

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DIGEST

SPRING 2005

CANADIAN CO-OPERATIVE ASSOCIATION



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IN THE WAKE OF THE TSUNAMI CANADIANS REACH OUT TO CREDIT UNIONS AND CO-OPERATIVES IN SOUTHERN ASIA

BY JOHN JULIAN

The crisis point is past. Most victims of the December 26 tsunami have some form of food and shelter. The swift outpouring of support has slowed to a trickle, and for the people on the ground, the adrenalin of a crisis has been replaced by numb fatigue.

"The news cameras are gone, but the work of rebuilding is just beginning," says Jo-Anne Ferguson, Senior Development Director at the Canadian Co-operative Association

(CCA). "A tent over one's family and food handouts may be enough to sustain life in a physical sense, but it is a long way from living a normal life, in your own home, in your own community. What remains for the people who lost everything is the daunting task of rebuilding."

In the weeks following the disaster, CCA sent teams to assess the needs of credit unions and co-operatives in Sri Lanka and Indonesia,

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THERE IS A STRONG WILL TO REBUILD HOMES AND LIVES IN TSUNAMI AFFECTED COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT SRI LANKA'S COASTLINE. PHOTO: DAVID SHANKS





SOUTHERN ASIA

IN THE WAKE OF THE TSUNAMI (FROM PAGE 1)

“The news cameras are gone, but the work of rebuilding is just beginning,”
– Jo-Anne Ferguson,

and launched a national campaign to rally financial support from Canada’s credit unions and co-operatives for rebuilding efforts in those countries. Early donations were sent to help CCA’s valued partner SANASA – the Thrift and Credit Co-operative Movement in Sri Lanka – with burial costs, providing temporary shelter, and giving families cooking utensils so they could once again prepare their own food.

“SANASA’s emergency response team is working day and night to deliver aid, assess needs and rally international support,” says CCA project officer David Shanks who visited villages in Sri Lanka hard hit by the tsunami. “Because it is community based and independent of government SANASA is able to deliver assistance on the ground quickly and effectively.”

In Sri Lanka, CCA aid continues to help SANASA cope with the challenges of rebuilding a credit union system affected at every level. “The response of Canadian co-ops and credit unions to the relief efforts in January was astounding, says CCA volunteer, Jim Barr, Senior V.P at the CUMIS Group who led the team visited affected communities in Sri Lanka. “But what lies ahead is a long haul to re-build – not only bricks and mortar, but to rebuild lives.”

A UNIQUE APPROACH TO REBUILDING COMMUNITIES

For CCA, it was a natural response to come to the aid of a valued partner and friend during those terrible days after the tsunami struck, says Ms. Ferguson. CCA’s skills and experience are best suited to the phase that is just beginning – helping SANASA to rebuild the communities it serves. “This phase draws on our experience helping people and communities build better lives through community-owned co-operatives,” she explains. “CCA has worked with the SANASA movement for over two decades, steadily improving its capacity to deliver savings, credit and other needed financial services to Sri Lankans. In the aftermath of the tsunami we can provide meaningful help once more.”



IN THE FISHING VILLAGE OF PAYAGALA, LOCATED ONE HOUR SOUTH OF COLOMBO, CREDIT UNION MANAGER MS. GAYANI SAMARATUNGE LOOKS OVER FINANCIAL RECORDS DESTROYED BY THE TSUNAMI. MEMBERS ESCAPED INJURY BUT LOST HOUSES AND LIVELIHOODS AND NEED LOANS TO REBUILD AND EARN INCOME. PHOTO: DAVID SHANKS

CCA has pledged its support to an innovative SANASA initiative to develop “People’s Camps” (also referred to as community development camps) which are designed to mobilize people and local organizations to rebuild communities physically, socially, and economically. The camps are really temporary office and meeting facilities, focal points bringing together teams of skilled people – engineers, masons, labourers, and counselors – with community people anxious to replace soul-destroying idleness with life-affirming work. SANASA volunteers have come from unaffected communities to help, but funds are needed to hire specific skills – engineers for example – to help guide the process.

At one camp, volunteers and local people have repaired 30 damaged homes and are beginning to build 50 new ones. But more than bricks and mortar, they are also focusing on other critical aspects of community rebuilding. Training programs are being created to provide families who have lost their breadwinner with the skills to earn a living. Counseling is available for people who will spend years recovering from the trauma they have experienced. Recreation is important for people who are bored and discouraged. The camps are organizing sports and social activities for young and old alike. People also need the comfort of familiar cultural rituals. The camps organized celebrations for the Sri Lankan New Year, and will ensure that other cultural milestones are observed.

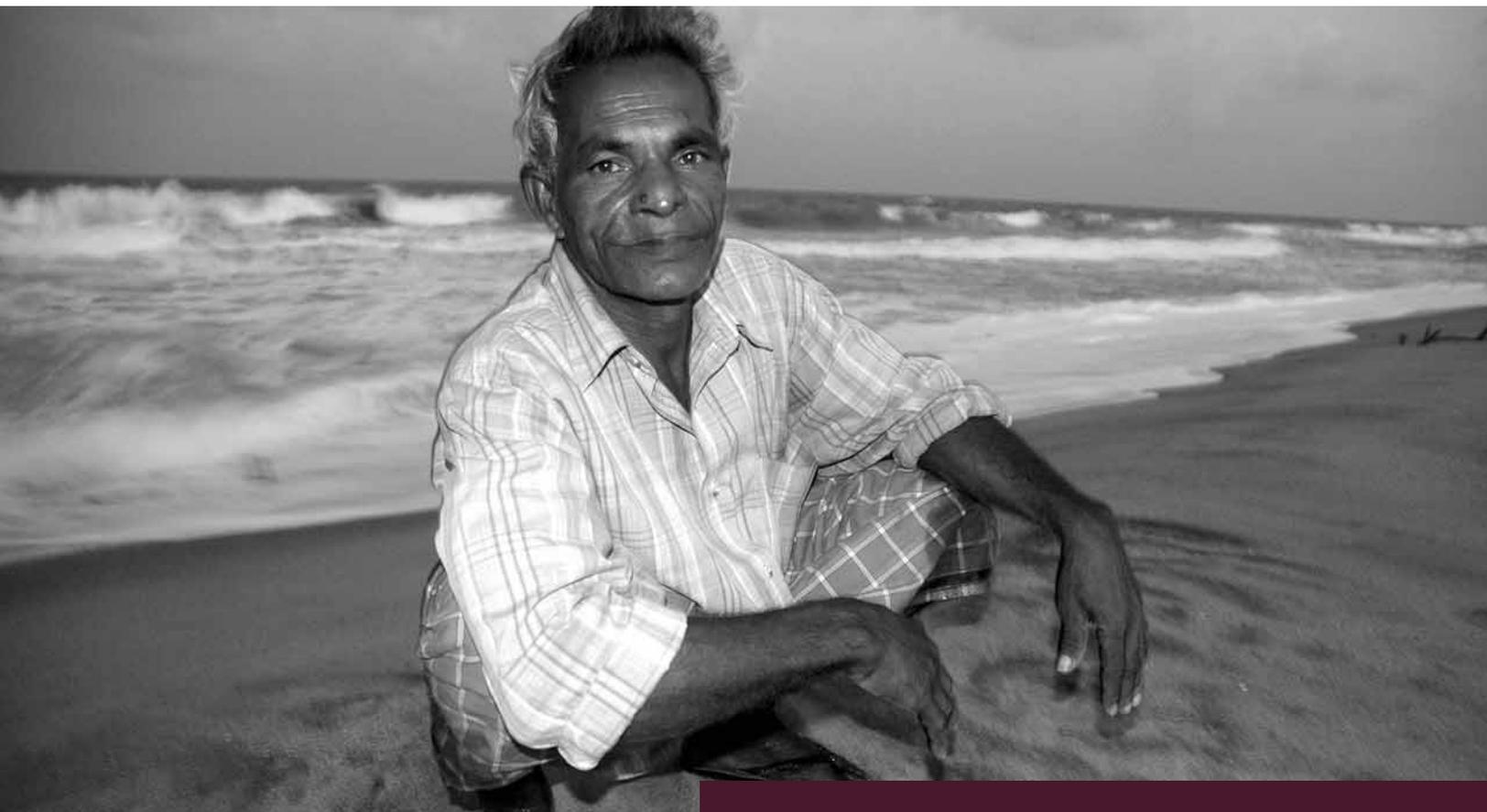
CCA volunteer Tom Stark, who has been in Sri Lanka co-ordinating CCA assistance for two months, says the camps are a one-stop source of support, advice and helping hands and build upon a core value of the SANASA movement – self-reliance.

“The camps also represent a place of international co-operation,” he says. “Various international donors will contribute to different camp activities in a manner organized by SANASA to suit community needs. The result is a well co-ordinated package of services to develop tsunami affected communities to a point stronger than ever before.”

So far four camps are in operation in the districts of Galle and Hambantota along the southern coast. Others are planned, but funds are needed to move ahead.

OFFERING CREDIT FOR THE NEXT PHASE OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

In Sri Lanka, credit unions have been the economic engines for many communities. With over 300 credit unions destroyed or damaged, that support has not been available to the most heavily affected communities. Credit unions are facing a serious liquidity crisis and SANASA staff are working with primary credit unions



FISHERS LIKE MEERASABU ARE STRUGGLING TO REPLACE THEIR BROKEN BOATS AND EQUIPMENT SO THAT THEY CAN RESUME FISHING. SOME NO LONGER WISH TO FISH THE WATERS OFF SRI LANKA'S BATTERED COASTLINE. PHOTO: DAVID SHANKS



“This phase of the rebuilding effort requires patience, skill, and a long term commitment, both for people and resources, if the battle is to be won,”
 – Jo-Anne Ferguson.

SOUTHERN ASIA

IN THE WAKE OF THE TSUNAMI (FROM PAGE 3)

where financial records, including member passbooks, have been washed away, and where cash and savings have been lost or looted. With credit union buildings destroyed, this work is being done at the SANASA People’s Camps where possible. Ultimately, CCA is committed to helping SANASA and its local credit unions provide productive credit to people who want to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. The affected credit unions are not yet ready to take on that work, but when they are, CCA hopes to have resources available to help establish a micro-finance program that will allow people to re-start their lives. This is the anticipated next stage in CCA’s support to SANASA.

INDONESIA — DAUNTING CHALLENGES, ENORMOUS NEED

A CCA delegation recently returned from Indonesia, the country most severely devastated by the tsunami, with tales of shocking destruction and loss of life. The delegation also found a difficult and challenging environment for future rebuilding efforts. Unlike Sri Lanka, CCA cannot join forces with a local co-op partner in the region. While credit unions and co-ops do exist there, civil strife in that region has kept them isolated from the national partners that CCA has worked with for many years. CCA is fortunate to have individuals it can turn to, however, and a small team is



AL-HUTHA WOMEN'S CREDIT UNION MEMBER ROSAMMA STANDS ON WHAT REMAINS OF HER CREDIT UNION IN SAINTHAMARUTHU ON SRI LANKA'S EASTERN COAST. TSUNAMI WAVES KILLED NINE MEMBERS AND DESTROYED MANY HOMES, INCLUDING HER OWN.
 PHOTO: DAVID SHANKS

working to establish a working partnership with organizations in the area. CCA will be working in an isolated region devastated by the tsunami which to this point has received little assistance.

It will take the combined efforts of many different organizations to rebuild the lives of people affected by the disaster. In Sri Lanka, SANASA and CCA are collaborating closely with a variety of international partners. Among them are the World Council of Credit Unions, the Desjardins group and the Swedish Co-operative Centre.

“This phase of the rebuilding effort requires patience, skill, and a long term commitment, both for people and resources, if the battle is to be won,” says Ms. Ferguson. “CCA is counting on the continued financial support of Canadians to move this forward.”

For regular updates on the rebuilding effort visit the CCA and SANASA web sites at www.coopscanada.coop and www.sdb.lk. ■



LEFT: BANDA ACEH, INDONESIA. RESIDENTS SORT THROUGH DEBRIS LOOKING FOR EVIDENCE OF LOVED ONES SEVEN WEEKS AFTER THE DECEMBER 26 EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI.

RIGHT: A TENT CITY NEIGHBOURS THIS MASS GRAVE (“MAKAM MASAL”).
 PHOTOS: LYDIA PHILLIPS

ITS TIME TO REBUILD LIVELIHOODS, COMMUNITIES



The head of a Canadian Co-operative Association team that went to Sri Lanka in February to assess damage and determine options for helping credit union members rebuild is now heading a national campaign asking Canadians to come to their aid. Jim Barr, Senior Vice-President with The CUMIS Group and past president of CCA and its fundraising arm, the Co-operative Development Foundation of Canada, says he was shocked by the scale of devastation the team witnessed. "The tsunami has taken its toll on many, many people," Jim reported. "Yet they are determined to rebuild their lives and communities. These people have brought back to me the true meaning of what a credit union is all about. It is the heart, the soul, the foundation of the community."

Jim and his team met credit union members who had lost friends and family members, their homes and their possessions. They also met with leaders of SANASA, Sri Lanka's national thrift and credit co-operative movement to draft a plan for channeling financial support from Canada's credit unions and co-operatives to its rebuilding effort.

In January, CCA sent 100,000 directly to SANASA to help with immediate needs – funding for burial costs, for purchase of temporary housing, food and kitchen utensils as well as support for orphans. "I was very glad to see evidence of the money CCA has already sent to help with SANASA's relief efforts," says Jim.

"We are asking the entire Canadian co-operative movement to donate funds to the Canadian Co-operative Association so they can help SANASA rebuild." Jim is crisscrossing Canada bringing his message to credit union and co-operative audiences. "Our message is very straightforward," says Jim. "We need to stand by our fellow credit union members in Sri Lanka, now more than ever."

CDF aims to raise one million dollars over two years for CCA's relief and reconstruction work in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In Sri Lanka, monies raised initially will assist the work of the People's Camps outlined in the cover story of

this issue of *Digest*. The second phase will support the establishment and operation of a micro-finance program providing the loans needed for people to rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

THANK YOU!!

We want to thank Canadian credit unions and co-operatives and the many individuals who have already donated to the campaign. At press time over \$400,000 has been received or pledged.

"People we spoke to were still in shock."
– Jim Barr

DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

Envision Credit Union's generous donation of \$70,000 was committed very early in January. In their release at that time, they stated, "This money is comprised of two components: (1) the gift that has traditionally been given

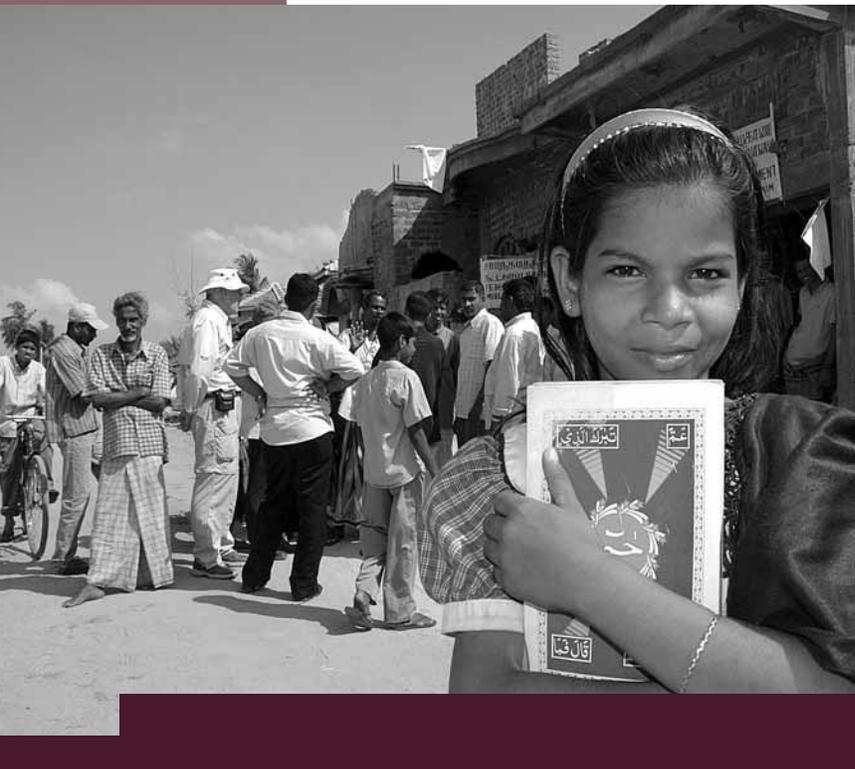
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"WHAT LIES AHEAD IS A LONG HAUL TO REBUILD NOT ONLY BRICKS AND MORTAR BUT TO RE-BUILD LIVES," SAYS CCA VOLUNTEER JIM BARR, SEEN HERE SURVEYING THE DAMAGE ON SRI LANKA'S EASTERN SHORE. PHOTO: DAVID SHANKS



ITS TIME TO REBUILD (FROM PAGE 5)



CHILDREN LIKE SAFNA, 10, IN THE VILLAGE OF SAINTHAMARUTHU, SRI LANKA LOST FRIENDS AND FAMILY ON DECEMBER 26. PHOTO: DAVID SHANKS

to Envision staff to thank them for helping Envision achieve the Top 50 Employer List. This represents \$35,000; and, (2) Envision will match this money with new dollars in order to contribute at the \$70,000 level. CCA is focused on the rebuilding efforts that will take years to accomplish and Envision is a proud supporter of this long term, worthwhile work.”

As well, Credit Union Central of Canada has endorsed the campaign and is promoting it throughout Canada. And, the Ontario Credit Union Charitable Foundation has announced they will match the first \$50,000 raised by Ontario credit unions for the campaign. The challenge is on!

For further information about the campaign please contact:
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EL SALVADOR:

NEW HOMES, NEW HOPE THREE YEARS AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

BY PETER WILSON

It was around eight in the morning and Ismael Martinez was sitting at his computer doing some number crunching when the earthquake struck.

“Everything began to shake and then all the electrical and telephone systems went out,” recalls Martinez, an accountant with FESACORA, a federation representing agrarian reform co-ops in El Salvador.

It was February 2001. The earthquake that rocked FESACORA’s office in San Salvador, the nation’s capital, was the second to hit the country in a month. The earthquake particularly

affected rural areas of the tiny Central American country, wrecking homes and infrastructure and laying a swath of destruction across many communities.

For the shocked Martinez, all he could think about were his wife and family living in San Vicente, a town 70 kilometres east of the capital. With a transportation system brought to a halt, and chaos in the streets, it took the determined accountant more than six hours to finally make his way back home.

“Roads were blocked by fallen rubble, and I had to walk the last two kilometres. My house was damaged but thank God my wife, children and mother had survived,” he sighs.

Fortunately, emergency aid had arrived quickly, explains Martinez, including a speedy response from the international community. The Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) worked with FESACORA, its regional partner in the country, to join the urgent program to alleviate suffering in the devastated countryside.

More than three years later, he’s taking us on a tour of the region, steering the four-wheel drive through the narrow streets and pointing out where the worst scenes of destruction had been.

After driving out of town a little way, Martinez pulls into a small farmyard set on the side of a hill. Chickens scratch around in the dusty yard as he walks up to the neat farmhouse. It’s not a big place, more or less the size of a modest North American garage, but it could make the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens* as far as Nicolos Navidad is concerned.

His smile is wide and his eyes beam with expectant delight as he opens the curtain that acts as a temporary door to show Martinez and other visitors inside his new home. Drapes also cover the window spaces. Glass, like doors, is a bit of a luxury in this part of rural El Salvador. There was just enough cash to put on the roof; extras will have to wait until the next harvest.

Navidad and his wife Felicita stand inside their one-room home. The hard dirt floor has been scrupulously cleaned and swept ready to receive the visitors. A small table, a couple of cots and some rolled up mats in the corner are the few signs of domesticity.

It’s a palace for the Salvadorian couple, especially considering the earthquake damaged shack they called home before the CCA came along and lent a hand.

“We are very grateful for all this,” the 55-year-old farmer says as he gently places weathered hands on the shoulders of two of his young children.

Through an interpreter, Navidad explains that he has just returned from his job in the local sugarcane mill. Later, he says, when he’s rested and the heat of the day begins to subside, he’ll head out to tend the small plot of land he farms.



NICOLOS AND FELICITA NAVIDAD SAY THEIR MODEST NEW ONE-ROOM HOME IS “A PALACE” COMPARED TO THE EARTHQUAKE DAMAGED SHACK THEY ONCE CALLED HOME.
PHOTO: PETER WILSON

He says that a home he had built immediately after the earthquake was a stopgap measure that was meant to provide only temporary shelter for his family. It had many gaps between the roof and walls that permitted bats to enter and bite some of his youngest children. He peels back his son’s shirt collar and then rolls up one of his daughter’s pant legs. The exposed skin of the two children reveals severe scarring.

“The new house is well sealed and we have had no problems since we moved in,” he says.

The Navidad home was one of the 16 that CCA funds helped build in this rural region of El Salvador. While it was a relatively small program, it was a unique concept that not only rebuilt homes. The combined donation and loan program also helped kick-start small business ventures to provide better incomes for families.

The hard dirt floor has been scrupulously cleaned and swept ready to receive the visitors.



EL SALVADOR:

NEW HOMES, NEW HOPE (FROM PAGE 7)

“The added bonus of CCA’s funding process was in its versatility”
– *Ismael Martinez*

The added bonus of CCA’s funding process was in its versatility, explains Martinez, giving people a better opportunity to access loans to establish a small business, such as a tiny grocery store, a market stall or maybe a couple of dairy cows.

“Not only did it provide families with a financial path to build a home, in some cases it also allowed them to create a new livelihood to generate income that would help pay off their home loan,” he says.

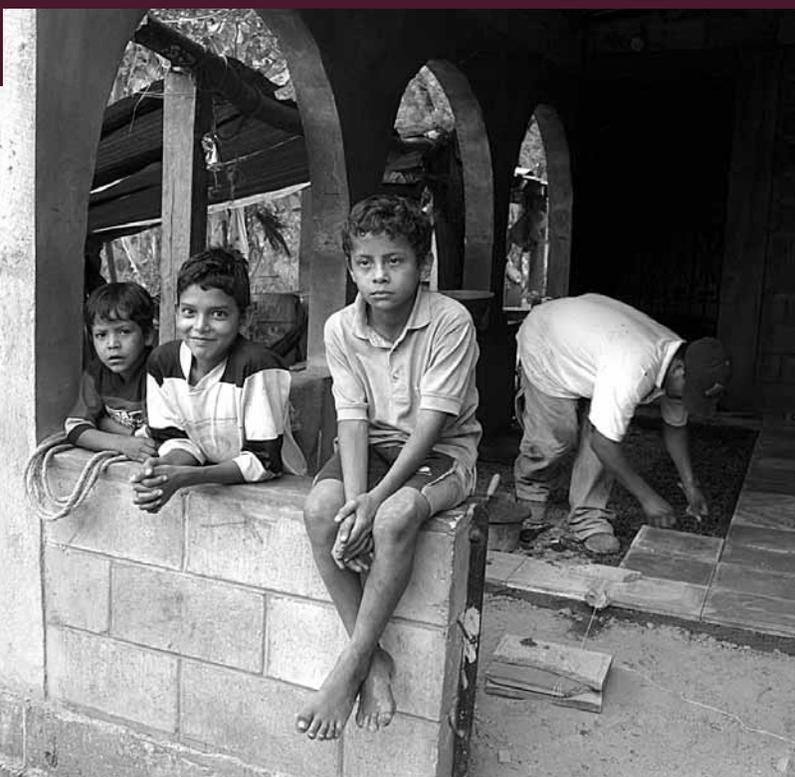
Though small, the business ventures generate sufficient cash flow to pay off both home and business loans.

Each participant in the home building program, which was administered through FESACORA, received \$1,200 to cover the bulk of the rebuilding costs. About 40 per cent of the amount came in the form of a donation and 60 per cent was given as a loan.

Some of the farm-based loan recipients purchased livestock; some used the money to establish a home-based business. Antonio Valladores was able to set up a thriving tailor’s shop in San Salvador. The new business not only enabled him to become financially self-sufficient, it is also creating enough cash flow to pay off the loan his mother received to rebuild the earthquake-damaged family home. Valladores received the loan in late 2002 and estimates that he will pay it off before the end of 2004.

Martinez says the rebuilding program was a success, providing much more than a roof over the heads of the earthquake victims. The process also helped build a more secure foundation for the future of families affected by the natural disaster.

“Besides the financial loss experienced by these people, they also suffered severe emotional trauma. I think the CCA program has turned that around and helped empower and energize them,” Martinez says. ■



CCA’S PROGRAM NOT ONLY REBUILT HOMES, BUT PROVIDED BUSINESS LOANS TO HELP PEOPLE IN RURAL EL SALVADOR EARN NEEDED INCOME. PHOTO: PETER WILSON



“Working with the orphans in the village was quite emotional for me.”

– Tom Stark

TOM SPENT PART OF HIS CCA INTERNSHIP HELPING MEMBERS OF THE MAYATIMA PROJECT RAISE AWARENESS AND FUNDS FOR THEIR WORK WITH AIDS ORPHANS. PHOTO: TOM STARK

KENYA:

YOUNG CANADIAN OPENING CHANNELS FOR GLOBAL CO-OPERATION

You may be forgiven if, after meeting Tom Stark, you have trouble keeping track of his whereabouts. Most recently you would have found him working in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami (see page 1). But over the past year and a half he has worked in four different countries on two continents.

“My aunt keeps hoping that one day I will come home to stay,” says the young Calgary man through an engaging grin, “but I think she has come to accept that I like to travel.”

For the past year Tom has combined his love of travel with a knack for organization and networking, and a newfound interest in co-operatives.

“I went to Kenya in August 2003 to help the International Co-operative Alliance office there conduct HIV/AIDS research as part of the Canadian Co-operation Association’s youth intern program” Tom explains.

Tom set up house in a subdivision called Kikuyu Location, a poor, crime-plagued bedroom community near the city of Nairobi. For two months he worked closely with a group of citizens who had banded together to tackle poverty in their community. “I hooked up with their Mayatima Project (Mayatima means *orphan* in Swahili) to help them educate and raise awareness about HIV/AIDS in churches, schools and community groups. Mayatima is a community based organization that works a lot like a co-op,” adds Tom. “I wrote a report about the group’s accomplishments and some of their challenges which they forwarded on to various donor agencies.”

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*“ICA can use its networks around the world to develop a global co-operative response to HIV/AIDS.”
– Tom Stark*

KENYA:

YOUNG CANADIAN OPENING CHANNELS

(FROM PAGE 8)

Tom says the report lent valuable credence to their work, prompting some donors to provide money for a school, an orphanage and materials to do HIV/AIDS education work in the community.

A cell-biology major, Tom says he knew a lot about the science of HIV/AIDS before his mission in Kenya but had little close up experience with the social and emotional impact of the disease. “I could tell you how it affects the body but not what it does to families and communities.”

“Working with the orphans in the village was quite emotional for me,” he says. “I asked the people at Mayatima to sensitize me to the issue and they certainly did that.” When Tom returned last August to check in on the orphans, some of the faces were no longer there.

“The death of one boy, Simon, particularly affected me. His parents died of AIDS and he and his sister had AIDS. His grandmother was dirt poor but somehow managed to look after them. Simon’s sister is 9 years old and still lives with AIDS. With help from Mayatima, the children are now getting anti-retro viral medication (ARVs) – the AIDS “cocktail” that has been available in northern countries for many years. The meds can extend life from 15 to 40 years but, though the price has come down, they are still unaffordable to most children living with HIV/AIDS.”

Tom showed Mayatima members how to take pictures and video footage of their program with orphans, to give donors a better idea of the value of their work. Armed with this powerful material, Tom and the group persuaded a US organization to sponsor 30 more AIDS orphans, bringing the total up to 50.

Back in Nairobi, Tom turned his talents to helping ICA’s four-person office revamp their website. “The ICA is all about networking, and so I worked with staff to transform the site into a more interactive and useful “portal” for co-operative networks in the region and beyond.”

“People don’t know what others are doing in HIV/AIDS,” says Tom. “I wanted to make the site a useful tool with message boards for linking people around the world... ICA’s mandate is to be a catalyst, to lobby governments to create an environment that enables co-ops to flourish. ICA can use its networks around the world to develop a global co-operative response to HIV/AIDS. After all, HIV/AIDS is a world wide problem.”

“I kind of jumped into this work in the beginning.” He says. “I knew very little about co-ops or that there even was an international network. I really have begun to appreciate how this organization (ICA) functions. It has so little funding and such a huge, worldwide mandate.”

Tom’s work in Nairobi touched a chord. He was invited to the ICA’s West Africa Regional Office in Burkina Faso for more website work.



TOM’S MOST RECENT CO-OP CHALLENGE TOOK HIM TO SRI LANKA TO HELP CO-ORDINATE CCA ASSISTANCE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE DECEMBER 26 TSUNAMI.

PHOTO: DAVID SHANKS

After travelling through 11 West African countries, Tom came home last summer, but after a brief visit with his aunt in Claresholm, south of Calgary, he boarded another plane, this time bound for New Delhi. The epicentre of AIDS pandemic may be sub-Saharan Africa, but parts of Asia are also reeling from the disease. The ICA Regional Office for Asia Pacific is launching a new AIDS initiative, and once again, Tom's unique combination of talents were in demand.

Four months later there was a new challenge. The Canadian Co-operative Association needed an organized, adaptable person to assist a partner in Sri Lanka as it faced the daunting task of

rebuilding after the December 26 tsunami. And once again Tom answered the call. It is hard to know where Tom will land next, but wherever he goes, he takes with him a growing list of stories, a powerful empathy with the people of the developing world, and a great respect for the power of co-operation.

Visit the ICA ROECSA website at www.icaroecs.coop ■

THE TAKE (FROM PAGE 12)

past owners and corrupted unions. In many cases the co-op model was chosen simply because it was the most expedient organizational form that could legally take control of a company. The understanding and commitment to co-op values was sketchy at best.

So the culture and commitment to co-operation in the recovered factories is a very tenuous thing. It is one reason why the mainstream co-op sector in Argentina has been so wary of this movement. Many question the authenticity of these newly formed co-ops. Others are skeptical that the recovered factories will survive without the legal foundations that will allow them access to such essentials as capital investment.

And the political battles continue. Owners are now claiming the factories they drove into the ground. In Patagonia, the workers of the ZANON ceramics plant are menaced with eviction by armed force despite the fact that they have returned the factory to profitability and increased employment to over 300 workers.

And in a final irony, the FORJA San Martin co-operative, after having fought so hard to win the victory chronicled in the film, has banned from the plant the very organizers who led the fight on the ground that they are communists. This is due to the influence of right wing Peronists with clear political ambitions, who have taken over the leadership of the co-operative.

Despite the setbacks however, important victories propel the movement forward. In Buenos Aires, the municipal council has passed legislation granting workers 20 years to purchase back their factories. And the movement is spreading. In neighboring Uruguay, 30 plants have been taken over and turned into co-operatives by their workers, mobilizing wide community support behind them.

So despite their fragility, the recovered factories are becoming a powerful symbol of opposition and positive resistance to the policies and programs that have bankrupted this once prosperous nation. And the co-operative idea, described so movingly by workers in the film, has taken centre stage in a global struggle to craft viable alternatives to the disastrous policies of neo liberal ideologues.

The Take has brought a fresh look at the power and potential of the co-op model to a new generation of social activists in the age of globalization. It's about time. ■

John Restakis is Executive Director of the British Columbia Co-operative Association and producer of Civilizing the Economy, a two-part video narrated by Patrick Watson that profiles co-operatives in Canada, Italy and the United States. Check out www.bcca.coop for more information.

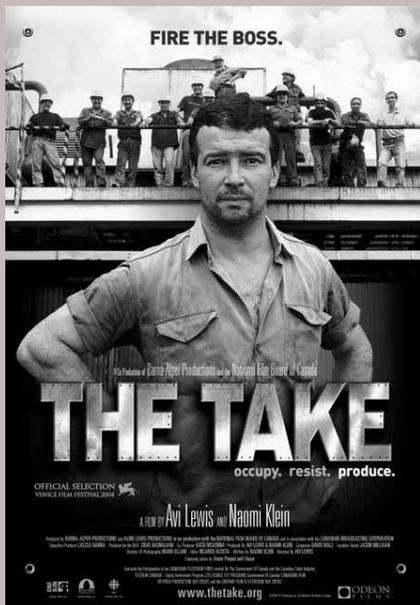


COMMENTARY BY JOHN RESTAKIS



THE TAKE

The Take is the most recent in a series of powerful partisan documentaries that have captured the imagination of a broad public both in North America and abroad. And, like *The Corporation* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* that preceded it, *The Take* makes no secret of its political intentions. It is a film with a cause. To its great credit however, the film moves beyond simple critique to examine alternatives to the conditions it criticizes.



Set against the backdrop of Argentina's economic collapse in 2001 and the last presidential elections, the storyline weaves broad political commentary with very personal drama to tell the fortunes of

workers and their families as they struggle to resurrect factories that have been bankrupted and then abandoned by their former owners. This, despite years of public subsidies and preferential treatment by past governments. Some 200 factories have now been taken over and transformed into worker co-operatives employing over 10,000 workers.

The dramatic focus of the film revolves around the figure of Freddy Espinosa, an unemployed auto parts worker from FORJA San Martin. The auto parts factory that Freddy and his co-workers are fighting to recover is named after the neighborhood of San Martin, a once thriving industrial district that has now become one of Buenos Aires' most notorious slums.

Driven by a combination of desperation and outrage, the workers of recovered factories like FORJA San Martin and ZANON (Latin America's largest ceramic tile factory) have come to symbolize a broad movement to change the economic and political culture of the country. And thanks in no small measure to *The Take* it is a movement that has attracted the attention of global justice activists and critics of institutions like the IMF whose neo liberal policies are held responsible for the economic tragedies unfolding in Argentina and elsewhere.

Equally fascinating as the struggle of workers in these plants is the film's portrayal of the underlying political culture of the country.

From the machinations of Carlos Menem to manipulate the Argentine electorate, to the efforts of Peronist party members to influence votes in the barrios of Buenos Aires, the political sensibilities of the nation seem grievously wounded by decades of corruption, privilege, state terror, and political messianism.

The dramatic force of the victorious underdog is what makes *The Take* both a powerful polemic and a captivating narrative. It also makes possible a very human portrayal of what it means to organize a worker co-operative in the face of such powerful odds. In this respect, *The Take* may be the best film ever made on the meaning of co-operation as both a personal and a political force.

I was able to learn more about the surrounding reality of the film's subject in a recent trip to Buenos Aires to determine how the co-op movements in Canada and Italy might lend support to the recovered factory movement in Argentina.

The hard truth is that many of these co-operatives are not run democratically. Sometimes they are covers for back room deals that are cut between

(continued on page 11)



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