



Global Voices: Celebrating International Development Week 2008

Lasting Effects: Overseas, Canadian volunteers work for sustainable change

Yohannes Edemariam

“Everybody was skeptical of the women’s ability to run their own organization,” remembers Didier Muamba, a Canadian who spent a year and a half beginning in 2003 working with Malian women to establish a business. Malian village women have traditionally gathered shea nuts whose oil they turn into a creamy butter and sell for unpredictable prices at informal local markets. Internationally, shea butter is primarily used as an ingredient in fine cosmetics, soaps, and hand creams.

Canadian volunteer Muamba, who has a graduate degree in co-op management, spent a full year interviewing people across the Malian district of Zantiébougou about the local trade of shea before he submitted a proposal on how to form Coprokazan, a shea butter producer cooperative. Today 250 rural women own and operate Coprokazan, and sell shea butter to retailers in Mali, across western Africa, and as far afield as Germany, the US and Canada. In 2003, a loose affiliation of about 100 women from the region generated only about \$700CDN per month from the sale of shea butter. In 2007 the Coprokazan cooperative generated more than three times that amount per month – \$2,400CDN – meaning all the women involved now earn better than minimum wage, and they own their own business cooperatively.

In the women’s villages, skepticism amongst chiefs and elders has turned to glowing enthusiasm. The women command respect within their communities and have new confidence in their abilities. The growing co-op is the first in a series of similar new Malian enterprises established by local people in partnership with Canadian volunteer cooperation programs.

Didier Muamba is one of thousands of Canadians who, through Canada’s volunteer cooperation agencies, donate their time and skills to international development projects. Since 1960, Canada’s 10 volunteer cooperation agencies have sent more than 70,000 volunteers overseas. Many volunteers forgo several months (or in some cases, years) of income to work overseas. Often living on small stipends, volunteers embody cost effective aid work and have established close relationships between Canadian and Southern partners – they are the human faces of Canadian aid.

Some volunteers are youth who partner with their peers in various countries to disseminate information about HIV/AIDS. Others are trained professionals who work with microfinance schemes for women in Latin America, Asia or Africa. Still others are seasoned veterans who draw on decades of experience to give advice in fields as diverse as governance, law, engineering or agriculture.

In addition to sending Canadians abroad, a number of Canada’s volunteer cooperation agencies have volunteers from developing countries come to Canada to explore new approaches to institutional governance, contribute their skills, and share lessons they have learned from long years spent doing on-the-ground development work.

The forms of volunteerism vary, but share the same fundamental goals: to create large networks of people dedicated to a more just and equitable world, and to direct human resources towards strengthening civil society, where the essential, small-scale components of democracies and



economies exist. One of the biggest assets of overseas volunteers is the fresh perspectives they bring to the challenges of international development and cooperation. Oumar Coulibaly, Director of *Association Malienne pour les Jeunes* (Malian Youth Association), the Malian NGO involved in the formation of the Coprokazan cooperative, says Canadian volunteers brought invaluable, fresh ways of looking at difficult issues. Before the Canadians arrived, he says, “It had never occurred to us to market our product internationally.

Even the mere presence of Canadian volunteers can have a positive impact. Consider an ongoing project that trains northern Cameroonian women in advocacy, lobbying, and administration. In the participating communities, the very idea that Cameroonian women can and should participate in politics is almost revolutionary, and so the mere presence of Canadian female volunteers serves as inspiration to locals who want change.

In many countries around the globe, women are often forced into marriage at young ages, are more likely to be single parents, and less likely to exercise or be able to exercise any sort of political power. Women are also more likely than men to have unstable jobs or have no job at all, frequently toiling for hours and hours with no compensation. The United Nations Development Fund for Women estimates the value of unpaid work done by the world’s women as being equal to almost 50 per cent of the entire planet’s GDP.

A meaningful fight against poverty is impossible without empowered women. A large number of Canadian volunteers work with organizations dedicated to advocating for women’s rights and to enabling women to gain more control of their own lives.

One such overseas volunteer is Christine Benoit, a 35-year-old lawyer from St-Hyacinthe, Québec. She has been volunteering in Peru since 2002, supporting programs aimed at decreasing levels of domestic violence in the southern, Quechua-speaking indigenous communities of the Andes. Benoit works with the Peruvian *Instituto de Defensa Legal* (Legal Defense Institute), which organized members of indigenous villages into *defensorías comunitarias*, groups dedicated to promoting an awareness of an alarming trend of violence against women and to connecting women and girls who have suffered abuse to Peru’s legal system.

Benoit, who has experience working on child-abuse cases in Canada, works with these legal defense groups. Her day-to-day work includes contributing to the development of workshops designed to inform women who are victims of spousal violence that they have the right to seek justice in courts of law. Benoit and her colleagues also partner with women in their efforts to reach out to other victims of domestic abuse in their communities.

“The women become empowered when they learn what [their] rights are,” says Benoit. “And when [these women inform] other people about their rights, they gain respect in their communities, and from the authorities and the police.”

In the 40 villages where Benoit works, she has already noticed an increasing acceptance of the serious nature of domestic violence. “Most rewarding for me is to see that in some communities some things have really changed,” she says.

Christine Benoit’s work is emblematic of what volunteers can achieve with overseas partners. Her skills and attitudes complement those found in the communities with which she works. Because she tackles abuse as a complex social problem, rather than just an offense that requires strict punishment, Benoit differs from most Peruvian lawyers. This gives her a unique position from which to work for change with local leaders. She and her colleagues are currently pushing for a law in Peru that would establish a balance between legal precedents, which favour incarceration



as the preferred form of punishment, and Quechan dispute-management, which puts more emphasis on rehabilitating offenders than removing them from the community.

Coprokazan in Mali and Benoit's efforts in Peru are just two examples of work Canadian overseas volunteers are doing around the globe. Every day Canadian volunteers are working with citizens in developing countries to advocate for their human rights and improve their lives.

Global Citizens for Change: Global Citizens for Change is a joint project of the coalition of nine of Canada's leading volunteer cooperation agencies (VCAs). The coalition comprises Canadian Crossroads International (CCI), Voluntary Service Overseas Canada (VSO), the Canadian Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI), World University Service of Canada (WUSC), Canada World Youth (CWY), the Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), CUSO, SUCO and Oxfam Québec.

Their goals are to build a constituency of support for volunteer cooperation, to increase the profile of volunteer cooperation as an effective means at ending poverty, and to increase the collective and individual VCA capacity to engage overseas volunteers upon their return to Canada so that they become an identifiable force, taking action, and deepening awareness around issues of global poverty. www.globalcitizensforchange.org