

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DIGEST

SPRING 2004

CANADIAN CO-OPERATIVE ASSOCIATION



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NICARAGUA: THE COLOUR OF BEANS BRINGS PROSPERITY TO CO-OP FARMERS IN NUEVA GUINEA

BY PETER WILSON

NUEVA GUINEA - The hot Nicaraguan sun was dipping below the trees by the time José Sanchez ended the day's bean harvest.

With the help of his four-year-old son Bryam, he scooped up some stray beans that lay scattered on the sorting blanket, poured them into a bulging sack and dragged it towards two others he'd already filled. From sun-up to sundown, it had been a long 12 hours since Sanchez and his son had begun their harvesting day.

Life is not easy for the farmers of Nicaragua. Revolutions, civil war and natural calamities such as 1998's Hurricane Mitch have all conspired to create a backdrop of trauma and economic uncertainty. Nevertheless, in recent years some well-focused Canadian help has gone a long way in bringing positive changes to the impoverished campesinos of this isolated region.

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BLACK BEAN PROSPERITY IS BRINGING BETTER HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION TO CHILDREN IN NUEVA GUINEA.





CCMC
provides an important safety net for members by minimizing trade risks associated with accessing new markets.

NICARAGUA: **THE COLOUR OF BEANS** (FROM PAGE 1)

About seven years ago, the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) launched a venture that's now improving the lives of Jose Sanchez and the other 400 members of the agricultural co-operative in Nueva Guinea. Working with its regional partner, Central Cooperativa de Servicios Agropecuarios (CECOOPSA), CCA has introduced various initiatives, including a successful growing and marketing strategy for black beans, the principal cash crop at Hamed Campos co-operative.

Getting product to market has always been a tough proposition for small farmer-owned co-ops. Now, thanks to a unique marketing network of Central American co-operatives, even farmers in remote Nueva Guinea can access a foreign customer base.

The Central American Co-operative Marketing Consortium (CCMC) is a five-country alliance that identifies new markets and helps develop production to fill the demand.

About five years ago, CCMC added a regional system of credit and guarantees by pooling capital from its trading members. That provides an important safety net for members by minimizing trade risks associated with accessing new markets.



JOSE SANCHEZ HARVESTS BLACK BEANS BOUND FOR COSTA RICA AND A SMALL PLOT OF RED BEANS FOR HIS OWN TABLE.

Beans are a staple in the diet of Central Americans, says Oscar Brown, CCA's region program manager for the Americas. Traditionally, Nicaraguans shun black beans, much preferring red beans to mix with their rice, he said. Yet the soils and humid climate of central Nicaragua are not as favourable for the production of the red variety. Ironically, black beans thrive in the region. However, faced with the lack of domestic demand, farmers saw no choice but to grow the less successful red variety.

"Other countries in the region, such as Costa Rica, use black beans in their diet," said Brown. "After identifying a market for black beans, it was a matter of ensuring we could help the co-operative here develop the consistent quality and quantity to supply that market."

With funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the CCA began their program at Nueva Guinea



OSCAR BROWN'S IMPROMPTU MEETING WITH CO-OP BOARD MEMBERS IN HIS TEMPORARY TRUCK BOX "OFFICE" ENCOUNTERS A PASSING BEAN CART.

working with about 100 men and 80 women from the local co-operative. Brown saw the fledgling project not only as a wealth creation process, but also as an opportunity to help women integrate into the co-operative structure.

Including women in decision making is not common practice in this part of the world, he says. Brown hopes that by incorporating them in the initial establishment of black bean production, it will be a stepping stone towards change.

The co-operative system encourages the community to work together to improve their lives, says Brown. The process can help overcome the tragic legacies of Nicaragua's troubled past. The worst of these occurred during the long, brutal dictatorship of the infamous Somoza family. When the regime was finally toppled in 1979, the new Sandinista government confiscated the family's vast landholdings and distributed them to newly formed farming co-operatives.

It is a tough seven-hour journey from Managua to Nueva Guinea, and another hour on rutted trails to reach the field where Jose Sanchez and other co-op members are working. As the vehicle lurched between pot holes, Oscar Brown held an impromptu meeting with two members of the co-operative's board in his temporary "office" in the truck box. Because of untimely rains, the bean crop is not as good as promised earlier in the year, explained Sinforoso Ruiz, the co-op's president. "But thank God we're growing black beans and not red, otherwise things would be much worse," he said through an interpreter.

Without machinery, harvesting is tiring, dusty work. "We don't have money to buy machinery, but there's always a shortage of employment opportunities, so we don't complain when there's work to do," smiled Julio Garcia, the agricultural specialist at Hamed Campos.

With pride the farmers opened their sacks to show Brown the quality of their latest black bean crop. The beans will join production from other co-op farmers at various collection points around the community to await shipment to Costa Rica. It takes about 44,000 pounds of beans to fill one large transport truck and Brown is quietly assessing transportation logistics.

Cash flow can be a problem at the co-op, but there is help. With CCMC financial guarantees, the co-op can borrow money against the cash they will receive from their crop to help pay for transportation.

On the 10 hectares of co-op land he farms, Sanchez, like his fellow co-op members, has included a small plot of red beans for his family's consumption. Recent rains have significantly reduced his red beans yield and it's noticeable that the quality has also suffered. The black bean crop yields, however, are virtually unaffected.

Garcia, the co-op's agricultural specialist, says the farmers' quality of life has improved not only because yields are higher these days, but also due to effective export marketing methods that have brought more financial stability to the community. Now there's more money for education and health care, he says. Flickering lights from the farmer's small homes also indicate that television has reached more than a few households in the district.

With the day's work done, Sanchez and his son climb aboard their horse and slowly make their way back to their small family home. Brown watches them disappear into the darkness before climbing back into the box of the mud-spattered Toyota. With another bone-crunching hour left before arriving back at Nueva Guinea, there is just enough time to conclude his meeting. ■

Peter Wilson is a staff writer with The Star Phoenix in Saskatoon.

***"Thank God we're growing black beans and not red, otherwise things would be much worse."
— José Sanchez***



HAMED CAMPOS CO-OP PRESIDENT SINFOROSO RUIZ (LEFT) SHARES THE PRIDE OF A FARMER MEMBER AT HARVEST TIME.



GHANA: CO-OPERATION ILLUMINATES A PATH TO PEACE

BY JANICE VICTOR

In the arid regions of northern Ghana, new agricultural co-operatives are ensuring better food supplies and nutrition for local people – but the co-operatives have also brought another unexpected dividend to the region – peace.

Twelve years ago, a simmering tribal conflict flared into violence, leaving a legacy of bitterness and suspicion. Such deep hurts take time to heal, but the co-operatives are speeding that process by uniting people from all tribal groups in a common purpose.

The co-operatives are one result of a partnership between the Canadian Co-operative Association and the Social Enterprise Development Foundation of West Africa (SEND). Over the past four years, farm families in north eastern Ghana have been organized into 24 village co-operatives. Another 26 are planned for the next two years. The co-operatives have been helping farmers to grow and market protein-rich soybeans, both to improve family nutrition and to improve family income. They also manage their finances through local credit unions, creating a whole range of financial possibilities for members.

The small community of Kitoe, the site of one new co-operative, is home to two ethnic groups – the Gonja and the Konkomba. For years these two tribal groups had coexisted peacefully, even though the Gonja, as the traditional landowners, held political power in the area, and charged the

Konkomba, “a settler tribe,” to use the land. In 1992, however, a land dispute between the Gonja and another “settler tribe” in a neighboring district spilled over into Kitoe. On the morning of May 23, 1992, a group of Konkomba launched an attack against the Gonja of Kitoe. When the violence ended, 79 Gonja were dead, of which an estimated 60 per cent were children. A number of Konkomba men also died in the fighting, and the village of Kitoe was virtually destroyed. Most of the Gonja people fled to Salaga, the capital of the East Gonja district, but they soon returned to rebuild their farms and resume their lives.

“We have realized... if we want to benefit in the future, we need to unite.” – Kidikpe Betcha (Konkomba man)

The peace was not to last. In 1994, a personal disagreement between a Konkomba man and a Nanumba man in the neighbouring district of Nanumba re-ignited pre-existing tensions. Being allied with the Nanumba people, the Gonja once again found themselves in conflict with the Konkomba. This time the Gonja of Kitoe immediately left for Salaga while their farms were razed. They remained there for three years, unable to go home, surviving off charity from aid organizations.

Twelve years ago, a simmering tribal conflict flared into violence, leaving a legacy of bitterness and suspicion.



THE STORY OF KITOE IS TOLD IN ITS TWO SCHOOL HOUSES – THE OLD ONE DESTROYED IN THE VIOLENCE OF 1992, AND A NEW ONE BUILT OUT OF A RENEWED SPIRIT OF TRUST BETWEEN THE GONJA AND KONKOMBA PEOPLE.



THE PEOPLE OF DOMEABRA, SITE OF ONE OF CCA'S NEWEST PROJECTS, ARE WORKING TOGETHER TO BRING BETTER FOOD SUPPLIES AND NUTRITION TO THEIR COMMUNITY.

Today, the people of Kitoe co-exist peacefully and co-operatively. Disputes are dealt with locally, usually through the complainant's own ethnic community. Gonja and Konkomba farmers often work the same plots of land, growing their soybean crops side by side. Members of the two ethnic groups help each other out when help is needed. The working co-operative alliance that has grown between the people also extends to personal alliances – friendships. Adisa Abudu is a prize-winning

Gonja soybean farmer and a petty trader who buys goods from the Konkomba. She says she has acquired many friendships among the Konkomba women that she trades with.

Intentionally, or not, the project has created the building blocks for peace. It insists on equal ethnic representation and ensures equitable distribution of resources. In the co-operative, it has created a safe venue that requires constant, open dialogue. It has created a mutual objective between the two groups – they know that they must work together to effectively market their crops and build their community – and it has created shared social and financial capital that they must work together to build and protect.

As much as the developments taking place in Kitoe can be considered a “success story,” it would be overly simplistic to assume that conflict will never break out again in that community. Peace building is a difficult task when there are so many lines of division and contradictory alliances among people. The co-operative has helped to instil a spirit of co-operation, yet family alliances and ethnic differences still leave Kitoe in a potentially volatile situation. The project may be powerless to change the ethnic differences that divide the two peoples, but it has taught lessons and skills that can be used to mediate between them. This co-operation project has helped to illuminate a path to peace. Residents of Kitoe understand that unity can lead to development. Now it is up to them to learn how to put aside their differences in order to make lasting changes. ■

Janice Victor is a CCA youth intern and technical co-operant just returned from northern Ghana.

“There’s no loggerheads between us, we and the Gonja. We don’t behave negatively toward one another. We act like one community.”
– ***John Betcha (Konkomba man)***

In 1997, the Gonja finally returned to Kitoe and began the process of rebuilding their farms. Initially, there was a great deal of tension between the Gonja and the Konkomba. When SEND, with CCA’s support, arrived in Kitoe in 2000 to initiate the Food Security Through Co-operation project, the two ethnic groups had started to put the past events behind them but were still hesitant and apprehensive with each other.

Both Gonja and Konkomba families were chosen to participate in the new co-operative. Despite the strained relations, the two groups learned to work together and were soon freely exchanging ideas. A Konkomba man was elected as chairman of the co-operative and a Gonja man took on the role of farmer extensionist to provide technical support to other members of the co-op. Whether consciously arranged or not, the appointment of a representative from each ethnic group to a leadership role helped to equalize the balance of power and through the realization of common goals, the members – 32 families and one single woman – forged a co-operative alliance. Co-operative members from both groups sought to expand their farm production, improve their livelihoods, and provide better nutrition for their children.

Abudu Jonathan is the farmer extensionist who works with the co-operative. He is convinced that the co-operative has contributed to the peace. “First and foremost, we formed one group with them,” he said. “We wouldn’t have been too free [to interact] if we hadn’t had the same co-operative or group.”



“There are so many wonderfully skilled people in Canada who are more than willing to take on an assignment like this”
 – John Julian

A WARM WELCOME FOR CANADIAN CREDIT UNION COACHES

When eight Canadian credit union professionals boarded a plane for Ghana in mid-January, the majority had no idea what they were letting themselves in for. They knew they were en-route to the West African country to share their skills and experience as credit union “coaches,” but silently, each member of the team harbored a host of questions: How would they cope with travel in a developing country? Would experience gained in Canada be applicable to credit unions in Africa? Would their assistance be welcomed?

The team was part of an experiment on the part of the Canadian Co-operative Association. “Over the past few years we have seen a reduction in the number of international opportunities for people from primary co-operatives and credit unions,” said John Julian, the CCA staff member who organized the trip. “The time and effort involved in recruiting and briefing technical co-operants means that we tend to focus on individuals with specialized skills that can be applied at the



MOST OF THE CREDIT UNIONS IN GHANA ARE SMALL WITH LIMITED STAFF SO VOLUNTEERS TEND TO BE MUCH MORE “HANDS ON” THAN THEY ARE IN CANADA. AS A RESULT, ROLES CAN BECOME BLURRED. THE APPROPRIATE DIVISION OF LABOUR BETWEEN STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS WAS ONE OF THE COMMON ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION WITH THE CANADIAN COACHES. BEATRICE JUMPAH IS ONE OF TWO STAFF MEMBERS AT KAMCU CREDIT UNION IN ACCRA.

national level – experts in credit union legislation or central finance facilities, for example.”

Yet evidence points to a continuing need for assistance to primary credit unions in many of the countries where CCA works. Ghana is a good example. With 250 credit unions to serve, many of them new and struggling, the Credit Union Association of Ghana (CUA) cannot meet the need for human resource development and on-site technical assistance at the primary level. As well,

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many of CUA's field staff are also relatively inexperienced. They too have a need for coaching and mentoring.

"There are so many wonderfully skilled people in Canada who are more than willing to take on an assignment like this," said Mr. Julian, "so we designed a program that would make this possible." Significant economies of scale were realized by recruiting and briefing a team, instead of an individual. As well, the coaches worked in teams of two — offering both professional and personal support throughout the assignment.

The team members quickly discovered that they did not need to be concerned about the welcome. "The people we met; whether they were credit union people or people unrelated to our cause, such as villagers and hotel staff, made me feel just like at home," said Perry MacPherson, General Manager of Capital Credit Union in Fredricton, New Brunswick. "It certainly was a blessing to have this feeling of ease when being so far away."

Not that there weren't challenges. "Because this was the first mission of this kind, managers did not know what to expect. Some were apprehensive about being evaluated or judged," said Mr. MacPherson. "Once they realized that our only purpose was to help them improve their operations, the atmosphere thawed considerably."

For F.E. Daniels, manager of North Tema Co-operative Credit Union, the time spent with Mr. MacPherson and fellow coach Eric Smith of Woodstock New Brunswick was valuable, but too short.

"We had a great start, and would wish to continue," he said. "We had such a good understanding with Perry and Eric Smith that we wish we could have them again. We are far behind computerizing our programs," he added.

The use of computers was one of the recurring themes encountered by the coaches. Others were board and management relations, service culture, staff compensation, conflict of interest policies, records management, security, safe investment strategies, credit granting policies, and managing delinquency. In every instance, the coaches offered advice based on practical knowledge gained from front-line credit union work. In many cases the coaching continues from a distance through the sharing of Canadian policies and procedures.

For Mr. Julian, the greatest problem with the project is that the demand far outstrips the supply. "There are so many people in Canada who would love to do an assignment like this, and there are so many credit unions around the world that could benefit," he said. "Our resources barely allow us to scratch the surface. For example, we only advertised this opportunity among credit unions that have hosted women through CCA's women and credit mentorship program. We had three times as many qualified applicants as we could accommodate."

On the other end of the equation, he said, the coaches worked with about a dozen credit unions in a country where there are 250. "I guess this is the story of development," Mr. Julian said. "The needs are always greater than our ability to meet them. I think the coaches involved in this first initiative can take pride in having done a really good job, and at launching something new that holds a lot of promise." ■

The members of the coaching team were: Janette Begley, Labatt Credit Union, Toronto; Eric Smith, Carleton Pioneer Credit Union, New Brunswick; Joan Baer, Goodsoil Credit Union, Saskatchewan; Debbie Bishop, Common Wealth Credit Union, Alberta; Perry MacPherson, Capital Credit Union, New Brunswick; Shaunna Appleyard, Police Credit Union, Manitoba; Valerie Gauvin, Terrace and District Credit Union, British Columbia; Colin Markusson (Team Leader) Raymore Credit Union, Saskatchewan.

The coaches offered advice based on practical knowledge gained from front-line credit union work.



THE COACHES WORKED IN TEAMS OF TWO — OFFERING BOTH PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE ASSIGNMENT. ERIC SMITH (L) AND PERRY MACPHERSON (R) WORKED WITH STAFF AND MEMBERS OF THE NORTH TEMA CO-OPERATIVE CREDIT UNION.



DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE – A GLOBAL CO-OPERATIVE CAMPAIGN AGAINST POVERTY

Last week an unassuming PowerPoint presentation arrived on my desk via E-mail. It was just four simple slides, yet it captured my imagination in a profound way.

The presentation made one simple suggestion – that co-operatives and co-operators all over the world – all 800 million of us – join forces in a global attack on poverty. The first thing that struck me about this notion was that it was remarkable and novel. My second thought was that it should be neither. After all, what are co-operatives all about anyway? Are they not built around the idea of people helping each other to build better lives? Are we not a global phenomenon, including people from both the developed North and the developing South? Would it not be logical that our shared values would have propelled us into some global partnership against poverty long ago?

It's not that this has never occurred to people in the co-operative movement. There are many co-operative organizations, like our own Canadian Co-operative Association, that have been using the co-operative model in the struggle against poverty for many years, but we would be hard pressed to argue that fighting poverty, at home or abroad, is a central motivation for most co-operative enterprises in the developed world.

The source of this idea is our world body, the International Co-operative Alliance, and the immediate catalyst for the campaign is the achievement of the United Nation's Millennium Goals. At its millennium session in 2000, 189 member nations of the UN pledged, by 2015 to: 1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2) achieve universal primary education; 3) promote gender equality and empower women; 4) reduce child mortality; 5) improve maternal health; 6) combat HIV/AIDS; 7) ensure environmental sustainability; 8) create a global partnership for development.

Taken together the goals can seem lofty and impossible, yet examined individually there is a distinct whiff of possibility around each one. The big picture may be overwhelming, but broken down into component tasks, the whole thing starts to seem doable. One way or another, co-operatives have something to contribute to every one of the Millennium Goals. Co-operatives are already working to improve livelihoods for poor people. They have taken on responsibility for the health of members, they are actively promoting the empowerment of women, and they are helping families access primary education.

In his passionate speeches about HIV/AIDS in Africa, Stephen Lewis often makes the point that the battle against this terrible disease can only be won when it becomes everyone's

battle. That goes for individuals, but it also applies to institutions – governments at all levels, churches, schools, businesses, and of course co-operatives. If that is true for HIV/AIDS, it is even more the case with the addition of seven other objectives. Achieving these goals will take a sustained and coordinated effort. Why shouldn't co-operatives lead the way – prove conclusively that global co-operation is achievable?

One of the chords that has been resonating since I first heard about the Co-operative Millennium Goal initiative is that, on a global basis, this is something that we must do together. This should not be a campaign of the rich co-operatives in the north helping poor co-operatives in the south. Sadly, in spite of our best efforts, that is often the case in our development work. Instead this is an opportunity where the voices of the poor should count for as much, or more, than the voices of the rich. Imagine if co-operatives all over the world included achievement of the Millennium Goals in their business plans. Imagine an issue that unites co-operatives all over the world. Imagine co-operatives assuming global leadership in rallying the other elements of civil society behind the Millennium Goals. Maybe it is time to stop imagining, and start doing.

John Julian is CCA Director of International Communications and Policy



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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DIGEST IS PUBLISHED THREE TIMES A YEAR BY CCA. CORRESPONDENCE SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO DAVID SHANKS, EDITOR.