/VKC programme was initiated skill development in computers was a popular one and it had great demand particularly from the school/college going persons. Even married women showed interest in learning to use the computers and interestingly few of them subsequently became Knowledge Workers also. It was felt that a physical structure is necessary for imparting computer skills and for the villagers in general to use the local data base which was known as *Valam*. VKCs mainly focused on knowledge empowerment and capacity building of the village women and men. This set up is a good platform to address various issues of the villagers.

The major focus of the VRC is rural development and as we have already mentioned the themes broadly covered are agriculture, animal husbandry, health, education, and government schemes that benefit villagers under each of the above themes. The VRC

9. When the VRC/VKC programme was expanded to districts of Thiruvaiyaru (2004) and Pudukottai (2005-2006), the respective VRCs sent letters to all the Village *Panchayats* explaining about the VRC/VKC programme and the objective of setting up of a VKC in a village and related matters. Then the staff from the VRCs met the village president and the elders to discuss about the feasibility of setting up a VKC in a particular village.

provides agriculture based services using Information and Communication Technology tools for development (ICTD) such as audio-conferencing, video conferencing, phone-in programmes, voice and audio messages with content prepared by MSSRF scientists along with other experts from universities and institutes situated in the region. Audio and video conferences are conducted in a common place and at a convenient time suitable for the community. The farming community gets opportunities to interact with experts from different fields related to their livelihood. Whatsapp groups are formed to exchange and share information; Whatsapp is also used to get guidance from experts. For example, picture of the affected part of the plant is posted in the group to get prescription and necessary care to be taken.

The MSSRF scientists also visit the farmers' fields, as per need, to provide on-site advisories on crops. They also conduct plant clinics¹⁰ in the villages at different stages of crop growth to provide crop advisories, say from sowing to post harvest. A farmer should be aware of the problem occurring in his/her crop; and he/she should be able to treat the same is the aim of the plant clinic (*Vivasayikku payiril pirachanai theriyanum. Namma veettu payirukku naam vaithyam seyyanum; adhudhan payir maruthuva mugam nokkam*) says the plant doctor Mr Senthil Kumar. The plant doctor/the agricultural expert is also available for guidance over the phone. VRC also circulated a local news letter, namely *Namma Ooru Seidhi* which carried local specific information on the broad categories mentioned above. This newsletter complemented or reinforced the information disseminated through other channels of MSSRF. However, this had to be discontinued later due to paucity of funds. This news letter was greatly appreciated and used by the village community.

Over the years, the elaborate physical set up of VKC was gradually reduced for various reasons. In few cases virtual mode was adopted. Some did not function well. They had to be closed. The common reason for this is the inability of the village community to

10. Plant clinics are meeting places (mostly operating from village common place) or diagnostic centres where the farming community including women have access to find solutions to the health problems they face in their crops. They take the samples of affected plants to the plant clinics where the trained agricultural background persons (referred to as plant doctors trained by CABI) for diagnosis and treatment for the same. Plant doctors provide technological solutions that are ecologically safe and environmentally sustainable; the aim is to provide right knowledge to the farm women and men to enhance plant health and bring economic benefits.

We had an opportunity to interact with the plant doctor Mr Senthil Kumar associated with the VRC of Pudukottai. He stated that plant clinic services aim at improving the lives of small and marginal farmers by providing guidance in using the inputs and technology ; in his own words *siru kuru vivasayigailai nokki engal panigal payanikkaradhu; avargaludiya veettu vasalil thagavalgaaii serpadhuthan engal nokkam.Ninaitha nerathil ninaitha idathil serpadhuthan engal nokkam.Kaala idaiveli illamal theervu kodupadhu than engal nokkam*. Voice messages (local based) are reached to 33650 persons in Tamil Nadu. Voice messages and audio messages are useful for the farmers. For example, messages on weather help the farmers in planning their agricultural operations. It helps them to avoid labour and input expenses. It is a short message but a big help (*chinnathagaval. Periya udhavi*).

provide rent free building, paying electricity charges and turnover of the VKC managers known as Knowledge Workers; also paying the honorarium of the Knowledge Worker was difficult. MSSRF was compelled to withdraw the VKC programme because it did not get sufficient support and cooperation from the village. It may be also pointed out that MSSRF was not able to provide the honorarium of the Knowledge Worker and meet other expenses. In spite of all this the concept of VKC got popularised. And, it is still functioning well in some villages.

VKCs function successfully when they have the support from their Village Management Committee, availability of proper physical structure with necessary infrastructure facilities essential to disseminate the information and provide skill development to the villagers, Knowledge Workers who are motivated and efficient, availability of appropriate guidance and support from the VRC (and strategic partners). It is evident that even if one component is weak it will have its impact on other. It requires coordinated efforts of all the stakeholders including the line departments, local *Anganwadis*, Village Health Nurse (VHN), agriculture and veterinary departments.

We will be analysing the factors both for sustainability and closure of the VKCs in the following pages.



II. Factors contributing for sustaining the VKC programme: a brief analysis

This brief study attempts exploring factors that have been responsible for continuous and fairly successful functioning of VKCs in two agricultural villages-Vilangudi and Onangudi; one in Thiruvaiyaru district and another one in Pudukottai district of Tamil Nadu where VRCs from the respective districts have not withdrawn formally and still serve as an active partner of the VKC programme. These are the first few VKCs set up by M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in Tamil Nadu. There is also one VKC in Manpathai in Tiruchirappalli district which is functioning well even after MSSRF's withdrawal of its project period of four years. It is amazing the way this VKC is functioning with the committed set of Village Management Committee and motivated Knowledge Worker with the technical support and encouragement of VRC of Pudukottai.

While the origin of the VKCs under study are different, the causes for continuity of the VKCs are similar with slight variations. In all the three VKCs the Boundary Partners are very supportive and committed and enthusiastic. The VKC at Vilangudi came up when VKC/VRC programme was expanded to different areas. In Vilangudi, the staff of VRC of MSSRF approached the village elders to explore the probability and feasibility of setting up VKC with the support of the community. On the other hand, the VKC at Onangudi was set up based on the demand of the Village *Panchayat* President and the community. They had an idea about VKC and its usefulness to the village. The third one at Manpathai in Tiruchirappalli district was entirely different. It was set up as part of a Project requirement by the MSSRF.

MSSRF's work was relatively easier in setting up the VKCs in these three cases. Boundary Partners from Vilangudi and Onangudi came forward to provide a rent free building and take care of the electricity charges. They identified the Knowledge Workers but expressed inability to pay the honorarium of the Knowledge Worker; so VRC has been paying the honorarium of the Knowledge Workers of the VKCs of Vilangudi and Onangudi. Interestingly, the villagers in Manpathai who were not enthusiastic about the VKC concept initially but somehow were made to come together and support in setting up a VKC (in Manpathai and also in the neighbouring village Aniyapur) have taken the responsibility of providing not only rent free building and electricity charges but also paying the salary of the Knowledge Workers in these two villages after the project period. Incidentally these two VKCs are the youngest in Tamil Nadu.

While analysing the reasons for some VKCs functioning well since their inception several interesting factors emerged as contributing factors; of which the most significant

ones are the effective boundary partner, the village *Panchayat* and committed Village Management Committee of the VKC fully supported by the village people, Knowledge Worker, the strategic partner (various government department such as health, agriculture, veterinary and so on) and the VRC. As it has been pointed out earlier the boundary partner is responsible for providing rent free building for VKC to function, providing electricity charges and appointing Knowledge Workers. MSSRF provides computer and related infrastructure and facilitates all its activities. Knowledge Workers in all the VKCs studied were proactive and enthusiastic in carrying out their work. Linkages/partnership with strategic partners is good; their services are utilised by the VKCs for the benefit of the village people and vice versa. Support of MSSRF is a major contributing factor for effective functioning of the VKC apart from the other above mentioned aspects. The VKCs are generally guided and supported by the VRC of MSSRF located in that particular area. The VMC in all the VKCs expressed that they need continuous guidance and support from the VRC for effective functioning of their respective VKCs.

i Village Knowledge Centre, Vilangudi Village

Setting up of VKC in Vilangudi

VKC in Vilangudi was one of the five VKCs¹¹ supported by the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru. This was set up on 22, September, 2005 with the support and cooperation of the then Village *Panchayat* President of Vilangudi and the village community. During our interaction with the VRC staff it was learnt that when the VRC programme was initiated in Thiruvaiyaru in October 2004, a letter was sent by the MSSRF to Village *Panchayats* in the district informing them of the establishment of the VRC and its purpose; also the letter dealt with the concept of VKC and VRC's objective in setting up the same in different villages for the socioeconomic development of the villagers through knowledge empowerment and capacity building. The village *Panchayat* president (and few other elders) of Vilangudi could appreciate the objective of the VKC programme and enthusiastically offered his support as the president of the village *Panchayat*. As the boundary partner he provided space in the *Panchayat* building and agreed to bear the electricity charges. In order to monitor the activities of the VKC and support the boundary partner and VRC in taking the services and activities to a larger village

11. The village resource centre in Thiruvaiyaru is one of the earliest centres set up by the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation. It was inaugurated on October 18, 2004. The VRC supported five VKCs in the villages of Thirupalanam, Villangudi, Rajendrem, Panaiyur and Illuppakkorai- all within 5 km radius from the VRC. Presently only two VKCs are functioning - one in Vilangudi and other one in Thirupalanam.

population, Village Management Committee¹² of the VKC was constituted consisting of village women and men from different social groups including the boundary partner and the Knowledge Workers, Village Health Nurse (VHN), *Anganwadi* teacher, *kalnadai aivalar* (veterinary inspector) of the village veterinary clinic, representatives from SHG and so on. Presently the VMC consists of 15 members (7 women and 8 men). The boundary partner and the VMC members were very supportive in identifying the Knowledge Workers to manage the VKC. The two Knowledge Workers identified by the VMC rendered their services free during the first six months after the inception of the programme. The VRC agreed to pay the honorarium to the VKC managers. (It may be mentioned here that the VRC continues to pay the salary for one Knowledge Worker. It is heartening to know that the senior Knowledge Worker shares her honorarium with the other Knowledge Worker).

VKC programme has not faced many challenges because the boundary partner and the few village elders have been very supportive and cooperative from the beginning. VRC found it relatively easy in the ensuing years also because the same person was President for two consequent terms. The village *Panchayat* has constructed a separate building for the VKC using MP funds and the VKC has been functioning in its building since eight years. Fortunately, the present village *Panchayat* President is also very understanding and appreciates the programme. Incidentally, he is the husband of the Knowledge Worker namely Ms Devika who has been serving the VKC as its manager since the inception of the VKC programme. It is because of his support she has been able to render her services as the manager of the VKC for nearly 17-18 years. After, he assumed office, the *Panchayat* has provided more lights, fans and furniture to the VKC. The building has been white washed. One of the VMC member proudly mentioned that only the computers and its accessories are provided by the VRC. Other infrastructural facilities in the Centre are taken care of by the *Panchayat*. Turnover of Knowledge Workers was a challenge to the VRC but fortunately there has been always one Knowledge Worker ie Ms Devika to manage the VKC. The presence of the Knowledge Worker and also her/his role is important in the functioning of the VKC.

12. VMC members meet regularly once in three months to discuss about the activities of VKC in the previous three month and the activities that should be focused on in the coming months. Attendance and participation in the meeting is very important. Sharing of information from all the members takes place for further action. For example the Treasurer of SHG Federation would share the details of what was discussed in their meeting (about new schemes, availability of seeds, and so on); similarly, the VHN would inform about the present health issues and the precautions to be taken). One of the senior VMC member and also the Knowledge Worker mentioned that those who do not attend the meeting for consecutive months will be removed as a member. Few members have passed away. In his or her place a new person with potential to serve the community will be included. There are six members who have been members of VKC since the inception of the VKC.

Growth of VKC of Vilangudi

The VKC is located in a central place of the village. It is easily accessible to the community and other stakeholders. VKC was set up in Vilangudi Village on Sept 22, 2005 after adopting the usual procedure with two Knowledge Workers namely Ms Devika and Ms Revathi. Interestingly, Ms Devika continues to be the Knowledge Worker of the VKC till today. Incidentally, we visited the VKC on September 22, 2022; it has completed 17 years of service to the village community and it is sincerely believed that it would continue to serve the community in the coming years. The interactions with the various stake holders indicated that the community recognises and values the services and activities of the VKC in improving their livelihood.

In the initial years of the VKC, school children showed inquisitiveness and interest in learning computers. It took a while to draw other section of the community towards the Centre. That's because they thought it was only for the children and students and it is a computer centre. The Knowledge Workers tried their best to encourage women and men to visit the Centre to look at the *Valam* website to learn about information on various aspects of agriculture, veterinary and other useful information regarding health, education and so on. Ms Devika says, she could see some interest in the villagers when they started writing information related to the sowing season on the notice board kept at the entrance of VKC building. She said, to start with news that appeared in the daily news paper was written on the notice board. Subsequently, the VKC began to write information on agriculture, veterinary, health and rain forecast. This brought in a slight change in the attitude of the villagers and gradually began to visit the Centre for enquiring about government schemes, seed availability, and market rate and so on. *Namma Ooru Seidhi*, a bimonthly local news letter covering relevant local and season specific information related to their livelihood and other details such as government schemes, employment opportunities, higher education and so on was well received by the village population. They found the information useful and gradually people started coming to the Centre for enquiries and clarifications. The VKC also started organising and conducting meetings with the help of government departments and NGOs (ably facilitated by the VRC) from 2006 onwards. The VKC conducted awareness programmes related to health with the help of the health department; villagers made use of the eye camp conducted by the VKC in collaboration with Shankara Nethralaya based in Chennai. After the awareness programme on AIDS (2007), the Knowledge Workers took personal interest to take few village women to Tanjavur government hospital for getting tested. Programmes like this drew few more people closer to the VKC.

A perceivable change took place among the village women and men when text messages were disseminated through mobile phones, in 2010. This had great impact on the community as these text messages were useful in their livelihood activities.

The messages helped them to plan their agricultural operations and take appropriate actions to prevent /treat pest and diseases and so on. Climate related information is very much appreciated by farmers as they are able to time certain activities such as drying the grains, irrigating land, fertiliser application, harvesting of a crop and so on.

This was followed by another significant, useful and helpful intervention for the farming community namely the plant clinic programme¹³ in 2012. This is considered as a lifeline programme by the farming community. This intervention also took some time before it got popularised among the farm women and men. The Knowledge Worker said that they had to go around the village to inform in advance whenever plant clinic was held in the village. In the initial days, she said that the farmers had the attitude “what they are going to tell us that we don’t know” (*enna sollapogirargal namakku theriyadadi*). But today this is the flagship programme of the VRC /VKC that is greatly valued and appreciated by the farming community. If one happens to meet and talk to any villager about the uses of the VKC or the functioning of the VKC the first response would be about the benefits of the plant clinic programme. They appreciate this programme because this directly addresses various plant health concerns. The farmers are aware of the method of collecting the plant sample to show it to the plant doctor for diagnosis and treatment. Enquiries shall keep pouring at the VKC if for some reason plant clinic is not held on the appointed day, says Ms Devika. Incidentally, she is also a trained plant doctor at the village level. She is trained to diagnose and provide solutions based on symptoms for diseases /pest or other problems. When farmers contact her for day today problems she consults the agricultural expert at MSSRF before giving crop advisory (The agricultural expert would be present at the plant clinic). This programme has brought down the expenses of the inputs and increased the yield. They are able to carry out their agricultural operation based on right knowledge and proper guidance. The farming community regard this programme as God sent to protect the farmers from losses.

VKC has also started providing online services(for example, applying ration card, PAN card, crop insurance, pension, getting *patta/chitta* (land records) and, nativity, caste certificates, deletion and inclusion of names in the ration card paying Electricity Bill and so on) since 2015. This is another service which is in demand from the women and men including the student community. The VKC has helped 200 villagers to register under Prime Minister Insurance Scheme. Villagers referred to this scheme as *Modi*

13. Plant clinic is held during important stages of crop growth in different seasons- three camps during *kuruvai* (September-November) season, three during *thaaladi* (June-July); altogether nine camps are held. If necessary one or two more camps are also conducted. The farmers get guidance and crop advisories right from sowing to harvest. The farmers are provided with updated crop advisories and agricultural technologies. Plant clinic promotes sustainable agricultural practices to increase the yield and at the same time to protect the environment.

Thittam. VKC helps in employment renewal. *Panchayat* office makes use of the online services of the VKC in getting the receipts for payments made or received. Availability of this service has helped women and men including the students to get their things done within the village without difficulty; it saves their time, energy and money. They do not have to go to the Taluk office for this. The VKC works in coordination with VAO in matters related to land and house issues; the VAO stated that once they receive the online application regarding a certificate related to house or land it is immediately looked into and the certificate is issued to the concerned person. There has been an increase in persons using online services at the VKC. Ms Devika pointed out that they do not consider the persons using online service as users of the VKC. She added to say that online service for Aadhar card correction has been locked due to some reason. Application for getting passport and booking train ticket are not done.

The VKC continues its services

It is encouraging to learn that the VKC has been able to provide its intended services continuously for over 17 years using various ICT tools and through other methods. When we asked the Knowledge Worker, Ms Devika, to discuss the reasons why the VKC continues its services for more than a decade, she explained the reasons briefly. VKC has been providing its services to the community in a reasonably effective and useful manner. Ms Devika firmly believes that the VKC should be kept open during the working hours; it is important, she says. She would be present in the morning at the Centre every day. Though the Centre has seen turnover of four to five Knowledge Workers so far, she has always made it a point that the Centre is kept open to avail its services by the village community. According to her the Centre has become a central place of activity in the village. The VKC is a focal point of contact for all the stake holders concerned such as VAO, VHN, Department people, Bank, *Anganwadi* teachers, Village *Panchayat* and so on and the VKC has a good rapport with them. The newly introduced scheme - *Illam thedi maruthavam* reaches the village community through the VKC. The volunteer of the scheme identifies the persons affected by hypertension and diabetes with the support and help of the VKC. The volunteer is able to monitor them without much difficulty and provides the necessary medicines. If any new agricultural scheme is announced by the government the department people seek the assistance of the VKC for reaching the scheme to the target farmers. Similarly, VKC takes the help of VAO in issuing certificates related to landed property. For any programme conducted by VKC, the local *Anganwadi* teacher, VHN and others extend their help and support. During the time when Corona epidemic was widespread cattle were affected by *madi noi* (udder disease); the veterinary inspector provided prescription and the same was written down on the notice board so that all cattle owners could follow the prescription to treat their cattle. It was very helpful in curing the udder disease. If any

veterinary camp is organised the VKC and the VMC members help in mobilising people to participate in the camp. Any relevant and useful news related to the socioeconomic development of the community gets easily disseminated to the entire village by the VMC members; the members reside in different streets; so the news reaches all. The VMC monitors the activity of the VKC. They make regular visits and enquire about the activities being carried out during that time. We also had opportunity to interact with the Village Health Nurse, VAO and the veterinary inspector who visits the village clinic on alternate days and the informal interaction with them corroborated that VKC is a central place of contact; programmes related to health of children or adults and veterinary are conducted in coordination with the VKC; there has always been mutual help and support among them.

During Covid pandemic the VKC and the VMC worked along with the village *Panchayat* in maintaining the cleanliness of the village; they worked along with the *thooymai kavalar* (cleaning staff) in clearing the waste. When Covid vaccination was carried out the villagers had apprehensions about it. Along with village health workers the Knowledge Worker and the VMC also worked. The VMC members, in order to clear the doubts amongst the villagers about the vaccine efficacy, got themselves vaccinated first. This encouraged many to have it without fear or doubt. Ms Devika proudly says nearly 90 % of the villagers have taken both the doses.

There are many other activities that are being carried out with the help of stake holders for the good of the community. All this have been possible because of the constant guidance, help and support of the VRC. The VRC facilitates linkages with departments and other institutions in bringing benefits to the village. “When we go to a department and tell them we are coming from the VRC, we get special attention and the job is done easily”, pointed out one of the VMC members present during our interview.

Voices of villagers

Ms Nithya, 36 years

Ms Nithya aged 36 years, a B A graduate with a diploma in teachers training, is an active member of the VMC. She is full of appreciation for the services of VKC particularly the plant clinic. Her husband is a retired military person. After her father in law passed away five years ago she took over the responsibility of taking care of their 10 acres of land. Her husband does not have interest in doing agriculture. She was totally new to farming but she was determined to manage the agricultural operations. Today she is a confident woman and reaping a better harvest than what her father in law ever got. She says, “*en mamananai vida naan niraya magasool edukkiren*” meaning “I am getting more yield than my father in law. He used to harvest 35 bags of paddy in an acre now I am producing 40-45 bags. Credit goes to the *payir maruthuva mugam* (plant clinic). I started

participating in the plant clinic sessions sometime during 2017. My input expenses are very less. I do not go by the advice of the input dealer”.

Ms Nithya was happy to share with us that she has come to realise that Zinc Sulphate is essential for crop growth; it is something like mother’s milk. Earlier she was not aware of the necessity of applying it. It is particularly important for *kalar vayal* (alkaline soil). She carries out her agricultural operations as per the guidance of the plant doctor.

Based on the knowledge she gained through her interaction with the plant doctor she can identify the symptoms of *pugaiyan noi* (Brown plant hopper), *kuruthu poochi thrips* (Stem borer) and *ilai pen* (Thrips). Though she knows the prescription to treat *kuruthu poochi* and *ilaipen* she would take the advice of the plant doctor. She mentioned that in case a plant clinic session is not held when she encounters a problem in her crop, she would take a photo of it and post it in the whatsapp group; she would immediately get necessary recommendation. She is thankful to the VKC and the VRC for conducting audio conferencing of plant clinic during the Corona pandemic. She is of the view that since the majority of the households in her village are engaged in agriculture for their livelihood, the services of plant clinic are always sought by the farmers. It is helping them to adopt sustainable agricultural practices without incurring much expenditure. She acknowledges the support extended by her neighbour to her in the farming activities.

Ms Nithya mentioned that she shares the information with her fellow women and men farmers and encourages small and marginal farmers to participate in the plant clinic sessions because she is benefitting a lot by it. According to her, small and marginal farmers need the help and guidance of the plant clinic. She says now many have started going to the clinics. She says number of farmers attending the plant clinic has increased in the last five years because they have experienced its usefulness and benefits. It has become popular programme in and around Vilangudi. She feels that entire village should use the services of the plant clinic. According to her, “*siru -kuru vivasayigal vara yosikkirargal; avargalaiyum varavazhaikkanum* (small and marginal farmers should be encouraged to avail the plant clinic services)”. She is of the view that it can be tried through Ms Devika with the necessary support and help from the VMC to carry out her work. The village community also should support and cooperate with the VKC in organising meetings and in other activities. Nithya has regards for the Knowledge Worker and values her contribution for reaching the services of VKC continuously. Ms Nithya mentioned that Ms Devika is always available for any help or guidance. She can also be contacted over the phone.

Ms Nithya is energetic and enthusiastic person. Not surprisingly, observing her interest and confidence in doing agriculture and helping her fellow farmers she has been made one of the VMC members.

Mr R Ramalingam 60 Years

According to Mr R Ramalingam, the services of VKC is 60 % useful for *vivasayam* (agriculture) (and also veterinary), 20 % for education and computer skill development and 10 % for *siru thozhil munaivor* (persons engaged in small business) and 10 % for miscellaneous items concerning the village. Farmers benefit a lot through the crop advisories disseminated through mobile phones, audio conference, whatsapp and various other means. Of all these, the most significant and useful guidance and crop advisories are provided through plant clinics. It has gained the confidence and respect from the farm women and men that it does not require any advertisement these days. Farmers come in large numbers with their affected plant samples to the clinic. VKC has even attracted farmers from the neighbouring villages such as Kunavasal, Okkak kudi, Veeramangudi, Kannak kudi and Viliya Nallur. Mr Ramalingam stated that plant clinics have become very important in the farmers' lives these days particularly when it is very difficult to have access to the agricultural extension people. Farmers are experiencing the benefits; there has been reduction in farm expenditure; only right input in required quantity is used to the crops for rectifying the crop problems. Dependence on input dealers is almost absent now. In case the farmers have problems related to crop production that require urgent solution they immediately go to the VRC to consult the agricultural scientist.

Mr Ramalingam 62 Years

One of the VMC members from the earlier days, whose name is also Ramalingam aged 62 years believes and asserts that the VKC has been growing steadily (*Maiyam valarndhu konde irukku*). He is of the view: *vivasayam dhan mukkiya kaaranam inda Centre nanraga nadakka* (meaning the Centre is performing well because it is contributing for improving agriculture of the village). Agriculture is the major occupation of the village; equally important is livestock rearing. The Centre caters to the needs of the farm women by providing necessary agricultural related information through various channels. Plant clinic is a major source of support to the farmers. Farming has improved considerably now. There is a good understanding among the VMC members. The village community still needs awareness and understanding of the sustainable agricultural practices. He pointed out that physical plant clinic sessions have not been carried out and it should be resumed soon for the benefit of the farm women and men.

Mr Muruganandham, 60years

Mr Muruganandham aged 60years also shares the views of Mr Ramalingam and commends the services of the VKC particularly the services provided through the plant clinic to the farmers. This has gained wide recognition not only in Vilangudi but also

in neighbouring villages. The advisories and guidance from the plant doctor from the clinic has tremendously brought down the expenses and has increased the yield. Soil health has improved. Earlier we used to harvest 35 bags (2007 - 2009) per acre now it is 50 bags. In his own words: "*Kurugiya selavu. Periya magasool. Mann valamum adhigarithu ulladhu* meaning (Less expense; more yield; soil health has improved). Many are aware of the indiscriminate use of the inputs and its harmful effects on the crop and soil. Farmers are careful in avoiding unnecessary application of inputs to the crops. I share the crop advisories with others".

Mr Mauruganandam mentioned that the VKC offers its services in other spheres also. It informs people about the visit of the volunteer of the *Illm thedi maruthuvam* and encourages them to make use of the facility and take proper prescribed medication provided through the scheme. Similarly, it warns people about the spread of flu or any other fever; tells them to be careful and take right medication. VKC cautions about the pest disease attack on the crop and advises to take necessary precaution. He added to say that Ms Devika, the Knowledge Worker encourages the villagers to listen and use the information disseminated through mobile phone. He on his part encourages many to listen to audio advisories and he also cross checks with them whether they have really listened to it or not.

Mr Thirujnanasammandam, 52 years

Mr Thirujnanasammandam aged 52 years expressed happiness for getting crop advisories/prescriptions in Tamil. He says he makes a note of everything written down on the notice board of the VKC and makes use of it whenever necessary. Messages are also conveyed in Tamil; so he is able to understand. Farmers are given agri related training and taken to other farms. Method of application of inputs to a particular crop (Eg Boron for coconut crop) is demonstrated which makes it easier to understand and adopt. He says there is improvement in the rice crop yield. It has improved from 30 bags per acre to 45 bags. Viewing the pests through the microscope gives knowledge about the pests. He got clarity on many aspects of cultivation (for eg., use of right inputs, type and quantity of pesticides to be used and so on). When asked whether VKC would be able to sustain its services, he confidently said that "...it will. But I don't know how"

Mutual help and support: VKC and other stake holders-few examples

It is encouraging to know that VKC functions in carrying out its activities with the help of various people from different spheres such as VAO, veterinary inspector, VHN, *Anganwadi* teacher, SHG, Village *Panchayat* and vice versa. It may be pointed out here that most of them are members of the management committee of the VKC. As members

of the VMC they meet once in three months and discuss about the present and future activities of the Centre . It also provides a platform to share information related to their respective sphere. For example, Ms Chithra who was a Knowledge Worker in the earlier years and now serves as Treasurer of Self Help Group (PLF) Federation, informs any health issues of the members so that VHN can work on that. Similarly, VHN would share information if any new health programmes (eg anaemia in women and children, health issues of *valar ilam pengal* (adolescent girls) are going to be conducted. VKC and VMC offer all necessary support in informing the villagers and mobilising them to participate in the programmes. The programmes are usually conducted in the VKC or village school premises. The volunteer of the *Illam Thedi Maruthvam* takes the assistance and help of the VKC to carry out her work in the village to check the people for hypertension and diabetes. As regards persons diagnosed with any serious health issue the volunteer tries to reach them through the VKC. In case, the concerned person with a health issue is unable to meet the volunteer, they would request the VKC to collect the medicine for them. VKC later hands over the medicine to the persons concerned. So, there is exchange and sharing of information and work among the various stakeholders. Staff of the Agricultural department contact the VKC and provides details of new schemes, eligibility to avail the same etc. The VKC in turn, with the help of the VMC identifies persons who can benefit from these schemes.

Ms Chithra says she has gained confidence and the capacity to meet and talk to people now; the first push for her improvement came from the VKC. She has enrolled 35 persons under the PMKY scheme through the VKC with Assistant Director of Agricultural Office . She has arranged for vegetable seeds for distribution to raise nutri-garden after participating in an audio conference which was attended by both women and men. Seeds were bought with the contribution of the VMC members and distributed to women and men (22 persons). They have sowed the seeds during Aani (June-July) and Aadi (July-August). Ms Devika gives training in book keeping and accounting to the SHG members. There has been sharing of information and help each other in the village level activities, pointed out Ms Chithra. She says VKC is an important centre of the village and it should continue its services to the village community.

Ms Daisy who has served as an *Anganwadi* Worker for 20 years in the village says she has been in constant contact with the VKC. She stated that VKC and the *Anganwadi* help each other and work together in village related matters. VKC helps and supports the *Anganwadi* in organising programmes such as *Ootta sathu vaara vizha* (Nutrient week festival), *Ratha sogai vizhippunaru mugam* (awareness on anaemia) and so on and in informing the people about the same. She mentioned that there has always been mutual understanding and help between the various programmes carried out at the village level.

Ms Devika, the Knowledge Worker apart from her regular work in the VKC takes initiative in matters concerning the village. For example, the day before we met her at the VKC (21.10. 2022) she had read about fever spreading fast in the villages. She immediately contacted the VHN Ms Jayalakshmi to arrange for a camp and take necessary steps to prevent spread of the fever and give medicines for those affected. When we spoke to the VHN she also confirmed that she has been contacted by the Knowledge Worker. The VKC also extends support while conducting health camps and special camps such as health issues of *valar ilam pengal*. Camps for *valar ilam pengal* helps the young women to share their health related problems and they also become aware of health issues (menstrual and other gynec problems) which should be given attention and requires necessary treatment.

The VKC is approached by the Banks (State Bank of India and Central cooperative bank) for promoting saving habit among the villagers by starting saving bank account. The Knowledge Workers stated that through their efforts 50 members have started savings bank account in SBI; SBI is the service bank of the VKC.

VKC along with VMC help village *Panchayat* in carrying out *Ooratchi Seyal Thittangal* (Village *Panchayat* Schemes). As already mentioned, VKC along with *thuppuravu thozhilargal* was engaged in waste disposal of the village when corona pandemic was prevalent. During this time, VKC and VMC members along with SHG women and few others from the village prepared food at the VKC and distributed to the police personal engaged in their village duties; the *Panchayat* bore the expenses. The VKC with the help of the VRC arranged for getting vegetables in a van (by getting a licence with the help of the VRC) to meet the requirements of the village. The villagers found it very useful because their mobility was restricted. It was highly appreciated by the people. All these were carried out with the help of the various stake holders having the VKC at the centre stage.

It may be pointed out here that important information is reached to entire village by word of mouth through VMC members residing in different streets. VMC members are particular that the village benefits by the services of the VKC and the other services that are provided through the VKC with the help of the different stake holders.

Role of Knowledge Worker

One can get an idea about the role played by the Knowledge Workers in the VKC and at the village level from the earlier pages. We were able to gather from our interaction with the few women and men of the village and others associated with the VKC the critical role played by them in reaching people with information and various schemes/ programmes to the community.

When asked Ms Devika how the VKC can continue to serve the community, she was prompt in saying that Knowledge Worker with sufficient training and capacity is the primary requirement for a VKC programme to sustain, of course with the support of the VMC and the community. Devika reiterated that “ Knowledge Worker’s role is important; we should be motivated and we should carry out our duties well.... we do not stop with providing services/information related to agriculture, we also take up work related to *Mudiyor* Pension, Widow Pension, veterinary services and so on. We have requested the VHN to conduct a fever camp in our village as it is spreading very fast; we alerted her after we saw the news in the news paper and learning that there are few fever cases in our adjacent village. We also came to know from *Panchayat* Union office that Vilangudi has more number of people with *ratha sogai* (anaemia) problem and it would be better if a programme is organised to create awareness and take necessary steps to rectify the problem. So we have sought *Balvadi* teacher help in this; we are taking efforts and it will be done soon in this week itself”.

There are 24 SHGs (organised into *Panchayat* Level Federation (PLF)) associated with Village *Panchayat*; Ms Menaka, who is currently undergoing training to manage the VKC, helps in opening bank account to the members. As already mentioned, Ms Devika gives training to SHGs in book keeping and accounting (She has undergone a software training conducted by MSSRF some years ago in the VRC of MSSRF, Puducherry). Ms Devika was confident when she said Knowledge Workers’ contribution is 50 % followed by the VMC and the VRC. She humbly stated that it is through coordinated and cooperated effort of all the players concerned that VKC has been able to continue serve the community for over 17 years.

Devika is proud to say that villagers both women and men irrespective of caste respect her for her role as a Knowledge Worker (and earlier as a plant doctor). She pointed out with pride that because of her contact and good relationship with the community her husband got elected as Village *Panchayat* President. He is currently the Village *Panchayat* president who extends all support to the VKC and he is the Boundary Partner of the VKC programme. Village community’s confidence in her is something she values and encourages her to continue her services at the VKC though she is becoming old. She wants the services of VKC to continue and for that as she had mentioned earlier a committed Knowledge Worker’s presence is essential always. She has taken it upon herself to prepare a young woman by name Ms Megala (a SHG member) for that role. Ms Megala went to the Centre to learn computers and Ms Devika encouraged her to help her with VKC functioning. She readily agreed as her work at the VKC would not clash with her household work. Her husband is supportive. It is interesting and highly encouraging to note that Ms Devika pays her a monthly honorarium of Rs 2000; Ms Devika is paid Rs4500 by the VRC from which she pays Ms Megala. Ms Devika is not able to contribute much for online services because of her age and the net is also slow.

Ms Megala helps her in that and writing information on the notice board and entering user register data on the computer and in other activities. She also collects questions for conducting phone-in-programme. She is interested in knowing the diseases and the treatment for the same. She also visits VRC once a month which she likes. Ms Devika feels Ms Menaga needs orientation to interact with people; which Ms Devika is giving .

Ms Devika appreciated the VRC for constantly giving training to them to improve their capacity. Ms Sujitha from the VRC can be contacted anytime for help regarding online services. Ms Sujitha also gives them training on online services whenever necessary.

VRC is a source of inspiration and help

We had an opportunity to interact with Mr S Ramalingam aged 60; he has been an active VMC member since the launch of the VKC programme. We could gather from our informal chat with him and other VMC members that there has been an understanding and cooperation among the VMC members in the functioning of the VKC. When we asked him, the major reasons for VKC to function well in the village he instantly responded saying *“padi padiyaga VKC valara karanam vazhi nadathugira valamaiyam; avargal kodukkum ookkam. Podumakkal unarchi pooroamana ennathil valargiradhu”* - meaning *“the main reason for the steady growth of the VKC in our village has been the good guidance and inspiration provided by the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru followed by the positive attitude of the villagers”*.

Mr Ramalingam recalled an incident that happened two years after the VKC was set up. He says both agriculture and cattle rearing are important economic activities of the village. He continues to say that within a day nine milch animals were dead due to some disease attack. He went directly to the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru. Immediately action was taken to conduct autopsy of the dead cow and the same night by 8 P M all the milch cows were vaccinated and further losses were prevented. *“Makkalukku sevai thuridhamaga nadakka VKC moolyam Vala Maiyam seyal padugiradhu. Valamaiyam illai enral engalukku kashtam”* meaning *“the VRC works through the VKC to reach the benefits of various services to the village community”*.

In recent times, when Pakistan was facing encountered *vettukili*(grasshopper) problem we in our village sighted few of them. Immediately, the agricultural department sprayed the necessary pesticide and told us to our relief that this *vettukili* was not the same variety that attacked the crops in Pakistan. We were able to get quick response within two days from the department because of the contact and help of the VRC. He says, *“ 40 % enga kalil nirkirom. VRC moolyam ponai oruangearam undu. Madippu undu(40 % we standing on our own legs. Still it is better if we go through the VRC; it has its recognition and value).*

Through the help of the VRC free tailoring course was conducted (six years ago -2015-16) in which 25 women participated. Three women were provided sewing machines for free. Like this, several programmes (for example health camps for children, women and men, veterinary health camps) are conducted for the socioeconomic improvement of the village community.

It will be very difficult to contact the line departments without VRC's facilitation. We have contact with the departments; but we need VRC, it is our *Oonrukol* (pillar of strength); *thadumaarram irukkadhu engalukku* (we will have no problem in carrying out the VKC activities).

The other VMC members and the Knowledge Workers concurred with Mr Ramalingam and whole heartedly expressed their gratitude to the VRC.

Expectations from the community

There is a general request and demand from the village community to the VRC for revival of regular plant clinic sessions in the village like in the pre Covid period. We understand from our interactions with the farm women and men that plant clinics have not been held after Covid. Instead farmers are connected with the plant doctor through audio conference. Farmers find it useful but they prefer the physical set up and face to face contact with the plant doctor. They mentioned that they make use of the plant clinic carried out through audio conference, crop advisories disseminated as short text messages, exchange and sharing of information through whatsapp group and getting clarification from the plant doctor/ agricultural expert over the phone. However, plant clinic held in the village give more scope for interaction and sharing of information and getting crop advisories. The VMC members on behalf of the farming community requested that normal plant clinic sessions should be revived in the interest of the farmers. They have benefitted a lot and they should continue to get benefitted. It was also affirmed by the users and the Knowledge Worker present at that time. The farming community has been able to improve their yield without unnecessarily spending on the inputs and without causing harm to the environment. The farming community needs a direction and this can only be given by institutions such as the MSSRF, the farmers pointed out. They cannot expect any help or guidance from the agriculture extension personnel, stated some of the VMC members.

One of the villagers who has been using the services of the VKC says, "We have agricultural machinery for everything. It would be of great help and encouragement to the farm women and men if the operation of the machineries is demonstrated at the village level through the VRC. I believe this will help in the development of the farming community".

It was expressed that computer classes could be conducted for school students in the VKC during the weekends. This will give them a foundation for future. It was also felt that few more computers in good working condition would be of help to the students and the youngsters. Awareness/training programmes on job opportunities for youngsters is essential.

The Knowledge Worker has identified nine youngsters from the *Panchayat* for participating in *Ilainjar Thiran Membadu* (Youth capacity building or skill development) programme conducted through *Mahalir Thittam*. A need for similar programme in Vilangudi has been expressed by the youngsters and the elders. The VMC feels that it is their duty to do something for creating job opportunities for Vilangudi youngsters.

It was also expressed that village women and men become more aware of online services.

When we asked one of the farmers how the services of the VKC can be further enhanced to reach more people he suggested a notice board be kept in a public place.

The challenges

For a VKC to function well there are certain essential attributes such as (1)the presence of an efficient and committed Knowledge Worker who is supported by the VMC and other strategic partners and the village community; (2). proper infrastructural facilities such as computers, printer, photo copying machine and so on. Presently the latter component is weak. This hinders the work of the VKC as it is unable to provide online services as expected by the people. Often Xerox machine and printer give problem. Whatever money the VKC earns through online services and taking printouts and Xerox copies is largely spent on repairing the ICT infrastructure. Often, VKC is unable to help people learn computers because of the recurrent problems. There is only one computer. The VKC requires a proper printer, photo copier machine and computers .

Another important thing that needs the attention is honorarium of the Knowledge Worker; it needs to be increased (from Rs 4500 to at least Rs 6500) for them to work enthusiastically and they are also answerable to the family. Some arrangement needs to be made in this regard. It is important for carrying out the services and activities of the VKC effectively and without any interruption, we were told. It is really great to know that the Knowledge Worker who has been serving since its inception taken the responsibility of training a person to manage the Knowledge Centre.¹⁴ This only reflects her sense of ownership of the VKC.

14. As we have mentioned earlier Ms Devika pays her a monthly honorarium of Rs 2000; Ms Devika is paid Rs4500 by the VRC from which she pays Ms Megala.

Fortunately, work has been going on because of the committed Knowledge Worker ably supported by the Boundary Partner, the VMC, strategic partners and the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru; this should be continued for the socioeconomic development of the village.

ii Village Knowledge Centre, Onangudi Village

Village Knowledge Centre at Onangudi in Pudukottai district is a vibrant centre with active participation and cooperation of all the stake holders concerned. Similar to Vilangudi VKC, this VKC has also earned a significant identity and recognition among the village community. The services of VKC reach all the streets of the village through the VMC members and Knowledge Worker. Onangudi is also primarily an agricultural based village along with livestock rearing.

Coming of VKC in Onangudi Village

The VKC at Onangudi was set up in September 2007 with initiative taken by the then Village *Panchayat* President Ms Megala, a very dynamic leader. She has good relationship with the villagers. She is the village representative. She had the cooperation and support of the village community in all the activities concerning the village. Few of the villagers had heard about VKC functioning in other villages and had an idea about its services to the village community. Ms Megala along with *Panchayat* Secretary and few others approached the VRC of Pudukottai and expressed the desire for a knowledge centre in their village. The President has vast experience of working at the grassroots level; she was not a stranger to Dr Rajakumar¹⁵, the Co-ordinator of the VRC programme of MSSRF with whom she had worked while he was engaged in *Ariyoli Iyakkam* (Literacy Programme) conducted at the district level. This made things much easier for her. Rajakumar was fully aware of the commitment and clarity of the *Panchayat* President; he was confident that if a VKC was set up it would definitely fulfil the purpose. The village *Panchayat* secretary was also keen on having a VKC in the village. Having able to assess the genuine interest and keenness of the *Panchayat* president and few villagers (who are members of Village Management Committee of VKC now), the VRC of Pudukottai started working towards setting up a VKC in Onangudi by adopting the usual procedure. All the necessary procedure was systematically followed with proper coordination and cooperation between the village community and the VRC. Few meetings were held with the village community and conducted Participatory Rural Appraisal, need assessment and awareness programmes about the services

15. Dr Rajakumar, before joining MSSRF as the coordinator of the VRC programme had the experience of working at the collector's office in implementing programmes like *Arivoli Iyakkam*. Ms Megala was also engaged in that programme. He was the district coordinator of the programme. Dr Rajakumar knew the ability and interest of Ms Megala working at grass root level. He was confident of her capacity working with people and doing her best in whatever work she undertakes. Ms Megala gives full credit to Dr Rajakumar for her growth from a quiet village woman to a Village Level President and now the Chairman of her Village *Panchayat*.

and activities of the VKC aimed at addressing the needs of the community. With the village *Panchayat* President as the Boundary Partner the Centre came into existence during September, 2007 in a Self Help Group building (rent free) allotted by the Village *Panchayat*. The Boundary Partner also came forward to take care of the electricity charges incurred by the VKC. The Village *Panchayat* also identified a woman to serve as Knowledge Worker of the VKC.

Subsequently, Village Management Committee of the VKC was constituted to monitor and support the activities of the VKC; originally it had 12 members; VMC members has increased from 12 to 15 and from 15 to 25 persons now (18 men and 17 men). Initially it included mostly male farmers; subsequently, care has been taken to include women and men farmers from different castes; it was a conscious decision to include women farmers in the VMC because many are involved fully in agriculture, pointed out the *Panchayat* Secretary. The VMC include persons from different fields (village men and women, village school head master (because the VMC wishes that their village should attain 100 % literacy), VHN, *Anganwadi* teacher (health) VAO (for village records), Village *Panchayat* Secretary, post master, a member from BDO and line departments) for sharing information and carrying out activities in an effective coordinative manner.

The VKC since its inception has been growing well in reaching people with its services supported by the committed VMC, a very helpful VRC in facilitating various activities and getting linkages and a friendly Knowledge Worker at the VKC. Most importantly, the village women and men appreciate the services of the VKC. The VMC in general has commitment to their work and wish to develop their village both socially and economically. This came out very clearly while talking to the various VMC members including women members. The VKC is regarded by the VMC as a best platform to improve the livelihood of the villagers. It may be pointed out here that the VKC has seen three *Panchayat* Presidents during its 15 years of journey; we could gather from our conversations that all of them have been a motivated lot and had the village development as their goal. The VKC also has seen three Knowledge Workers (including the present one) who have rendered their services with commitment and clarity. The present Knowledge Worker used to visit the VKC when she was engaged in MGREGA work; she took interest in the VKC activities. So, it was easy to find a new Knowledge Worker in her when her predecessor had to leave because she got married. It may be of interest to mention that Ms Megala has grown to become *Panchayat* Chairman now and has a good rapport with government departments which is used for the benefit of the entire village.

Services and activities of the VKC

The VKC caters to the various needs of the villagers through its various services; a

majority including women make use of its services in one way or the other. Similar to VKC in Vilangudi, the VKC at Onangudi also extends its services to the village community. Its services cover computer skill development, online services, conducting camps and training/awareness programmes on general health for different age groups, eye camp, veterinary camps, and agricultural training programmes and so on with active participation of the respective strategic partner. The VKC gradually started drawing village women and men irrespective of caste, age and sex. One of the women staff at the VRC of Pudukottai mentioned that initially they used to go behind the villagers to encourage them to avail the services of the VKC but today they are coming in search of the VKC/VRC. We are providing them with necessary services (... *munbu payanaligalai thedi naam povom. Ippa avargal nammai thedi varugirargal. Ella sevaiyum seigirom!*) This indicates the development of the VKC in helping the village community in their livelihood and other social aspects, she stated. The Knowledge Worker mentioned that the VKC is the *adaiyalam* (identity) of the village. She confidently said that at least one of the services of the VKC is used and benefitted by every household; VKC services reach almost all the households in the village in different ways.

Steady growth of VKC in reaching the village community

In the early days, computers were the attraction to the children; they came in large numbers to learn through CALP (Computer Aided Learning Programme) and by the grownups to develop their computer skills. We were told that more than 200 (boys and girls) underwent skill development in training through MUPP¹⁶ (Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme). Around 40 participants of the programme including women have got employment based on their MUPP certificate (in post office, *Panchayat* union office, in school on temporary basis and few undertake work from home).

VKC monitors and observe the growth of a girl or boy gradually improving computer skills and encourages him or her to strengthen ones skills. There has been a request from the school to train the school students in computers but VKC is not in a position to fulfil this need because of lack of proper system. VKC is using *Panchayat* Union office's computer. There has been a request for a separate room for conducting computer classes. It is mentioned that necessary funds have not been released from the *Panchayat*.

The VKC has a small library and encourages school students and others to read books.. Books were got by using *Anna Marumalarchi Thittam* . Class 7 and 8 students make use of the library for writing essays or composition or to prepare for talks at school or village

16. National Virtual Academy conducted three ICT-based curricula including (i) Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP), (ii) Computer-Aided Learning Programme (CALP) and (iii) Intel Learn Programme. They are addressed to the rural children and youth (both female and male members) to improve their IT skills and knowledge about sustainable development through IT literacy.

function. Books related to Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission Exam (TNPSC) are available in the VKC which are used by the older students to appear for the exam. It may be mentioned here that the books for preparing TNPSC exams were provided by the Coordinator of the VRC programme based on the demand from the VKC.

Season based veterinary camps are held in the village. It was pointed out by one of the VRC staff that cattle population is more than human population in the village. Almost all the households rear two-three cows. Earlier, the livestock was prone to disease and mortality was high. But situation started showing signs of improvement in cattle health and reduction in mortality rate with conducting regular veterinary camps. Action is also taken periodically to vaccinate the livestock against disease attack, mentioned one of the informants. Deworming is done periodically for calves. Awareness level has increased among the cattle owners to approach the VKC for any help to protect their livestock.

Text / voice messages from the VRC/VKC have been received well by the farming community. It is useful in planning their agricultural operations, in taking precautions against pest/ disease attack on their crops and to protect their livestock as well. Weather forecast sent through as voice/text messages are found to be useful; it helps the farmers in taking decisions and plan out their agricultural activities. During our interaction with a group of farmers it was pointed out by one Mr Sridhar (who is also a VMC member for a long time) that nearly 1000 farm women and men make use of voice messages. He added to say that he himself shares the information with 10 others. Like this information is passed on and shared among the village community.

Agriculture Helpline Service is yet another facility provided by the VRC/VKC; which is used by both women and men farmers for any doubts or clarifications regarding farming related information. Queries from the farmers are answered by agricultural expert or plant doctor. Helpline numbers are printed in bold letters in a thick sheet and the same is displayed at strategic points in the village. Helpline is used to get details or help in getting details about government schemes. It was mentioned by one of the VRC staff that there was an enquiry about getting a tractor on subsidy. The plant doctor's help was sought in this. Through his guidance the farmer could get his tractor for subsidy without difficulty.

A farmers' Whatsapp group of Onangudi *Ooraatchi* (*Panchayat*) with members of 214 (120 women and 94 men) is very active in exchange and sharing of information and getting crop advisories. Plant doctor is part of this Whatsapp group. We learnt that affected portion of the plant's picture is shared in the Whatsapp. They get immediate response from the plant doctor and other agricultural scientists associated with MSSRF. The plant doctor and the VRC staff are also accessible through phone for any clarification

related to crop health; the farmers explain the symptoms very clearly. Villagers also contact over the phone related to livestock and government schemes.

Services of Plant Clinic

Plant clinic, commenced in 2012, is a landmark programme which is hailed by the farming community; it has undoubtedly created a profound impact in their lives though it took some time to gain the recognition. Generally, plant clinic session is held once in 15 days in one of the villages that come under Onangudi *Panchayat*. All the five villages are covered. They are informed about the clinic timings two days in advance. The VKC undertook household visits to create awareness about plant clinic services. During the process of creating awareness about plant clinic it was realised by the VKC/VRC that agriculture being a major economic activity, attention to proper land utilisation should be promoted to improve farmers' income. So, one of the efforts taken was converting waste land into productive one. VKC created importance on soil testing. Before this, the farmers never paid any attention to soil testing; there was no need for it, they thought. Now, soil test is carried out by a majority of the households. Similarly, through plant clinic awareness was created on control and management. Farmers' dependence on local input dealer for guidance and getting inputs has reduced significantly. Whatever, the local input dealer prescribed the farmers applied without giving any thought to it. They are saved from using excess inputs to the crop. Phone-in-programme, audio conference and video conference are conducted with the help of an expert concerned with a particular subject matter (crop/veterinary related, health, education and employment opportunities and so on).

Plant Clinic: a great support to women farmers

The Knowledge Worker and few women we spoke to pointed out that the plant clinic programme was initiated at a crucial time when men farmers started moving out (one of the reasons cited for this was shortage of labour) of the village looking for alternative economic activity and leaving the entire farm responsibility on women' s shoulders. It was also mentioned by the women that men complained about labour shortage (they blamed MGNREGA for this) as one of the reasons for giving up agriculture. It is pointed out that plant clinic has been a great support to women particularly those who are managing their farming operations without a male member's support. VKC took particular interest to encourage women interested in continuing the household economic activity of agriculture; they have the experience of working at the field since their childhood. So, they are able to grasp well when symptoms of disease/pest are explained using the affected plant parts and also with the help of microscope. Awareness on using required inputs has increased among them. They do not hesitate to call the plant doctor for any crop advisory. 98% of the crop advisories are organic based; only in

extreme cases chemical is prescribed. Plant clinic advises only sustainable agricultural practices and gives explanation why it should be adopted. So, the farmers get right understanding and try their best to adopt sustainable practices. With the guidance of the plant clinic the women are able take care of the cultivation of crops; they are empowered with right knowledge and this has enhanced their confidence level.

The VKC has got two sprayers which are rented out. The sprayers were bought with the contribution of the Coordinator of the VRC programme and the village Chairman. The sprayers are rented out to farmers.

Online services

Online services rendered at the VKC are well appreciated by the village community by both women and men. It is helping them to get things done in their own village without having to travel outside of it . Online services include for applying *Thirumana udavipanam* (Marriage allowance scheme), *garpini pen paramarippu panam* (Pregnant woman maintenance payment), *kuzhandaigal kalvi thogai* (scholarship for children's education), applying for a new ration card and renewal of ration card, inclusion and deletion of names from the ration card, correction in Aadhar card, applying for PAN card, applying for a fresh passport and renewal. Certificates related to land, house *patta*, nativity, caste and so on are immediately given on the following day itself by the VAO. Villagers including illiterate women are aware of the online services available at the VKC and feel free to approach the Knowledge Worker for getting nativity certificate, community certificate (*jaadhi chaniridhazh*), inclusion and deletion of names in the ration card, online transfer of money, fresh application and renewal of passport and so on. Knowledge Worker also helps in getting *kisan* card, for mobile recharge, old age pension and widow pension. It was also pointed out by the Knowledge Worker that villagers are encouraged to include the name of a woman in any land transactions and subsequent registration of land; whenever a girl is given a motorbike or any other vehicle as a marriage gift the parents of the girl are encouraged to register the vehicle in their daughter's name.

Reach of VKC services expands

VKC's reach is increasing day by day even beyond the village and the *Panchayat* also. The above mentioned services and activities are continued without losing the momentum. Farm women and men make use of the various facilities and services related to their livelihood. They are saved from travelling more than five kilometres to get details. One of the VMC members confidently said *kattayamoru kudumbathirku oru sevai nammidam irundu poi irukkum* meaning ... definitely at least one service from the VKC would have gone to every household in the village (such as photocopying, opening of bank account, savings in the post office, for clarification related to their livelihood

or government schemes). Season based agricultural camps (example pest/disease related) and veterinary camps (*komari noi* or foot and mouth disease) are conducted regularly. Livestock is protected against diseases now; so there has been considerable decrease in cattle death rate. In the last five to six years awareness on the importance of soil test has increased. Now, once a year soil test is carried out. From seed to harvest training is conducted. Our interaction with the farmers also revealed that there is yield increase (by five to 10 bags per acre). Their expenses have come down. So, naturally it has created a great change in the attitude of the farmers (that they know everything) and are largely making use of the programmes, training and information disseminated through various ICTD tools.

Services and benefits of *Payir Maruthuva Mugam* has spread to surrounding villages such as Maramadakki, Seegampatti, Chathiram and Anna Nagar. There are 20 households in Maramadakki village; all are agriculturalists. We were told that these households initially wondered and made fun of others who visited the plant clinic. Now, they want a VKC in their village. They walk two kilometres to consult the plant doctor for their crop problems. Based on their request a plant clinic was held through video conference which was well received by them. Even from other *Panchayat* farmers would visit the plant clinic. Such is the popularity of the plant clinic services in improving the yield and minimising expenditure.

Like in Vilangudi Village, when Covid vaccination was carried out the Knowledge Worker and the VMC also worked along with village health workers. The VMC members got vaccinated first. This encouraged many to have it without fear or doubt.

There are many other activities that are being carried out with the help of stake holders for the good of the community. All this have been possible because of the constant guidance, help and support of the VRC. The VRC facilitates linkages with departments and other institutions in bringing benefits to the village. It is pointed out by some of the VMC members, “When we go to a department and tell them we are coming from the VRC, we get special attention and the job is done easily”.

Voices from the village

Ms Thenmozhi, 33 Years

Ms Thenmozhi aged 33 years is a mother of two children; she has two acres of land; she lost her husband due to Covid . She works in the Village *Panchayat* office as *panithala poruppalar* (in charge of MGNREGA work) of MGNREGA for more than 10 years. She is of the view that the VKC is helping many in the village- school students are able to learn computers. Online services are extensively used by the villagers for getting phone recharge, to get *patta* and *chitta* etc. She said that as far as she knows more than

25 persons known to her have used the online services. She mentioned that the villagers are saved from travelling by bus to go to Town *Panchayat* located in Arimalam, five kilometres from Onangudi. Most of their needs are met at the VKC. Time and money is saved. People can visit the VKC without any inhibition for information or clarification. There are many who need help and support; old people are able to get their pension, women visit the centre in more numbers; men go out and it is women who take care of the agriculture; they get the guidance and necessary information from the VKC; for such women and others VKC is doing a great service, added Ms Thenmozhi.

Ms Thenmozhi owns two acres of land. She appreciates the help rendered by the VKC related to agriculture and cattle care. She has personally benefitted through the VKC. She mentioned about distributing Helpline cards to farm women and men. This enables them to contact for any assistance related to their livelihood. Ms Thenmozhi also messages related to agriculture and livestock through SMS. The villagers can contact VKC and the plant doctor directly and get necessary guidance and crop advisories. She is happy to share with us that now she buys only necessary inputs; the input dealer would prescribe more; so she is spending less on the inputs. She was given a solution for controlling *konda poochi* (Ear head bug) in rice crop by using Helpline service. She shares the information with others. In case someone near her house needs any help from the VKC she helps them with it. She values the direct contact and the explanation / reasons given for adopting a particular practice or treating a plant and in taking precautions against pest/disease. She said she could not participate in mushroom cultivation training. Her neighbours participated and three of them are planning to start together mushroom cultivation for market.

Ms Thenmozhi owns milch cow and makes use of the veterinary camps held at the village. She finds them useful for taking precaution or treating *kaanal noi* (foot and mouth disease) or *madi noi* (udder disease). She does not have to go to Arimalam which is five kilo metres from her village. She is able to get her cow vaccinated in her village itself. Veterinary camps are held generally once in six months, she mentioned. The camp is held alternatively in all the four hamlets that come under the Onangudi Village *Panchayat*. So it is easy for the cattle owners to make use of the camps.

Ms Thenmozhi also mentioned about the service done by the VKC in linking the farmers with Modi Scheme¹⁷. It is done free of cost. Otherwise they had to go outside and the farmers generally would be charged Rs 200 to Rs 300. Even for verifying the number Rs 100 is charged. Based on one of the VMC members guidance she has applied for widow certificate with the help of the VKC. She wished that training on tailoring would be

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of great help to the women. She expressed a desire to learn computers. VKC is doing yeomen service to the village community through agriculture and online services. The Knowledge Worker is approachable and the VKC is in a central place of the village, pointed out Ms Thenmozhi. The VKC is located very near the *Panchayat* office. Middle School and the Post Office are located near to the VKC. It is easily noticeable and accessible. And there is likelihood that more than 380 families are aware of the VKC and its services and they are making use of it. She wished VKC many, many more years of service (*neenda naal irukkanum*) to the women and men of the village.

Lakshmi, 45 years

Ms Lakshmi, though illiterate is a confident person who makes use of the services of the VKC in several ways. Her husband takes up agricultural work for wages. She also goes for daily wages. She also takes care of her small parcel of land where she cultivates rice and *vellari*. The household does not have any livestock except four hens. She says she has been going to the VKC when Ms Kanaka was a Knowledge Worker (the previous Knowledge Worker) and she happened to be her neighbour. Ms Lakshmi has been one of the many persons using the plant clinic services effectively. She takes the affected portion of the crop to the plant clinic for diagnosis. She gets the inputs recommended by the plant clinic and applies as per the instruction. She carried out soil test first time. Visiting plant clinic personally helps her; she says, “we can find out/learn directly, isn’t it (*nambale neraga theridhu kollam allawa?*)?” Ms Lakshmi does not go to the input dealer for guidance. She uses the inputs prescribed by the plant clinic and she says it is very effective in preventing/controlling pest/diseases and avoiding use of unnecessary inputs. Based on the advice of the plant clinic she has reduced the quantity of Urea applied to the land.

Only once, she failed to take the guidance of the plant clinic/VKC and planted a rice (PNR) variety which was not suited to that particular season. Based on input dealer’s suggestion she applied fertilisers. The decision was entirely hers, pointed out Ms Lakshmi. She lost nearly Rs 25000. Had she contacted plant doctor may be loss could have been avoided; but when she contacted the plant clinic it was too late. She participates in the meetings organised by the VKC.

Apart from using plant clinic services, Ms Lakshmi takes the help of the Knowledge Worker for online services for paying electricity bill and for phone recharge. She suggested her son to apply for his passport who was planning to do it elsewhere. He got his passport without difficulty. She could make use of the *Thirumana Udhavi Thittam* when her daughter got married. After her daughter’s marriage Ms Lakshmi approached the VKC to delete her daughter’s name from the ration card.

When we asked her whether she encourages others in her village to visit plant clinic and the VKC pat came her reply, “...there is no need for that. All know about the services and benefits about the VKC!”

Ms Lakshmi is thankful to the Knowledge Worker for enrolling her in SHG. Surprisingly, she is the leader of the new SHG formed. She says she takes the help of an educated young girl for accounting purposes and writing the *theermanam* (decisions/resolutions); the young girl is paid by the group for her services. Being part of the SHG is of great help to her and other members. They have started savings and as group members they also got loan for more than three times so far from the government. The group members are able to repay the loan instalment on time. The loan amount was very useful for her to meet the expenses of her daughter’s child delivery. Ms Lakshmi pointing out at Ms Kavitha (who is also a member (not gone to school) in the SHG and present during the interview) said that Ms Kavitha redeemed her pledged jewels and used it for her children’s education; Ms Kavitha added to say that it was helpful in meeting the unexpected expenses of the household.

Ms Lakshmi and Ms Kavitha wished sincerely that the VKC should continue to function for the good of the village women and men; *pengalukku rumba ubayogam. Veettai naduthuvadhu pengal.Naangale mudivu eduppom. Veetukkararai ketkanum enru illai* meaning it is particularly helpful for women who essentially run the household. Women take decisions without depending on men.

Ms Nithya, 29 years

Ms Nithya lives in Seegampatti village one km from Onangudi. She is married. She is working in the *Panchayat* office for the past two years. The household owns one and half acre with bore pump facility. They rear milch cows and goats. Her association with VKC started seven years ago. She first came for taking photocopies. Her husband takes care of the agricultural operations but he normally does not visit the VKC or plant clinic. But he would use the crop advisories provided by the plant clinic. She would take the affected portion of the crop to the plant clinic and get necessary crop advisories. Her father-in-law also visits the clinic. Their crops such as *ulundu* (black gram), *kathari* (egg plant), *sundai chedi* (*Solanum* sp) affected by pest/ disease could be treated based on the advisory of the plant clinic. Her village people also send their sample crops though her to the plant clinic.

Even if she misses attending the plant clinic session held in the village she can get required clarification through phone. Moreover, she receives SMS (crop advisories and livestock information) which gives information well in advance. She could not participate in mushroom cultivation training. For the first time the villagers came to

know of such training. Now they are using mushrooms in their cooking. Her neighbours who participated in the training are planning to start cultivation on a small scale for commercial purpose. .

Ms Nithya asserts that there is improvement/development in agriculture. Earlier, she said, “we used to try one chemical after another. Now the situation has changed; we take the affected portion of the crop to the clinic and we get the necessary advisory. Our doubts are cleared. We carry out agricultural operations based on knowledge”.

According to Ms Nithya, both agriculture and online services provided at the VKC are of great help and use to the villagers. They do not have to stand in the queue to pay their bill and can avoid going to Arimalam village. Villagers, particularly women find it useful. They can pay their EB bill and get their phone recharged; they can apply for getting *patta* and *chitta* and other certificates such as nativity and caste.

Ms Nithya mentioned that she came to know that VKC would organise training on tailoring and she would like to make use of it.

Ms Senthamarai, 42 years

It is encouraging to find women like Ms Senthamarai from a neighbouring village three kilometres from Onangudi makes use of the services rendered through the VKC particularly agriculture and livestock related ones. She is a hardworking woman and carries out agricultural operations in her land (half an acre) without much help from her spouse who is a mason. She mainly cultivates rice. She also goes for agricultural work for wages. She has milch cows and goat. Two years ago (2019-2020) she happened to participate in an agricultural meeting organised by the VRC through the Onangudi VKC. Soon after the meeting she registered her mobile number to receive SMS from the VRC. Since that day she has been one of the regular persons using the services of the VKC. From raising seed bed to harvest she follows the guidance of the plant clinic. She finds the advisories provided at the plant clinic helpful in preventing/controlling pest/disease on crops. As per the advice of the plant doctor she tries to adopt sustainable agricultural practices. She uses farm yard manure these days and avoids harmful chemicals. As per the guidance she applied farm yard manure just before transplantation of rice crop. She learnt that spider does not cause any harm to the crop. She is happy with the growth of the crop and the yield.

Ms Senthamarai also shared with us that she has been able to take care of her cattle. She has got her cow vaccinated against *komari* and *kaanal noi* attack. She also dewormed her calf. She has got her cow injected for artificial insemination (*Sinai voosi*).

VKC also helps people to include and delete name from the ration card. It also helps in getting *kisan* card.

Senthamarai concluded by saying “no complaints about the services of VKC. It is useful and helpful to the village community”.

Mr Arumugam, 55 years, Class 10

Mr Arumugam is one of the VMC members. He is a big farmer. He is of the view that there has been improvement in agriculture and cattle care. Government used to conduct veterinary camp only after some incidence of cattle death. The VKC in advance conducts veterinary camp to prevent disease attack (such as *kaanal noi, madi noi*). Vaccination is done to the cattle to safe guard them. Insemination of cows is also carried out. To prevent or reduce the mortality rate among the lamps measures are taken in advance with the help of the veterinary department.

Guidance is given from seed to harvest of a crop. Farmers are informed about the suitable season for planting a particular variety of rice. Same variety may not perform well in the following season. So, farmers are careful in choosing a right variety depending on the season. VKC/plant clinic recommends mostly organic based advisories. The farmers are aware of the harmful chemicals now. SMS reach more than 1000 farm women and men. Pest control advisories for coconut and rice are useful. Weather forecast is greatly appreciated by the villagers; it helps to plan their harvest of crop, fertiliser application and so on. Importance of using certified seeds (from Joint Director of Agriculture office) are disseminated among the farmers.

Mr Arumugam mentioned about health programmes conducted for school children. He proudly said that he does not know his blood group but the school children would know their blood group. And, also they know the importance of deworming once in three months. In case they go to a doctor for some consultation for fever or something else and the doctor advices deworming he/she would say that he/she got it done recently. Children are aware of the importance of deworming.

Any health scheme (ICDS, *Illam thedi maruthuvam*) announced by the department is reached to the respective section (school children, pregnant women, adolescent girls) of the population with the help of the VKC in coordination with the respective persons in charge from the department. Awareness on health and *Ootta Chathu* is created among the school children.

Through VRC the village women, men and the students get all necessary support. So, people’s needs are met to a great extent possible. It is helpful to access different department for any help.

Ms Padma, 36 years, Class 12

Ms Padma is one of the women in the village doing agriculture single handed in her three acres of land. Her husband is a driver in Tiruchirappalli. She cultivates rice in

both the seasons. In dry land sesame, black gram, groundnut and tapioca are cultivated. She has been using VKC services for the past five years. Earlier she was working in a Bank. Ms Padma's statement "*aangal illadavarku VKC romba udhavi*" meaning VKC is very helpful for woman who does not have male support, reflects the role played by the VKC/VRC in the lives of the women farmers. It has given them the support and guidance to carry out the agricultural operations with confidence and clarity through the plant clinic programme. Farmers both women and men are not taken for a ride by the input dealers.

Based on the suggestion of the plant clinic she bought drum seed machine to handle labour problem. This method is very economical also. In a land where 100 kilos of seed used it is sufficient if one has 30kilos of seed material, mentioned Ms Padma. She got the machine for subsidized rate of Rs 3500. She says six or seven persons have bought it with subsidy. Thanks to the plant clinic programme which has been helping the farmers to continue with their traditional livelihood.

Ms Padma shared with us about her participation in a programme participated by women farmers. This meeting was about how women are able to take care of household activities and at the same are able to work on their lands fulltime. Ms Padma says it was enlightening to know how women carryout different activities by themselves such as bund forming. (*varappu vettudal*) and ploughing the land using the oxen; she learnt that few women manage the farm by themselves while few others shared that they work along with the labourers. Her participation in this programme motivated her further; she felt that when elderly women are able to do such work by themselves why can't she do it!

Ms Padma is a member in women seed farmers group for the last two years. The purpose of this group has been to encourage women to get trained and share the knowledge with others. Ms Padma has also participated in mushroom cultivation training organised by the VKC. She is happy to learn many new things regarding agriculture and other related aspects. Ms Padma pointed out she has made use of VKC service for getting a PAN card and for getting *kalvi chanridazh and jadi chandridazh*.

Ms Padma was proud to mention that she has been included as a member in the VMC committee three months ago because of her interest and confidence in doing agriculture.

Mr Kannan, 48 years

Mr Kannan has been doing agriculture only from the last six-seven years; he was working earlier as a driver in a foreign country. He finds plant clinic services very helpful in carrying out his day-to-day agricultural operations in his six acres of land. He appreciates the timely pest/disease alerts in different seasons and the relevant crop

advisories. Based on the recommendation of the plant doctor he carried out soil test in his land. Based on the soil test result he was advised to apply farm yard manure to the land to improve the soil nutrients which he has been following. He never misses plant clinic sessions held in his village.

VMC of the VKC, committed to village development

The Village Committee Members' earnest interest in improving the village both socially and economically was evident during our lengthy discussion. Importantly, the VMC has a clear understanding of the utility of the VKC/VRC programme. We could gather from our interactions that the members are very regular in meeting every month and discuss the activities of the Centre. Exchange of information also takes place between members from different backgrounds. There is perfect understanding and coordination among the VMC members irrespective of age, sex and caste. The VMC believes that the VRC/VKC programme is a perfect platform to improve the livelihood of the villagers and their social conditions. Ms Megala who held the office as Village *Panchayat* President is the Chairman of the village now. She was instrumental in getting the VKC programme to Onangudi. She is a member of the VMC and takes great interest in the functioning of the VKC. She is a great source of strength to the VMC. It was interesting to observe that even the elders had confidence in her as the President and now as *Panchayat* Union Chairman.

The newly elected President is very supportive and helpful in running the VKC. Though the President appeared a reserved and soft spoken person, his intentions were very clear; the only point he kept emphasising was creating employment opportunities for both women and men and improving agriculture and cattle care, the primary livelihood of the majority of the villagers. He mentioned that the *Panchayat* is ready to provide another building for conducting training to the villagers to improve their livelihood. He said that the VRC has to guide the *Panchayat* in realising this objective. As the President he would do his best, he mentioned. Interestingly, all the other members echoed similar concerns. *Panchayat* Secretary felt that it is important to provide training in computer skill development and strengthening it. Four or five systems are required at the Centre to provide computer training to the village students both male and female students. He added to say it helps in their studies and getting employment. It is pointed out during our interaction with the VMC members that it is the duty of the VMC to provide training to students and women; the training should be related to agriculture/veterinary to improve their income. It was also pointed out that more and more they think about the development of the village their role and responsibility also increase. It is also pointed out their activities concerning the village development should bring good name to MSSRF.

The *Panchayat* President and also the Boundary Partner of the VKC programme asserted that the village *Panchayat* is functioning with the help of the VKC/VRC (*Ooratchye VKC /VRC vaithu nadakiradhu*). “We do not know about computers. But our work is being done by using the computers. Ours is the first village in preparing the report and other documents using computers”. He says he knew about the VKC for a long time. But it is after becoming the *Panchayat* President he started taking keen interest in the VKC activities. Because he understood that it is a good platform to carry out *Panchayat* activities and taking the benefits to the village community. He commended VRC for conducting veterinary health camps and agricultural programmes; the livelihood of the villagers is centred on agriculture and cattle rearing. The online services available in the Centre greatly fulfil the needs of the villagers.

The VMC has been well constituted with members from different backgrounds so that they can be roped in when a programme or activity concern with one member. For example, it was decided to include the Village Middle School Headmaster because her support is essential in achieving 100 % literacy in the village. VMC takes the help of workers associated with MGNREGA to identify school dropouts in the village. The dropouts are encouraged to continue with their school education. We had an opportunity to interact with the Headmaster of the school. She appreciated the intention of the VMC in making their village 100 % literate and that she would extend her wholehearted support in this. She appreciated the VKC and VMC in sponsoring ID cards for the school students and providing gift items to give to the winners in oratory competitions and sports. She pointed out that the presence of VKC is a great source of help and inspiration to the students. The students make use of the books available at the VKC to prepare for oratory competitions or writing essays. The VKC also helps in filling up the application forms and so on. She appreciated the role played by the Knowledge Worker in encouraging the students to visit the VKC and use the books. She also expressed that students should be encouraged in sports such as Javelin, high jump, shot-put and wondered whether VRC can help in this. It is heartening to mention here that the VRC immediately acted on it by contacting Nehru Yuva Kendra, Pudukottai who in turn responded positively.

In reaching the new scheme of the Tamil Nadu Government - *Makkalai thedi maruthuvam* (doorstep healthcare system) the VMC and the Knowledge Worker extend help to the VHN; and in health and awareness programmes conducted for *valar ilam pengal* (adolescent girls) the VMC helps *Anganwadi* worker. Knowledge Worker and the VRC staff also participate in these programmes and help increasing awareness on personal hygiene particularly during menstruation, health, education and social security and so on. *Anganwadi* teacher gets support and help of the VMC/VKC while conducting programmes related to pregnant women and *Ootta Chathu* (nutrition) for children.

VHN participates in health programmes conducted for school children (blood group test, deworming and so on) by the Government hospital. School children know their blood group now and they are also aware of the importance of deworming. They even remember when was the last deworming was done, mentioned proudly one of the VMC members. VMC members support and participate in the programmes conducted through the *Anganwadi* workers and Village Health Nurse in the village by sharing the information in their respective streets and in common places and also in mobilising people for the programme. The Anganwadi Worker and the VHN reciprocate by extending their help whenever VRC/VKC organises health programmes/eye camps.

Concept of saving has been promoted by the VKC among the village women and men. The villagers have been encouraged to open account under small saving (*siru semippu*) scheme in the post office which is located near the VKC. The Knowledge Worker confidently says that there is hardly any household without saving account in the post office. Beginning with the process of starting the account and thereafter maintaining it, the staff at the post office is helpful. The post office is located very near to the VKC. The Knowledge Worker promotes savings among Self Help Group members. Many have been inspired to become members in Self Help Group and start savings by opening saving bank account.

The VMC is well aware of the importance of a woman farmer's representation in the VKC. As we have mentioned earlier that Ms Padma was recently included in the VMC as member after observing her interest in agriculture and her involvement with VKC activities. She was included because it is believed that she would be a source of inspiration and help to others particularly women. True to their belief she has been doing her best in reaching the services of VKC to others. She says after becoming a VMC member her self esteem has enhanced. She shares information with her street people and her neighbouring field persons. She shares Helpline numbers with others. She was proud to mention that the villagers have come to know that she is one of the VMC members and it has given her importance among them. She encouraged many women to participate in mushroom cultivation training. Women have confidence in her and they show interest in participating meetings held outside the village.

After each training programme feedback is collected from the participants. Need assessment helps to understand the needs of the community and act accordingly, mentioned one of the staff at the VRC. For instance, during a health awareness programme conducted for adolescent girls, the participants expressed a need for awareness on women's legal rights. So a programme was conducted on women and law (*Pengalum Sattamum*) with the help of a woman lawyer. Involvement and co-operation of the VMC members play a significant role in sustaining the services and activities of the VKC/VRC programme. It was pointed out that through *Panchayat* they carry out

the *kattaya kadamaigal* (mandatory duties) and through the VKC *viruppa kadamaigal* (supportive duties/activities). VKC plays a very supportive role in implementing the *kattaya kadamaigal*. Through the VKC the *Panchayat* is able to take various programmes to the people immediately.

VKC acts as a central place of contact for all the stake holders/different departments/government offices. The location of VKC also plays a significant role in its functioning. It is situated in a central place of the village that no one can miss. The Village *Panchayat* office, The Village Middle School and Post Office are situated near to the VKC. It is easily accessible. Moreover, the village women and men feel free to visit the Centre without any reservations because one of their girls (Knowledge Worker) is only managing the Centre; so they feel comfortable in seeking the guidance or help of the VKC. The villagers believe that the VKC is theirs. For most of them it is *namma vivasaya* office (Our agriculture office) or it is referred to by relating it with the name of the Knowledge Worker, Menaka. Knowledge Worker's role in the VKC programme is an important factor for taking the services of the programme to all sections of the population, stated the *Panchayat* Chairman. Her approach is very good. She has been working for the past nine years. It is important her honorarium is increased, added the chairman.

Role of Knowledge Worker

The present Knowledge Worker, Ms Menaka has been working at the VKC since 2015; she took up this role after the second Knowledge Worker got married. For Ms Menaka it was easy to step into that role. Because, when she started working at the *Panchayat* office from 2013 under the MGNREGA scheme she was a regular visitor to the VKC and she keenly used to observe people coming to the VKC and children coming to work on the computers. She also used to take interest in plant clinic sessions. So, she was familiar with the VKC services and activities and the role of Knowledge Worker. She started with Rs 2200 as her monthly salary. She likes the nature of job and it is also a safe place to work.

Ms Menaka utilised the opportunity to connect with village women and men when they were mobilised to participate in plant clinic programme. She equipped herself with basic plant health issues and remedies. She is of the view that VKC through its agriculture and veterinary programmes and services is doing great service to the village community. It has attracted the attention of neighbouring *Panchayat* too.

When asked her why VKC in her village draws people towards it, she responded by saying that, they would not have come across such a facility anywhere. Agriculture is the major livelihood of this village. The plant clinic programme activities have gained the appreciation and confidence of the farmers, particularly women. Youngsters

are showing interest in agriculture these days. She pointed out that the farmers were surprised when they heard that there is a doctor for crops. Farmers could not believe themselves when the plant doctor visited their fields personally and giving relevant crops advisories. The thought that only big farmers can get such services was broken by the VKC/VRC plant clinic programme (*chinna vivasayiyai parpargala. periya vivasyayigalathan parpargal enbhadaai udaithathe naam dhan*). They have never seen agricultural extension person visiting them. The small and marginal farmers get to know about the schemes available for them.

It is difficult for farmers particularly women to go to the agricultural office. One has to pass through four villages to go to AO office. Women normally are little hesitant to visit a government office. They would be worried about the treatment they would get at the office. Another important factor for women and men to visit the VKC is the Knowledge Worker is from their midst, a very familiar face. So, no reservation, added Ms Menaka. All this draw more and more people to the VKC, to make use of the services for improving their livelihood and social condition, stated the Knowledge Worker, Ms Menaka.

Ms Menaka is happy to share with us that in some cases VKC acts as a link between a strategic partner and a farmer; going through an institution has more value than approaching directly by the farmer. VKC plays a significant role in getting Government schemes meant for farmers and livestock owners. The line department persons also approach for disseminating information related to schemes and subsidies. The concern department would ask for a list of eligible people from the VKC - for example in getting tarpaulin. VKC helps farmer interested in silkworm production. Menaka was proud to mention she visits the strategic partners for getting help and assistance from them for the village. She has gone to Horticultural office located in Keezha Paniayur (13 km from Onangudi) to find out about harvest machine. The VKC arranged for seed roller for Ms Padma. She mentioned that the role as a Knowledge Worker has given her the capacity to understand the needs of the people and to approach strategic partners for conducting a programme or for any information. She gives credit to the VRC and VMC for encouraging her to perform well.

Menaka says her self esteem has enhanced. She has grown to a level where she can interact with people without any fear. She says people won't believe if she says she has studied only up to Class 12. They think she is a post graduate. She carries out online related services. She has improved her skills and capacity in handling the VKC activities and interacting with the villagers. She is able to appreciate the needs of the farmers and she has the confidence in meeting officers. All this has been possible because of her role as a Knowledge Worker, mentioned Ms Menaka. She is confident that VKC would

function well and she would continue to serve the village as Knowledge Worker of the VKC. She added to say, “...my identity is VKC. If VKC is not there Menaka is not there. All the needs of the village should be met by the VKC. This is my dream (*Enakku adaiyalam Arivu Maiyam dhan. Arivu Maiyam illavittal Menaka illai. Ella thevaigalum naan seyyanum. Idhu ennudaiya kanavu*)”. Ms Menaka was proud to say that she has learnt to do photo shop work within a day. She feels this skill can be utilised to design invitation cards and take photos. People do not have to go out for taking a photo if the facility is made available at the VKC. She has done a wall paper for VRC. VRC encourages her to prepare colourful invitation cards for programmes to attract more people.

According to the Knowledge Worker, the VKC does not confine its activities related only to its services/programme. It goes beyond that, says MS Menaka. The village community takes the liberty of approaching VKC for other needs. VKC extends its help and guidance to those needs of the community also. As already mentioned, the VKC has motivated women to start RD account in the post office. Money cannot be withdrawn in between. They will get interest on the savings. Women have also been inspired to take insurance in the post office. Many of the households in the village have lost money by investing in chit fund companies. Savings in the post office gives them security.

Ms Menaka has taken interest in creating awareness about using the toilet facility (most of the toilet space was occupied for storing the firewood) . She would take the help of the school children to talk to their parents about the necessity of using the toilet and also using water economically. She feels this has greater reach and acceptance from the parents.

Ms Menaka is very happy to share that she is able to carry out online services with ease and thereby helping women, men and youngsters from going outside the village. They do not have to go to *Tahsildhar*'s office to get *Jaadhi Sanridhazh* (Community Certificate). Their time is saved; earlier to apply for passport one has to go to Tiruchirappalli (90km from Onangudi). Almost all the services available online are done at the VKC. If Menaka does not know to do certain service such as applying for Kisan card she would take the help of Ms Sujitha from VRC of Thiruvaiyaru . She would get the details through conference call. She got it done for Ms Thenmozhi working in the *Panchayat* Office. Otherwise it would have cost Ms Thenmozhi Rs 400/-. Similarly, Ms Menaka did not know when she had to help someone to get unemployed youth certificate from the Employment office she took the help of Ms Sujitha. She helps people to pay electricity bill online; they do not have to the other village, namely Arimalam for that. Likewise, she takes the help of VRC of Pudukottai when there is any problem in money transfer.

Ms Menaka mentioned that the VKC tried to help students to get courses based on their interest and marks. A student (completed Class 12) had come for some online

service. He casually mentioned that he wished to do Health Inspector course. But he was not aware of the Institution providing this course. He had good marks. So, she found out the college which offers this course and gave the student the fees details also. The student has joined the course. Similarly, a girl student wanted to do medicine but she did not have sufficient marks for that. So, the VKC suggested her to do something related to medicine; she has taken nursing course.

Ms Menaka continued to say that the VKC also tries to help them get employment after their studies. Through *Mahalir Thittam* (Tamil Nadu State Rural Livelihoods Mission) four persons have got job (in a car company). Five girls participated in a beautician course organised by the VKC/VRC (based on demand) . Three of them joined together and have set up a beauty parlour. Two persons undertake work at social functions.

Awareness is created about biodegradable and non degradable waste by involving school children. In all the activities carried out by the VKC Dr Rajakumar's role is very significant and commendable, stated Ms Menaka.

VMC's Role

Ms Menaka says VMC members play a significant role in sharing and exchange of information. She says information is shared between the VMC members and the Knowledge Worker so that it would reach the village people. She is confident when she says that if VMC knows about any information it is certain that the entire village would come to know of it. Because the VMC members are from different streets of the village and each member would make it a point to inform the residents in his/her street. She says "if I know means, my whole street would know it. This is how information is shared and exchanged. It is not just me sharing the information others are involved in that(*enakku theriyum enral en veedikke theriyum. Ippadithan thagaval parimarram nadakkiradhu. Naan chollithan enru illai*)".

Ms Menaka was full of appreciation for the VMC members in taking interest in the welfare of the village. Most of the members are primarily agriculturalists. They would visit their respective lands regularly; they would also take interest to observe the surrounding lands. In case he/she finds some disease/pest incidence in someone's field it would be reported to the Knowledge Worker so that she would inform the plant doctor about it and get necessary remedial measures. For example, a VMC member would say '...there is *ilai karugal*(leaf blight) problem in that field. Inform sir", so that the damage to the crop is controlled immediately. The concerned farmer also would be alerted. She pointed out that '... *sonda nilathil iruppadu vivasayikke theriyadhu*(the owner of the field may not have noticed the pest/disease attack on his crop); VMC member on his way to his field observes others fields and give necessary inputs for it. This is how exchange of information takes place between various departments and the village community'.

VRC, a great source of support

The role played by the VRC during the Corona epidemic of 2020-21 received the appreciation of the villagers and increased their confidence in the VKC/VRC, mentioned Ms Menaka, the Knowledge Worker and Ms Padma, one of the VMC members. It was a time when people's mobility was totally restricted and their livelihood was affected. VRC's timely action helped the farmers to sell their vegetables in Pudukottai market; not only that they were able to get vegetables from Pudukottai that are not cultivated in Onangudi. It helped both the producers of vegetables and consumers. The VRC, through the District Collector, helped in arranging a TATA AC van (with a license) using which the vegetables from Onangudi were sold in the Pudukottai market and the same van was used to bring vegetables (eg carrot, cabbage and beetroot) from the market that are not generally grown in the village. Two VMC members accompanied the van to the market. Cucumber is major vegetable cultivated in Onangudi and mainly women are involved in that cultivation. They were happy when they were able to market their produce in Pudukottai market by staying in their village itself.

Ms Padma also brought to our attention the role played by the VRC when cyclone Gaja hit the coast of Tamil Nadu in 2018. Some of the households in Onangudi were also affected by it; their houses were damaged. VRC of Pudukottai helped in organising relief material such as grocery items, bed sheets, clothes, tarpaulin by getting sponsorship for 50 members.

The Video and audio conferences conducted during the period of Corona epidemic has been well received by the farm women and men. They were able to carry out their daily agricultural operations with confidence. They were getting the required guidance. They were also able to contact the plant doctor and the VRC staff over the phone. In this context, it is worthwhile to know what the plant doctor had to say about plant clinic held through audio/video conference during the lockdown. According to Mr Senthil Kumar, the plant clinic doctor, audio/video conferences created interest in doing agriculture in those who had come home and stayed throughout the lockout. He was happy to share with us that several young men stayed back in their village to take up agriculture for their livelihood. He says, 40-42 % women farmers attended the audio/video programme. Women are empowered; they handle 95 % of *vellari* market. Mr Senthil Kumar gave credit to the Boundary Partner and the VMC particularly with one of the dynamic personality – the village *Panchayat* Chairman Ms Menaka- for taking the programme forward. Who takes it forward, is important, mentioned Mr Senthil Kumar.

Whatever cannot be done by the VKC they get it done through the help of respective line department (For example, getting ID card for physically challenged person). In such cases VKC acts as a bridge between the concerned department and the person

involved. Priority is given to such cases. This is possible because of the supportive VRC (For getting certified seeds help is taken from the office of Joint Director of Agriculture). And, when there was a Helpline query from a neighbouring village regarding getting a tractor on subsidy, the VRC connected the Helpline caller with the agricultural expert associated with the VRC who in turn contacted the AO and got the tractor on subsidy. Similarly, the VRC has helped in getting oil motor and electric motor on subsidy for the farmers. Line departments have confidence in the VRC particularly the VRC programme coordinator.

The Knowledge Worker pointed out that if there is any issue or problem facing the village, the VRC offers support. The VRC's thinking would be how it can help the villagers, added Ms Menaka.

It is understood from our interaction with women and men that they believe VKC as *pokkisham* (treasure). The VMC members consider the VKC as a temple. This is one of the factors for success of the VKC and the support of strategic partners is another factor for success. VMC members coming from different walks of life (women and men engaged primarily in agriculture, Village *Panchayat* President and the Secretary *Anganwadi*, VAO, BDO, School Headmaster and so on) and their coordinated efforts has been an important factor. The Knowledge Worker has a good rapport with the village women and men. She is proactive in taking the benefits of government programmes/schemes to the village community. She is good in communication. She would contact the strategic partners and get information related to the village. The two Knowledge Workers who managed the VKC earlier were also efficient and friendly. VRCs contact and regular follow up has been another important factor for the proper functioning of the VKC. Knowledge Workers is still given capacity building training (eg on line services such communication, Internet related and so on) on regular basis by the VRC. As it has been mentioned earlier Ms Sujitha a staff from the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru extends all necessary support to the Knowledge Workers (including the Knowledge Workers of Manpathai and other VKCs) related to online services. The woman staff has the patience and interest in imparting the knowledge to the Knowledge Workers. Not only that she monitors internet related work¹⁸ of the Knowledge Workers.

Expectations from the community

The Boundary Partner and the other members of the VMC are of the view that training programmes and camps should continue to be held in the village and

18. Any new scheme comes through the CLC (Common Learning Centre) Ms Sujitha shares it with the Knowledge Workers. She helps the Knowledge Workers to open a particular website and how to make use of it (for example how to apply for latest crop insurance scheme). Technical support is given by a staff from Pudukottai VRC.

Knowledge Workers were given training through All India Radio persons as to how to give voice messages. It was a good capacity building training mentioned few Knowledge Workers.

importantly they should be translated into action. He appreciates the frequent visits of staff from the VRC to the village. He is of the view that VKC should be a platform for creating job opportunities for the youth. This he feels could be achieved by giving importance for training youth in preparing for exams such as NEET and TNPSC. While the president was talking about the exams, a woman member interrupted and said a trainer could be appointed in the VKC for this purpose. The VMC members present at that time said in one voice that they are all ready to give their total support in this. The president said that he wished to see many *thozhil munaivor* (entrepreneurs) from this village. The *Panchayat* President added to say that it would be appreciated if training is given to SHG members to create job opportunities for them. The *Panchayat* Secretary and women such as Ms Thenmozhi and Ms Nithya expressed that it would be very much appreciated if training in tailoring is conducted for women in the village; this will help women to earn some money. It was expressed that it would be helpful if MSSRF assists in getting bank linkages.

Some of the senior VMC members brought to our notice about a local newsletter namely *Namma Ooru Seidhi*¹⁹ distributed to the villagers few years ago. They wished that this important newsletter be revived and circulated for the benefit of the rural people. They are willing to pay for it²⁰.

It was also suggested setting up a milk society in the village would enable the cattle owners to sell their milk for right rate. Now, private milk vendors procure milk from the village. VRC could facilitate in this, mentioned VMC members.

VKC/VRC programme has brought in lot of positive changes in the society. Some farmers were sceptical about the VKC and plant clinic services. Their attitude was “... we know farming; we have been doing it since our childhood. What is that they are going to tell us that we do not know”. The VKC programme has changed that attitude. Another significant impact or change has been that women too can do farming like men. It is not that only men can handle sprayers; even a woman can operate it. Brining out this change in the attitude has been a challenge, mentioned Ms Menaka. Women have started going out to participate in training programmes. Women have gained confidence that they can operate their lands on their own.

19. Published and circulated by the VRC, *Namma Ooru Seidhi* dealt with local and season specific information on agriculture and allied activities, employment opportunities, government schemes and subsidies and so on. This newsletter has not been in print for past few years because of paucity of funds. It was distributed free of cost in most of the VKC villages, NGOs and so on.

20. We learnt that when the newsletter was in print VMC members used to take turns to pay for the issues for distribution in Onangudi Village.

It is said that it was difficult to mobilise the villagers. They have to be explained why, what, how and at a time convenient to them. Now on their own they approach the VKC or the VMC members for any help. Almost all the households are using the services of the VKC. They particularly find it very, very useful the services rendered through the plant clinic. It has been a great blessing for the farming community. Another important service appreciated by the community is online services. It is helping them including in saving their time, energy, money and so on. The other health services and eye camps conducted have been well received by the community. Veterinary camps and advisories have saved the livestock of the villagers. Livestock rearing has been another major economic activity of the households in the village.

Challenges

The VMC members while appreciating the effective role played by the enthusiastic Knowledge Worker felt her honorarium should be increased. Presently she is getting Rs 4500/- per month. It is also felt that one more person should be trained to manage the VKC for its continuous services.

The VKC has been functioning well with efficient and committed Knowledge Worker supported by the VMC, strategic partners and the village community. Another significant and critical component for a VKC to offer its services is proper infrastructural facilities such as computers, printer, and photo copying machine and so on. Similar to VKC in Vilangudi, this component is weak. VKC is unable to help people learn computers because of non availability of system. There is only one computer but not functioning well. The VKC is using *Panchayat* Union system. The Knowledge Worker stated that if computers are available she can train the students using MUPP (Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme) curriculum; this would help them in their education and getting job opportunities. She also expressed that she would like to get trained in a course like MUPP. The Knowledge Worker mentioned that the *Panchayat* is willing to provide space for conducting computer training. Internet is also weak. The VKC requires a proper printer, Xerox machine and good computers from the VRC.

The School Head Master also brought to our notice that number of computers with proper functioning should be made available for children to learn computers. It was also brought to our notice that Public Address System (PAS) installed by the VRC has not been functioning for more than two years. The whole village gets benefitted when information is conveyed using the PAS.

The valuable need based services provided by the VKC/VRC programme has to continue in Onangudi for community's socioeconomic development. Whatever has

been done so far is very well appreciated by the community and it is not a surprise that it looks forward for similar continuous guidance and help from the programme. One of the men present during our interview said we do not expect any monetary help; we need guidance to carry our farming operations and in cattle care. Villagers consider the VKC as *pokkisham* (treasure). The newly elected President is very supportive and helpful in running the VKC. The VMC members consider the VKC as a temple.

iii Village Knowledge Centre, Manpathai Village

Village Knowledge Centre at Manpathai, Tiruchirappalli district is the youngest and dynamic centre functioning very well with active participation and cooperation of all the stake holders concerned. Within a short span of period this VKC has gained a significant recognition among the village community and its role in the socioeconomic development of the rural community is appreciated by the stakeholders concerned. The services of VKC reach a larger section of the village community through the committed VMC members and Knowledge Worker.

Launch of VKC at Manpathai

Village Knowledge Centre in Manpathai Village, Tiruchirappalli district was set up in June 2012 as a component of ClimaAdapt project funded by Norway (through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Royal Norwegian Embassy) in the Ponnaniar Reservoir System in this district. As a partner of ClimaAdapt project, MSSRF implemented this programme in Manpathai Village. The objective of the project has been to ensure food security by improving climate change adaptive capacity of agriculture and water sectors. This village was selected for VKC because this region experiences rainfall shortage. Livelihood of around 80% of the population revolves around agriculture. A majority of the households rear cattle which is an important source of income for them.

MSSRF did not have presence in Manpathai Village prior to setting up of the VKC; it was a new area. The VRC of Pudukottai was primarily engaged in identifying the area and implementing the VKC programme. After a series of meeting held with the village community, a VKC was set up by following the usual procedure before finalising and setting up the VKC with the Village Panchayat President as the boundary partner. He came forward to provide a room in the *Panchayat* office for the VKC and take care of the electricity charges. Subsequently, Village Management Committee of the VKC was constituted to monitor and support the activities of the VKC. The Village *Panchayat* also identified a suitable woman to serve as a Knowledge Worker of the VKC who had rendered her services with commitment. It was also agreed by the boundary partner and the VMC members that honorarium of the Knowledge Worker would be taken care of by the VMC members after the withdrawal of the project period of three years.

It was learnt during our interaction with the VMC members that initially with exception of few persons such as Mr Sesuraj from Manpathai Village there was lot of apprehension and doubts among the village community about the feasibility of running a VKC; it was generally felt it was not practical. One of the VMC members from Aniyappur²¹ mentioned that prior to setting up of the VKC whenever they were informed of the visit of the co-ordinator of the VRC to the village the first thought for him and few others would be to escape from the scene. However, the co-ordinator's perseverance, interest, commitment to serve the people and his positive approach greatly contributed to win over the confidence and subsequently villagers' cooperation in setting up the VKC in Manpathai and later in Aniyappur, added the same person. As the days passed by their concerns and apprehensions were replaced with confidence and commitment to sustain the programme. He and other VMC members were proud to share with us that the VKC which was set up as a component of ClimaAdapt project still continues to function very well even after the VKC was handed over to the village community after the project period.

We have mentioned earlier that the VKC in Manpathai (and also one in Aniyapur, a neighbouring village) is a unique one. It is unique and different from the VKCs of Vilangudi and Onangudi; both these VKCs are functioning very well with the support of the respective boundary partner, VMC members, Knowledge Worker, strategic partners and the village community. We have seen that the VRC of Pudukottai plays a significant role as a facilitator of the programme. The VRC of Pudukottai is formally associated with these two VKCs which are more than 15 years old and the honorarium of the Knowledge Workers of the VKCs are taken care of by MSSRF while the VKC of Manpathai is fully managed by the community. The VMC takes care of the honorarium of the Knowledge Worker. However, the VRC of Pudukottai continues to provide support and guidance in the functioning of the VKC in Manpathai (and also in Aniyapur). The VRC disseminates crop/veterinary advisory, weather forecast and other information through audio messages. The VRC conducts plant clinic programme to the farmers in the area. The Knowledge Workers in VKCs of Manpathai and Aniyapur continue to get capacity building training along with the other Knowledge Workers of VKCs run by MSSRF. The VMC members and the Knowledge Workers look forward for an opportunity to meet and discuss with the Coordinator of the VRC programme.

21. Six months after setting up of the VKC in Manpathai another VKC was set up in Aniyappur Village in Annapur, the neighbouring Village *Panchayat*.

Finding a place for setting up the VKC at Manpathai was much smooth and easy unlike the VKC in Aniyapur²²; once the decision was taken about the VKC programme in the village with the Village *Panchayat* as the Boundary Partner everything seemed to have fallen inline. Village Management Committee was formed mainly consisting of important persons (*girama mukkiyasthargal*) in the village. The then *Panchayat* president, who is respected by the village and the agricultural and other departments extended all the necessary help (and still gives his support though he is not the village President now) and cooperation. Fortunately, the VKC could find a place in a room in the *Panchayat* building when the veterinary clinic functioning there moved into new building in a nearby area. He continues to be regarded as the Boundary Partner because the VMC insists on that and the present *Panchayat* President who is a woman also endorses it. It was mentioned that she also gives all necessary support and visits the Centre often. It was pointed out by the VMC members that coming of VKC inspired them to get agriculture office in the vicinity of the VKC.

As part of the VKC programme, Village Management Committee was constituted to monitor and support the activities of the VKC; originally it had 12 members; The VMC initially included persons from different fields such as village contact farmers, VHN, *Anganwadi* teacher, VAO, and agricultural department for sharing information and carrying out activities in an effective coordinative manner. Presently, the VMC includes 14 men, six women from the hamlets that come under the *Panchayat* and from the department of agriculture. The VHN and the *Anganwadi* teacher though not in the VMC²³ now they offer their full support and cooperation to the VKC programme and in the same way the VKC too provides all necessary support to them in organising health and other related programmes for the villagers.

The VKC since its inception has been playing a significant role in reaching its services to the people. Fortunately, the VMC and the Knowledge Worker have been a motivated lot and have a sense responsibility in running the VKC efficiently for the benefit of the

22. Aniyappur is located 14 km away from Manpathai. This village was also selected for setting up the VKC under ClimaAdapt project along with Manpathai. The VKC in Aniyappur is also functioning well. Once the decision was taken to set up a VKC it was comparatively easy for Manpathai when compared to the VKC in Aniyappur. Mr. Sivasamy from Aniyappur who has been active since the beginning of the VKC programme is a contact farmer. He also mentioned that after much hesitation and deliberations it was decided by both the villages to set up VKCs. Mr Sivasamy pointed out that there was a section of people from the village who resisted the programme. They could not identify a place for the VKC. Then it occurred to them *Panchayat* building is village property and the VKC is for the community; then it was thought why can't a room in the *Panchayat* building used for the VKC?! Though there was resistance from the *Panchayat* clerk the village people went ahead and made arrangements for the VKC to function from the *Panchayat* building.

23. It was mentioned that the job of VHN and Anganwadi teacher is transferable. And, it takes time to include the new appointees in the VMC as its members. Some of them do not show interest in participating VMC meeting but they work along with VKC in conducting programmes at the village level.

village as a whole. The VMC has fully understood the purpose of the VKC and they believe it as a major platform to improve the livelihood of the villagers. The VMC in general is determined lot in taking the VKC programme further. In order to sustain the VKC programme the VMC members have created a core fund²⁴ by contributing individually a specific amount towards it. The VMC bought a colour Xerox machine to generate income for the VKC. The VKC has two computers and three Xerox machines including the colour one. The present Knowledge Worker has been working as the manager of the VKC for the past five years. She has clarity about the VKC programme and carries her work as a manager of the VKC with interest and dedication. She is very efficient in her work; her attitude and behaviour command respect and appreciation even by the VMC of the VKC in Aniyapur.

Services and activities of the VKC²⁵

Similar to the VKCs in Vilangudi and Onangudi the VKC in Manpathai renders its services to the village community. The VKC in Manpathai is accessible to all the villagers irrespective of age, sex, caste and class. Since its inception, it has been a vibrant centre because of the effective participation of the VMCs and proactive Knowledge Worker supported by the strategic partners and the VRC of Pudukottai. Its services cover veterinary camps, and agricultural training programmes, online services, conducting camps and training/awareness programmes on general health for different age groups, eye camp, and so on with active participation of the respective strategic partner. Computer classes (NDLM) were conducted for students completed Class 10. More than 70 persons were trained and most of them are employed; some of them use this computer knowledge to earn additional income and some use the skill in their work, mentioned one of the VMC members.

24. MSSRF, probably based on its experiences in setting up the VKCs in the past made it very clear to both the village elders at Manpathai and Aniyapur that the support of the project would be withdrawn after the project period and the VKC would be handed over to the community. This meant that the VMC and the Boundary Partner should arrange for a source of income to maintain the VKC and pay honorarium to the Knowledge Workers in both the VKCs. Fund was collected through informal chit system whereby each member from the VMC contributed Rs 1000. The informal chit group had already had some amount as their savings from their contribution to chit fund. Today each VMC has more than Rs 2 lakhs. This amount is kept separately for maintenance work of the VKC and the income earned through the online services in the VKCs is used to pay the honorarium of the Knowledge Workers. In case there is a shortfall for the honorarium money from the core fund would be used. One of them, Mr Sivasami aged 60 years pointed out that somehow they were able to contribute for this and also forget about it. He said that the members are not able to believe themselves that they have come forward to do this. "Thanks to Dr Rajakumar who inspired us and gave the confidence that we can do it", he added.

25. Services and activities of the VKC in Manpathai (and also in Aniyapur) are more or less similar to that of the VKCs in Vilangudi, Tanjavur district and Onangudi, Pudukottai district. Most of the services and activities are carried out in coordination and help of the strategic partners (VAO, VHN, Anganwadi teacher, Agriculture/ veterinary department). Online services are much appreciated and used by a majority of the villagers. Women seem to be using it a lot.

The VKC is used as a platform for reaching the services related to agriculture, health, nutrition and so on to the village community. These services are provided in partnership with institutes/organisations (strategic partners) which are mutually beneficial and helpful in promoting socioeconomic development of the rural community. One of the VMC members proudly mentioned that the VKC is used as central point by the government departments/staff such as Department of Agriculture, *Panchayat* Office, VAO, Cooperative Bank, and Private Bank and so on. The Knowledge Worker and the VMC members/village key persons (*girama mukkiyasthargal*) help in disseminating the information and also in mobilising people for a programme. For example, the VKC helps in informing and mobilising the village women and men for participating in veterinary camps conducted at the village level. With the guidance and support of the VRC of Pudukottai efforts are taken to conduct health camps for the livestock just before the onset of summer and winter so that preventive measures can be taken against cattle illness such as *komari noi* (Foot and mouth disease). We find that the VKC has a good rapport with the agricultural department. The VKC plays a major role in identifying beneficiaries for government schemes. The VKC also takes efforts to help and assist in reaching the government entitlements to the eligible persons.

The services of the VKC through plant clinic programme reach the small and marginal farmers in the villages/hamlets that come under the jurisdiction of the neighbouring *Panchayat* also. Plant clinic provide necessary crop advisories from land preparation to harvest of a crop. The farm women and men are able to appreciate the necessity of using suitable inputs in right proportion and new agricultural technologies. The advisories help in reducing input cost and improving the yield, mentioned farm women and men.

Whenever Audio and video conferences (related to agriculture (eg plant clinic), animal husbandry and health and so on) are conducted for the VKCs of MSSRF the VKC in Manpathai (also Aniyapur) also included; similarly Phone in programme is also conducted along with the other VKCs. We were told that a minimum of 20 persons including women participate in the programme. The farming community gets opportunities to interact with experts from different fields related to their livelihood. Whatsapp groups are formed to exchange and share information; but not many are in the group; because they do not use smart phones.

Voice messages and audio messages are useful for the farmers. For example, messages on weather help the farmers in planning their agricultural operations. It helps them to avoid labour and input expenses. It is a short message but a big help (*chinnathagaval. Periya udhavi*) mentioned few farmers. Some of them pointed out that they have not been receiving voice messages these days and requested that that service should be restored.

VKC provides online services(for example , paying Electricity Bill, phone recharge, applying ration card, PAN card, crop insurance, pension, apply for *neradi nel kolmudal* (direct paddy procurement) getting *patta/chitta* (land records) and, nativity, caste certificates , deletion and inclusion of names in the ration card and so on,) and it is extensively used by the community. A nominal fee is collected from the people for the service rendered. Recently, the VKC played a major role in helping villagers to apply for crop insurance. The Knowledge Worker also helps women and men to get old age pension, widow pension, *thirumana udhavi thittam* and so on. (Marriage assistance scheme) *Panchayat* office makes use of the online services of the VKC in getting the receipts for payments made or received. Availability of this service has helped women and men including the students to get their things done within the village without difficulty; it saves their time, energy and money. They do not have to travel to Manaparai and Vaiyampatti (distance 30 kms) for this. The VKC works in coordination with VAO in matters related to land and house issues; the VAOs of Mugavanur and V. Periyapadi send farmers to register for direct paddy procurement and get online token. It involves scanning of *Aadhar*, *adanagal* and bank pass book. It was pointed out by the Knowledge Worker that women use the online services more than the men because men go for outside work. The earnings are used to pay honorarium of the Knowledge Worker and maintain computer and Xerox/scan machines. The VMC members visit the VKC often to monitor the work .The presence of VKC offering these services helps the women a lot. One of the VMC members stated that they would try their best from people running here and there to get their work done (*Alaya vidamattom*).

Whenever, any camp is organised the information is written on the notice board kept outside the VKC. Since VKC is functioning in the *Panchayat* building many visit the *Panchayat* office and they would come to know about the programmes/camps conducted by various departments.

Voices from the village

Pazhani, 43 years

Pazhani who resisted the idea of setting up of a VKC today is full of appreciation for the programme; he is one of the VMC members. He said when the VKC programme was explained by MSSRF to the community he was not receptive. He was confident it would not work out. Moreover, he was apprehensive about taking over management of the VKC after the project period. "Money is involved; how to maintain the VKC and who would pay the honorarium/", were the doubts he had. He said "*thevai illai enru sonnen; inru perumai padugiran* meaning I said it is not needed; but today I feel very proud (of the VKC facility). All of us came forward to contribute Rs 1000 for a common cause. We collected from 40 persons (20 from Aniyappur and 20 from Manpathai). We would somehow run the VKC and we would continue to be in touch with Dr Rajakumar and

he also would not leave us. He has a knack to convince people with his sincere talk ; he would always encourage us”, he added to say. He directs people to go to the VKC for any help or clarification. He feels that the villagers should be aware of the existence of VKC in their village.

Mr Anthoni, 69 Years

Mr Anthoni is one of the VMC members. He is of the view that many in the village approach the VKC for livestock related information. Livestock rearing is an important economic activity of the villages. VKC informs the community about the availability of schemes/subsidies (farm implements, seed material and so on). From one person this information is shared with 10 others. Thus VKC helps in sharing of information among women and men. The Knowledge Worker gets herself updated with latest information from the agricultural department which is located very near to the VKC. Agricultural department also takes the help of the Knowledge Worker in identifying persons to avail the schemes and in disseminating information to the village community. The VKC and the other departments work in coordination and cooperation. So all the village level programmes are conducted efficiently and the benefits reach the community.

Mr Sesuraj, 55years

Mr Sesuraj, one of the very few who was positive about the VKC programme. He says “I was confident from the beginning (about the VKC programme); there were people who ridiculed me; I chose to talk to people who would be receptive(*Aaarambikkumpodu enakku thrupthi. Enakku nambikki.Aaru perilirundhu irubhadu perai serthen*) about the VKC programme. It worked ; so, from six members we could increase the numbers to twenty”.

Mr Bala Subramaniyam, BBA

Mr Balasubramaniyam owns five acres of land where he cultivates rice and maize. Plant clinic helps to take precautionary measures to protect the crops from pests/disease. He says he sends the picture of the affected portion of the crop through whatsapp and gets the necessary crop advisory. For instance, last year his rice crop was affected by *anaikomban* (Gal midge) and *ver azhugal* (root rot).He came to know of the pest when he took the affected portion to plant clinic. He got rid of the pest by following the advisory provided by the plant doctor. Through the VKC he gets in touch with the agricultural department to know about the schemes and subsidies. He availed the subsidy for installing drip irrigation technology for three years which was useful; later he had to dismantle it because there was no sufficient rainfall for three consecutive years.

Mr Bala Subramaniyam spoke about the E service and its usefulness to the village community. It has reduced the expenses; one need go to Manapparai Taluk Office, a

place which is 20 km away from Manpathai. Time and energy are also saved. He was happy to mention that women find this very useful and they are the ones who make use of it more than men; because men go for outside work.

According to Mr Bala Subramaniam the villagers believe that VKC would give links to handle or guidance for any issue faced by them and also about getting subsidies and so on. He mentioned that the VKC, true to its objective of serving the community for its development carries out its work only as a service. The VKC is considerate; very minimum amount is charged for E services. Whatever a woman or man has with him or her is taken without insistence of paying the rate fixed for a service. The Knowledge Worker also reminds the people about the last date for applying any scheme (such as crop insurance, government procurement of rice). He added to say that there are E service centres; but VKC is different from them because in the VKC not only the service is rendered to the people but also get additional associated details (*Ingu (VKC) sevaiyum kidaikkum; vilakkamum kidaikkum*). In the other centres in case a person goes for Xerox or E service, only that work he gets done; but he/she would not get any details such as last date of the scheme or about any other things that need to be done (like linking Aadhar with EB). People irrespective of caste and class feel comfortable in visiting the VKC for any help or assistance. Whenever, any camp is organised the information is written on the notice board kept outside the VKC. Since VKC is functioning in the *Panchayat* building many visit the Panchayat office and they would come to know about the programmes/camps conducted by various departments.

Mr Balasubramaniam pointed out that coming of VKC in Manpathi (and also in Aniyappur) has been of great help to the village women and men. Earlier, for everything they have to go to Manaparai; agricultural office was in Vaiyampatti. Subsequent to the setting up of the VKC the agricultural office was shifted to a newly constructed building very near to the VKC. They get the necessary details and services from the VKC and also from the Agricultural Office.

Mr Sivasamy

Mr Sivasamy appreciates the services of VKC particularly for agriculture and veterinary. He pointed out that voice messages were helpful and useful to the farming community in their agriculture and livestock rearing. He collected 300 phone numbers for registering to get voice messages. They got voice messages daily for two years. The messages would not allow the farmers to sleep; it would keep them alert always. Farmers would be encouraged to carry out their activities. (*Thoonga vidadhu makkalai; gjapaga padithikkutte irukkum; makkalukku urchagamaga irukkum*). He continued to say that they have not been getting voice messages for quite some time. They miss the crop/

veterinary advisories disseminated through the voice messages. Also weather forecast was very useful information for a farmer to plan and carryout agricultural operations.

Reciprocal help and support: VKC, VMC and strategic partners

One can see that there is an effective cooperation and understanding among the VKC and different strategic partners such as agricultural department, veterinary department, VAO, VHN and so on in reaching various services and programmes to the community for their socioeconomic development. During the author's visit to the VKC at Manpathai, it was evident that there is a good rapport between the agriculture department and the VKC. She had an opportunity to be present during a programme conducted by the VKC in association with the agriculture department in connection with plant clinic programme. It was heartening to listen to A. D from the agriculture department; he stated that the VKCs (in Manpathai and Aniyapur) are serving well for the development of the community. He mentioned that what agriculture department is expected to do is done by the VKC; scheme/subsidies related work takes away the time of the AOs and AAos and they are not in a position to render extension service. He added to say that the VKC through plant clinic programme reaches marginal and small farmers. It reaches the door steps of the farmer. Another officer mentioned that they are not able to update the farmers with new technologies by visiting them because they are tied up with paper work. He pointed out where agriculture department could not reach MSSRF is doing it through the VKC(*nanga thodatha idathai VKC thodugiradhu*). He commended the services of the VKC in helping the farm women and men . He said there is an informal tie up between the Agriculture department and the VKC in taking the agricultural schemes/subsidies to the eligible persons. The VKC plays a significant role in rendering online services to the village community. This not only makes things easier for the Agriculture department it also helps the farming community particularly the small and marginal farmers to avail the benefits of the schemes and in updating the scheme (eg crop insurance registration and renewal) details. He made a special mention of VKCs role in the camp held recently during the month of November 2022 for renewal and registration of crop insurance scheme. He said he visits the VKC often to share agriculture related information. The Knowledge Worker visits almost daily the agricultural department to get updates and for clarification for any scheme/subsidy.

Whenever the VHN plans to vaccinate and conduct health programmes for young women the information is passed on to the Knowledge Worker who in turn conveys the same to the VMC members. They would pass on the same to the villagers. The information also conveyed through the phone and it is also written down on the notice board of the VKC. If there is any change in the programme that is also conveyed to the VKC so that people would be informed in advance. Similarly, the VKC extends support

to the Anganwadi teacher in her work in the village. The VHN and the Anganwadi teacher reciprocate the same gesture when VKC needs any support in its activities.

It is heartening to find that the VMC (also in Aniyapur) is quite serious in discharging their duties and responsibilities. They encourage the community to make use of VKC services. Whenever a programme is conducted or any new information needs to be disseminated the VMC members and other elders from the village make sure that the information reaches the households in each and every street. One of the SHG members and also a VMC member disseminates the information in all the groups with the help of group leaders. Out of 20 VMC members 10 regularly monitor the activities and services of the VKC; they scrutinise the accounts- earnings from online services and expenditure incurred towards repair work of Xerox machine or a scanner. It is said that the income from online services are more than sufficient to pay the honorarium of Rs 5000 to the Knowledge Worker. The VMC is contemplating of increasing the honorarium of the Knowledge Worker in recognition of her good work. One month's earnings from the VKC is given to the Knowledge Worker as a petty cash to meet any expenses related to the VKC. She does not have to wait for someone to give her the money. The Knowledge Worker deposits the money (monthly earnings of the VKC) in the bank and she maintains the accounts of the same. The VMC members carefully scrutinise all the details. It is said they do not touch the core fund which is more than Rs 200000. It is lent out to responsible persons charging Rs 2 interest. Mr. Sivasamy was proud to say that '*VKC thann kaalil nirkumalavirku vandu vittadhu*' meaning the VKC is in a position to stand on its own.

As we have mentioned earlier there is mutual help and understanding between the VKC and the agriculture department. The VKC has a good access to the agriculture office. They help each other in taking the schemes and other related information to the community. When a plant clinic programme was planned to conduct on a bigger scale the Knowledge Worker approached the former President to help in finding a place for it. He helped the VKC to organise the programme in a hall of the Agricultural Department.

Role of Knowledge Worker

Commitment and motivation of the Knowledge Worker plays a significant role in reaching the benefits of the VKC programme to the community which is reflected in the Knowledge Worker of Manpathai VKC. She is proactive and helps the community to avail government schemes/subsidies, in updating them with agricultural information (example, pest/disease attack and the precautions need to be taken). She patiently deals with the farm women and men coming to the VKC to enquire about details related to their day today agricultural operations, children's education and getting online

services. She feels that villagers should be able to get services without going here and there. She commands the respect of the community and the appreciation of the VMC members including the VMC members of Aniyappur VKC. She has a good rapport with the strategic partners. We have seen how the VKC and the strategic partners help each other in carrying out their respective activities. Officers in the agricultural departments spoke highly of her commitment to serve the villagers through the VKC. She is accessible and understanding. She comes from the same village; so the community also feels comfortable visiting the VKC.

VRC: a pillar of strength

The VRC still gives capacity building training to the Knowledge Worker. When voice modulation training was given in All India Radio, Trichy the Knowledge Worker from Manpathai and Aniyappur had also participated along with other Knowledge Workers from the VKCs directly managed by MSSRF. The Knowledge Workers are updated with any new scheme from the government and how to use the respective website to apply for the scheme (eg latest crop insurance scheme) through zoom meeting organised from the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru. The Knowledge Worker is guided with all the details such as how to open the website, how to update farmers' details, how to transfer money and so on.

VRC of Pudukottai continues to provide plant clinic services; it conducts phone-in-programmes, audio/video conferences on aspects related to the livelihoods of the village community. Local specific crop / veterinary and climate information is disseminated through voice/audio messages. The VRC lends a helping hand if there is any problem related to computers, Xerox/scanning machine. It provides technical help. VRC also helps the VKC to get a replacement for Xerox machine and so on.

Wherever necessary, the VRC of Pudukottai offers help to the VKC in building partnerships with government departments, NGOS and so on.

The VMC is full of appreciation for the contribution of the VRC in setting up the VKC and providing continuous guidance in taking the benefits of the VKC programme to improve the livelihood of the village community.

The VRC helped the VKC to get a Xerox machine and got a new UPS when the old one did not work well. After the project period the VRC paid 50% of the salary to the Knowledge Worker for three months.

The coordinator of the VRC visits the VKCs now and then to encourage the VMC and the Knowledge Workers and also to monitor the activities and services of the VKC in helping the community. It was stated by the VMC members that they look forward the

coordinator's visit; because he generates positive energy in them and gives them the necessary confidence and direction. They were very much touched by the coordinator's supportive and helping nature. His passion and commitment for the village development through the VKC programme inspire the VMC and the Knowledge Worker to work with sincerity (*pechu kettaal arvam. Engirundalum vanduvividuom*).

It was heartening to hear from one of the VMC members in a village meeting when he said that Ms Rajeswari (Knowledge Worker) gives agri and veterinary related information to the villagers. She gives details and explains well. She is the main support to the VKC (*Rajeswari than idanudaya (VKC) urudhunai*).

Commitment is necessary for the sustainability of the VKCs says Dr Rajakumar. He is happy to share with us that the VKCs in Manpathai and Aniyapur are functioning well even after the project support is withdrawn and handing over them to the community.

According to Mr Senthil Kumar, Village *Panchayat* and Department of agriculture are the main pillars of the VKC . VKC plays a major role in identifying beneficiaries for government schemes. The VKC also takes efforts in getting the schemes or subsidies to the most deserving persons. Linkages are created.

The genuine interest and keenness of MSSRF inspired the village *Panchayat* president and few villagers (who are members of Village Management Committee of VKC now) to get seriously involved in taking the benefits of the VKC programme to the community. It is heartening to mention that the same interest and commitment still continues. The VRC of Pudukottai also continues to offer its guidance and support to the VKC, Manpathai.

The VRC/VKC programme encourages building up partnerships with institutes/ organisations (strategic partners) which will be mutually beneficial and helpful in promoting socioeconomic development of the rural community. Partnerships facilitate sharing of knowledge and experiences. So, VRC facilitates and offers help to the VKCs in building partnerships with government departments, NGOS and so on.

Expectations from the community

On the whole the VMC members expressed that almost all the services and activities of the VKC are going on well. They have not encountered any major challenge in running the VKC. However, they mentioned about not getting voice/audio messages for quite some time. Mr. Sesuraj aged 55 years pointed out that it was convenient for them when they were getting voice messages daily. For instance, when they get climate forecast; some of them would discuss about it and take a decision about next course of action. Mr Palani aged 43 years who was present during our discussion with the VMC and

other villagers pointed out that it (voice message/audio message) was like a tonic to them which energised them to undertake their agricultural operations. It helped them to prepare themselves mentally. So, the feeling how we are going to handle will not be there. Suppose, a crop advisory is disseminated they keep thinking about it and make use of it. Not only that they share it with others; information on weather forecast was very useful (*Kurunseidhigal robma ubhayagama irundadu. Irandu naal munbe varum. Nanga pathu pesikkolvoom. Inda seidhigl gluose toninc maadhiri. Manadirkul odum. Malaippu theriyadu velai eduthu seyya*). They pointed they miss getting weather and rainfall information now because it is an important one for a farmer to take a decision well in advance. They pleaded that this service is restored soon²⁶.

It is also brought to our notice that generally the inputs prescribed by the plant clinic are not available in the local market. One has to go to either Manaparai (40 km) or Dindigul (60 km). So, the farmers are unable to make use of the services effectively. However, the services of plant clinic are appreciated and it is felt that it help the farmers to use only the required quantity of input at the right time.

It was pointed out that when solar PAS was working it was very useful and convenient to broadcast information to the villagers. Due to some problem in the panels it is not operating. It would be helpful if it could be operated again. It is an effective medium to reach a large section of the population in the village. It was also mentioned that if VRC could guide the VMC, the members are willing to repair it.

The VMC members wondered whether the VKC can be used to take passport size photos which will fetch income and at the same it would help increase the peoples contact.

It was also mentioned that computer needs a replacement; so that the VKC can conduct training in computer skill development. It was also shared that reviving training in computer skill development would help the village youth to improve their capacity. The VMC felt the VKC requires a good computer for that.

It is heartening to observe that the VKC is self reliant and carries out its tasks and services with active and enthusiastic VMC, a committed and proactive Knowledge Worker supported well by the strategic partners especially the department of agriculture.

It is learnt from our interaction with VMC members and the coordinator of VRC programme and the plant doctor that the local *Panchayat*, Department of Agriculture and the Knowledge Worker are the main pillars of the VKC.

26. The staff at the VRC and the Knowledge Worker said they would check and do the needful to the farmers.



III. Winding up of Village Knowledge Centre Programme: challenges/difficulties in continuing the programme, a few examples

The VRCs of MSSRF have had several experiences in the process of setting up a VKC and faced challenges at various stages of implementing the programme. As we have mentioned earlier in addition to studying the factors responsible for smooth and successful functioning of the VKCs this study also tries to gather factors that acted against the continuity of the VKCs such as Rajendiram Village and Neduvasal in the districts of Thiruvaiyaru and Pudukottai. It also briefly discusses about a VKC in Akkaraipettai Village of Nagapattinam district.

Sustainability of the VKC programme suffered setback particularly because of lack of support and attitude of the concerned Boundary Partner/VMC, change of leadership at the village Panchayat level, social issues and also paucity of funds for the VRCs to provide honorarium to the Knowledge Worker and other maintenance and ICT infrastructure requirements. The hindrance also came in the form of Gaja cyclone in November 2018 though not the major issue but in a way hastened the process of closure of VKCs such as Rajendiram and Neduvasal. Outbreak of Covid in 2020 also to an extent did not give an opportunity to make an effort by the VMC and the VRC to sort out issues concerning the VKC in Rajendiram Village.

i Village Knowledge Centre, Rajendiram Village

VKC at Rajendiram in Thiruvaiyaru district was one of the earliest VKCs set up in 2006 by MSSRF as part of its drive to promote sustainable rural development by empowering rural women and men with knowledge /information using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and non-ICT tools. Fortunately, the then village *Panchayat* President of Rajendiram could easily grasp the utility of the programme for village socio-economic development. He extended his full support and cooperation to the VRC in implementing the VKC/VRC programme in Rajendiram Village. The VKC functioned well during his tenure of 10 years. As the boundary partner of the VKC programme he gave place for the VKC, agreed to pay the electricity bill and identified Knowledge Worker to manage the VKC. Honorarium of the Knowledge Workers was taken care of by MSSRF. The boundary partner was proactive and he personally monitored the activities of the VKC and motivated the Knowledge Workers (worked at different periods of time) to discharge their duties and responsibilities with enthusiasm; he also worked along with them in mobilising the community for a training/awareness programme and provided necessary information whoever wanted. He daily spent some time in the VKC. He showed the villagers the *Valam* website covering local specific

information related to agriculture, veterinary, weather, government schemes and so on. He had a sense of ownership of the VKC.

VKC services/ activities in Rajendiram Village in brief

All sections of the population had easy access to the VKC. Similar to the villages of Vilangudi, Onangudi and Manpathai various training/awareness programmes were conducted to improve the villagers' livelihood (agriculture and veterinary) based on right knowledge. The farmers came to know of the new technologies in agriculture, preparing organic fertilisers/pesticides and avoiding unnecessary input application. In all these they were aided (and still) through voice messages, phone in programme, field level demonstration (eg soil sample and SRI method/ Direct sowing method) and most importantly through plant clinic programme. The Knowledge Workers had a significant role to play in reaching the services of the VKC to the villagers. He/she was a motivated person. Farmers could contact the plant doctor or the VRC staff any time if there is anything important. The Knowledge Worker was also helpful in getting specific information or details from the VRC or strategic partners to farm women and men and students. Many villagers including women farmers shared with us that through the VKC programme and particularly the plant clinic programme they could learn to appreciate the value of adopting sustainable agricultural practices. It helped them reduce their farm expenditure and able to carry out farming activities based on right knowledge without much anxiety. Similarly, season based veterinary health camps (also phone in programme and voice message) conducted helped in protecting and managing the livestock from seasonal diseases. Livestock is also an important source of income for the farm households, maintenance of which matters a lot.

Skill development in computers

The children belonging to all the castes were encouraged to under go training in skill development in computers. It helped many in enhancing their self esteem and confidence. It was pointed out that more than 300 (including the then village president) persons (male and female) gained computer literacy and it helped them in their school/college education and in employment. Some of them said that they could teach their seniors in the college and office some advanced computer lessons. Few persons like Mr Ranjit Kumar now 26 years who got his certificate as a school student after completing MUPP course he was inspired to do his undergraduate and post graduate studies connected with computers. After working for two years he gained confidence to be on his own; he decided to be a freelancer. He is presently earning through web designing; he is able to do his agriculture side by side. He is confident that with guidance from the VRC he would be able to do agriculture without difficulty. One Mr Kannan who was one of the earlier Knowledge Workers got a permanent employment as cleric in *Panchayat*

Union office based on his experience at the VKC and MUPP certificate. More than two young women served as Knowledge Workers after getting training in computer skill development programme. Two women got employment based on MUPP certificate in post office.

Encouraged school dropout boys and girls to complete Class 8

The Boundary partner Mr Manohar who was the village *Panchayat* president through the VKC encouraged school drops out boys and girls (six boys and 12 girls of 12 to 14 years age group) to complete their education atleast till Class 8 because this would enable them to participate in some of the training providing employment opportunities. With Knowledge Worker's enthusiastic participation and the support of VMC members they could get 18 youngsters to get their middle school pass certificate. Getting Class 8 certificate helped the boys to undergo training in electrical and electronic work and so on. After the training one boy has his own electrical shop, another boy has undertaken wiring work; one is taking up work covering the roof with asbestos sheets and another boy has become a cycle mechanic. Few girls have been encouraged to take up MUPP course seriously and got certificate.

Strategic partners support

The VKC activities/programmes concerning agriculture, veterinary, human health and education and so on were conducted by involving strategic partners from respective office/department. Similarly, the VKC also extended its support whenever a programme was conducted by any government department or any other NGOs. For example the VKC and the Village Management Committee extended its support to Village Health Nurse (health issues related to adolescent girls and young women) and to the *Anganwadi* worker (awareness on nutritious food to the expectant mother and preschool children). The VKC served as an important central point for persons from the departments and from other NGOs to contact the targeted villagers. Staff or officers like AAO or AOs would provide information of various schemes/ subsidies to the VKC to be disseminated to the intended audience. The VKC maintained various details such as households belonging to below poverty line and population details and so on. Several households have been benefitted by raising kitchen garden in their backyard by using the vegetable seeds provided by horticultural department and distributed through the VKC. Some of them (around 20 women) still maintain a good kitchen garden which provide them fresh and nutritious vegetables and greens. Excess vegetables are sold and also shared with their relatives and friends. The VKC also organised tree planting in the village. Around 1500 saplings consisting of neem, tamarind and *pongam* were planted. According to the Knowledge Worker, most of the cattle owners were not aware of the symptoms and causes for cattle disease. So veterinary camps were organised; the cattle were vaccinated to protect them from diseases

Online services

Online services were appreciated by the women, men and the youngsters. They felt comfortable in going to the VKC because of the known and friendly person at the VKC. Most of their work such as EB payment, applying for PAN card, Aadhar card, linking Aadhar with PAN card, getting *patta*, change of residence address, application for crop insurance, Passport and many other services were got done without going here and there. The Knowledge Worker was helpful in getting pension for old and disabled persons. Time, energy and additional expenditure were saved for women and men. Now they have to walk 5 kilometres; outside centres charge heavily (Rs 50-60) from the villagers. VKC used to collect very nominal charges. In case some was not in a position to pay the VMC members would pay for that person.

Other services-few examples

Just before the Covid the VKC helped to identify eligible persons in getting loan for rearing country chicks (*naattu kozhi kunjugal*) for 15 women; cattle shed for 10 persons; and cattle loan for 12 persons from Indian Bank through *uzhavar manram* (Farmers Club). It must be mentioned here that VRC facilitated in getting the benefits to the village community.

VMC members were supportive and participated in all the activities of the VKC

The VMC meeting was held regularly by 10th of every month for the first 10-12 years. Knowledge Worker Ms Nadia mentioned that VMC members worked as a family (*oru kudumbamagathan seyala pattargal*). The VMC members were also engaged in mobilising the community whenever a camp/training was conducted at the village. They also passed on useful and relevant information to the households located in their respective trees. They participated in plant clinic sessions and encouraged others to make use of the service. In fact few of them adopted whenever a new agricultural technology was introduced to the farming community (Direct Sowing method, preparing and using organic inputs). One of the members Mr Sridhar was ridiculed by his fellow farmers whenever he followed anything new in his farm only to be appreciated later by the very same persons who felt it was not practical. There are instances where VMC members stood as examples for others to adopt a new technology without hesitation. Few of them were source of inspiration to others mentioned a woman VMC member. It is stated that most of the VMC members were progressive farmers (*munodi vivasayigal*) and that whatever they say, the people (most of them) would listen to them. The boundary partner had been a great source of inspiration to the villagers and the VMC as well. His humbleness and commitment to the VKC programme motivated many to take active

participation in the VKC activities. The VMC also gave loan to needy farmers from the earnings they earned through Common Facility Centre.

The Knowledge Worker mentioned that VMC members used to help villagers when they were not in a position to pay for online services. But they found it difficult to pay the monthly honorarium to her though the VMC was also seriously thinking about paying honorarium to the Knowledge Worker. The Knowledge Worker mentioned that differences of opinion among the VMC members arose over financial issues related to the Common Facility Centre, demolition of the building where VKC functioned and the non supportive attitude of the newly elected *Panchayat* president to provide a room for the VKC all contributed for closing of the VKC programme in Rajendiram.

VKC can be approached for any information or clarification

The benefits experienced by the community both women and men by the VKC programme were such that few of them who we met and spoke mentioned that the VKC had become part of their lives. VKC had given them the confidence that they can approach it for any information or clarification (VKC *ponaal therinjikkalam*) such as about government schemes/subsidies, for crop pest/disease, and educational/employment opportunities. The impact of the programmes particularly plant clinic was tremendous; it created a great confidence in the farm women and men to carry out their day today agricultural operations because at every stage they had the guidance from plant doctor, agro advisories through Voice SMS and Phone in Programme and so on. Online services too drew more and more people towards the VKC. School children and others learnt computers. VKC had a good rapport with the village community. Thanks to the understanding and motivated boundary partner, supportive VMC, energetic Knowledge Worker and the VRC as a good facilitator.

The VKC saw turnover of the Knowledge Workers but there had always been someone to fill up that position. The VMC members regularly met and discussed the work done by the VKC and the activities to be conducted in the following days. Few of the VMC members were trained as plant doctors. Few are contact farmers. Most of them were motivated persons and showed interest in adopting new agricultural technologies in their respective fields so that others would show interest in adopting the same. They wished to be examples for others to follow and get benefitted.

Ms Nadia stated that she used to be very happy serving people by giving them information on government schemes/subsidies, employment/educational opportunities and other information related to their livelihood. VKC offered its services irrespective of class and caste (*jaadhipirachanai illai; veru illai*). The then village *Panchayat* president gave full support.

Role of Knowledge Worker

We had lengthy interaction with the Knowledge Worker Ms Nadia who managed the VKC (for nearly eight years) since 2010. Her services to the community through the VKC have been greatly appreciated by the community. We could gather from our discussion with women and men including the youth that she was very helpful and understanding in attending to the requirements of the village community. They were confident that Ms Nadia would definitely help them and get things done for them either by contacting the VRC or the department people. People miss her presence in the village now; such was her contribution as a Knowledge Worker of the VKC.

Ms Nadia who had come to the VKC to learn computers with the encouragement of the boundary partner later became the manager of the VKC. Along with her 20 persons both women and men had also underwent skill development in computers. She says as far as she knows that four women and one male are employed using the computer knowledge while she got the opportunity to work as the manager of the Rajendiram VKC. She was the third Knowledge Worker. Ms Nadia used to walk two kilometres; she liked the job and had a great sense of contentment that she insisted her parents to find a boy for her very near to Rajendiram Village so that she could continue to serve the village community through the VKC.

Ms Nadia was proactive and rendered her service with enthusiasm. She was happy to mention that she could help the village women and men through the VKC. When asked her what was that which really touched her heart and gave her fulfilment, she said she could help physically challenged women and men to get cycles- "When they tell me that we are able to walk because of you it gives me a great sense of satisfaction". She could help 13 widows to get *udhavithogai* (financial assistance of) of Rs 1000 and this was during Covid time. She came to the CSC (VKC functioned at the CSC during Covid time) only to help the women to get their widow pension and *thirumana udhavi thogai* (Financial assistance/marriage allowance) for young girls for their marriage. She also pointed out that when she was in the VKC she could help the villagers to get their caste certificate, income certificate, *patta* for the house and so on. They could get it done online easily without going outside. Some villagers got covered under Indian Bank insurance scheme. One person passed away within a short period of getting covered under the insurance scheme. The household got a sum of Rs 1, 30000/- Ms Nadia was very happy to share with us that she earned Rs 23000/ through helping 126 persons get registered under BIMA Insurance Scheme. She used the amount Rs 23000/ to buy jewellery for her.

Ms Nadia mentioned about plant clinic sessions held in the village. She says she also learnt about common pests/diseases that attack the crops and solutions for them. She

feels sad because the withdrawal of the programme mostly affects the farm women and men. She says now-a-days they are applying the pesticides only after the crop is affected badly. It seems it incurs more expenditure. They, particularly the elder population do not have access to season based crop advisories which affects their production. She says she feels very sad when she passes by the places where plant clinic used to be held during the VKC programme. However, some including women go to the VRC for crop advisories.

Ms Nadia stated that as a Knowledge Worker she got more exposure to the outside world; helped her interact with different department people. She says she continues to give her services with the support of the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru using her laptop. But she says it does not give her the satisfaction.

VRC as a facilitator of the VKC programme helped the village community

The VRC of Thiruvaiyaru played a significant role in implementing the VKC programme in Rajendiram Village. It organised regular capacity programme particularly in online services for the Knowledge Workers. Twenty one hours long training programme was conducted on PMG Disha course; the VRC helped the Knowledge Workers to earn income through this and also serve the community.

Common Facility Centre - *Pasumai Vivasaya Kuzhu*

Most of the VMC members were likeminded people and respected the boundary partner. Wherever possible the VMC provided their support and cooperation in taking the VKC programme to the community. The VMC members were inspired to start some income generating activity a group endeavour with the guidance of the VRC. It was mainly because the VRC now and then reminded the VMC members about the sustainability of the VKC programme; it also reminded them that MSSRF could not pay honorarium to the Knowledge Workers for ever. The VMC thought of an idea of starting some economic enterprise or business that would help generate income from which the honorarium of the Knowledge Worker could be paid and also the member could earn some income through it. The result of that deliberation facilitated by the VRC was the setting up of a common facility centre²⁷ by a group named as *Pasumai Vivasaya Kuzhu* consisting 20 men farmers (most of them were VMC members) borrowing from bank and also from their individual contribution. All the 20 members had share in the CFC. The group also got some farm implements on subsidy. The farm implements

27. Farm implements such as machines for transplanting, ploughing, straw separator and sprayer and few other implements were bought using bank loan, subsidy given to the CFC and from the individual share of money. Farmers based on their requirement borrowed that particular machinery or implement and returned it after using the same ; the borrower of the implement paid the amount fixed as rental charges.

were borrowed by famers; hiring charges were fixed based on the farm implement and number of borrowed hours. The accounts were maintained by Ms Nadia, the Knowledge Worker. One of the VMC members took over the administration of the CFC (He was one of the committed persons and encouraged the farming community to adopt new technologies). It functioned well for the first two years. Some issues cropped up in lending the implements and collecting the rent for the same. The person who was in charge of the administration faced some problems at home and he could not follow up with the persons borrowed the implements. Meetings were also not held regularly. The borrowers failed to pay the rent to the Centre. It got accumulated and resulted in a feeling of uncertainty among the members. All the members were aware that the person in charge of administration was genuine and honest in his dealings. They also knew of his domestic issues. However, after much deliberation it was decided to sell all the implements and share the amount among them. It is also gathered that VRC did not try to facilitate in solving the issue. One of them pointed out that VRC could have helped to arrive at a solution acceptable to the concern members without closing the CFC.

Reasons for good performance of the VKC (*Nalla nadakka kaaranam*)

Ms Nithya and also the village women and men (including VMC members) we spoke to gave full credit to the boundary partner who was also *Panchayat* President for 10 years, for the effective and successful functioning of the VKC. He was committed to his work. He gave his total support and encouraged the village community irrespective of their age , sex and caste to participate in the VKC programme and improve their lives. He used to organise meetings; he is generous. Through the VKC he helped many coming from poor economic background. Ever after his term as *Panchayat* president over, he continued take interest in the VKC activities and gave his full support.

The VMC members and the Knowledge Workers remembered the help and support extended by the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru in the functioning of the VKC. Most of them mentioned about the plant clinic services of the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru. The women and men farmers to an extent became aware of the problem they face in their cultivation of crops. They have come to know that they should spray a chemical to the crop only after consulting the expert. Most of them are in a position to assess properly and take appropriate remedial measures. Indiscriminate use of inputs has drastically reduced. They realise that they should not follow blindly what his or her neighbour does in his/ her field. That understanding has come now. They find out the names of the outdated chemicals and insist on the right input from the input dealer. The agricultural expert who is in still in touch with the farmers confirmed the above information provided by the villagers.

However, the farming community misses the plant clinic sessions conducted periodically at the village now. They were confident to carry out their agricultural operations. Some of them pleaded with us to restore the practice of conducting plant clinics in the village. Few of them expressed a concern that most of them may be forced to go back to their old days seeking guidance from the input dealer (We heard from VRC of Thiruvaiyaru that virtual or online plant clinics will be conducted for them).

In this context, it should be mentioned the interest taken by the then Village *Panchayat* President and also the Boundary Partner of the VKC programme to organise plant Clinic during Covid time in a place (Manakarambai) where farmers from two *Panchayats* could participate and get benefitted by it. He issued tokens to the farmers so that it would not be crowded.

Mr Manohar, paid Rs 500 for six months to the Knowledge Worker after the VKC was shifted to the Common Service Centre. Ms Nadia was touched by his gesture. It helped to cover the transport charges.

Many women and men like Ms Lakshmi, Ms Selvamani, Ms Nadiya and even VMC members (and also the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru) spoke highly of the services and the genuine interest of Mr Manohar. They were all unanimous when they said had he continued to be president he would not have certainly allowed the closure of VKC facility. Somehow he would have seen that it is functioning. Ms Selvamani lamented saying, 'VKCvittukoduthuvittome (we have given it (VKC) away)'

Differences of opinion among the VMC members, inability to pay the honorarium to the Knowledge Worker and non cooperative attitude of the newly elected *Panchayat* President to provide space for VKC and the helplessness of the community contributed for the closure of the VKC. Based on the guidelines of state government old buildings under the control of Village *Panchayat* and *Panchayat* Unions were demolished. During that time the building where VKC functioned was also brought under old building category to be demolished. This was the final blow to the VKC programme in Rajendiram.

Reflections from the villagers

Mr Gnanasekar, 58 years

Mr Gnanasekar one of the VMC members feels that the reason for successful functioning of the VKC was cooperation among the VMC members, the Knowledge Worker and the support of VRC. Inability to pay Knowledge Worker was the reason for closing the VKC. 'Why should we take risk was the attitude among many. But we are still in touch with the VRC', says Mr Gnanasekar.

According to Mr Gnanasekar the VKC played a very significant role in the lives of the village community. "Agriculture is our main livelihood which got benefitted most. Most of the farmers were not well informed about the sustainable agricultural practices. For such people VKC provided guidance through its various agricultural services mainly through plant clinics. 'enna edhu enru theriyadavargalukku thagaval therindadu' meaning those who did not know what is what got correct information. Farmers became aware of pests and diseases and their symptoms. Climate and weather audio advisories aided farmers in carrying out farming operations.

Many became aware of sustainable agricultural practices. Dependence on the input dealer reduced. The farmers were inspired to do agriculture based on right knowledge by using plant clinic services and other source of information through audio advisory, phone in programme and whatsapp. However, now there is a risk of going back to the earlier condition because possibility of conducting plant clinic sessions in the village seemed to be not favourable now; because the agricultural expert in the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru has been transferred to some other place. So, a majority of farmers may suffer for want of up to date information and guidance. Some already would have gone back to earlier condition! Not all can go to the VRC for getting guidance", says Mr Gnanasekar

Ms Manimegalai, 38 years

Ms Manimegalai is one of the many in the village who misses the presence of the VKC in her village. She feels very sad about it. She has personally benefited a lot through the VKC. She is not a farmer. She got a bank loan of Rs 15000/ with the help of the VKC to start a small snack stall in her house itself. She got vegetable seeds such as bottle gourd, ridge gourd, cluster beans, greens and so on from the VKC for five consecutive years; which she sowed in her backyard and reaped a good harvest. She was happy that the household could get nutritious vegetables and also sold the excess vegetables. There was a demand for her vegetables. Based on the VKC's/plant clinic advice she raised the vegetable crops using mainly organic inputs. She said she encouraged others to grow vegetables. She was happy to show the vegetable garden she raised. Ms Manimegalai also participated in health programmes (eg cancer awareness). Manimegalai feels that the centre was very useful for people like her coming from poor economic background. They became aware of many things. They could be saved by using excessive pesticides and other inputs.

Ms Manimegalai attended few computer classes but could not continue because she had small children. She also mentioned the awareness programme conducted for school children (both female and male) about the bad touch and good touch and hygienic practices. It was useful for parents too. These are all important programmes, feels Ms Manimegalai.

Manimegalai is very sad about the VKC being closed down. Many meetings were conducted which were useful for all the sections of the population. Big farmers also benefitted. She added to say, '... now no VKC; no meetings' When we asked her why was VKC closed she said that she is of the view that it was because of space problem that VKC had to be closed down (*ennudaya kanippu ida vasadhi illai. Adanaalmoodi vittargal*). She pleaded several times towards the end of the interview to open the VKC again so that poor people would get benefitted. "Manohar sir (boundary partner and the earlier village *Panchayat* president) is very good. It (VKC) was set up with lot of efforts. It would be useful to the children. Let 25 get benefitted out of 50 persons. It would help in village development (*siramapattu konduvandeergal; pillaigalukkupayanpadum. 50 peril 25 per payan adayattume! Giramam nanraga irukkum*).

Mr T Balu, 58 years

Mr Balu is a contact farmer; he feels the loss of VKC to his village. He was one of the VMC members and was the leader of the committee for one year. He had undergone training as plant doctor. Both as a plant doctor and a VMC member he had good rapport with the VRC and the community. He said MSSRF supported well and VMC also cooperated with them. He is of the view that the committee with the guidance of the VRC should have taken efforts for the sustainability of the VKC while it functioned well with MSSRF's financial support. He mentioned that MSSRF had been reminding them about handing over the VKC to the village community. The VKC was handed over to the community in 2019. Now the question of paying the honorarium of the Knowledge Worker came up. This financial issue could not be handled by the VMC. They could have paid the Knowledge Worker had the Farmers' Common Facility Centre continued to function well; the income earned through hiring charges. However, it did not happen, he regretted.

Mr Balu said Common Facility Hiring Centre operated by the VMC members functioned for four-five years. The person who handled the giving the machinery for hiring and collecting charges is a very good person and worked to reach the services of VKC to the community. Any new technology he would be the first person to be adopted in his land and motivate others to do the same. Unfortunately, he could not collect hiring charges amounting to Rs 1, 00, 000/ from farmers who borrowed the machinery. Mr Manohar, the previous *Panchayat* president and the boundary partner of the VKC was very sincere and supportive. One can see sense of ownership in persons Mr Manohar, Mr Sridhar and the Knowledge Worker Ms Nadiya. We all cooperated with them. Regrettably, when financial issue came up we could not arrive at a solution. To add to the problem the building where VKC functioned got damaged. Mr Manohar and other VMC members tried their best to find a place in the *Panchayat* building; but it did not materialise.

Moreover, the woman who succeeded Mr Manohar as the *Panchayat* president is not at all supportive and cooperative. The president's husband manages and controls the *Panchayat* affairs. He is not prepared to allot a place for the VKC in the *Panchayat* building. Space also became a problem. The VKC functioned in the CSC located on the main road for nearly six months during COVID. But it was not remunerative for the Knowledge Worker. She continued her services travelling by bus even after she got married and moved to a town.

While analysing the information gathered through our interviews with the women and men of the VKCs in Rajendiram and Neduvasal villages it brings out the critical role played by the Boundary Partner who in most cases the Village *Panchayat* President too in the functioning and continuity of the VKC programme in their respective village. The commitment and interest of the boundary partner, the VMC support and cooperation, role of Knowledge Worker, change of leadership, their attitudes, social issues and economic power contributed a lot in the functioning or otherwise. It emerged clearly that VRC's support, facilitation and handholding are necessary for the effective functioning of the VKCs. It is unfortunate that VRC also could not do that in some cases.

Ms Lakshmi 38 years

Ms Lakshmi is a handicapped person. The VKC building was near to her house. Through the help of the VKC/VRC she got her cycle. The Knowledge Worker used to get her monthly cash assistance provided by the government. It was very helpful. Lakshmi feels sad about withdrawing the VKC programme. She is of the view that poor students were deprived of getting computer education. Her brother's family is rearing chicks got through the help of the VKC. Ms Nadia used to help to get veterinary and crop advisories. She says we (villagers and the Knowledge Worker) were more like siblings. Now farmers do not get crop advisories. No meetings are conducted these days. She feels that the present president can provide a room for the VKC to function. She added to say if the President thinks he can provide space for the VKC. It would be useful for children (*Varum pillaigalukku nanraga irukkum. President erpaadu seyyalam; avargal kattidam kodukkalam*).

Ms Selvamani 55 years

Ms Selvamani pointed out that the boundary partner struggled a lot to retain the VKC and even Ms Nadia tried her best to run the VKC; she worked for almost six months without any remuneration. Her husband was very understanding; he let her work. For six months the VKC functioned on the main road (in CSC building) during Covid time. "Unfortunately, the new president did not support at all; he does not have outside exposure (*Pudhu president othuzhapu thara villai; velipazhakkam theriyadavar*)". VKC was regarded as a lifeline for farmers

ii Village Knowledge Centre, Neduvasal Village

VKC at Neduvasal was set up in 2009 with lot of expectations; the then Village *Panchayat* President showed great interest in the concept. The *Panchayat* President was very keen and he was persistent in his efforts in getting a VKC to his village because he was inspired by the services and activities of the VKC in his neighbouring village, Pullanvidudhi. So, the VRC decided to accede to the Village *Panchayat* President's demand for a VKC though the VRC was not keen in setting up a VKC in Neduvasal initially (which the *Panchayat* President himself mentioned). Afterwards, MSSRF felt that since it is an agriculture area with great potential VKC would be of great use to the community. However, the VKC which was set up with *Panchayat* President as the boundary partner with much hope had to be closed down soon because of the non supportive attitude and cooperation of the community particularly by the very same person who was responsible for setting up the VKC and finally aided by cyclone Gaja in 2018 which damaged the building where VKC functioned.

The VKC at Neduvasal witnessed tenure of two *Panchayat* Presidents who were also boundary partner of the programme during their respective term. Interacting with them and the Knowledge Workers, few men from the village and also with the VRC staff brought out certain crucial factors about the benefits of VKC programme to the community and the participation of the community in the programme and also the likely causes that led to the closure of the VKC facility. The services and activities of the VKC seemed to have reached the community through awareness/training programmes, whatsapp and audio messages related to agriculture, veterinary, general health and skill development in computers and so on. The persons we spoke to were of the view that the village community benefitted a lot through these programmes. Most of them appreciated sustainable agricultural practices; it helped (and still helps) the farming community in reducing the chemical input usage and reduce the expenditure; they were able to protect their livestock from diseases; many school going and college children and adults including women have been benefitted by skill development in computers. The Village *Panchayat* President in whose tenure the VKC was set up pointed out that the VKC programme was initiated at such a crucial time when the village needed it most. He mentioned that most of the villagers got access to information after the VKC was set up.

The challenge in the functioning of the VKC came in the form of change in leadership/ Boundary Partner and Knowledge Worker. We could talk to few individuals who were important players in the VKC programme. The initial years of the VKC seemed to have been successful with three Knowledge Workers managing the Centre well. The Knowledge Workers did not have much difficulty while mobilising the villagers for a programme; the VKC could also attract people particularly men for getting information

or clarifications. Skill development in computers benefitted both female and male children and young adults. Things were going on well until the next village *Panchayat* President election was held and a new President was elected in 2011. We learnt that incoming Village Present worked along with the outgoing president (as Village President he was the Boundary Partner) in the day today functioning of the VKC. But, it was not reciprocated by the later, we were told. The outgoing President got elected as the Councillor and became busy with his work.

It is understood that the change in mind-set of the person who was mainly responsible for setting up the VKC contributed to an extent for the set back of the VKC programme; he did not show interest in the programme once he was elected as a Councillor and did not support the succeeding Village Panchayat President who eventually became the Boundary Partner of the VKC programme. It is learnt from our interactions with few of the villagers and the VRC staff that he (the person who succeeded the earlier President as the boundary partner of the VKC programme) worked tirelessly along with his predecessor in mobilising people and creating awareness about the VKC programme among the community. Though both belonged to the same community their economic background was different. Differences of opinion between the two and their economic status hindered the services of the VKC.

Added to this, when the VKC was without a Knowledge Worker, a young widow from socially deprived section of the society was appointed to manage the VKC in 2014 by the succeeding Boundary Partner; she was the fifth Knowledge Worker (The earlier Knowledge Workers were either married or got another job). Before her appointment more than two persons managed the VKC at a time. Her social background also seemed to have discouraged people from participating in the VKC programme. The community did not respond well when she went for mobilising them for any programme. The only section that used the VKC was female student community; they participated in computer skill development training conducted by Nehru Yuva Kendra in association with the VKC. The Knowledge Worker pointed out that the girl students came directly from the school to learn computers. According to her this is the only service that gave her a sense of satisfaction. She trained four batches (2014-2017) of young women.

Voices from the village

We had in depth interview with both the persons who were boundary partners of the VKC programme, two Knowledge Workers and few villagers; we also spoke to the staff of the VRC. We are sharing in brief the information we gathered through our interviews which may provide the background resulting in the winding up of the VKC programme in Neduvasal Village. As we have already mentioned it was obvious that underlying caste and class differences, ego clashes appeared to have played a great

role in ending the VKC programme; no one mentioned about the caste factor openly though it emerged clearly during our interactions with the main players of the VKC programme in the village.

Mr Dakshinamoorthy, age 57 years

Mr Dakshinamoorthy, a big farmer was responsible in bringing the VKC to his village, Neduvasal during his tenure as the village *Panchayat* President. The enthusiasm he showed during his term as the boundary partner in the VKC activities and leading the VMC meetings contributed significantly in reaching the community through the various services and activities of the VKC. According to him, the community got outside contacts; they participated in agricultural/horticultural training programmes organised outside the village; many could establish good contact with Horticultural department in Vamban and registered their names for getting the benefits of schemes and subsidies; information and training on rice, coconut and banana cultivation were given; through horticultural department training on cultivation and crop management of small grains (*siru daniyam*) such as *ulundu* (black gram) and *kadalai* (chick pea). For unemployed youth (selected by the village *Panchayat*) training was given in micro enterprises and tailoring by utilising the government schemes through the VKC. Some of them have gone out to earn income through the training they got. The villagers got guidance for carrying out season based agricultural activities- from sowing to harvest. He continued to say that farmers' dependence on the fertiliser dealer has reduced.

Mr Dakshinamoorthy mentioned that during his time the VKC had three Knowledge Workers who discharged their duties efficiently. They were good at mobilising women and men for a training/awareness programmes such as agriculture, veterinary and health and so on. The VKC had generated income through online services and providing services such as typing (filling up of application) and giving printout. He also pointed that through the help of selected four-five members information was passed on to the community whenever there was a meeting. He also mentioned that they could not keep pace with MSSRF; such was the speed with which MSSRF worked.

Dakshinamoorthy brought to our attention that everything was going on well with the VKC programme until he became the Councillor. As a Councillor, he got tied up with various work and personal work. He could not give his time to the VKC; he had to travel a lot. So he could not concentrate on the functioning of the VKC. Moreover, according to him there was also difference of opinion between him and the new *Panchayat* president. He added to say VMC meetings were regularly held during his time and the members cooperated and supported him. "However, the person who succeeded me did not have the capacity to conduct the meetings and run the VKC. Also, he was not financially well off (*Presidentukkum enakkum karuthu vithiyasam vandhu vittadhu. Aduthu vandavarkku*

thiramai pathadhu VMC meeting nadatha; avarkku vasadhi vaippum kuraiou)" he pointed out. He mentioned that MSSRF provided good support. Even now the villagers are in contact with the VRC of Pudukottai. When VKC was functioning in the village the community had outside contact. He stated that he continue to attend various meetings held at the VRC of Pudukottai even now!

During our interaction when we asked Mr Dakshinamoorthy if there is any intension of reviving the VKC facility. Incidentally, he is the present Village *Panchayat* President now. He felt that VKC programme was not necessary because he feels similar services can be had through Common Service Centre scheme in the village; he also pointed out that a building is also constructed for this purpose. He added to say that it has broad band facility and computers. It would soon start providing its services to the village people. So, there is no need for the people to go outside village for online services and information. He said he is not for reviving the VKC. He was of the opinion that the VKC had served its purpose when the village needed most and now the CSC would take that role! He also added to say, "...now, farmers are getting information from many sources; *valarchi illadha nerathil VKC udaviyaga irundadu* (meaning at a time when the village lacked information and communication facility VKC was very helpful in its development)".

Mr Sundar rajan

Mr Sundar rajan, a soft spoken person succeeded Mr Dakshinamoorthy as the boundary partner of the VKC programme; he worked actively along with Mr Dakshinamoorthy in the day today activities of the VKC. He appreciated the various services and activities of the VKC which benefitted many in the village. Farming community became aware of the sustainable agricultural practices; inspired to use organic inputs and reduce chemical fertilisers/pesticides. Awareness level on certain health issues (both for humans and the livestock) increased and the people also came to know of preventive and remedial measures. Young boys and girls got certificates after completing computer skill development training. According to him everything went on well until Mr Dakshinamoorthy was the main player in the VKC. After he became the Councillor there was perceptible change in his outlook towards the VKC programme. He distanced himself from the VKC activities. Difference of opinion arose between the two.

Mr Sundar rajan is a small farmer; he commanded respect from the socially deprived sections of the society. During his time, he identified one young widow from a socially and economically deprived segment of the society to manage the VKC. However, Mr Sundar rajan did not have much influence among his community and other sections of the village community. Incidentally, both Mr Sundar rajan and Mr Dakshinamoorthy hail from the same community; the differences in the economic status between the

two in a way seemed to have played against the former. VMC members except three-four did not attend the VMC meeting. It required lot of effort to mobilise women and men for plant clinic programme. Some farmers directly contacted the plant doctor. He mentioned that there was a time when veterinary camps and eye camp were conducted a large population participated.

Mr Sundar rajan stated that he, much against his wish was forced to take a decision of handing over the computers, printer and the infrastructure to the VRC in the post Gaja cyclone (2018) period. The Gaja cyclone damaged the building which housed the VKC. He felt that it was better for him to hand over the infrastructure provided by the VRC before much damage happen to them; because he felt responsible for its safety. He handed over them saying that there was no one to manage the VKC (the Knowledge Worker left the VKC before the Gaja cyclone because she got a job as *balwadi* teacher). Village local body elections were not held on the scheduled time and there was no elected village representative to hand over the VKC facility, he mentioned. He added to say when the local body elections were held during 2019 both he and Mr Dakshinamoorthy contested for the post of Village *Panchayat* President which he lost. No one took efforts to revive the services of the VKC and he was helpless in this matter. He pointed out that the VKC in the neighbouring village, Pullanviduthi is functioning well with the active participation of the boundary partner and the VMC. He also mentioned that some from his village go to the VKC in Pullanviduthi for information or for clarification.

Ms Prabha 35 years.

Ms Prabha who is presently working in a ration shop (public distribution system) was one of the Knowledge Workers managed the VKC along with two other during the initial four-five years. She was very happy to share with us that she really enjoyed doing her work at the Centre. It was her first job which gave her the opportunity to interact and move with people (while mobilising people for VKC programmes and participating in the programmes). She could learn computers and impart the same to her village people. She pointed out that the experience she gained in the VKC and the computer knowledge are helpful in her present work. She helped her village women paying EB charges through online services. She mentioned that SMS messages were disseminated to the village by using the public address system. Farmers became aware of the importance of using *pancha kavya* and other organic inputs. VMC meeting was held often where the members discussed about the activities that were conducted and the future activities to be undertaken. She also mentioned about the capacity building training given to the Knowledge Workers by the VRC and how the coordinator of the programme encouraged the Knowledge Workers to carry out their work with confidence. It is an unforgettable experience (working as a Knowledge Worker), said Ms

Prabha. Responding to the enquiries of women and men gave her a sense of satisfaction and enhanced her self esteem. She mentioned that it was very satisfying working at the VKC and that's the reason she came forward to talk to the researcher. When asked her why the VKC has not been functioning in her village she responded saying that she thought probably many computer centres have come up in and around the village. She did not elaborate.

Ms Prema, 34 years

Ms Prema was the fifth and the last Knowledge Worker who managed the VKC in Neduvasal. She is grateful to the then boundary partner who gave the job which was very helpful to meet her daily expenses because it was soon after husband's demise.

VKC gave her lot of opportunity to become aware of many things. First of all she learnt as to how to interact with people. She learnt computers and gave training to the school going female children. Training on skill development in computers was held in association with Nehru Yuva Kendra; it was her most fruitful time at the VKC, pointed out Ms Prema. She trained four batches of girl students; they used to come directly from the school to learn computers. She was happy to share with us that she was paid honorarium for giving training to the students. By observing plant clinic sessions she came to know of common pests that affect the crop. She learnt about online services. Women used to come to the Centre for reading *Namma Ooru Seidhi*, a local news letter published by MSSRF. Some used to come for information related to employment opportunities. She said that after she joined the first programme was on tuberculosis which was a free health camp. It was organised through the village *Panchayat*. She said many participated in the camp. There were some who used to visit the centre for clarification after seeing the information written on the notice board. Big farmers expected the VKC to procure inputs and give it to the farmers.

Ms Prema mentioned that she used to go to the village to mobilise women and men for programmes such as plant clinic; response would be discouraging. There would be only four to five persons and they would not bring plant sample. She contacted people over the phone whenever phone-in-programme or plant clinic was conducted. There were two photo copying shops near the VKC; so many did not seek the services available in the VKC. She pointed out that a great majority of the farmers are economically well off and they did not feel the need to use the services of the VKC. Some of them are abroad and many are in government jobs. She continued to say that people from economically poor background would have appreciated the services of the VKC (*namma thagavalgalai, nammai oru poruttaga edukka villai*)! Many had registered themselves in the Horticultural department in Vamban; so they made use of the schemes and the subsidies available in the department. Moreover, the officers from the department visited their fields and

gave guidance. According to Ms Prema the big farmers were of the view that they knew everything and there is nothing to know from the VKC. There was no support from the big farmers. They would not expect anything from the VKC (*avargal (peru vivasaayigal) vasadhi aanavargal; othuzhappu kodukka villai; VKC sevagalai edhirparkamaataangal*). The VKC was located in a market place so not many women visit the centre, mentioned Ms Prema. She pointed out that children came to the VKC because it was training in skill development in computers (*computer enbhadaal anuppivittargal*).

Ms Prema was sad that VKC had been closed. She said that old president (Mr Sundar rajan) was a kind hearted person and was interested in people's welfare. He did his best to continue the VKC services for the benefit of the village people. There were few farmers like Mr Natarajan who cooperated well with Mr Sundar rajan. She is of the view that there is no scope for the VKC to start its operation in Neduvasal.

Staff of VRC

We had discussion with the VRC staff closely associated with VKC of Neduvasal. It confirmed that socio-economic or caste/class factors played a significant role in the functioning of the VKC and its subsequent closure. We gathered that there was a perceptible difference in the functioning of VKC between the terms of two *Panchayat* Presidents as the boundary partner of the VKC programme. It was stated that the second part of the VKC programme suffered a setback in the implementation of the services and activities of the VKC in spite of the genuine and sincere efforts taken by the subsequent boundary partner Mr Sundar rajan; he tried his best to conduct plant clinic programmes in the fields. But farmers' participation reduced (It was also pointed out that when Ms Prabha mobilised farm women and men for the plant clinic and other programmes there was poor response); he was very humble and had interest in the village development. We were told that he did his best along with few likely minded people. However, the power and influence of the earlier boundary partner, Mr Dakshinamoorthy was much more than his predecessor. The VRC staff also mentioned that after Mr Dakshinamoorthy became Councillor he became busy and could not be contacted. We were also told that MR Sundar Rajan still is in touch with the VRC and requests the staff to conduct soil health camp and plant clinic programme in the village. They also added to say that both Mr Sundar rajan and Mr Dakshinamoorthy participate in VRC meetings even now.

It is sad that a VKC set up with interest had to be closed down because of the ego clashes between the two individuals who were boundary partners of the VKC programme coupled with socioeconomic factors. This came out clearly during our interaction with Mr Dakshinamoorthy who openly said that Mr Sundara rajan lacked the capacity and financial resources to manage the VKC programme. For some reason the VRC also

distanced itself and did not take efforts in sustaining the VKC programme. It may be because of the financial constraints and indirect pressure the VRC faced to close down the VKCs that were not functioning well. It is heartening to learn that VRC continues to send voice messages; so there is continuity of the service for updating agriculture and veterinary information. The earlier information and crop/veterinary advisories have played a significant role in their livelihood that some of them keep in touch with the VRC; they also seek guidance from the plant doctor. The farmers were happy to share with us that they are aware of certain basic factors to be remembered in carrying out their agricultural activities such as in applying only the required quantity of inputs and preventing and managing disease/pest.

iii Village Knowledge Centre, Akkaraipettai Village

MSSRF also had an experience of setting up a VKC in a village called Akkaraipettai²⁸, a fishing village in Nagapattinam district in the post Tsunami period where no usual procedure such as need assessment and PRA was carried out. Akkaraipettai was severely affected by the Tsunami in 2004. As a post-Tsunami intervention VKC was set up by MSSRF, with the financial support of TATA Relief Committee (TRC), in early 2005. A significant development ultimately resulted in the VKC being closed (in spite of this, MSSRF disseminate daily important information using its various ICT tools and conduct training programmes for the fisherwomen and men).

Setting up of this particular VKC during the stressful post-Tsunami period and the development of the VKC have certain unique and interesting features. In order to help the villagers the TRC was involved in a housing project to provide houses for the affected fishing households of Akkaraipettai. Alongside, they also came up with the suggestion to set up a Village Knowledge Centre as a corporate social responsibility in association with MSSRF. The VKC was set up without community's participation. The VRC had to struggle a lot both with the community and TRC staff. Somehow the VKC was set up in a building owned by a NGO. The centre was shifted from one place to another before it found a place in TATA building (Community Hall).

Mobilising the *Panchayat* members was not an easy task. It was a busy period because it was relief distribution time. There were about 24 members in the traditional *Panchayat* but bringing them together was a difficult task. The hope of mobilising all the *Panchayat* members in one place at a time to explain about the VKC and its activities never materialised. Our discussions with the staff revealed it was a Herculean task to mobilise people and create awareness about the VKC activities among the village elders in an

28. For more details see Evolution of a Village Knowledge Centre Under Extraordinary Conditions: Case Study of Tsunami Affected Akkaraipettai Village, MSSRF, 2010

atmosphere where there were a number of NGOs were extending different kinds of material and financial assistance.

In spite of several efforts of MSSRF staff the *Panchayat* showed little or no interest in the activities. They appreciated the programme but did not give the necessary support and involvement. They would attend whenever there was any important occasion like inauguration of the VKC, during the visit of President of India, when Professor M S Swaminathan had visited the Centre etc; but there was no perceptible involvement in the Centre's activities. This attitude has been a main reason for various challenges the VKC has/had to face in its four years of presence in the village and finally closing down the Centre.

The *Panchayat* never gave any support to find a rent free building to house the VKC, they did not help in finding Knowledge Workers and pay electricity charges. Interestingly, the users themselves became Knowledge Workers for whom VRC paid a nominal honorarium. But somehow, there was someone or the other to manage the VKC. It was because the villagers particularly the youngsters realised the benefits of the Centre for their community; they tried their best to sustain the services and activities of the Centre.

When finally the VKC was shifted to a community hall built by TRC /TATA again the VRC/VKC confronted with another problem – higher electricity bill; the building has three phase electricity line which would result in heavy bill like between Rs 3000-4000. *Panchayat* cannot bear it. They cannot generate income to pay the bill. TRC did not hand over the building to the community in a proper manner. When the community hall constructed it was given to understand that it would also house the VKC. But there was no written commitment from the TRC that VKC would also be accommodated in that building. VRC tried several times but could not succeed. At least a word from the TRC to the *Panchayat* would have yielded positive results; confusion could have been avoided. Today we would not have landed up in closing the Centre, mentioned Dr Velvizhi, the coordinator of VRC programme in Nagapattinam.

During its four years the VKC offered services and conducted programmes for different section of the population. Parents felt that VKC was God sent because the Centre attracted the children to play on the computers. It was a good and useful diversion for the fear stricken children; for the youth both women and men they were able to get skill development training in computers. Skill development in computers really enhanced the confidence level and self esteem. Several school boys were able to come out of their hesitation and lack of confidence. One boy got into Anna University who used to be very timid and introvert. There are several instances where the youngsters showed improvement in their studies and behaviour. Many young women and men

got employment based on their computer skills. Young fishermen were encouraged to learn photo shop and learn DTP skills. This gave them employment opportunities and to earn income. This was very useful at a time when they had not yet resumed fishing.

Despite the benefits experienced by user community the VKC had to be closed down much to the disappointment and helplessness of the user community. It was the general feeling that the *Panchayat* members come from a comfortable position; they won't understand the needs of the other section of their own community. If the *Panchayat* had rendered the necessary support of providing a rent free building and taking care of the rent/electricity bill the users would have taken it upon themselves to run the Centre successfully!

**Village Knowledge Centres of Rajendiram, Neduvasal and Akkaraipettai:
Snapshot of activities carried out**





My Experience with the Village Resource Centers

MSSRF – TATA Relief Committee Akrasipettai, Nagapattinam

- I found they are helping the locals by imparting education through computers
- Helping the Self Help Group Members to maintain their accounts
- Providing weather and sea forecast data, etc.
- Potential Fish zones by electronic board through INCOIS, Dept. of Ocean Development
- Weather reports and information on wave heights from the downloaded information from US Navy website




IV. Concluding Remarks

Information and knowledge empowerment is vital to improve the lives of the rural population, particularly the poor. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a tool has great potential to promote social and economic development in rural areas. In this context, M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) has initiated Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres²⁹ (VKCs)/Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs) programme in 1998 to promote and strengthen knowledge empowerment of rural communities.

This study has made an attempt studying favourable factors that are responsible for functioning of certain VKCs (Example Vilangudi in Thiruvaiyaru district, Onangudi in Pudukottai district and Manpathai in Trichi); an attempt has also been made to gather factors that acted against the continuity of the VKCs³⁰ (Rajendiram and Neduvasal in the districts of Thiruvaiyaru and Pudukottai and briefly in Akkaraipettai Village of Nagapattinam district).

The three central components which play an important role in the effective functioning and continuity of the VKC programme are Boundary Partner/Village Management Committee of the VKC, Knowledge Worker and ICT based effective infrastructure in the VKC supported by the implementing agency, strategic partners/line departments and the users.

VKC programme is a community centred one. In all the VKCs we have studied so far revealed that a proper procedure was adopted (except in Akkaraipettai, Nagapattinam district) before taking a decision to set up a VKC in a village with the consent of the village community. However, it is also learnt that not all the VKCs continue to function; while some continue to operate reasonably well in rendering its expected services to the village with the support of the community and the VRC, there are some that have been closed down for some reason or the other.

In the VKC villages of Vilangudi, Onangudi and Manpathai and also in the villages of Rajendiram and Neduvasal (except Akkaraipettai, a fishing village) where VKCs have been closed down-agriculture is the main occupation followed by livestock rearing. The villagers appreciate the services of the VKCs particularly in their farming

29. As it has been mentioned earlier, The Interdisciplinary Dialogue in 1992 on "Information Technology: Reaching the Unreached" revealed that the future of food security in the developing world, especially South Asia, may depend less on resource intensive agriculture and more on knowledge intensity. Thus the concept of Village Knowledge Centre was born in the dialogue held in 1992.

30. Though the VKCs have been closed down in these villages MSSRF continue to serve the community with information in all possible ways by using digital tools.

operations and livestock rearing. It has been seen that the VKC programme adopts a multi-pronged communication strategy through its specialised services such as mobile phone based audio advisories, Farmers' Helpline services, audio-video conferences, Phone-in programmes, social media, video including multimedia-based learning, plant clinics etc to disseminate dynamic and static information and knowledge.

Access to local specific and need based timely programmes/activities/services of the VKC have been found to be very useful to the rural community and have gained the appreciation of women and men. The informal interviews gave us insights about how the village as a whole and the neighbouring ones is benefitting by the services of the VKCs in the villages of Vilangudi, Onangudi and Manpathai and also from the villages of Rajendiram and Neduvasal where VKCs have been closed down. It was interesting and encouraging to listen to the women and men of different age groups as to how they have been benefitted by utilising the services of the VKC. It is the general expectation and request of the women and men of the villagers we have visited that the VKC/VRC should continue its services to the village community.

It is learnt that in the initial years not many made use of the VKC services except children and college going students. A substantial number of youngsters including female benefitted a lot through skill development in computers. It has raised their confidence and self esteem which are important in their socioeconomic development. It has helped them in their studies and to shine well in their jobs. Gradually, the adult and older generation have been drawn to the VKC to enquire about government/agricultural schemes, subsidies, weather, market information and crop/veterinary advisories. The VKC/VRC programme gained the attention of more and more people including women with the introduction of plant clinic programme (and also with messages sent through SMS, Whatsapp, Voicemail and phone in programme and so on) as it directly connected to their livelihood. Services such as plant clinic programme and veterinary services seem to be playing a very significant role in improving the livelihood of the village community and have gained widespread recognition among the farmers. It has brought in lot of changes and impact in the lives of rural women and men. It is also understood that these services in general help women manage agricultural operations and maintain the livestock of the house hold without men's support. The crop advisories and the cattle care advisories have made them confident in handling issues related to agriculture and cattle care. The farmers have been able to avoid unnecessary expenditure by taking timely measures to prevent and control disease/pest in crops and livestock.

The most demanded and appreciated service amongst the villagers particularly in

the Vilangudi and Onangudi VKCs (and even in Rajendiram³¹ Village and Neduvasal where VKCs are not functioning) is the service rendered to the farming community through plant clinics. It was really heartening to observe the feelings of the women and men when they shared about the role of the plant clinics in helping them sustain their interest in pursuing agriculture as their livelihood. It is learnt that this programme has created interest among the younger generation particularly in Onangudi Village to work on their agricultural fields with interest. The plant clinics seemed to have given the motivation and confidence even to young women who were compelled to take care of farming activities in the absence of their men's help. They are able to carry out their agricultural operations based on right knowledge and proper guidance from the plant doctors (and also by attending programmes related to agriculture). It has helped to improve their economic condition, minimising expenses by taking timely appropriate action to control pest and diseases and adopt agricultural operation based on updated knowledge.

The services rendered by plant clinic programme through video/audio conferences during the pandemic have been greatly appreciated. The farmers were able to carry out their agricultural operations through plant clinic programme and through telephone contact with the plant doctor/agricultural expert. Audio and video conferences are conducted in a common place and at a convenient time suitable for the community. The farming community gets opportunities to interact with experts from different fields related to their livelihood. It is also heartening to learn that the plant clinic services have created interest among the youngsters and women to pursue agriculture as the main economic activity. The farming community in Vilangudi³² wished that physical plant clinic sessions resumed soon which has been discontinued during pandemic. It is felt that direct contact with the agricultural expert would be a great source of support and encouragement in carrying out their agricultural operations. Whatsapp groups are formed to exchange and share information; whatsapp is also used to get guidance from experts. For example picture of the affected part of the plant is posted to get prescription and necessary care to be taken. The villagers appreciate the staff of the VRC and the Knowledge Workers for their timely advice and inputs to take appropriate action.

It is important to point out here that information is shared with the relatives and friends; also by observing the neighbours fields others are motivated to seek the help

31. Farming community in the villages particularly in Rajendiram where VKCs have been closed down greatly miss the services of plant clinic and some of the women became emotional when they shared their experiences of the plant clinic and its positive impact on their lives.

32. The agricultural scientist in the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru who worked as Plant Clinic doctor has been transferred to some other area. So, the VRC is finding it difficult to conduct physical plant clinic sessions. However, audio/video conferences are held. The farmers contact the plant doctor over the phone; we learnt that he is accessible and he helps the farmers with necessary crop advisories and suggestions.

of the VKC or the progressive farmers to adopt new technologies in their fields. So, the VKCs' services reach indirectly many others.

Interestingly, the VKC programme has also been rendering good services in improving the social condition of the village women and men. The health camps conducted in the village schools and in other common places in the villages have raised awareness on health issues and appropriate action to be taken. For instance, creating awareness on adolescent girls about the possible health issues they would face and how to manage them. School children are encouraged to follow basic hygienic measures to be adopted in their day today lives and share the same with their parents. School dropouts are identified and encouraged to continue their school education. As we have mentioned earlier the skill development in computers have raised confidence level and self esteem of those who underwent the training. This also helped many in getting employment and perform well in their work and also help their colleagues. Other than this, the VKC also disseminates information on higher education and employment opportunity.

Online service is another significant aspect helping the rural women, men and children. They can get their work (such as getting community certificate, land/house *patta*, paying electricity bill and so on) done within the village itself; they are able to avail the government schemes/subsidies using online services. They are saved from travelling to a nearby village or town. The rural population also feel comfortable in accessing the services at the VKC because it is located in their own village and managed by a local person familiar to them. The Knowledge Workers in all the VKCs studied do it with enthusiasm; so villagers, particularly women, feel comfortable to access the VKC services. It is heartening to learn that the Knowledge Worker of Rajendiram Village (which has been handed over to the village community and presently not functioning) continues to serve people through online service from home.

It is wonderful to know that the VKC carries out its activities/services related to agriculture, health, nutrition and so on in partnership with institutes/organisations (strategic partners) which are mutually beneficial and helpful in promoting socioeconomic development of the rural community. The VKC (VMC and the Knowledge Workers) in all the villages studied has a good rapport with VAO, veterinary inspector, VHN, *Anganwadi* teacher, SHG, Village *Panchayat* and vice versa. There is exchange and sharing of information and work among the various stakeholders. For instance, Staff of the Agricultural department would contact the VKC and provides details of new schemes, eligibility to avail the same etc. The VKC in turn, with the help of the VMC identifies persons who can benefit from these schemes. Likewise, The VKC also extends support while conducting health camps and special camps such as health issues of *valar ilam pengal* (adolescent girls). Camps for *valar ilam pengal* helps the young women to share their health related problems and they also become aware of health issues

(menstrual and other gynaecological problems) which should be given attention and requires necessary treatment. The mutual help and support between and among the various stake holders is very important for effective functioning of the VKC.

It has been observed that there is a good understanding and cooperation among the VMC members which is crucial for the effective functioning of a VKC; in general, the VMC members in the villages studied are particular that their respective village benefits by the services of the VKC provided with the help of the different stake holders. Important information is reached to entire village by word of mouth through VMC members residing in different streets. The Knowledge Workers are proactive and sincere in rendering their services to the community. They have the full support of the VMC members from their respective villages.

Knowledge Workers play a critical role in reaching people with information and various schemes/programmes to the community. The Knowledge Workers are aware of their role and responsibilities. One of them pointed out that 'a Knowledge Worker with sufficient training and capacity is important for a VKC programme to sustain, of course with the support of the VMC and the community'. They do not confine their role only in disseminating information and mobilising the community for a training/awareness programmes. They voluntarily take up work in helping women or needy people in getting their pension or any government scheme /subsidy. In case of any outbreak of fever they would request VHN to conduct a fever camp and similarly for livestock. They have a good rapport with local banks and encourage the villagers to start saving bank account.

Hand holding of the VRC and its coordinator role seem to have played a significant role for the functioning of the VKCs with the full support of the Boundary Partner/VMC. Dr Rajakumar coordinating VRC programme is an inspiration and motivation for the staff of the VRCs and also mainly to the VMC members and Knowledge Workers. For example, his untiring efforts and persuasive capacity in creating confidence and interest in the village elders (that it is possible and we can do it attitude) has created a great impact on the VMC of Manpathai and Aniyapur who were pessimistic about the feasibility of establishing a VKC and running it. Reluctant villagers were convinced by his dynamic personality, patience and commitment to take the benefits of the VKC programme to the village community. They mentioned that they were totally captivated by his motivating words (*engalai vaarthaigalal kattipottuvittar*).

Dr Rajakumar stated that there is convergence from all sides; there is participation. According to him linkages are very important for functioning of the VKCs. He also pointed out it is important that VKC managers (including the VKC at Manpathai Village) are given regular capacity building training (such as in using online services

and dissemination of information through voice message) and the VRC would not compromise on it.

Dr Rajakumar was humble to say that the VRC is able to give only 70 % support to the VKCs (under the study). He feels it should be 100% and there is more to be done from the VRC side. "There has been demand for computers and allied gadgets. We have to improve the infrastructure. We are finding it difficult to improve the infrastructure. We are giving technical support. All the programmes are conducted with MSSRF help. The Boundary Partner of the VKC programmes is taking care of the rent and Electricity bill of the VKC building. VRC is paying the Knowledge Worker's honorarium of the VKCs Vilangudi and Onangudi. The Knowledge Workers salary can be paid by the VRC provided there is fund availability. This is an important issue and concern which needs attention and sorted out. Sustainability of the VKCs depends greatly on this".

Involvement of a varied spectrum of community stakeholders is critical for the good reach and sustainability of the VKC programme is evident from the VKCs studied in Thiruvaiyaru district and another one in Pudukottai supported and monitored by MSSRF and one VKC in Manpathai, Tiruchirappalli district fully managed by the VMC with the guidance of the VRC of Pudukottai.

From our brief visit to the VKCs (including Rajendiram and Neduvsal) and also to the VKC at Manpathai clearly brings out the importance of the three components – the VMC, the Knowledge Worker and the infrastructure such as computers, scan facility, printer and photocopying machine (ably supported by the implementing agency, strategic partners/line departments and the users) for the sustainability of the VKCs. In spite of well intentioned VMC, proactive Knowledge Worker and a very helpful role played by the VRC as a facilitator for conducting programmes/training and getting linkages there are few serious concerns that need to be looked into by all the stakeholders. How long VRC would be able to play a facilitator role and how it is going to pay the Knowledge Workers in the two VKCs of Vilangudi and Onangudi. Continuous support and guidance from the VRC is expected by VMC members; the VMC at Manpathai are relatively in a more strong position; they have made arrangements to take care of the Knowledge Workers salary. The VMC in the other two VKCs (Vilangudi and Onangudi) may be motivated to contribute towards a corpus fund that will take care of Knowledge Worker's salary. Also, some income generating activities can be thought of for the VKCs. Computer classes and TNPSC coaching classes can be undertaken charging nominal fees. This would encourage the youngsters and the parents to make use of the programme since they do not have to go outside the village. Another source of income may be generated through online services. Online services can be strengthen. It is important that VKCs are equipped with sufficient number of good computers with

scan facility, printer and photocopying machine. This component is very weak but the VKCs are managing with the available facility.

We have seen about the three VKCs that have been functioning reasonably well since their inception with the support and facilitation of the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru and VRC of Pudukottai. However, as we have seen MSSRF has not yet handed over the two VKCs one in Vilangudi in Thiruvaiyaru district and Onangudi in Pudukottai district to the community; though the VMC and the Boundary Partner in both the VKCs are very cooperative and committed to the VKC programme, the honorarium of the Knowledge Workers in both the VKCs are paid by MSSRF; these two VKCs were set up much earlier (2005-2006). The boundary partner and the VMC have a sense of ownership of the VKC but they have not yet seriously thought of creating regular income to the VKC which would take care of the honorarium of the Knowledge Worker and maintenance of the VKC infrastructure.

Interestingly, the VKCs of Manpathai and Aniyapur set up much later in 2012 have been handed over to the community in 2016 and rendering their services to the community like the ones in Vilangudi and Onangudi. The honorarium of the Knowledge Workers has been taken care of by the respective VMC by creating a core fund. The maintenance of the infrastructure is also taken care by the income earned through online services. May be the experiences of MSSRF in the past has taught the organisation to be very careful and made it very clear to the community from the beginning that when the project is withdrawn it is the responsibility of the VMC to run the VKC in Manpathai and Aniyapur without any financial support from outside. The VMC members in both the villages are also enthusiastic and prepared themselves well in advance to organise for core fund (by their personal contribution through informal chit system). The interest from the savings and other service charges from the VKC take care of the honorarium of the Knowledge Workers and the maintenance of the VKCs.

Handholding of VRC seems to be important. Continuous handholding by the VRC is expected by the VMC including the VMC at Manpathai. They strongly feel that the momentum can be maintained only with the frequent contact and guidance from the VRC. The VKC programme has been going on reasonably well and the villagers are getting benefited which is acknowledged by the village community in the villages of Vilangudi, Onangudi and Manpathai. Will VRCs be able to provide the role expected by the VKCs is an issue that needs to be given a serious thought! A well intentioned and useful programme for the village community should not be left to suffer for want of institutional guidance, facilitation and support!

We have learnt that the continuity of the VKC programme depends to a greater extent on the supportive Boundary Partner/Village Management Committee of the VKC,

Knowledge Worker and ICT based effective infrastructure in the VKC supported by the implementing agency, strategic partners/line departments and the users. Unfortunately, some of the VKCs had to be closed down for various reasons mainly because of the attitude of the Boundary Partner /VMC, their lack of support and interest in continuing the programme and certain social issues. Also, changes in the leadership of newly elected village *Panchayat* hastened the process. It is learnt that they did not show interest in the VKC programme; it is mainly because of the different socioeconomic background of the new leadership particularly in Neduvasal and to an extent in Rajendiram.

VKC in Rajendiram Village (Thiruvaiyaru district) one of the earliest VKCs to be set up and functioned fairly well till three-four years ago was handed over to the community two years back only to be closed down (during the Covid time) because of lack of committed leadership in the VMC, small issues among the VMC members and the indifferent attitude of the present elected village *Panchayat* President who comes from a different social background. The VKC also suffered from want of a building for it to operate. The elected new President did not show interest to give a room for the VKC in the *Panchayat* building. Honorarium to the Knowledge Worker could not be paid. The enthusiastic Knowledge Worker gave her services for some months without getting any honorarium. The VMC even now seem to be inclined to revive the VKC facility because they are well aware the benefits of its services to the community; they feel the loss to the community now. However, there is no right leadership to work on this. The earlier Village President³³ (he was President for 10 consecutive years) was very enthusiastic and committed and had he continued to be in that position the VKC would be functioning now, stated some VMC members and women and men from the village; he is fully aware of the benefits of the programme to the community. He personally monitored the programme activities and the Knowledge Worker. Also, it is inferred that MSSRF as a facilitator did not take sufficient effort in handling the issues. May be the prevailing condition favoured or suited them to withdraw from these villages as the VRC had a pressure from the head office to close down the VKCs due to financial constrains and other factors.

In the case of VKC in Neduvasal, it could be gathered from our interactions with the two key persons who were boundary partners of the VKC programme during their respective tenure as Village *Panchayat* President and few VMC members including the Knowledge Workers that subtle socio-economic issues (change of village leadership/ boundary partner from a person with more economic power to lesser economic resources but belonging to the same caste and ego clashes between them and also to an extent

34. He could not contest the election because it was declared as a reserved constituency.

social background of the Knowledge Worker) seemed to have played a significant role in the closing of the VKC. The VKC could have continued to its services to the people of Neduvasal had the person who was responsible for getting the VKC programme to his village continued to show the same interest and enthusiasm even after he got elected as a Councillor. He did not offer support to the person who succeeded him as the Village *Panchayat* President and also the Boundary Partner of the VKC (He was a VMC member and along with his predecessor took active part in the functioning of the Centre). It is pointed out by the former that his successor's economic condition did not allow him to manage the VKC efficiently and he lacked the community's support.

It was also learnt that the social background of the woman who served as Knowledge Worker during the tenure of the subsequent boundary partner had a negative impact. The Knowledge Worker did not receive support or help from the community for mobilising people or conducting any programme. Though it was not shared openly we could infer that caste/ class issues acted against the VKC programme to an extent.

Like in Rajendiram, the VKC in Neduvasal also required a proper physical structure because the room functioned as a VKC got damaged when *Gaja puyal* (cyclone) hit the region. In Neduvasal, the present *Panchayat* President on whose request the VKC was setup had himself become indifferent when he got elected as Village *Panchayat* President after serving as a councillor for five years; he did not show interest in finding a place for the VKC ; he does not seem to have regrets about the VKC being closed down. He was very causal when he mentioned that Common Service Centre (CSC) -yet to start its functioning in the village- can do the job of a VKC. He could have easily accommodated the VKC in the building readied for CSC. With the VRCs help he could have combined the services of CSC and the VKC for the benefit of the village community. The VRC also did not take efforts to talk to the concerned people to find a solution to resume the activities of the VKC. This may be also because of the attitude of the present *Panchayat* President instrumental in setting up the VKC in the village and the pressure from the head office in Chennai to close down the VKCs not functioning well.

In the case of Akkaraipettai Village in Nagapattinam district, the VKC set up with the financial support of TATA Relief Committee (TRC), in early 2005 as a post Tsunami intervention (without following the normal procedure) had to be closed down despite the benefits experienced by the fishing community. It was set up during the time when government departments, civil society organisations and individuals were engaged in relief and rehabilitation work involving material help/assistance. The general feeling was that the *Panchayat* members could not appreciate the services of the VKC for improving the socioeconomic condition of their village through knowledge/skill empowerment. If the *Panchayat* had rendered the necessary support of providing a rent

free building and taken care of the rent/electricity bill the users would have taken it upon themselves to run the Centre successfully!

It is better to assess properly functioning of an existing programme particularly a well meaning community centred programme. Depending on the assessment one can give up or carry on with the programme. It is important to have clarity while taking a decision regarding closing/withdrawing a programme and continue with it. One cannot give up just like that or continue with it if it is not working. One should know when to give up totally or keep going. Right assessment and right approach to the problem are important. It is also not fair on the part of the village community to expect an organisation to keep working and never give up. In some cases the organisation has to give up if something is not working and the prevailing conditions are unfavourable. In order to ensure that the programme achieves its desired goals, there is need for a proper assessment of its impact on a continuous basis. The material gathered will help to further improve the methodologies adopted in establishing VRCs and VKCs and in making the movement sustainable and user-driven.



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