

Nancy Yates

Livestock, High Tech and TOKTEN

■ During nearly 20 years with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Nancy Yates has lived and worked in Ethiopia, Brazil, New York and Barbados. She has taken these very different places in her stride and says it was easy after her childhood homes. She was born near Portage-la-Prairie in Manitoba and grew up, from age 11 to 18, in Churchill, Manitoba. After those years in Churchill, she says, "I could probably have lived anywhere and not felt any physical hardship." She claims she enjoyed that bleak town on the shore of Hudson Bay and always hoped to see a polar bear walk down its main street. She graduated from the University of Manitoba in 1966 and was recruited directly into the External Aid Office (a forerunner of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)) to work in the training division.

It was partially an accident that Yates was drawn into international work. She was interviewed by people from a number of federal departments, who were touring the universities; the recruiting team from the External Aid Office showed particular interest. But she was already involved with the International House in Winnipeg and with helping foreign students. After two years in Ottawa, Yates was posted to Ethiopia as a junior professional officer with the UNDP, and stayed there for a little over two years. Then the UNDP offered her a posting in Brazil as a program officer. After four and a half years divided between Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia, she was based at headquarters in New York for seven years. During that time she became chairperson of the staff council, and worked vigorously—but not with any striking success—to open up more senior posts for women. A posting followed in 1982 to Barbados, where she was the deputy resident representative for the eastern Caribbean, which comprised 10 islands. In 1987, she was back in New York as senior area officer in the Caribbean unit. She talks here about all these stages in her career, and about how the UNDP has evolved:

"When I thought in 1968 about a first assignment abroad, I decided I wanted to go to somewhere completely different from what I had known in Canada, somewhere exotic. With Ethiopia I got exactly what I wanted. In some ways it was very shocking, seeing many people living in terrible conditions. But it was also most exciting. Addis Ababa had recently become the headquarters of two important institutions. The Organization of African Unity was new, and people of all sorts of nationalities were working at the Economic Commission for Africa. The UN program included a geological survey, agricultural research, UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization] book production, and improvement of livestock. My particular job had a lot to do with South African refugees.

"The program in Brazil was totally different. The UN there was helping Brazil absorb high technology. We had a professor from Harvard help[ing] the Brazilians [to] work out this kind of policy, to get something worthwhile out of the UNDP. In terms of money, the UNDP was not that important to Brazil, but they decided to use us as a conduit to get high technology. For example, they wanted to export civilian aircraft—no, not counterinsurgency aircraft—and we helped them with that, and also with nuclear techniques in agriculture, radioisotopes and so on. Then there was research on fruits and