

Meeting associates and partners : Bhuj, GUJARAT - October 2008

Two of our staff went to Bhuj and Ahmedabad in Gujarat in the first week of October.

Sahjeevan is our partner NGO in Gujarat, with whom we have been associated for many years now. Though their principal agenda is grassroots empowerment, *Sahjeevan* today is extending the scope of its initiatives and objectives without losing sight of its core philosophy. Two years ago it set up a renewable energy cell to introduce the benefits of solar packages for water and lighting in rural Gujarat. Today it has partnered with WASMO (Water and Sanitation Management Organisation) - a Govt. Of Gujarat initiative - to deploy solar pumping systems in rural villages faced with both power and water scarcity.

Aurore advises *Sahjeevan* on renewable energy technology and appropriate product choices to go with it. On this visit we decided to promote a range of solar and LED lighting systems for fishing communities operating in the Gulf of Kutch region.

The fishing communities of this part of the Gujarat coast are different from those in other parts of India. For one, the landscape (seascape to be precise!) is denuded and barren. Unlike coconut palms and shady casuarinas that dot the verdant seascapes of southern India (the coasts off Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Goa and Karnataka), the coastline of Kutch has more of the characteristics of a desert. The ubiquitous *Prosopis juliflora* (a thorny semi-arid shrub) is the only plant life of note in these settings, prized more for its fuel (fire-wood) value than the paltry shade it provides for either man or beast living in this harsh region. Again, unlike the settled fishing communities of the south, these fishermen of Kutch are nomadic. They hail from inland villages and set up temporary shelters along different stretches of the coast for some 7-8 months in a year when its season time; after which they "de-camp" and return to their villages till the call of the next fishing season.

The solar powered lamps we took with us were seen to be very useful by these fishermen who need such lights when they go out fishing as well as for domestic needs. We demonstrated no fewer than 4 -5 different types of lamps and charging options. The hand-crank lanterns with multiple settings (made by FreePlay) were a hit. Solar packs with an on-roof mini panel and battery were also appealing to them. We left it to *Sahjeevan* to take bookings from these fishermen and forward them to us for processing. Technical support would be provided by Aurore.

We also helped *Sahjeevan* develop a presentation for WASMO and accompanied key members to Ahmedabad to meet with the heads of WASMO. The intent and objective of our pitch was to reinforce the desirability and necessity of ground level social support and intervention to precede the technological one in order to ensure overall success. Fortunately for all of us, the Government officials saw the merits of this clearly for themselves and did not need undue convincing.

ON our return, we whetted a report for WASMO, prepared by *Sahjeevan* and incorporating the points we had made at our meeting with them earlier.

We await developments on this front. If this project comes through it would mean bringing safe drinking water with reliability and regularity to many villages in rural Gujarat plagued with water and power deficiencies, forcing hundreds of rural women to travel long distances to fetch water for their families and cattle. It would also garner points for its "eco friendliness" - as it employs the large scale use of renewable energy technology and system; in this case solar power.

