

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
concerned citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

CoDev CANADA

The Little NGO That Could



IN 1985, A SMALL GROUP OF ACTIVISTS envisioned a way to forge links between labour, community groups and student associations in B.C. and their counterparts in Latin America. "We wanted to build more of a partnership model, north to the south," says Julia Goulden, a retired teacher. "That's basically how the idea of CoDevelopment Canada came into being — actually, in my living room. We each put in \$100 and started it up."

Five people, including Goulden, were each involved with different organizations like Tools for Peace and the Trade Union Group, which gave support to people in Latin America, primarily Nicaragua's Sandinistas. What they really desired, though, was a closer relationship with these communities in the south, a two-way partnership to exchange information and help build understanding.

"Initially, some of this work was done directly union to union," recalls Rick Craig, one of CoDev's founders who is now executive director of the Law Courts Education Society of B.C. "Later on, we said, 'This is crazy. We should be creating our own NGO because, if we do that, we could get CIDA money (Canadian International Development Agency). And we can take this money and get it matched through the Canadian government and we can do much more with it.'"

Other existing NGOs such as Oxfam and CUSO were accepting donations for work in this region but, as Craig explains, "No matter how sympathetic they were, they already had their own defined programs and partners and weren't in a position to respond to our needs that said, 'Look, if we're working with the carpenters' union or the IWA (woodworkers) or the B.C. Teachers' Federation, we want programs that are built with sectoral partners.'"

CoDevelopment Canada, known as CoDev, was a unique model at the time: an NGO that not only managed projects in the global south, but allowed its partner organizations to be part of the process, to determine where and how support would be most effective. It shunned the notion of charity, and emphasized the sharing of experiences between the partners and learning

By Carole Pearson

from each other.

In the 1980s, Craig and Goulden were both teachers and members of the BCTF, an organization that was already performing international solidarity work through its W.R. Long Fund. Not surprisingly, CoDev's first project involved a partnership between the BCTF and SUTEP, the Union of Education Workers of Peru. With CoDev in its formative stages and reliant on job creation grants and volunteer help, the infusion of money from BCTF's newly formed international solidarity committee helped ensure its survival.

Goulden, a special education teacher in Burnaby, B.C. at the time, had seen a photograph in the

Vancouver Sun showing striking women teachers in Peru facing a line of riot police. With little hesitation, she flew to Lima to find out how her colleagues at the BCTF could support the women. She was amazed to learn that the women teachers there had no role in managing their union. "They were put in the front lines," Goulden was told, "because it was less likely the riot police would beat them up."

The male union leaders she met were disgruntled by her insistence on meeting with the women teachers. She was told by the men that there was no need. When Goulden finally met with two women, she learned of the huge issues they faced. Women were given the worst teaching assignments in dangerous neighbourhoods. They were ignored by the men and were refused funding for their own projects even though an overwhelming majority of the membership were women. Goulden says, "There was no representation at any level for women. It was all men. The only woman who would be at their meetings was the secretary — and she wasn't even a teacher."

CoDev helped SUTEP set up a program of empowerment for women that continues today. Along with workshops on self-esteem and women's empowerment, conferences were held to discuss sex discrimination in education. Goulden met with the same male union leaders on a subsequent visit six years later. They came to understand that a women's committee, and recog-

PHOTOGRAPH: LEE BENSTED

CoDev shuns the notion of charity and emphasizes sharing experiences



Above: MEC is one of the most influential organizations in Central America today, with more than 70,000 members, including these maquila workers in Nicaragua.

Left: CoDev has worked in partnership with Nicaragua's Maria Elena Cuadra Movement for Working and Unemployed Women (MEC). Here (opposite page), maquila workers stand in front of MEC's building in Managua.

nizing the contributions of women in their union, "was the best thing that happened." The women had become much more active and came to play a major part in the labour struggles.

"We see training of women in women's leadership, gender awareness, gender-equality training, and non-sexist pedagogy as being really able to influence a whole society so that's a key area for us," says CoDev's executive director, Barbara Wood. "Women have made many advances in Latin America, but there's still a long

money to fund projects through CoDev."

One of these is the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the 2004 recipient of CoDev's International Solidarity Award. "CoDev is such a fine organization," says former board member Sandra Sorensen, who is now staff advisor to CUPE National's global justice committee. "It has an excellent staff and a very strong, working board that many unions have representation on."

CoDev's projects are aimed at historically disadvantaged sectors: women, workers, indigenous people, and the poor. Ten of its 15 southern partners are women's organizations or committees, and gender equity remains a priority for all programs. "For CoDev, the initial interest was from a feminist perspective, so a lot of our projects were in that direction," says Goulden, who is currently on CoDev's board of directors.

The women teachers in many Latin American countries have made great advances in changing social attitudes through education, both in the classroom and out. "One of the things most evident to me," says Goulden, "is they have worked into their regular curriculum a pedagogy of women's awareness. That's happened in Peru and other countries where they've been working on this national agenda. From a feminist point of view and an educator's point of view, to be able to get that into the approved curriculum, good on them. We have not been able to do that here in Canada."

It is the focus on exchanging ideas, discussing common struggles and encouraging face-to-face visits that set CoDev apart from many other NGOs. Says Craig, "We created CoDev with the whole idea being that solidarity works both ways. This isn't just about helping people overseas. It's about sharing and learning."

"We speak as equals," says Goulden. "The struggles in Canada are different but we certainly sense the pressure here as well of privatization of health services and education. All of a sudden, it becomes a much more common battle." When she visited Chile to meet with union groups there, Goulden first became aware of their struggle to oppose the privatization of public services. This issue was still unheard of in Canada. "It



Barbara Wood (left) is CoDev's executive director. Marcela Máspero (right), an executive member of the National Union of Workers of Venezuela (UNT), was invited as a special guest to the B.C. Federation of Labour's 2004 convention. CoDev coordinated her trip.

PHOTOGRAPH: DAN GAWTHROP/CUPE

way to go in that region. Machismo is still very much present and relationships are far from being equal."

Since it was founded 20 years ago, CoDev has developed a solid reputation for its projects. "Of course now, CoDev does more than women's work," Goulden says. "It does other kinds of community development work. In the ensuing years, a number of other unions in B.C. have become more aware of international solidarity work and have set up committees and set aside

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"We speak as equals," says CoDev board member, and one of the organization's founders, Julia Goulden. "The struggles in Canada are different but we certainly sense the pressure, too, of privatization of health services and education." Here, health promoters in Nicaragua show off their basic health training manuals.

The whole idea is that solidarity works both ways

really opened my eyes. When I came back home, it became so clear that Chile was a test case and, of course, it had a regime that allowed it to happen."

Besides the leadership programs for women teachers, CoDev works with teachers' organizations, students and other community groups through a hemispheric network to protect public education throughout the continent. IDEA (Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas) brings together teachers and students from 23 countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and North America.

Hospital Employees' Union (HEU/CUPE) president Fred Muzin says, "The privatization initiatives in Venezuela are tied to privatization initiatives in B.C. We try and share some of the resources and advantages we have here and also to learn from them about some of their organizing, mobilization and education techniques, because they are more advanced in many ways than we are."

Ken Davidson, chair of the CUPE B.C.'s international solidarity committee concurs. "Everything that employers get away with in Nicaragua, Mexico, wherever, eventually come home to roost in Canada. They test them out down there, see how it works and, next thing you know, they're trying out a variation of it here."

Quality health care is another important concern among all of CoDev's partner organizations. The B.C. Nurses' Union and the Health Sciences Association are working in partnership with the Salvadoran Association for Integrated Health and

Social Services (APSIES). One project was a children's health program that, in only three years, reduced child malnutrition rates from 25 per cent to 10 per cent through the use of vitamins, de-parasiting medicine, and education around the use of soy beans to supplement meagre diets. The association also set up 10 clinics to provide health care to 15 rural communities through 30 trained health promoters. Exchange visits between partner organizations is a key element of CoDev's approach to building strong international solidarity. Delegations from Canada travel to Latin America to meet with members of their partner organizations, who, in turn, are invited to speak about their projects with union members or community groups in Canada.

Santiago Diaz, APSIES' general co-ordinator, says, "The trips made to El Salvador by the HSA and CoDev staff have really helped us to keep up the energy for the fight in El Salvador, to know we are not alone." Muzin says, "We all have the same problems as workers. Our standards of living differ but we have the same problems. It's an education to see how workers in other parts of the world are able to organize against the oppression and hold their ground and win, in some cases. So, when we're feeling overwhelmed here by the labour laws and arbitrations, it's good to see how they deal with it in other countries. How they are able to do the grassroots organizing and educating to build a resistance when you think they didn't stand a chance at all. It's good for us to see that and remind us that a little bit of good hard work can pay off."

PHOTOGRAPH: CAROL WOOD



The Honduran Women's Collective (CODEMUH) was started in 1989 to educate women maquila workers from a feminist perspective about their rights as women and as workers.

A prime example of this is Nicaragua's Maria Elena Cuadra Movement for Working and Unemployed Women (MEC), one of the most influential women's organizations in Central America today. Formed in 1996 by former textile union leader Sandra Ramos, MEC has grown to 70,000 members. It works with society's marginalized women — including maquila workers, domestics, and unemployed women — providing leadership programs and workshops on labour rights and negotiation techniques.

The maquiladoras (factories in free trade zones) employ 335,000 workers, mostly women, in five Central American countries, and they are notorious for their sweatshop conditions. Knowledge of labour and human rights assists the women workers in defending themselves against workplace abuse. MEC's northern partners through CoDev are CUPE B.C., the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU), and the HEU (a CUPE affiliate).

The United Kingdom's Central American Women's Network reports that, "Resistance from male-dominated union culture in Nicaragua has meant that MEC has to work doubly hard in their lobbying efforts. Gender and labour rights are not attractive themes in the Nicaraguan political scene."

A mobile law clinic run by MEC since 2004 has handled 2,000 cases for maquila workers. The majority (95 per cent) deal with labour complaints, but also concern domestic violence and alimony conflicts. Of these, 90 per cent have been resolved, most in favour of the worker.

In 1998, MEC successfully lobbied the Nicaraguan minister of labour for a code of ethics for the maquila workers. The owners of all 24 transnational corporations in Nicaragua's free trade zone agreed to comply and signed the Ministerial Resolution which created vast improvements in the rights of the workers. These are rights to organize, to freedom from violence and harassment, to a livelihood, and to expect foreign companies to respect national laws.

However, without amendments to the country's outdated labour code there was no mechanism for compliance. So, in 2001, MEC leaders presented a 127-page document to Nicaragua's Parliament, accompanied by 50,000 signatures on a petition of support. The submission was approved by Parliament but vetoed by the outgoing president, Arnoldo Aleman. MEC is waiting for a politically opportune time to re-submit their document.

Still, the hard work is paying off. MEC director Ramos says, "The government comes to the table to debate with us now since we have a demonstrated ability to mobilize throughout the country, and a high level of credibility."

Another of CoDev's southern partners (with the HEU and the BCGEU) is the Honduran Women's Collective. It was begun in 1989 to train and educate women maquila workers from a feminist perspective about their rights, as women and workers.

Says Wood, CoDev's executive director, "These women's organizations see the whole person, not only as a maquila worker or possibly a union member, but as a woman with a whole range of concerns. These include labour rights, but also issues around reproductive health, STDs, HIV/Aids,

It's an education to see how workers in other parts of the world organize against oppression

domestic violence, childhood nutrition and even income-generating projects. They look at the whole person and try to address those broader needs. I think that's why they have been so successful."

Last year, the collective was able to force a meeting with officials from Honduras' Ministry of Labour and the president of the Honduran Free Trade Zone Association to present their demands. It was so convincing that 16 health and safety inspectors were immediately dispatched to factories where the collective members work. The government also invited the women to submit a proposal on how to improve conditions for workers. These are major successes for women and for workers in general, and have made the women's collective a powerful force for change in Honduran society.

There are so many organizations doing excellent work but, being a small organization, CoDev can only be involved with a few of them. "We haven't

been able to take on any new partners in quite a while," says Wood. "It's difficult sometimes to say no but we don't have any extra funding lying around."

CoDev's operating costs come partly from an administrative fee that is charged for every project. "Our staff are also unionized (CUPE Local 1004) and we pay well in that sector. That's always been our view," says board member Goulden. "The people who work for us should be treated well and have the rights that we are trying to espouse in the south. And we are working with the union movement here so it is only logical that we should have unionized workers."

Other sources of revenue come from fundraising efforts and occasional grants from CoDev's northern partners. This year, CoDev will receive a one-time award through the Citizen's Bank Shared Interest Program. There is also income from annual membership fees, monthly donations, and, although it doesn't generate any actual profit, there is CoDev's annual Travelling World Community Film Festival, "B.C.'s largest social justice issues film festival."

As well, there are the proceeds from the sale of CoDev's Café Etico brand coffee, which is described by CUPE as "the only unionized fair trade coffee available in B.C." CoDev imports and roasts 16,000 pounds of coffee beans annually from partner cooperatives in Nicaragua, Mexico, and Cuba. The growers are guaranteed well over the minimum international fair trade price for their product, making CoDev one of the highest-paying purchasers of coffee beans.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY MEC



MEC works with marginalized women, including maquila workers, domestics and unemployed women, providing leadership programs and workshops on labour rights and negotiation techniques. Here, members rally in Managua, Nicaragua. The banner says "Jobs, Yes! But with Dignity," the theme of the Central American maquila workers' network.

"We haven't received any private sector union funding for some time," says Wood. "All the big unions have their own funds and they don't need to work with a group like us. Whereas the smaller public sector unions, for the most part, don't have their own departments or funds. If they do, they are managed with a smaller staff so, for them, to channel their funds through us to partners in the south makes a lot of sense because we can do a lot of the admin-



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- We fought for women leaders
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... and we won.

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... and we will win!

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istrative, translation, and monitoring work."

HEU president Muzin says, "We have done projects on our own, but because we don't have the infrastructure CoDev has, it was always difficult to get accountability for the funds. CoDev provides exchange tours and we get regular reports. Without that, it becomes difficult to convince our executive to fund these things.



Joey Hartman (left) is a CoDev board member and a staff person at the Hospital Employees' Union.

Sandra Ramos (right) is the director of MEC.

We're putting the money out but is it really being used where it's intended and are we getting the results (shown in) the project description?"

Monitoring the various organizations is done on a regular basis by CoDev's two program directors who keep in

touch via e-mail or telephone. "We also try and visit our partners, minimally every year and a half so we can see the work that is being done," says Wood. "We go to a workshop, speak with some of the participants, talk with the staff, look at reports. We get a general sense not just of their work, but even the context they are working in — what the political climate is like."

CUPE's Davidson says some union members have argued the money should be spent to help disadvantaged people here at home. "But when they see how far a little bit of money goes in these countries and how well the organization has done with the amount of money they have, they get the bigger picture."

Santiago Diaz, from the Salvadoran Association for Integrated Health and Social Services, says, "The most important part of our relationship with CoDev has been the respectful treatment in the partnership, with all organizations seen horizontally and as a compliment to each other."

Twenty years after Codev was begun in her living room, Goulden says, "For myself, it's a very heartfelt, wonderful thing to realize it was a plan that worked."

Carole Pearson, a regular contributor to **Our Times** (www.ourtimes.ca), is a Victoria-area freelance writer who specializes in labour, environmental and human rights issues.

For more information about CoDevelopment Canada visit their website: www.codev.org. Write to: CoDevelopment Canada, 101 – 2747 East Hastings Street, Vancouver, B.C. V5K 1Z8. Telephone: (604) 708-1495. Fax: (604) 708-1497. E-mail: codev@codev.org.

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