

"It was quite a big gap since I wrote something about the farm goings-on. I somehow got lost in the running of the farm and did not feel the need to write about it too much.

There is so much to do every day and there is an incredible flow of energy in the work.

In this newsletter I want to report about our investments, farm financials, and of course Covid-19 needs a little reflection."

Tomas

New development of infrastructure

As mentioned in our previous newsletters, we have finished the new cow house which was started a year ago, put a new roof on the existing old shed and created a new banana plantation. Both cow houses have metal sheet roofs with a roof frame of Hardwickia binate wood. These trees have been grown on the farm itself. The sheds have a loft made of casuarina poles where we store the rice straw to be fed to the animals. In this way the straw is well stored and protected from the rain and the animals have a cool space underneath.

The bananas in the new plantation do well and we hope to see the first harvest by the end of this year. As mentioned, we planted 0.75 acre under bananas of the 1.5 acres prepared plantation area; the rest is now cultivated with fodder sorghum for the dairy. Once the sorghum harvest is over in August the rest of the plot will be planted with bananas as well. Since the winter monsoon was ok, we can maintain the area with rain water from the ponds.



Corona times

“ The Corona crisis has had and will have quite an impact on the functioning of the farm.

When the crisis started for us at the end of March we had to grapple with the roadblocks to be able to deliver the products to Auroville, get needed supplies and make it possible for the workers to come to the farm. There was a lot of confusion about the rules, police were acting heavy-handed and there was a lot of fear. At some point we had some of our workers staying on the farm because part of Vanur village was locked down since there was a confirmed case of Corona in the village. With the help of the Working Committee and the Covid-19 task force we survived it all and the farm kept functioning pretty smoothly throughout the last 3 months.

Slowly the Corona factor becomes part of the new reality and we try to go with the flow of lock down, unlock and what lock not. What I do realize more and more is that the future will not be the same as it used to be: that after a slow moving summer the market picks up again and will go to peak consumption in the winter, etc. Most probably the curve will be pretty flat (and low) in the coming season. It might even never come back to the past patterns if we in Auroville decide to change our future after this jolt and decide to make ourselves less dependent on tourism. For example planning rice is a long-term affair; what we now start to invest in for the crop

of rice this monsoon will be consumed only 1-2 years from now. Investments are huge and grain storage is limited. We might do a bit less rice in the coming season but will decide that in the next few months and see how things develop. Normally this wouldn't be a question but if we're looking at a reduced consumption in the coming season this could present problems for us in the future.

We are having discussions about it in our grain working group but realize it is very hard to do better than make a wild guess where all this will go.

At the end of February we had decided to raise grain prices 5-10% from April but in the new reality we had to abandon that plan when it became clear that Auroville will be going into a financial recession; but it also means it is hard to increase wages of laborers and to cover increasing expenses of inputs in the farm. All this will have slow but sure repercussions on the farm level.

The dairy is an even more interesting case where we decided a few years back to increase Annapurna's herd by approximately 25% and those home-bred new animals take approx. 4 years to start milk production... the world can change a lot in 4 years as we have seen! ”



Farm operations

Financially the last year has been not so easy. The income of the dairy was low because of several factors like the after effect of the foot and mouth disease in January 2019; it was difficult to get animals pregnant again and milk production dipped. Laila, a cow which was in the middle of her lactation, died very unexpectedly without apparent reason, then besides losing the animal cost us milk. Besides all that we are in the process of bringing up 15 new heifers to be able to increase the herd size and retire some old animals. Bringing up new animals is a costly affair but is the long-term investment needed to increase production and secure us a healthy future.

From 2014 we have been investing substantially in the dairy, first with the installation of a cool room, then building of a proper food processing space, after that the building of a heifer shed and last year replacing the roof of the old cow house.

At the same time we have been improving the dairy effluent distribution system with a booster pump system and sprinklers to be able to improve our fodder production.

Pictures top: rain guns



Lots of longtime investments and work slowly is coming to an end and we hope it will show in the future a better and more productive farm.

Besides the poor dairy finances the paddy has been doing not very well in the last years. There were a few pests affecting the rice crop and there are some limiting factors which are still not clear to us. We have been looking into the poor rice yield years back but never found a clear reason for it. In the last years we have been working hard on the basic logistics like right amount of manure, healthy seedlings, correct transplanting time, sufficient irrigation, etc but still these changes did not result in what we want and need.

Recently we picked up a conversation with our old contact from Wageningen. Gerard Oomen is a retired senior soil scientist from Wageningen agricultural university in The Netherlands and we will once more try to pinpoint the yield restricting factor(s). We have a new volunteer Madhuri from Mumbai who will help us to conduct pot tests, make field observations, and handle a lot of the communication which will come with this.

Gerard Oomen has visited Annapurna many years back and through him we have had several students from the Wageningen University to look into various farm practices.

Pictures below: many heifers, Madhuri planting rice test

Franziska

At the end of December we had Franziska a young German volunteer joining for a planned 9 months but then the Corona crisis made the German government pull out students all over the world in the beginning of April.

Franziska was a lot involved in the dairy and general maintenance of the farm.

This is what she wrote:

„Hello everyone,

My name is Franziska. I am a new volunteer at Annapurna. After finishing my agriculture

studies in Germany I decided to gain more practical experience. I also want to see a little bit of the world and open my horizon. I heard about a volunteer program which offered me working on a farm abroad. That was just the perfect solution for me and destiny decided that I should come to Annapurna. I am very thankful that I can be here. It is such a beautiful place and I learned so much during my time here. One of my favorite places is the dairy. So it was no surprise that I started helping to milk our cows. I really enjoy working outside with the animals and of course also with all the nice human here. I will always remember my great time here“.

