



Photo: Author

This drawing – to be used as a learning tool in the fight against the red hairy caterpillar – is the result of careful observation and creativity of the children.

Children and the red hairy caterpillar offensive

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Do not be surprised if you happen to see a group of school children on a campaign rally, sporting slogans and posters with messages about natural farming and LEISA technologies in Odugampatty and other villages in the Pudukkottai district of Tamilnadu. This is one of the many strategies adopted by KUDUMBAM, a small NGO working with local dryland farmers. Its aim is to create awareness about the benefits of low-cost technologies for rainfed groundnut production in an area where groundnuts are a major and multi-functional crop.

KUDUMBAM organizes such events on specific themes during the summer school vacation, immediately before the main agricultural season begins in June. The 30 orphan girls supported by KUDUMBAM in its Vidivelli Children's Home also take part in these activities, creating programmes that are not only entertaining but which also inform farm families about LEISA technologies and natural farming.

KUDUMBAM cooperates with AME Foundation, another local organization concerned with LEISA practices, in promoting sustainable agriculture and livelihoods in the dryland farming communities of the Deccan plateau. Using Participatory Technology Development approaches, they have been

experimenting with local solutions to community agricultural problems. One of the most serious of these problems is the red hairy caterpillar (*Amsacta albistriga*).

This pest is a persistent problem in the Odugampatty area and in 2000, mass collective action was necessary. Full participation of the community was important for eradication methods to be effective, so awareness raising on a large scale was needed in the villages about the pest, its life cycle and how it could be dealt with. With the support of the Department of Agriculture and the Centre for Integrated Pest Management, KUDUMBAM adopted a multi-pronged strategy. Part of this strategy was to involve village school children who – having studied science at school – might be better able to understand the issues involved than their parents. Activities were therefore planned that would not only appeal to the children but would also bring across important messages to adults.

School-based programmes

A drawing competition for children between the ages of 12 and 14 years from Classes 6 to 8 was organized in schools in seven of the villages where the red hairy caterpillar was endemic. This was one of the main activities, but before the competition started an attempt was made to create a more general awareness of the issues involved. To do this KUDUMBAM staff trained in Farmer

Field School (FFS) approach, worked with children from the Vidivelli home and prepared performances in local folk art forms based on the theme “Community control of the red hairy caterpillar”. The street theatre, plays and songs they developed were intended to help people understand the value of IPM for good groundnut cultivation practices in general and managing the caterpillar in particular.

The children held their performances in the village at evening time. Before the Vidivelli children’s group made their presentations, however, KUDUMBAM staff set up exhibitions using charts prepared by farmers during FFS exercises to arouse interest in the coming events. Charts and message boards on the red hairy caterpillar theme were also displayed in all small stores and teashops. These preparatory steps ensured that the “*yatra*” or message was well received in all villages.

Next, KUDUMBAM started training village school children, stimulating their curiosity and interest in the campaign and the proposed drawing competition. Eventually 19 students were identified for the final stage of the competition. They were given further training by FFS staff to create a better synergy between their creative abilities and their scientific knowledge of red hairy caterpillar management. The selected students produced very creative diagrams on different aspects of the pest, ranging from its life cycle to control measures. The winners of the competition were presented with their award during a special function attended by district agricultural officers and other stakeholders.

Outcomes

That year there was a serious caterpillar outbreak, but the campaign had made farmers confident enough to use the techniques they had learned to manage the pest and minimize damage. The collective effort of so many institutional actors and the large-scale awareness created in the villages through the strategies mentioned above had encouraged them to take the necessary preventive action. For example, in one village farmers and groups of children collected and destroyed around 6000 adult moths before the creatures could start laying eggs and causing damage. News of the community’s success began to spread and Odugampatty became a learning centre for farmers from other villages with similar problems.

Studying the process

The success of the campaign was, of course, not due to the efforts of children alone. However, they were a key factor in creating the mass awareness that led to further action. It is clear that working with school children in this way and building on the knowledge and skills they have developed at school can have very positive benefits for the community as a whole. However, when designing programmes based on children the Odugampatty experience shows that it is important to bear the following points in mind:

- Child-based programmes are often designed with the future in mind. If this is the case provisions should be made for continuous field support;
- It should not be assumed that the needs of the community are the same as the needs of the children or that the community will accept children’s contributions as meaningful;
- Parents in small-scale farming communities have multiple priorities. This may mean they are less ready to take the time to learn from their surroundings and from their children;
- Activities designed to include children should be appropriate for their age and stage of development if they are to empower them rather than confuse them.

How serious is the red hairy caterpillar problem?



Photo: ICRI/SAT

The red hairy caterpillar (*Amsacta albistriga*), is a common pest in parts of the Pudukkottai district and can cause crop losses of up to 80% in years of severe infestation, which usually occur once every two years.

The red hairy caterpillar is a unique pest in many ways. A single moth lays up to 1000 eggs in clusters of 50-100 eggs. In a severe infestation the larvae can eat all the foliage in the field plot where they hatched, and then start moving from field to field in search of food.

Preventive non-chemical methods, such as the use of light traps and bonfires to capture moths before eggs are laid, hand picking of egg masses and larvae and using trap crops and field trenches to stop migrating larvae, are the only options available to small dryland farmers to reduce damage. A collective community action and clear understanding of the pest’s life cycle are prerequisite to taking up many of these activities, which are effective only when carried out on a large scale.

Initiatives such as KUDUMBAM’s work with the red hairy caterpillar that aim to increase the capacity of children and their communities to deal with specific agricultural problems show that, to be successful, carefully preparation and a well-planned and gradual introduction are key factors in achieving success. ■

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