

Helping the third world help itself



photo Martin Beales

by Ann Grever

Larry McDermit is the national director of Plenty Canada, a Canadian based international aid organization.

A.G.: What is Plenty Canada?

LM.: Plenty Canada started in 1976. It started as a group of families and a couple of single people who were all interested in the international development as part of the world's citizenry and we wanted to do something for those less fortunate than us.

So when the earthquake came in Guatemala — we heard about it through our ham radio system actually — we sent some people and got involved in the reconstruction of approximately 1,200 homes, a dozen schools and a couple of clinics and that led to other projects. We built a municipal centre for Indian people and that led to more long term development. We've got nutrition projects, agriculture projects and gravity fed water systems. Last Friday I got back from Guatemala. We left in 1980. So we hadn't been there for almost five years. The water projects — all five village water systems — were working fine. They had no breakdowns since we left, which I call partially good luck too. That's pretty good.

Other projects we got involved with was using soy for the production of high protein food. We built a soya dairy that makes milk, tofu and ice cream. That dairy had to shut down in 1983 because of the violence in the area, but we're looking forward to getting things going again.

We also worked with widows and orphans. There's about 3,000 widows and 7,000 orphans in the immediate area we were working in alone. So we supported weaving cooperatives as well as other small scale agriculture initiatives.

A.G.: Where's the money for all this coming from?

LM.: The money comes from private donations. And the private donations are the key, because the private donations are matched by

the government. The best matching system is in Alberta. If someone gives money to Plenty Canada, the provincial government comes up with a factor every year. I think last year it was 80 cents on the dollar or somewhere in that range. So you have a lot of leverage with a donation here.

CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) is our other contributor, which is the federal government's way of getting involved in international development. Within CIDA they have a NGO division (a non government organizations division) which includes us and other organizations like CARE and OXFAM. The NGO also funds on a matching basis. That's why that first dollar, although it's a small percentage, is the key.

So we rely on private donations from coast to coast. We've gotten support from, for instance, the committee of 10,000 at the U of Calgary supported a project in Dominique for the Caribbean Indians.

We also want to put an application in for projects here at the U of A and I spoke with Paul Alpern the VP External affairs and there's a program here too. We have an application in here at the Foundation.

Occasionally we have had benefits. For example the Wonderful Grand Band did a benefit for us in St. John's Newfoundland. We had about 1,000 people who came out for us. Volunteers also came out and planted trees for us which raises a few bucks. Last year we had a couple who reached their 50th wedding anniversary and gave us a fairly significant donation. So it's a little here, a little there.

So we get our money from a number of varied and interesting sources. The human interest that goes along with the whole process I find a lot of fun.

A.G.: How successful are your projects?

LM.: You're asking a biased judge. I was happy with what I saw in Guatemala, because that's where we really cut our development teeth.

In Lesotho we have a large project. We went to Lesotho in 1979. Most of the young men, particularly between 18 and 45 — statistics say 60 per cent — go to work in the mines in South Africa. They have to sign contracts of usually 50 weeks with two weeks off so they come home for two weeks. So that means women share

the burden of development in Lesotho.

Lesotho is also one of the countries identified by the UN as most severely affected by the drought. That's been going on for about four years, though it broke with a bang about 6-7 weeks ago. They got all kinds of rains and floods, which was good. It actually helped the crops survive.

Another problem was on Christmas day they got a frost at 2,000 meters. Now the whole country is 1,000 meters or higher so that means the people up in the mountains were struggling and lost most of their crops. So it's going to be another year before they restore their food supplies and that's if the weather cooperates.

So we're involved in food relief for the first time in a long time. But we concentrate on development. We're more concerned with preventing future disasters. And if there is another drought we feel there are development programs that can cushion the affects of a drought even as severe as the one that has been going on. Because throughout the drought there were always mountain springs, that could be capped.

A gravity water system is capped, piped and sometimes there is a breaker box because the water pressure is so high. The water is brought into the village and spigots are appropriately placed in different areas in the village. Usually 4-5 huts have a spigot. Then you've got potable water. That's the project the villagers asked for the most.

A.G.: So you don't always do the projects you feel the people need but what they want?

LM.: Usually the people have common sense and they know what they need the most and it's usually very practical.

Once you've developed the water system, for a few more bucks you can run a pipe to an area with good land, fence that in and give the families each a plot, set up a spigot or two in that fenced in area and distribute the seed. Teach them how to collect their own seed, so they can keep growing their own vegetables and if you divide that cost on a per capita basis it's actually cheaper than food aid for a year.

During the drought we noticed the villages, with at least a water system, were at least able to grow their own vegetables even if their field crops failed. And we've also noticed that certain crops like spinach, swiss chard and even brussel sprouts will grow right through the winter. Crops like that will continue to grow so that means they at least have some food with a high vitamin and mineral content, a low protein content but some green leafy vegetables. It will sustain life until other things come through. It makes a big difference if you don't have something like that.

So we think projects like that are really the answer for cushioning the effect of the drought. That's true too in other African countries that are severely affected by the drought.

I also want to talk about the forestry project in Lesotho. Lesotho is losing about one per cent of its soil a year, which is a lot. They have big steep mountains, no trees, all over grazed with too many cattle on them. It's a delicate situation environmentally to have cattle, and there are programs that try and limit them but still the land way up on the mountains are overgrazed. So its important to have a forestry program both from the standpoint of firewood production and soil

conservation. We find that chiefs and village committees are cooperating with the forestry programs. They are getting involved and we're fencing in some fairly large areas and planting trees and developing wood lots for the future. That takes a long term commitment. It involves the village people in long term training.

We're educating people on the value of forestry. We find it particularly important that we involve the schools — teaching the school children the value of things like forestry, sanitation and nutrition.

Another component of the forestry program is that we are growing fruit trees and distributing those to farmers. We are fortunate to have an orchard that was developed on the site where we are. It gives us a training ground for people to learn pruning. It was actually developed by English people years ago. It's old but it does the job. It gives us a chance to teach pruning and teach care of a mature orchard at the same time giving people some experience, in all the stages of growing.

So there's the technology centre, the water system, forestry and then we have agricultural initiatives, with a variety of crops trying to improve the crop base. This includes soy to improve the basic crops of corn and sorghum that are high in carbohydrates but not much else. So this legume project complements that. And we're looking at other agricultural initiatives we are starting up soon.

A.G.: How does your volunteer program work?

LM.: We have quite a cross section of people volunteering. People, once they are accepted, are provided with airfare, food, clothing and shelter and a small stipend to land on.

There is a steady flow but often we have trouble finding people with specific needed skills. Right now we need agronomists, and foresters. Otherwise there is a fairly strong flow.

So we recruit lightly. We recruit through the articles etc. We're thinking about coming to schools, universities more often, to let people know what we're doing. Certainly if people are interested in more information about Plenty Canada, volunteering or donating, can contact Susan Boychuk in Edmonton at 433-9925.

A.G.: So what kind of future goals do you have?

LM.: Well certainly to improve the projects we have. Besides the projects in Guatemala and Lesotho that I've mentioned, there's also the Caribbean programs in St. Vincent, Dominique, Antigua, Jamaica, Haiti, and in a few months we are starting a nutrition program in Sri Lanka.

We want to continue with the education and the development and to continue to develop the infrastructure of where we are now so those projects can be taken over by the people in those countries. We're trying to work ourselves out of a job as quickly as possible because there's lots of work to be done throughout the world.

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