CUSO outgrows university image

Just over 25 years ago, the first group of 15 CUSO volunteers went overseas to embark on a cultural and work experience in the Third World. While still committed to sending Canadians overseas, CUSO requires more specialized participants, above and beyond the fresh university grad to meet the changing needs of the developing nations.

By Laura Lush

Not too long ago all you needed was a university degree and a desire to work in a different culture to qualify as a volunteer with a developing agency in a Third World country. While there are still many avenues open for university students to work overseas, more and more developing agencies are recruiting volunteers with a degree or trade, plus several years' working experience.

CUSO is one such non-governmental organization (NGO) that over the years has raised its average age and qualifications from fresh university grads in their early 20s to skilled professionals in their early 30s, specializing in non-academic fields. Although CUSO originated at the University of Toronto campus as a privately funded initiative in 1961, it dropped its affiliation with universities in 1981 to reflect its mandate as a developing agency rather than an overseas placement service. In the last 25 years, CUSO has sent more than 9,000 Canadians to developing countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean.

"We started out essentially the same as the American Peace Corps—as an organization that gave young people a chance to go overseas, but over the years we've learned to start looking at how we can be more effective as a developing agency overseas," said John Farvolden, coordinator of the Toronto CUSO office. "We no longer say the acronym CUSO stands for Canadian Universities Services Overseas; CUSO just stands by itself. We also moved off the university campus last year during our 25th anniversary."

Although Farvolden acknowledged that the commitment to place young people overseas to gain a cultural experience was a valuable one and the basis of CUSO's formation, its priority now has been to fill the needs of their overseas partners rather than giving Canadians an overseas experience. "We still get a lot of calls from young university graduates that expect that CUSO is a real option for them, but for the most part it isn't," he said. "It's been very hard to shake that association with universities."

Farvolden said that CUSO increased its volunteer qualifications to match rising education levels in the developing countries in which more skilled local people have been able to fill many of the previous CUSO positions. "Qualifications are developing by our field-staff overseas and by the host agency in the country," Farvolden said.

"For example, they're not asking for people who just finished a nursing program. They want Canadians who have a Bachelor of Science in nursing and several years of experience to raise their standards rather than just fill in positions. We're not much interested in plugging somebody in to stop a gap."

CUSO now refers to its volunteers as "cooperants" to reflect its developing philosophy of maintaining an egalitarian relationship with its overseas partners. To further ensure that the developing process is not an authoritative and hierarchical one controlled by the donor country, CUSO supports local government or non-government inititatives abroad either at the labour, administrative or funding level. "This is the basic developing model we use," Farvolden said. "Our overseas partners initiate a development project, and if they see a role for Canadians in that project in the form of doctors, computer technicians, etc. then they work out those details overseas, send the information back to us and we try to fill those positions. We've been around long enough to know that you can't go overseas and tell people what to do and what they need. It just isn't a sound development process."

Another way of making CUSO's development process a more equitable one, is by basing the cooperants' salaries on local salaries in the host country which range from $ 3,000 to $8,000 (Canadian) yearly. CUSO pays return expenses to the country, and benefits such as health care and a resettlement fund for returning cooperants. "You'll live pretty comfortably because it's a professional salary, plus you'll have a house supplied by the host agency," Farvolden said, "but you usually can't save very much."

Although Farvolden said that sometimes CUSO will pay the salary, especially with a non-government organization that might not have enough funds, "CUSO, as much as possible, tries to get the employer to pay the salary to demonstrate a commitment on their part."

In comparison, CIDA, (the federally run Canadian International Development agency) which is responsible for 85 percent of CUSO's funding and has large development projects of its own abroad, will match the Canadian salary overseas. "CUSO usually works in a different position than CIDA," Farvolden said. "CIDA sees its people as technical advisors—they'll go in for two weeks, a month or a year and advise. They're very qualified people as well, but we try to send in people for a longer time (two years) to work at the same level with the people that are eventually going to implement that project. When you do that, the cooperants can understand their partner's situation, motivation and frustrations. It puts the work they're trying to do in a much more human perspective."

Although CUSO does work in cooperation with big international development agencies such as CIDA, its rule of thumb is to work at the grass-roots or community level. "NGOs are better equipped to work at the local level in delivering development assistance than some of the other big developing agencies," Farvolden said. "It's person-to-person development rather than country-to-country." With approximately $1.5-million allocated to 250 projects in the Third World, CUSO concentrates on small to medium-sized projects and is not involved in building big pieces of infrastructures like dams and hydroelectric plants.

"Generally we're looking at working with the poorest people in that country at the village or community level that usually don't benefit from a lot of the big development projects," Farvolden said.

CUSO's biggest projects are the $6-million Togolese water project in West Africa (funded by CIDA but implemented by CUSO) and the irrigation project in Thailand which will affect about 50 villages. According to Farvolden, CUSO's methods will prevent the waste usually associated with large developments. A problem with a lot of the larger government development agencies, Farvolden said, is that "in a lot of projects, people just go in and install a bunch of water pumps and go away and see what happens." In comparison, "CUSO's role in a project is to work with villagers deciding what their needs and health concerns are, and how to best use that water pump to benefit all of the people."

Farvolden said that the large water project in Togo, Africa will probably be workable "because extra resources are tacked onto the project to allow consultation with villagers to ensure that the project is not going to cause more problems than it's solving."

"CUSO won't embark on a project until we know what's best for the community's needs. That a real priority in CUSO programming—consultation and participation," Farvolden said.

While Farvolden said that things can go wrong with both small and big development projects, on the whole the "big projects are the most scandalous because a lot of money is wasted." For example, Farvolden said Canada has about an 80 percent tied aid component. "If we say we'll give Tanzania $100-million, only $20-million ends up in Tanzania in terms of cash because we'll agree to build them something like a railway system, providing they use Canadian technology and equipment which they may or may not be able to maintain." He added, "They may not even want a railway system. However, if we were to give them the $200-million to do with what they wanted, the

TORONTO CUSO COORDINATOR JOHN FARVOLDEN SAID CUSO HAS NEW IMAGE