

Understanding Livelihoods
Complexity, Choices and Policies in South India

Annotated Video Script

July 2001

The annotations on this script represent the personal observations of the producer of the video and are not endorsed by DfID. They are intended to aid discussion of the material presented in the video, by providing additional background material and presenting some of the thinking behind the script. The notes are based on personal experience and on an IIED research report:

*Rengasamy, S., et. al. (2001). **Thaan Vuzha Nilam Tharisu - The Land Without a Farmer Becomes Barren: Policies that Work for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods in Virudhunagar District, Tamilnadu.** London, IIED,*

which can be ordered from the IIED bookshop on the [IIED web site](#).

The video can be ordered from DfID's [Sustainable Livelihoods Resource Centre](#)

Notes in blue are background material

Notes in red discuss the thinking behind the script

Introduction

Voiceover 1: You can't put people at the centre of development, without understanding how they make their living. Rural people's livelihoods are as rich as complex as anyone else's. Understanding their reality means appreciating that everyone faces their own particular challenges, and that these might look very different from the inside than they do to an outsider. This video will demonstrate some of the complexities of understanding livelihoods by looking at a particular context and place: Development work in a rural area of Southern India

Agriculture around Thiruchuli

Voiceover 2 Thiruchuli Panchayat Union is a *A Panchayat Union is*

small administrative area in the South of Tamilnadu. It is regarded as rural, with 85% of the workforce employed in agriculture, which depends on seasonal rainfall. Only a quarter of the land is irrigated and the irrigation systems are often poorly maintained. The region is drought prone which makes farming difficult and there is no guaranteed green revolution package that works to ensure productivity. Many farmers are failing in their own terms, and there is a sense of crisis about the future of farming in the district.

the second tier of local government in Tamilnadu. Thiruchuli Panchayat Union has more than 75,000 (1991 census) people living on 42,785 ha of land.

The 'green revolution package' is the set of hybrid seed, pesticide, fertiliser, technology and irrigation that increased rice and wheat yields around the beginning of the 1970s. It fails to do so reliably in the rainfed agriculture around Thiruchuli because of the uncertainty of the water supply.

INTERVIEW 1 - FARMER

Farming is very difficult in the region. I come from a traditional farming family but I think this will come to an end with my generation – there is no more interest in agriculture. Production costs are increasing all the time, farmers often make a loss and they cannot afford to make much-needed investment in agriculture. All of this will lead to a scarcity of food crops in the region within the next ten years.

In focus groups and interviews, the despair and cynicism of many local farmers comes across very strongly. Farming is difficult in Thiruchuli, but at the same time is central to local culture, giving rise to a sense of crisis.

Voiceover 3: The state government is responding to the agricultural problems of areas like Thiruchuli by spending money on over 140 programmes, ranging from poster campaigns to credit and subsidies. The bureaucracy needed to run all this is large and complex and sometimes the programmes contradict one another as development gets divided up into smaller and smaller chunks, split between different departments. There are also contradictions with field realities, when policy assumptions do not match what's happening in the villages.

For example, there are separate line departments for agriculture, animal husbandry and horticulture.

At this point we wanted to introduce some of the ways in which the policy delivery system was complex, but in a way which does not match the complexity of the 'local reality'

For example, the standard form in which the agricultural department keeps its crop records doesn't recognise locally successful crops. This type of classification 'leads away' from local reality and doesn't reflect the value that farmers produce from their land. Some important local products are ignored completely, like Velikaruvel, a fast growing, drought-resistant shrub.

This problem is more subtle than just Velikaruvel not appearing in the records. Four varieties of millet, which collectively cover 1400 ha are lumped together in one category in the records. Maize, which covers just 5 ha, has a category of its own. The suspicion is that this is because millet seed is not sold commercially and hence is not so important to the agriculture department, in spite of its local significance (It's comparatively drought-resistant).

INTERVIEW 2 ERSKINE

Velikaruvel didn't used to be considered productive by the official system and land where it grew was classified as wasteland. Now things are changing and it's starting to be recognised that it is productive. Leaving the land with Velikaruvel is a livelihood option because it provides a regular income and there's no need to spend money on it, whereas with a regular crop, you have to spend money on seed, fertiliser, pesticide, ploughing and labour.

Velikaruvel is Prosopis juliflora, which was introduced to the area for fencing sometime in the 1960s, and now covers vast swathes of the countryside, in areas once officially regarded as 'wasteland'. It self-seeds and quickly springs up on any land left fallow.

Voiceover 4: Velikaruvel is used for firewood, and can be burnt for charcoal. It makes industrial grade charcoal that gets shipped as far away as Bombay. Landowners make money from it without having to do anything, as traders will arrange for labourers to cut and process it. Velikaruvel is an option for individual farmers, but choosing to let it grow affects their neighbours too.

The purpose here is to show that this 'woody weed' is actually productive. Following sections then balance this with some of the costs of farmers allowing Velikaruvel to grow, building up a more complex picture than 'grow' or 'don't grow'.

INTERVIEW 3 ERSKINE

Farmers can grow Velikaruvel, but at a risk of losing their connection with the land. This plant draws up groundwater, even from

The trade-off is that farmers can earn a guaranteed income from Velikaruvel every three years. Keeping

neighbouring fields and destroys the fertility of the land. It strikes at the heart of traditional agriculture, because it alienates the farmers from their land.

their land free of it and practising agriculture may produce more income, but it requires considerable effort and entails significant risk of crop failure and indebtedness.

Voiceover 5: Farming has always been a challenge around Thiruchuli, but farmers there have traditionally appreciated a need to stay close to their land in order to maintain its fertility. Now more and more are giving up and seeking other ways of life. What's driving this change?

Changes to labour relations

One answer is that local agriculture has always depended on a ready supply of cheap labour. Cheap labour made it possible to keep oxen for manure and draught power and get ploughing, planting and harvest done on time. Now farmers must compete with the cotton mills and other employers of local labour and they feel they cannot pay the going rate and make a profit themselves.

This is to start to counterbalance the simplistic assumption that farmers simply don't know or don't want to farm sustainably.

INTERVIEW 4 BALA

Labourers can get a permanent income from cotton mills and match factories so there is little incentive for them to work on the land. This has led to an increased demand for the labourers by farmers but the farmers often resent paying higher wages when the labourers work no harder and often stop at lunch-time to earn money elsewhere.

Labour relations are a significant issue locally, compounded by cultural and caste differences between labourers and landholders.

Voiceover 5B: With these sorts of pressures on profit, as well as rising costs and capped selling prices, many farmers are no longer willing to invest in agriculture. A good year means a reasonable profit, but a bad year results in debt. As Velikaruvel needs no investment, it makes a lot of sense to grow the shrub, in spite of the damage it inflicts on the land.

The story of Velikaruvel, is not one about simple 'good and evil'. The issue of whether to discourage or promote its Velikaruvel is complex, and there is no clear 'path forward'. The point of presenting it here is not to say what the policy should be, merely to point out that this is an important

social issue which cuts right to the heart of the future of local land-use.

Voiceover 6: With the future of Thiruchuli seeming to hold nothing more than day labour and the export of charcoal it is worth noting that some farmers who are doing well, even under these difficult conditions. One such successful farmer is Dhanuskodi of Errampatti.

The aim of profiling Dhanuskodi was to introduce the idea that agriculture can work locally. His relevance is not that all landless labourers can become rich farmers or that struggling farmers should copy his methods, but there are things to be learnt from his approach.

A successful farmer

INTERVIEW 5 - DHANUSKODI

I have land so that is not a problem and I plant throughout the year many different crops using rain-fed and irrigation methods of agriculture. I plan ahead thoroughly and will change crops to respond to a scarcity. Working for others as a labourer has given me a great deal of experience and I also treat my labourers well. If I break for tea then the labourers are also given tea. When the demand for labour is high I pay well and always within four days.

Dhanuskodi lives simply, reinvests his profits, treats his labour well (and therefore gets good value for the money he spends on their wages), and above all farms strategically: Responding to climatic and market conditions and preparing fall-back positions.

Voiceover 7: Dhanuskodi started life as a landless labourer. Now he has over 40 hectares of land thanks to hard work and careful planning. His success is all down to strategy and care with his relationships. His most successful crop is Jasmine....

As a result of his attention to detail and simple lifestyle, Dhanuskodi is a 'rich' farmer. (Most local farmers have less than 5 ha of land). However, he started life without any wealth, working for someone else.

INTERVIEW 6 DHANUSKODI

Jasmine is used on special occasions so I check the dates of festivals and auspicious days for marriages and plant the jasmine so that it flowers at those times. I plan very carefully, watching for rain and the general climate, so that I can make timely and careful applications of pesticides and weed-killers

The districts south of Madurai, which includes the area around Thiruchuli, are known for jasmine cultivation. Jasmine is flown all over India from the airport of Madurai, as well as further afield to Singapore and

ensuring the plants flower just when I want them to. My jasmine flowers are of a good quality and we harvest them early in the morning so that I can then drive them to market on my motorbike in advance of other farmers. Delivered early, on the right day, just a kilogram of good quality jasmine will fetch a good price.

Malaysia.

Voiceover 8: Dhanuskodi's success depends on being able to take many complex factors into account and come up with a strategy that works. Taking complexity into account means going beyond traditional categories and set ways of thinking. A local issue where this is important is use of animal manure for fertiliser

The next section develops another strand of the complexity of agriculture as a local livelihood, more explicitly tying together the issues of labour trends and land fertility.

Animal manure

Voiceover 9: Most farmers in Thiruchuli think that using farmyard manure for fertiliser is preferable to chemical fertilisers in the long term. They say it helps retain moisture and maintain soil fertility. However, many use chemicals which give higher short term yields. The government's response is to encourage the use of manure by spending money on poster campaigns. The assumption is that this will result in farmers changing over from chemicals to more sustainable practices.

The script presents simplistic version of policy regarding chemical fertilisers. As well as poster campaigns promoting chemical fertilisers, the agriculture department makes subsidies and credit available to buy fertilisers and pesticides. The signals given by the system are contradictory.

The problem is that farmers already know about farmyard manure and its role in good farming practice. Although they would prefer to use it if they could, there are important reasons that many don't:

INTERVIEW 7 VENKEDRAMEN

Farmers know that after a time spent using chemical fertiliser their yield will go down and the soil fertility will be reduced whereas manure protects the soil. But there are other concerns they need to consider. The use of animal manure has declined, because it's heavy. The amount you need is measured in wagonloads, whereas chemical fertiliser you can get by the sack. Manure requires animals and animals require labour to look after them, so the price keeps going up as labour prices go up.

The evidence from farmers is that the numbers of draught oxen in the area are falling significantly, because there are other options for many of the roles (eg. lifting water, ploughing, transport) that they used to fulfil, and because their keep has become relatively more expensive (ie. it costs time or money to care for them, and labour prices are generally rising).

Voiceover 10: Farmers already understand the links between animal manure and the other factors that affect its use, because its part of their day to day decision-making. When it's mapped out, their knowledge demonstrates linkages between the use of manure and labour trends, climate, subsidies, debt and a host of other factors.

The graphics are based on a 'web diagram', which shows the many linkages that farmers are aware of between the use of animal manure and other factors.

Poster campaigns aren't going to change anyone's mind when they already have a good grasp of the issue, because it's a solution to the wrong problem. However, when policymakers take local realities into account, even simple initiatives can have dramatic effects by creating new opportunities for people.

This section wraps up the focus on agriculture and changes the focus to policy and rural livelihoods in general.

Transport policy initiatives

Voiceover 11: Around Thiruchuli, new livelihood options are opening up to villagers as new transport facilities become available. A road building programme is improving access to villages, which means more opportunities for employment as well as better access to healthcare and education.

Roads have been built and improved over a number of years, but rural road-building accelerated under the DMK-led state government until May this year, when they lost office.

INTERVIEW 8 MALE VILLAGERS

Before the road to the village had been built, the men would have had to sit at home during off-season times but now they can travel to earn money from construction work as well as easily travelling to and from the neighbouring villages to do farm labouring work. The road has also meant that the village children can attend school in the towns to gain a higher level of education than they could have done in the village. Nowadays, if there is an emergency, a villager can receive medicines and attention more easily. Pregnant women are more confident now that they can be taken to hospital. For social occasions too, a marriage or funeral, people can come and go until the last bus at 11 o'clock at night. Women are learning to ride bikes so they can go shopping in nearby towns and villages. The road is the backbone of the village.

This interview actually happened while a PRA exercise with a group of village women to ascertain the effects of the road was being carried out. In order to increase the impact of the material below on gender differences and the benefits of development initiatives, and because the material actually filmed worked better, the men's interview was used. The results of the PRA exercise were largely the same as the material in the interview.

Voiceover 12: But improving transport

This minibus initiative

doesn't only mean building new roads. The state government has recently begun to licence new minibus routes, bringing public transport to people's doorsteps.

had been established in the cities at the time of filming and was just starting to make a difference in the rural areas.

INTERVIEW 9 BALA

The minibuses have had a great effect in my home town. Before, I had to walk ten kilometres from the nearest bus stop in order to visit my parents but now the minibuses stop at my door. The Government have made it possible for private owners to register new routes that have benefited many villages. These minibuses travel to places the larger buses did not reach. It really is a very good scheme because people have gained access to employment, health and education. The minibuses allow people to transport their vegetables to market, women can get around more easily with a greater feeling of security and the prices of the other buses have also fallen.

In policy terms, the minibus story is incredibly successful. On the face of it, enormous benefits have been gained for very little outlay by the state, little more than a regulative change. The reality is as usual more complex, and we could have explored the down side (eg. the allegedly criminal connections of many of the operators, loss of income for the state bus companies etc.).

Voiceover 13: A significant benefit of better transport is that less people are forced to migrate to the cities during the off-season.

Migration

INTERVIEW 10 ERSKINE

As an NGO, SPEECH offer programmes to decrease migration because when people leave the villages many complications can arise. In some cases the women who are left behind face social problems and have to work very hard to survive. If the land is not used and is overrun by weeds it will develop into a wasteland. It also becomes harder for the villagers to resolve communal clashes when the fabric of the community has been affected. The migrants themselves might improve their skills and earn money but these do not benefit the community as a whole. The migrants can also find they are in a weakened position to claim their rights with access to mainstream health and education denied.

During the dry season there is little casual employment in the villages, and many of the landless migrate for employment. SPEECH have picked up on the issue, because of the connection to natural resource management and to communal clashes.

Voiceover 14: However, migration isn't always a bad thing for individuals and

The idea with these interviews is to show

families. There are different kinds of migration.

that migration has different facets. It can be necessary for individuals to survive, although it can threaten the survival of others. It can benefit a community as a whole, or destroy its fabric.

INTERVIEW 11 RENGASAMY

When villagers use their collective intelligence to permanently migrate to cities they can be very successful. Certain rural communities know about specific employment opportunities in cities that urban people remain completely unaware of. In the city of Madurai, where I live, all of the peanut sellers come from the same few villages. Maintaining a strong link with their community, they take up this occupation with a pattern and wisdom to their choice and do very well. Others who migrate to the city without these links can flounder in the slums.

Professor Rengasamy has a different view, because his work with urban communities in Madurai brings him into contact with people who have migrated. SPEECH, on the other hand are biased towards those who might, or who have been left behind.

Voiceover 15: In Thiruchuli, investing in transport is successful, because it multiplies the effects of all sorts of other investments. If people can get to education, healthcare and other government services, then you don't need to build a school, a hospital and an extension office in every village.

This wraps the section on transport and migration up, and links to the material on the gendered effects of development initiatives.

Electrification and gender

Voiceover 16: Another effective initiative was the electrification of the villages. An immediate benefit was that electric pumps could painlessly draw water in a fraction of the time previously taken by teams of oxen. Although diesel motors are now more popular, electrification lightened the workload of many villagers, giving them time for new pursuits. However, with both transport and electrification, the benefits weren't all evenly spread.

The care of draught animals was traditionally a man's job. Electrification and the availability of tractors for ploughing decreased the need for this, as part of the general decrease in draught oxen.

INTERVIEW 12 RENGASAMY

Electrification freed the men-folk from many of the tasks they were traditionally engaged in and it left them with leisure time to become involved with politics and improve their

Electrification did not particularly alleviate any of the tasks that are traditionally women's. There was a similar effect with increased transport

agricultural methods. However, because of the women's traditional role their workload was not alleviated and in many cases increased. It used to be men that looked after the animals, so now they have more time on their hands. Women have not gained in the same way.

links, although more recently women have begun to benefit more as social change has freed them to travel and work for cash wages.

Voiceover 17: So policy can help the community as a whole, without benefiting everyone equally. Women failed to gain much from electrification because of their traditional role and the constraints it imposes on their activities. However tradition isn't always a constraint, it can be an opportunity too. In Tamilnadu, a new initiative is building on women's customary practice of saving for emergencies and special occasions to create self-help groups.

We wanted to show that it's not inevitable that women lose out from development initiatives, especially when their needs are taken into account at the planning stage. Also that tradition is not a bugbear - it is a feature of the social landscape and can be a force for the good if appreciated properly.

Women's self-help groups

INTERVIEW - 13 GIRIJA

Nanayams are about women coming together for mutual help and sharing. They have an inborn habit of saving and this talent is organised through the self-help groups. Through nanayams, they play a major role in the family and society having gained economic empowerment and confidence.

Nanayams are the name given to the particular form of self-help groups promoted by SPEECH.

INTERVIEW 14 WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Investigating research from a pilot scheme of a nanayam in Bangladesh, the Indian Government became interested in supporting women's self-help groups. In Tamilnadu they decided to target the poorest areas in four districts to promote the nanayams, with very encouraging results. Now the Government is actively supporting self-help groups because they believe women should be encouraged to take care of the village's financial matters. They are responsible, hard working and manage things extremely well.

The interviewee is referring to the pioneering work of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, which set the international standard for savings and loans for the poor.

Voiceover 18: SPEECH has been involved in setting up women's groups for the last 15 years, but as the organisation has evolved,

In its early days, SPEECH worked on a Fréreian model of

so has their approach. NGOs like SPEECH don't have the resources to make a substantial difference on their own, so they are moving into partnership with local government in order to help improve lives and bring about sustainable development in the area. They are able to bring their own expertise to new initiatives, based on an appreciation of local people and their world.

development: Education and consciousness raising. As they established themselves around Thiruchuli, they began to work on particular issues a-lá sectoral development.

Their understanding of local people and close relationship with them has helped them add value to the self-help group idea. All around Thiruchuli and their other working areas, they are helping to form women's self-help groups, or nanayam, through their innovative security card scheme.

They were also one of the early adopters of PRA and have a strong participatory slant to their development practice.

INTERVIEW 15 RENGASAMY

The idea for the security card came from the practises of local people who kept an invoice book of their credit transactions with local shopkeepers and also from the credit cards used by more affluent people.

Rengasamy originally proposed the idea for the security card, and it was subsequently developed by one of his students, working at SPEECH.

INTERVIEW 16 GIRIJA

The security card is an initiative offered by SPEECH that allows local people to purchase food, agricultural supplies and medicines from shopkeepers who will then settle the account with SPEECH. The nanayams then co-ordinate the repaying of the debt to SPEECH in three instalments and are charged a small administrative fee which is smaller than the interest that the shopkeepers charge for their credit. If repayments are prompt larger amounts can be borrowed from the scheme.

Shop-keepers provide credit to rural people already, but not necessarily on good terms. The flat fee charged by SPEECH for administration is much better value for the women, who stand guarantor for one another.

Here is a security book with the date of the purchase, how much was spent, the particular shopkeeper, when the nanayams meet to repay and the outstanding figure.

Voiceover 19: Once a savings and credit scheme is established, the group can undertake projects for individual and collective benefit. SPEECH has helped some nanayam groups set up milch cow and goat-rearing operations – forms of livestock care that fit with women's traditional role. These increase livelihood opportunities and

This made a nice link back to animal manure, but the problem of insufficient manure to replace chemical fertiliser is by no means solved.

incidentally replace the lost draught oxen as a source of animal manure.

Conclusion

Voiceover 20: People-centred approaches to development work because they are flexible and put local priorities first. A commitment to reducing poverty and close relationships with local people means that you are able to seize opportunities as they come up and take advantage of them.

Improving livelihoods and working for sustainable solutions is neither simple nor easy. Sometimes a brilliant solution brings new problems or fails to address old ones. However, positive change *is* possible and depends on being able to appreciate the full picture. Policies and intervention can make all the difference if they are based on local rather than outside realities.