

First world solutions for third world problems

By **ROBBY ROBERTSON**

Try to imagine you are in a village with mud huts, no running water, electricity or health clinics, and goats running around everywhere. Outside the huts, you might see a Mercedes-Benz. That's the kind of picture I have of Nigeria, the priorities they have for development. Nigeria is a country of extremes."

Chung Kuan, a recent Canadian University Services Overseas volunteer and University of British Columbia graduate, speaks slowly and carefully about his two-year mathematics teaching placement in Nigeria. A Chinese-Canadian in his mid-20's, Kuan seems constantly aware that his words might form black and white images which characterize Western views of the third world.

"Nigeria is a large and complex country of many tribes, and it varies from area to area," he says. "It's hard to generalize my experience to the whole of Nigeria."

Kuan worked at a teacher's training school, teaching students who could barely speak English, much less use the imported language to understand math. In the school's storeroom, Kuan found many unused beakers, graduated cylinders and various chemicals.

"Some of the equipment you could not even find in our high schools, such as a chemical balance. It had never been used. People who came over 10 or 15 years ago thought buying a lot of scientific equipment would solve the problem."

Bill Raikes, another CUSO volunteer who spent two years in Sierra Leone and Papua, New Guinea, says foreign attempts to help impoverished countries often fail because the country's situation is poorly understood.

First world solutions are unsuitable for third world problems, he says, citing an agricultural problem near his home in Sierra Leone involving the harvest of several rice fields as an example.

The locals encountered problems in determining how to harvest the rice because the fields were so large. A Canadian advisor recommended they buy three Massey-Ferguson combines, which proved difficult to use. They could not be adjusted to the height of the rice, which was grown in flooded fields, and had no spare parts.

"All three of them seized up after three months, simply because no one knew to change the oil. And that's \$90,000 worth of farming equipment," Raikes says.

One of CUSO's basic operating principles is to promote grass roots development and

deal with economic inequities on terms set by the third world. While most CUSO volunteers hesitate to define these inequities, Wes Mautsald, CUSO's B.C. regional director, ventures an opinion.

"Well, I think that it is the social and economic system that has been built over the years," he says. Mautsald brings 13 years of experience in international organizations to bear in his slow, accurate statements.

"Third world countries' resources have come under the control of countries and transnational corporations. In Guatemala, they have the resources to feed and house the people, but the exploitation of these resources does not benefit the local people. They are taken out and used to maintain the standard of living that first world countries are used to," Mautsald says.

"Many countries have gained political independence, but they have not gained economic independence. They are stuck in a cycle of dependency."

The Canadian International Development Agency, which funds CUSO and other volunteer programs, is responsible for more costly forms of aid. According to a recent study by Roger Young of the North-South Institute, many CIDA programs are wasteful and encourage third world dependency on Canada.

CIDA emphasizes providing expensive technology, instead of supplying spare parts and training the people to utilize existing technology, says Young. When the imported Canadian machines break down, they must ask CIDA for new ones.

Canada's tied aid programs, which specify that funds must be used to purchase Canadian goods, force recipients to use expensive technology where it may not be appropriate.

Raikes says often simple solutions work where highly technical ones fail. When visiting the garden of one of his Sierra Leone students, Raikes found the student used a half gallon gourd to water his plants. He walked half a mile for each gourd full of water, making watering the garden a five-hour task. Raikes later discovered a five gallon watering can in the nearby city, which he bought for \$2. "With the watering can, my student was able to reduce his watering time to half an hour, and consequently pay his school fees, support his family and double the size of his plot.

"It was just \$2 worth of technology that saved his life," says Raikes, smiling at the solution's simplicity.

But CUSO volunteers are uncertain if their work has any major effect on the country's development. Most said they felt the personal interaction was the most important aspect of their placement for both them and the locals.

A CUSO volunteer lives as the local lives—sometimes without running water, transportation or electricity. They are often held responsible for projects they feel are not of the greatest use, but must complete them because of the local government's insistence, which pays them. The CUSO volunteer must also learn a new language and culture.

Despite these obstacles, Kuan says the time he spent in Nigeria was very valuable. "I feel I have gained more than I have put out. Two years is a tremendous learning experience, and I believe five years of university education could not give me what I have experienced over there."

Kuan does not claim to have changed Nigeria's unequal economic system, but he

says he is satisfied with his contribution on a personal level.

Jean Maloney, a UBC adult education student, says her recent experience in Papua, New Guinea was also personally enriching. "On a personal level, there were some people that I think I really did help. Just a few of my students I think I really touched and made a difference in their lives. And that has to be enough."

Critics of the program, including some CUSO volunteers, say volunteer groups like CUSO sometimes fail to help the country's poor directly. Volunteers—especially those in teaching programs which make up 50 per cent of CUSO's placements—think they are perpetuating a culturally and economically biased system.

Kuan says Nigeria's Western form of education is stifling its culture and altering its traditions. "When they ask Canadians to come here and teach they are also getting our culture, our values, our thinking," he says.

"They are taking children away from the villages and putting them in schools, teaching them the city culture. The price they pay is quite big."

Raikes also has reservations about the Western education system, saying what is taught is often useless to the locals. The Sierra Leone government contracted him to teach North American geography to its students because it is a requirement on regional tests qualifying one to continue study. In West Africa, regional exams retain a Western bias left from the time of colonialism, he says.

"I could not teach them the area's geography because it was not on the exam. After three years of teaching these kids, I don't think I contributed one iota to their development," he admits.

Another organization that sends volunteers to developing countries is World University Services Canada. Richard Dalgarno, WUSC's overseas project assistant director, defends their program, where 70 per cent of placements teach a Western style education. "If it's of relevance to the bulk of the people is debatable," says Dalgarno in a telephone interview in Ottawa. "But it's what they asked for. It's what they want."

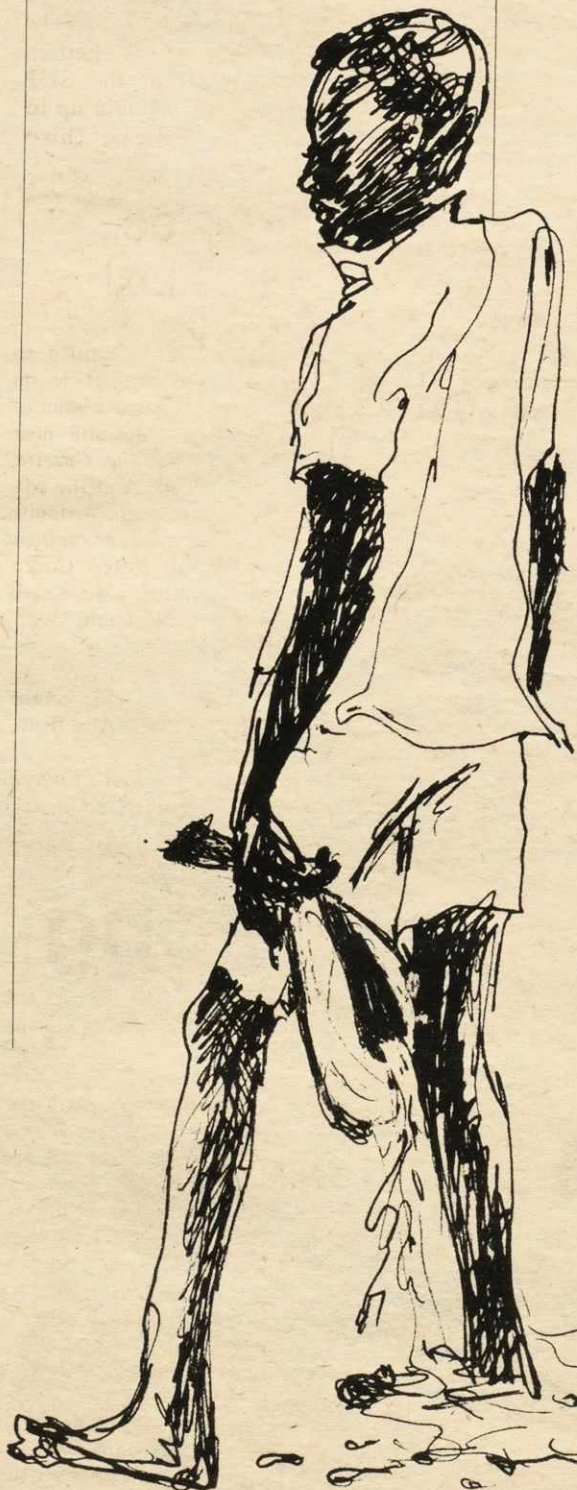
In response to criticism of its teaching placements, CUSO is shifting its emphasis to more specific projects designed to raise the basic standard of living. Skilled university graduates coordinate projects, such as setting up health facilities and implementing more effective subsistence farming methods.

"We would try to get several Canadians to go to Columbia," says Mautsald, giving an example of a specific scheme. "One would be a doctor, one a nurse, one a dentist and maybe a co-ordinator. They would work with four Columbian people, so we could start a health project in a certain part of the country. After a while, we would withdraw the CUSO people and hope the program would be carried on under the Columbians."

Volunteers do agree on one thing—they want to increase Canadians' awareness of third world realities. "They want to do something that is no for them personally but for society," says Raikes.

"Sometimes I felt I wasn't doing much, but at least I was doing something."

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