

My University of the World
Adventures of an International Film & Media Producer

Neill McKee

Draft – March 15, 2023

For final review by Pamela Yenser

Praise for
My University of the World

I don't even know where to start while talking about my feelings after reading *My University of the World*. I first need to explain that as a mother with six young children and as the owner of a small Wisconsin dairy farm, I don't get an opportunity to vacation. I've never even left the country. I don't share that information in hopes of your pity, I just want to explain how well Neill McKee's writing draws the reader in. I physically feel as though I've now been to South Africa, Uganda, Japan, Sri Lanka, and more! McKee's powerful writing pulled me into the environment and relationships he forged throughout his career as an International Film & Media Producer. I didn't even know I was interested in snails in Egypt...and yet here I was absorbing eastern mysticism! This memoir is engaging, thought provoking, and has allowed me to see so much of the world through the eyes of the author, and yet my heart feels as though I've experienced it personally. I will forever think of Neill McKee while making Saturday morning pancakes! I am eternally grateful that he was willing to share his experiences through photos and stories and this is a book I would recommend to those who have traveled extensively or those, like myself, who wish to travel if only through the pages of the books we read!

Crystal J. Casavant Otto, Avid Reader, Book Blogger, and more!

In this remarkable book Neill McKee takes us on an extraordinary journey with him around the world to some of the poorest and most underserved communities. We travel to remote parts of Latin America, Asia, and Africa to meet courageous people who struggle with endemic poverty and adversity and yet find new ways of overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges. The book is a personal memoir of Neill's long and distinguished career in international development. Human progress in health and education has lifted millions of people out of extreme poverty and despair in a very short period of history. National and international development efforts since the end of World War II continue to be complex and require multidimensional factors to succeed. But one thing is clear: communication and social and behavioral outreach have helped underpin successes because they attempt to empower people to bring about change. It is in these areas that Neill excels. He is creative, innovative, and persistent. He grasped that rapidly evolving technology in film and animation could be utilized to help change entrenched attitudes and behaviors. Initiatives such as Sara in Africa and Meena in South Asia, which he and his team developed, brought about important social change through skillful storytelling and entertainment.

This book humanizes the lives and work of development workers and the environments they work in. With humor and sensitivity, Neill also allows us into his own life and family for some of the most endearing parts of his story.

Mehr Khan Williams, former Assistant Secretary General and Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations

My University of the World is a wonderful memoir full of adventure, insights, humor, and feeling. Readers are treated to a balanced mix of technical challenges, "on the road" adventures, a love story, behavioral sciences, and proof that development-related communication makes a difference—all presented with remarkable details on the history, culture, and context of countries around the world, which bring the stories to life in ways that add richness and deeper understanding and appreciation. While very much a personal story, anyone and everyone who

has ever worked in the field of development will be able to relate to Neill's stories and experiences.

Gary Saffitz, Former: International Consultant; Deputy Director/Faculty, Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs; President, Saffitz, Alpert & Associates; Vice President/Account Group Head, Porter Novelli

This is a book that will appeal to the first generation who lived the opportunities offered by the creation of the international volunteer movement—Peace Corp, CUSO, VSO, UNV. McKee's curriculum vita, which is the essence of autobiography, is also a history in miniature of an era in international development, a firsthand report of the past waning, a future waxing.

McKee reaches back to the challenges of the 1960s and 70s efforts to work for a better world (the utopias we thought possible), and brings the story up to the 2000s. He has lived international development and encountered people, places, and prospects to document and film the wished-for changes. Readers familiar with IDRC will appreciate how well McKee narrates the story of its promoting local knowledge-making to foster and empower problem-solving where inadequacies of health, nutrition, education delay development.

The book is a manual for anyone considering work in international development.

Christopher Smart, former CUSO and erstwhile Director, Special Initiatives, IDRC

Neill McKee's memoir revisits a four-decade career of crisscrossing the globe during different chapters of a highly successful and personally rewarding career in international media production and later in development communication. The lucky reader travels shotgun with McKee during his adventures in numerous countries: harrowing flights, back-breaking overland trips, frigid lodging, humorous cultural misunderstandings, and local foods consumed to be respectful. Interwoven in the narrative are engaging details of his multi-continent courtship with Beth, who would become his life partner in this odyssey. Having won multiple awards for his films, McKee segues to UNICEF in Bangladesh. Here he creates an animated character "Meena," a South Asian girl who for years afterward would bring messages about girls' education and empowerment to countries across Asia, followed by a similarly successful "Sara" in Sub-Saharan Africa. He would finish his career working for behavior change communication programs at Johns Hopkins University, before directing a similar USAID-funded project that reached about 25 countries. Throughout this account of 40+ years in communication, McKee's memoir reflects the formula for his own success: commitment, integrity, compassion, and a sense of humor.

Jane Bertrand, Professor, Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine

It is important to note that Neill McKee has written much more than a memoir about filmmaking and media production. He has shared an avalanche of diverse, inspiring, informative stories of actions aimed at helping the world become a better place. These stories highlight the extraordinary activities undertaken by an ordinary Canadian, whose dreams began in a small town in Southwestern Ontario. His significant accomplishments are presented in a relaxed, highly personal manner enlivened both by the author's sensitive instincts about human behaviour, as well as his mischievous sense of humour. The book is partly a distinctive travelogue featuring solitary filming treks through jungle, mountains, deserts, oceans, as well as in slums and dangerous traffic. It also offers intriguing historical anecdotes that set useful context for the larger stories, including his meetings with an intriguing array of global activist citizens.

Neill's early chapters can serve as insightful introductions to the history of the international volunteer movement and to some of the most illuminating examples of the realities faced by young Canadians working in Asia and Africa under the auspices of CUSO in the 1960s and 1970s. His chapters covering his time with Canada's International Development Research Centre also provide a powerful reminder of why and how this agency, in the 1970s and 1980s, became a global leader in pioneering new approaches to the field of international development.

Surprisingly, the book is also a beautiful love story. I so enjoyed the tales of meeting his partner, Beth, their ability to sustain a love affair at a distance, and their incredibly special and unusual marriage in Zambia. Throughout the book the challenging stories of poverty and conflict are balanced by examples of Beth's poetry and her artwork. For me, the most exciting output and outcomes from Neill's design skills are represented by the animated life stories of "Meena" and "Sara" and their continuing impact on children and adolescents across Africa and Asia. The stories behind their creation make extremely compelling reading. I highly recommend this book to a wide range of readers who care about supporting leaders who balance a focus on high performance with an altruistic focus on humanity and the sustainability of our planet.

Don Simpson Ph.D., Chief Explorer of the Renaissance Expedition

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Note: This book is a work of creative nonfiction reflecting the memories of the author’s career as an international filmmaker and media producer. The dialogs contained herein have been recreated to the best of his memory and are not intended to represent word-for-word transcripts of the many conversations that took place. **Some names and identifying details have been changed out of respect for the privacy of the people involved.**

Editor: Pamela Yenser, NM Book Editors, LLC www.nm-bookeditors.com

Photographs: By the author unless otherwise credited or noted.

Book and cover design:

Maps: ?

Publisher’s Cataloging-in-Publication Data

TO BE COMPLETED

Names: McKee, Neill, author.

Title: My University of the World/ Neill McKee.

Description: Albuquerque, NM: NBFS Creations LLC, 2020.

Identifiers: ISBN ???? (pbk.) | **Library of Congress Control Number: To come**

Identifiers **to come**: LCCN: **xxxxxxxxxx** | ISBN: 978- ???? (paperback) | 978- ???? (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH McKee, Neill. | McKee, Neill—

To Elizabeth, my partner in life who shared many of these adventures with me.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my wife, Elizabeth, an artist with a portable career, who reviewed the manuscript and corrected details of our adventures together. Also, thanks go to my children, Derek and Ruth for their feedback, corrections, suggestions, and encouragement. I also much appreciate the input and reviews provided by Crystal Casavant Otto, Gary Saffitz, Mehr Khan Williams, Chris Smart, Jane Bertrand, and Donald Simpson, as well as the excellent suggestions of Bruce Williamson and Jeanette Panagapka. Former colleagues: Fred Harland, Barbara Hoffman, Richard Carothers, Elaine McNeil, Peter Westaway, Doug Miller, Brian Davy, Cherla Sastry, Gordon Banta, Gordon McNeil, Jean-Marc Fleury, Trevor Chandler, Paul Stinson, Bob Forrest, Sylva Etian, Nuzhat Shahzadi, and Sanjeeda Islam also reviewed particular chapters for their accuracy. Thanks also goes to Pascale Vaudrin, who assisted me in accessing IDRC's photo collection in Ottawa, Canada, and to Peter Westaway and Trevor Chandler for their photo contributions. I very much appreciated the early reviews by and feedback from Gaye Lauradunn, an Albuquerque writer and poet. Finally, I want to thank Pamela Yenser, my literary and copy editor for her usual great work on the manuscript.

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PART ONE
LEARNING TO MAKE FILMS AND TO LOVE

1. An Itinerant Cinematographer in India

As I rolled across the plains of northern India in December 1970, on a rickety old train, rumbling between station stops and passing many smaller ones, I soon got into the stride of things by listening to *Santana Abraxas* through the earphones plugged into my compact reel-to-reel tape recorder. From that time on, the song *Black Magic Woman* forever became embedded in my mind as a part of India. The time was magic for me because I was on the road, filming and photographing Canadian volunteers in India. It was exactly what I wanted to do with my life, an answer to my prayers, or I should say meditation sessions. I was more in touch with Zen Buddhism in those days, like many North American youth who traveled to the East in search of answers to life's mysteries and their future paths—many of them hippies or what we called “flower children.”

But I had a different goal. I had left Canada in August 1968 to be a volunteer high school teacher in the small town of Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia (formerly British North Borneo). I only had a B.A. with no teaching experience, but somehow was accepted and I became a pretty good teacher, learned Malay language and so much more. My two years in Borneo were the driving force for the rest of my life. It is there that I literally and figuratively “found myself” in a magical land populated by people of many Asian linguistic and ethnic groups. At the time, it was a land of tropical jungle and mountains, rice fields and coastal plains, where horses, cattle, and water buffalo roamed beside uninhabited beaches with sharks, attracting only adventurous swimmers, like me and my volunteer friends.

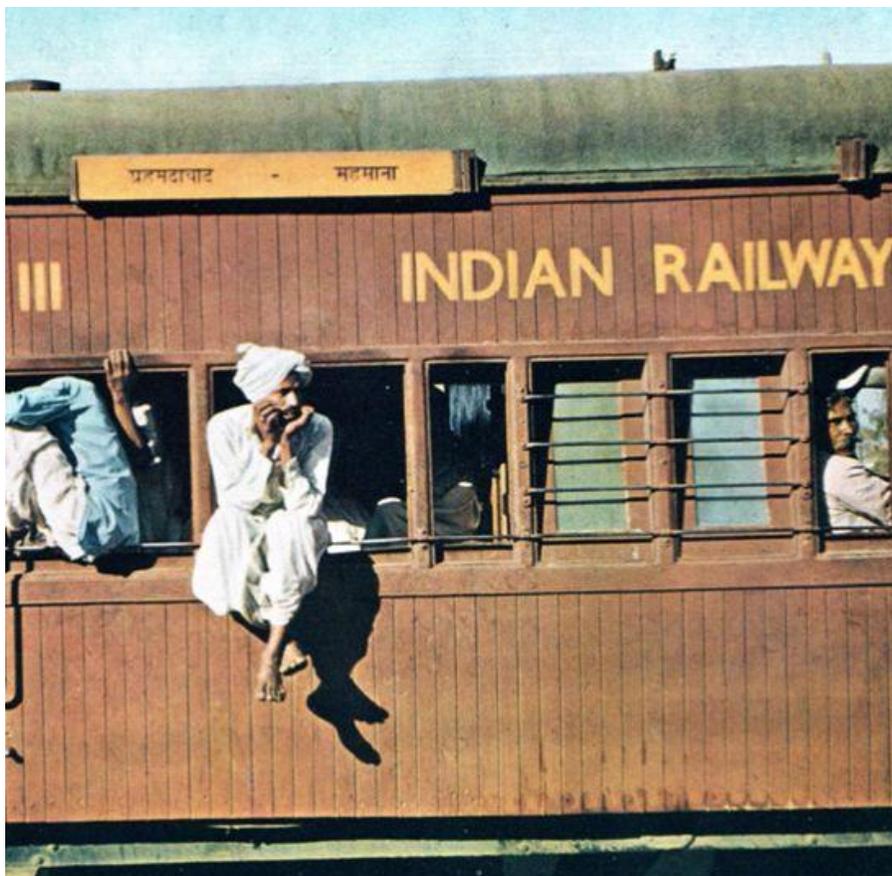
The agency that recruited me to teach in Borneo was CUSO, which then stood for “Canadian University Services Overseas,” but now is simply called Cuso International(1). Through a lot of exaggeration about my past filmmaking experience, CUSO took me up on my proposal to make a 16mm film on our program in East Malaysia—Sabah and Sarawak. After I left Malaysia, I stayed for two months in Japan, where I sent them my Borneo film with soundtrack incorporated, and waited for a reply on a new proposal to do more films during a long journey home through Asia and Africa. I had spent most of my repatriation funds to buy a Super-8 movie camera and a new still camera in Hong Kong, and burned up more money traveling around Japan. If CUSO didn't want more films from me, I would have to stay in Japan and teach English to earn my way home, eventually. I had never studied filmmaking, nor worked in a film studio. I had access to a few books on the craft and spent many hours watching documentaries at the National Film Board's screening room at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo.

After seeing all those films, I knew mine was pretty shoddy. What made me think I could do this job? Was it pure hubris on my part? Was I doomed for failure? Why did they take me up on this second proposal? I had new clue at the time that this job would lead me to a career in international development communication, traveling the globe and living and working in other developing countries and emerging economies, while meeting so many interesting, knowledgeable, and wonderful people.

In retrospect, probably my success in getting this job was because I could act as a cheap “one-man film crew” who could slog around on local transportation with my movie cameras, tripod, tape recorder, film, and tape stock, while also taking still photos of almost everything I covered. When the good news arrived I also received a letter of instruction from the head of CUSO Information in Ottawa to take shorter and varied shots—more sequences with mid-shots and close-ups, and cut-aways to people watching the main action. These were important points which I internalized immediately.

My first stop was Thailand, where, due to its relaxed culture, I saw some of those wandering flower children. They stayed as long as they could—food and lodging were cheap, marijuana and hashish easily accessible. But I stuck to my main mission of photographing various volunteers and completing a 16mm sequence on a Canadian woman by the name of Joan Tuck. She worked at Chulalongkorn University, in Bangkok, on a study of rural manpower utilization, unemployment, and underemployment, helping to formulate policies on the need for rural industries and employment of youth. Her work involved inputting data on a mainframe computer, using those old-fashioned punch cards. I was impressed with Joan. She spoke fluent Thai and I filmed her interacting with her community in a market.

Back on that slow-moving train in India, as Santana Abraxas played in my ears, I gazed at endless brown dry plains dotted with people carrying buckets of water, squatting to talk in groups, or to defecate in solitude, while others drove bullock carts loaded with produce to and from small market towns. Whenever the train stopped at a station, a crowd of vendors would rally to offer fruits, various flatbreads with curry, and cups of sweet milky tea. I had a choice of consuming what was thrust at me through the train window or going hungry. I threw caution to the wind and chose the former, not knowing, or maybe not wanting to know, that I was ingesting the eggs of long intestinal worms, which would journey with me all the way home to Canada—at least helping me to keep my weight down.



1.1 - Indian Railways passenger cooling himself, Source: Lilibaba(2)

I spent most of December on trains, stopping to photograph and interview CUSO teachers, nurses, and agriculture workers in places such as Patna, Bihar and Calcutta, West Bengal—some

of the poorest cities on Earth, where smallpox was still raging at the time. I found it hard to navigate streets with camera equipment without drawing a crowd of children and numerous beggars, some pockmarked. I began to feel depressed—filth, confusion, harassment, and the unrelenting staring at me. To survive and get the job done, I had to ignore the onslaught of people with missing eyes, arms, and legs. Children, children everywhere—no wonder Indian’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s priority was family planning.



1.2 - Author filming a CUSO agricultural worker
Photographer unknown



1.3 - CUSO nurse talking to a local pharmacist
Photo by Neill McKee

I also photographed a volunteer in a more prosperous place called Chandigarh, a center for the Sikh community, surrounded by farms that produced the bulk of northern India’s staple food—wheat. The various forms of delicious breads I consumed kept me energized. I managed to travel by myself because most people I met spoke English, thanks to the former British Empire, of which India was once the “Jewel in the Crown.”

In late December, I was slated to film Alex Ritchie, a farm boy from Saskatchewan, who was helping to set up a tractor unit at the Nibkar Agriculture Research Institute in Phaltan, Maharashtra, to the east of Bombay (a city which has now been renamed “Mumbai”). This would be my main 16mm sequence in India. But it turned out to be rather difficult to achieve because of miscommunication.

After an arduous journey with all my luggage, I arrived at Alex’s institute just before Christmas, only to find he had taken off on vacation. His Indian manager was away too, and I received a cool reception from the manager’s wife, so I decided to travel to where Alex was staying north of Bombay, with some other CUSO volunteers. When I arrived on Christmas eve, I found that the two women there had planned a cozy Christmas with Alex and another male volunteer, and they made it clear I wasn’t welcome to crash their party. I returned to Bombay in the early morning to spend Christmas alone. I entered a cinema to see a stupid movie starring Jerry Lewis, *Don’t Raise the Bridge, Lower the River*, and then took a boat to Elephanta Caves—ancient ruins devoted to the Hindu god Shiva. But I was never a good tourist. I preferred to sit in cafes and restaurants, talking to local people and watching the world go by—picking up the rhythm of life, rather than wandering through temples and mosques.

In the evening, I wrote a letter to my parents in Canada and another to Elizabeth, an American woman I had met in Tokyo. These letters acted as a substitute for a diary. My mother kept all of them. But how did I retrieve those I sent to Japan? Well, the woman I wrote to, Elizabeth Ann Diemer, who went by the diminutive, “Beth,” would become my wife in 1972. I

had met her the evening she arrived in Japan to teach English as a volunteer in a Lutheran-supported school. Through a friend's connection with a resident of a Lutheran volunteer hostel, I had been staying there in Tokyo, waiting to hear from CUSO-Ottawa on my new filming proposal, when Beth arrived. We hit it off immediately. But Beth had to attend her orientation and language lessons, so we only spent time together on a couple of weekends and a few hours each weekday.

When my filming contract came through, we met once more and parted without any promises to each other. But in that letter to her from Bombay I wrote, "Being in Tokyo with you was the happiest time in recent memory for me, and I do love you. I don't know where you are in your feelings toward me so.... I guess we either wait until we meet again, or meet again sooner, by plan." My letters to her, and hers to me, provided some form of anchor during the months that followed.

Alex Ritchie and I managed to meet up in Bombay and travel back to Phaltan together. It was a delight working with this practical, down-to-earth man. I filmed him interacting with his Indian boss and counterparts, as well as local farmers—helping them maintain equipment and learn new mechanized cultivation and planting methods, which would improve the production of food for their families and increase their incomes. A cooperative facility like this seemed sensible to me because few farmers could afford to purchase such equipment by themselves. I interviewed Alex and took shots of him in the community, the local outdoor market, and on his motorcycle, which I thought would make a great musical sequence.

After a few days, it was time to move on. I boarded an old bus that took off heading for Poona (now spelled Pune). My aluminum suitcase, containing all my exposed and unexposed film stock, had to go on the roof of the bus and I remained alert at every stop, making sure it wasn't off-loaded when we picked up and dropped off passengers and their possessions. I balanced my camera equipment and tape recorder on my lap, as we bounced along. The journey was interrupted at one railway crossing, where there was no one around to lift the barrier gate. This resulted in a half-hour, on-the-bus, off-the-bus argument-cum-scuffle between the bus driver and another man, all of which was entirely incomprehensible to me because I understood neither Marathi nor Hindi.

Arriving in Poona, I bought a first-class sleeper compartment ticket for the night train to Bombay with the help of a "coolie," a colonial term then still used by Indians for porters. We managed to get my luggage to the station's designated platform for the train. It was late and I sat there for an hour. By the time the train finally arrived, I could see a line of about 20 first-class ticket holders for each first-class compartment. When I purchased the ticket, I wanted to ensure I had a place to sleep, but the clerk told me that reservations for compartments would be available on the platform. This seemed odd.

An attendant guarded the entrance to my designated space. Others were lined up there as well. I'd heard about this scam by then, so I waited until he walked away, followed by all the other ticket holders who wanted to bribe him for the place. Then, I simply loaded all my luggage and sat in the compartment. The attendant returned to ask me to move out, but I refused. I had a first-class ticket and I didn't want to pay the bribe. He must have realized I had beaten him at his game, for he soon gave up to this foreigner who refused to play by Indian rules. A couple of other foreign travelers in the same boat asked if they could share the small compartment, and somehow we all fitted in. The train soon departed for Bombay, putting me to sleep with the rhythmic clunking of steel-against-steel on ancient tracks between station stops.

After about eight hours, we arrived in Bombay—a journey which was supposed to take only five. But how could I complain? I had had a half-decent sleep. With the help of another coolie, I headed through a mass of money changers, vendors, and beggars to reservations, where I booked a first-class ticket on an evening train to Bangalore.

I caught a taxi to a cheap hotel and checked in, securing all my belongings in the room. With the whole day ahead of me, I decided to send my exposed film stock to Canada for processing. I'd been told about the difficulties of sending anything from India and wanted to get it right. I asked the hotel clerk where I could get my film packaged for sending to Canada by registered airmail. This pleasant lady sent me to a nearby shop, where in no time my items were nicely wrapped up in a white cloth, all stitched up according to Indian regulations. I thought to myself, *I'll have this in the mail in an hour and go for a leisurely lunch at a good restaurant.*

I must digress a little to explain that when I entered India at New Delhi airport on November 30th, I was required to write down the details of my cameras, tape recorder, and film and tape stock, including the value of all items, on a Tourist Baggage Re-Export (TBRE) form to be shown on exiting India. But it wasn't explained to me that if I couldn't show all items on departure, I'd have to pay 100 percent duty on those missing.



1.4 - Bombay taxi, Source: The Wire(3)

After a short walk to a post office, I waited in line only to be told I had to take my package to the General Post Office in the center of the city. So, I hailed a taxi—a clanking and smelly yellow and black car made in India—and headed downtown. When I arrived, I entered the empty parcel section, where an idle clerk seemed to be waiting for me. *So easy*, I thought, *all I'd have to do is fill out the customs form and have the package sealed with one of those old-fashioned red wax jobs.*

But the clerk asked, “Is its value over five rupees?”

“Yes, it's exposed film. Very important it gets to Canada.”

He said, “Then you will be requiring permission from the Bank of India.”

“But this is film stock I brought into India.”

“Do you have proof?”

“Yes. My TBRE form, but it's at my hotel.”

The clerk said pointing, “You must show the TBRE form at the Foreign Parcel Counter over there.”

I'd already experienced a good deal of Indian bureaucracy during the past month and knew I had reached an impasse, so I went outside to find the same taxi and asked the driver to take me back to my hotel. *Just a little set back*, I thought. *Since the clerk knew about the form, all I would have to do is show it to his colleague.*

Returning to the post office, package and TBRE form in hand, I walked to the designated counter where a short male clerk weighed my package and started to glue the form to it. I shouted, "Please stop! I need the form. My cameras, tape recorder, and unused film and tape stock are on it!"

"You cannot separate the shipment. All must be sent at once," the man said.

"But I am going on to Africa from here to do more filming."

"I must ask my supervisor. Please wait here," the little man said.

After ten minutes, a much larger Sikh man in a turban arrived to inspect my package and TBRE form. After repeating my explanation, he said authoritatively, "What's the commercial value of the package?"

"It has no commercial value since it's exposed film. I'm sending it to Canada for processing and it only has value for my agency, a non-profit volunteer organization."

"How much value?"

"None, commercially. It really can't be sold to anyone."

"Can I open it for inspection?" the supervisor asked.

"If I open it, I can only show you the cans of film. They can't be opened and exposed to light or they'd be ruined."

The supervisor was getting suspicious. I think he saw the frustration in my eyes, so possibly he tried another ploy to get rid of me, "You will be needing a Re-Export Certificate."

"Okay. Can you give me one?"

"No."

"Can't you just mark off the items I'm shipping on the form and sign and stamp it?" I knew I was getting more creative than Indian bureaucracy would ever allow, but it was worth a try.

The Sikh replied with a slight smile, "No. You must go to the New Customs Office for that."

He wrote the address on a slip of paper and I returned to the taxi. We headed through the increasingly filthy and smoky city air to the office, where I bought the required form for ten rupees from a silent clerk. I filled it out and handed it back to him. By this time, I only had about five hours before my night train to Bangalore was scheduled to depart.

The clerk said, "You must take this for validation to the Export Office at Church Gate Station."

I stared in disbelief, but tried not to show my dismay. I knew I had hit another roadblock, so I went outside to hail my taxi driver, patiently waiting. Arriving at the Export Office, I approached a nice-looking lady who directed me to another woman with a mocking smirk. I started my explanation over, as she rocked her head back and forth in that Indian way of signaling a non-committal "I hear you," which looks like a definite "no" to Westerners when they first come to India. As I explained my situation, I laid my TBRE form and the Re-Export Certificate on the counter.

The lady stopped me in the middle of a sentence, "Are you sending it airmail or post?"

I replied, "I want to post it by registered airmail."

She said, "You should send it air freight."

"Through whom? I asked.

“Send it by BOAC air cargo. They will take care of the re-export procedures. Their office is on the next block. It’s not hard to find.” (BOAC was the short form for British Overseas Airways Corporation, the precursor to British Airways.)

As I thanked the lady and left the office, I could have kicked myself, *Why didn’t I think of that alternative route in the first place? It would be much safer and more efficient.*

It was a quick walk to BOAC. I’d already paid off my faithful taxi driver, not knowing how long he’d have to wait. But he followed me to the BOAC office and parked, waving at me as I disappeared inside. The interior looked much cleaner and more efficient, a good omen. I approached a pleasant-looking clerk and started to repeat my story. He listened patiently, with his head rocking back and forth as if it was mounted on a single large ball bearing in his neck. When I stopped for his reaction, he smiled and handed me a form, saying, “You will please fill this in.”

I was more than pleased with this fellow, a man of action and few words—unusual in India. I carefully filled in the new form and handed it back to him. *That is that!*, or so I thought.

The clerk inspected the form carefully, then said, “You must now take it to a shipping agent.”

“Aren’t you a shipping agent?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. “We are the shippers. You’ll need an agent. They will take care of the re-export procedures.”

“Can you tell me where?” I asked.

“At the New Customs Office.”

“Yes, I know that place,” I said. I kept my cool as I left the office to find my smiling driver. His smelly taxi was a welcome refuge in my ever-more-absurd adventure.

When I reentered the New Customs Office, a clerk directed me to the shipping agent’s office where I began to repeat my story over. I told him up-front that I had a train to catch in three hours.

The clerk looked at my TBRE and my Re-Export Certificate and said, “That’s the wrong form. You need to fill in this one.”

I quickly filled in the new form and handed it back to the man, who inspected it carefully, then said, “Okay. Follow me to the TBRE customs man next door.”

I said, “Oh yes, I know him—met him this morning.”

As we walked into the office, the TBRE customs man didn’t look so happy, probably thinking that he’d gotten rid of me. He looked closely at my TBRE form and said, “Your problem is that the customs people in New Delhi should never have entered the film and sound tapes on the TBRE form. The only people who can regulate this are at the Export Office. Tell them the whole story and I’m sure they will understand.”

I remembered that office very well. That’s where I met the lady with the mocking smile who directed me to BOAC air cargo. I headed back there with my faithful and ever-growing-richer taxi driver, where I followed the custom man’s instructions, throwing in even more detail to impress her, “It’s about a Canadian volunteer working at the Nibkar Agriculture Research Institute in Phaltan. He’s helping improve agriculture production in India.”

The lady was not too impressed with this new line of narrative. She said, “You’re only allowed to export 120 meters of film footage.”

I had never heard of this rule before, so I countered, “But I brought all this film into India unexposed and so I should have the right to take it out if it’s on my TBRE form.”

The lady said, “Well, if you want, you can see the Export Superintendent. He may be able to help.”

I agreed, and she led me to his office. I estimated the man to be about 45 years-old, with red lips and teeth from chewing betel nut. He spat into the spittoon beside his chair before taking a good look at my papers. After a tense minute, he said, “Can you show me your permission from the Government of India for making this film?”

The CUSO field staff officer (FSO) in New Delhi had told me not to bother with such permission because it could take months, or may never be granted. As a one-man crew, I could probably get away without official permission. Realizing I had been defeated, I picked up my papers and package and walked out of the place. I found my taxi driver, who happily took me back to the hotel to retrieve my baggage, and then drove me to the train station. He was a pleasant enough fellow, but I began to think he had seen a good thing coming when I first told him in the morning where I wanted to go, package in hand. Probably he’d taken other foreigners on such a ride-about before. An all-day customer was a very lucrative proposition in a city flooded with taxi cabs.

I reached the station, paid my happy taxi driver, hired a coolie, and headed to the platform marked “Bangalore.” I can’t recall how I managed to get a sleeping compartment that evening. As the train pulled out of the station, I thought about my day. I wondered if the British had set up this system within their policy of “divide and rule”—keep everyone so busy, going around in circles, so they would never have time to rebel? If so, it didn’t work. The rebellion came to a climax in 1947 when independence was granted, but by that time the Brits had so entrenched such systems in the country that Indians knew no other way of life. I was starting to believe that they were all condemned to go around in such circles for eternity, or at least through many reincarnations.

Despite these difficulties and frustrations, my first Indian experience ended on a high note. When I returned to New Delhi, the CUSO FSO invited me to attend a garden party at the residence of the Canadian High Commissioner (the term used for ambassadors in and from Commonwealth countries). The occasion was in honor of Pierre Trudeau, our Prime Minister. It was January 12, 1971, and he was on his way to Singapore to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. I recall talking to him very briefly about my time in Sabah, Malaysia, as a CUSO volunteer teacher, and my present filming mission. I recommended that, if he had the time, he should visit Borneo. I’m not sure if my recommendation helped, but I found out later that he did fly to Sabah to meet and greet orangutans, and humans too, including the CUSO volunteer sub-species.



1.5 - Pierre Trudeau in New Delhi, January 1971

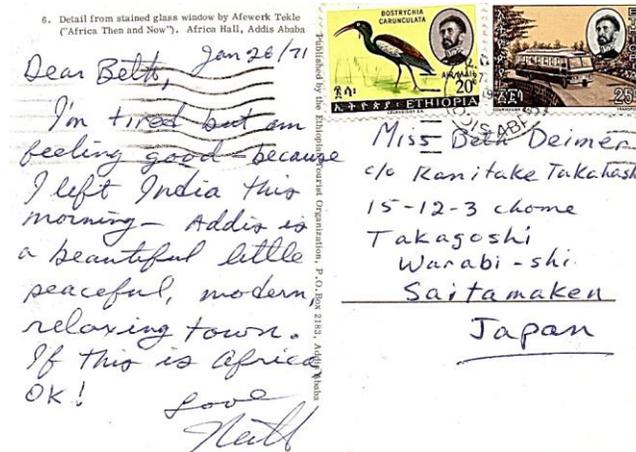
Photo by Neill McKee

In a letter to my parents I wrote, “Trudeau appears much older and less powerful than you’d expect. He’s sort of a shy and quiet-toned person.” I suppose I had different expectations about this famous 51-year-old bachelor, who had enthralled most of Canada’s younger generations when he was elected in 1968. He had dated Barbra Streisand in 1970, and when I met him, he was about to marry Margaret Sinclair, a woman three years younger than me.

I never recorded the exact details of how I finally managed to send my film package to Canada. I believe I got a letter from the Canadian High Commission, asking for assistance, and simply took the parcel to BOAC in New Delhi. They must have shipped it off, no questions asked. But I do clearly remember all the details of that day in Bombay, for one evening before I departed, I wrote a short story, which remained in my files. I called it “A day in the life of a CUSO cinematographer in India” and added under the title, a line from a then-popular song by the group known as Blood, Sweat & Tears: “What goes up, must come down. Spinning wheel got to go round.”

2. Making My First African Films

I arrived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on a flight from New Delhi on January 26, 1971. It was the first time I'd stepped onto African soil, and after India, the feeling was elating. Instead of New Delhi's thick winter air, containing smoke from millions of home fires and exhaust from thousands of inefficient combustion engines, in Addis I saw blue skies, brilliant white buildings, and boulevards dotted with green trees. The city, situated at only 8.9 degrees north of the equator but at 7,700 feet (2,347 meters) above sea level, is graced by gentle breezes and adequate rainfall—a purifying effect. The postcard I wrote to Beth in Japan reflected my new state of mind.



2.1 – Postcard from Addis

I had imagined and dreamed of going to Africa as a child, while growing up in my industrially-polluted hometown of Elmira, Ontario, Canada. I ended up in Borneo instead—a great substitute. But now I had arrived on the so-called “dark continent,” which appeared brilliant to me.

Emperor Haile Selassie held onto power at the time, desperately trying to usher in a few reforms to save his skin. In 1963, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) had established its headquarters on a hill in Addis Ababa, occupying shiny new buildings—a symbol that helped to drive and sustain African countries' new independence. Ethiopia is the only Sub-Saharan African country that managed to avoid colonization by European powers, although it had briefly been occupied by the Italian Army from 1936 to 1941.

At the time of my brief stop-over, Rastafarians from Jamaica and elsewhere were living amongst the people, some idealizing Haile Selassie as a kind of second coming of Jesus Christ, the incarnate of *Jah*—their concept of God—who would usher in a new age of Pan-Africanism on the continent, and throughout the world, for the benefit of black people. Rastafarians helped to popularize marijuana consumption as a way of life, and reggae provided the background music for their social movement.

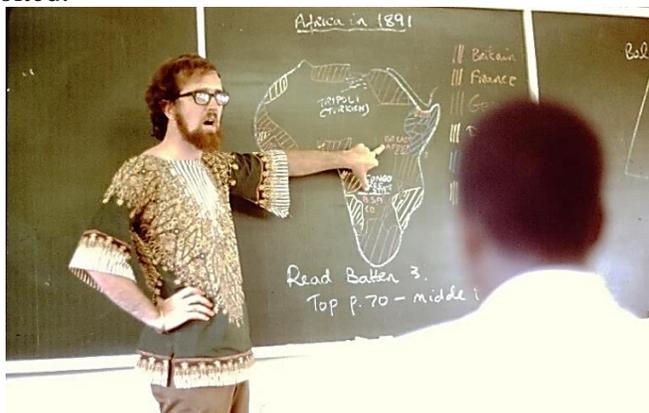
However, less peaceful movements were also afoot on African soil. The day before I landed in Addis Ababa, General Idi Amin had overthrown the elected government of President Milton Obote in Uganda. I was due to travel there, but had to change my plans. When I left Addis Ababa, I stopped in Nairobi, Kenya—another modern and high-altitude African city—long enough to photograph a couple of volunteers working in tertiary education. Then I flew to Zambia, a country that had gained its independence from Britain in 1964. It had been a British

protectorate known as Northern Rhodesia, but was now run by the independent government of President Kenneth Kaunda. To me the bustling city center of the nation's capital, Lusaka, gave off an air of newness and prosperity, but I knew that I was only getting a brief glimpse of the city—growing urban slums would tell a different story.

CUSO had built up a large education and health program in Zambia, and Dave Beer, the FSO welcomed me on arrival. Dave and his spouse, Irene, a black Zambian woman with a fiery spirit, oriented me on the CUSO program, as well as the country and the region—especially the struggle for black majority rule in Rhodesia, where the racist white settler government of Ian Smith remained in power. I knew something about this because I had talked through the early days of that struggle with a friend from Southern Rhodesia, Naison Mawande, when we were together at the University of Western Ontario during 1965-66. On November 11, 1965, Smith declared unilateral independence from Britain, refusing to share power with the majority black population. In my talks with Dave Beer, it was evident that he wanted CUSO to be involved in education about this struggle for what would become Zimbabwe a decade later, after a protracted bush war.

Between Beer and CUSO-Ottawa, it was decided I would do a 16mm film sequence on Volker Budziak, a young Canadian electronics and mathematics teacher in Ndola, a small city in Zambia's copper belt. At the time, mining copper remained the main source of foreign currency for the country, and the copper industry was still run by white mining specialists and businessmen, mainly Brits or people of British descent, some of whom came from Rhodesia and South Africa.

My assignment took me to Ndola to film and photograph Volker as he went about teaching, mixing with his fellow teachers, and buzzing around on his Honda 350 motorcycle. I found him to be a congenial and adventuresome man. He had taken up membership in a gliding club and invited me to experience his newly-found extracurricular activity. I had no qualms about that since I had joined a parachuting club in university and had no fear of such heights. I sat in the seat behind Volker to capture a great sequence, including the tow plane releasing us to slowly and silently glide in the clouds above the green forests, red soil farms, and hills—my first good overview of this land. In all my filming, I wanted to show how volunteers lived, both on the job and in their spare time. Usually, I edited these leisure sequences to local music, giving some spice to these volunteers' lives, hoping this would attract more Canadians to join the service. I photographed and interviewed a few other volunteers in Zambia. Some taught general subjects, such as African colonial history—educating students on how their continent and cultures had been exploited.



2.2 - Michael Murphy gives the middle finger to the British East Indian Company
Photo by Neill McKee

Then I flew to Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, for a CUSO regional conference, and to meet my boss from Ottawa, Iain Thomson, the head of CUSO Information. He was the man who had accepted my idea of making my first film on CUSO in East Malaysia, and my proposal to do more filming in Asia and Africa. Although I had only known him through letters and telegrams, he turned out to be just as I expected—a warm personality with a great sense of humor. He had emigrated from Britain to Canada and had also spent time in Australia, where he gained experience in the newsreel business and knew quite a lot about 16mm film production. I had been getting pointers from him and a film editor in Ottawa on how to improve my cinematography and, by then, he'd seen my Thailand and India footage. He told me I'd improved and I might be hired as regular staff to do more films and photography after this trip. This was a great relief since he'd taken a chance on me and CUSO never actually used my Borneo film because it was not that well-crafted and contained some controversial statements.

I don't recall much about the actual CUSO conference, except that there was a big debate about whether, and to what extent, CUSO should be involved in the Southern African liberation movements—mainly in development education on such matters in Canada. The discussion interested me, but my focus was on making films to recruit volunteers. At the time, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)(1), then a branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs, gave CUSO grants to run its operations based on the number of volunteers it recruited and placed.

By this time on the trip, my old Bolex 16mm movie camera, purchased in Borneo from my US Peace Corps buddy, Peter Ragan, was giving me problems, and Iain agreed to take it back to Canada for repairs and then ship it to me in Nigeria, where I would need it next to do the final coverage of volunteers for the main film I was making. I still had my new Super-8 movie camera with me. I had proposed to make a more impressionistic film with it, and another film focusing on just one volunteer. It was decided I should do that on a volunteer in Tanga, Tanzania.

I did some general photography in and around Dar-es-Salaam, which seemed much more authentic to me than Lusaka, with its blend of black African and coastal Swahili Muslim culture, dotted with Indian and Arab merchants. Julius Nyerere was President, an African socialist who was introducing rapid changes, such as land reform and communal organization of farming, as well as other economic policies that would benefit the poor. Unlike Nairobi and Lusaka, whites were almost missing from the scene in Dar-es-Salaam. Its mixture of humanity reminded me of Malaysian cities, and I felt more at home.

Then one evening, when returning to my hotel with CUSO's Deputy FSO, Jack Titsworth, we passed a commercial area where we witnessed a scene of "instant justice." Some man had been accused of theft and was being beaten to death on the side of the road. Jack, a man who normally drove at a frantic pace, doubled his speed to "get the hell out of there." As we sped away, he explained that there was nothing we could have done about it that wouldn't have led to our beatings or deaths. Education and the rule of law would eventually erase most of such killings from the African landscape. Over the centuries on this soil, black Africans had been enslaved and/or ruled by other African tribes, Arabs, Germans, and the British. Colonialism runs counter to the concept of human rights, and Tanzania had been granted its independence from Britain only a decade earlier. I concluded it would take time to change.

My next assignment took me on a flight to Tanga on the northeast coast of Tanzania, to do Super-8 filming of Richard Carothers, a CUSO volunteer teaching at a government secondary

school. I found Tanga to be a great place and Richard friendly and cooperative. My experience as a volunteer teacher in Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, and his in Tanga, were similar. First of all, the majority of Tanga residents are Muslim Swahilis—a culture and language which blends black Africa and Arabia. Kota Belud's population is also an ethnic and cultural mix, dominated by a local Muslim group called "Bajau." Richard had become quite fluent in Swahili, as I was in Malay, and he moved easily about town in different social circles, as I had done. I stayed with him in his teachers' quarters, much like my government-issued bungalow in Borneo. We visited the seaside and dined in local restaurants, as I had done in Sabah. We both had rickety old motorcycles—instruments of freedom and mobility, which we maintained with our similar mechanical skills.

One big difference was that I had taught English and geography, whereas Richard taught math and science. Also, his school was better resourced since it was located in a larger town and had been operating for a much longer time. Richard was musically talented, so he had helped to resurrect the school band and start a guitar club. His music, and the interview with him I taped, made up most of the soundtrack. No need for a separate narrator—his voice told it all. He had made a multi-color light machine, which rotated with heat generated by a lightbulb, and I filmed a dreamy sequence, dissolving from its lens into clouds from arial shots I had taken while landing at Tanga. This sequence went well with his anticipated nostalgic thoughts about how it would be to return someday. I found my week with Richard to be a creative and energizing time—exactly what I needed at this point in my long journey—and I used up a lot more Super-8 film stock than intended.



2.3 to 2.8 - Images from my film on Richard Carothers in Tanga

By the time I was wrapping up filming in Tanga, I had been in Africa for about five weeks but had never seen an African animal. Through a stroke of luck, I caught a ride with some volunteers to a game park near Mount Kilimanjaro, a dormant volcano rising 19,340 feet (5,895 meters) above sea level. It is often capped with snow, despite its location just south of the equator. The nomadic Masai people call it the “House of God” in their language. There, I photographed and filmed the wild animals of my childhood dreams—elephants, rhinos, giraffes, mixed with herds of wildebeests, impalas, zebras, dik-diks, and kudus. Most of my efforts were too touristy to ever use, but, I thought, *How could I leave East Africa without capturing this?*



2.9 - Giraffes lazing and grazing in Tanzania – Photo by Andrew Ker/IDRC

From Kilimanjaro, I made my way by bus back to Nairobi, where I caught a flight to Lagos, Nigeria. There my infatuation with Africa ended. On arrival, I was met by the CUSO driver and was taken to the office to meet Ian Smillie, the FSO. After a brief discussion, he brought up the subject of my 16mm camera, which had arrived at Lagos airport after being repaired in Canada. Smillie didn't smile about that. He said, “Do you realize what difficulties we could encounter to get it out of customs?” Why didn't you bring it in with you along with the rest of your equipment?”

“It broke down and needed repairs,” I told him.

“Couldn't you have rented a camera here?”

“That's unlikely. It's 16mm, not a tourist item.”

Smillie frowned and explained I had landed in Nigeria a year after the Biafran Civil War had ended. The country was still suffering from that disastrous and complicated conflict. It was difficult to get things done.

The next day, he took me to the customs house, where my camera was being held, to begin negotiations. I was hoping I could retrieve it and get to work right away, but the process of getting it out took four days. Smillie had to be there since it required his skills in talking with officials. Each day, we returned to take a new approach. On the last day, we somehow

succeeded, but I counted 12 steps that had to be taken by 12 different people. One clerk held the stamp to be placed on a document, while another held the ink pad. It was a mind-bending exercise that reminded me of my experience in Bombay, trying to ship film footage out of India. *The British had been here as well*, I mused, *setting up all sorts of regulations to pit one minor official against another, possibly to prevent corruption.*

After finally succeeding in taking possession of my camera, I was driven to Zonkwa, a small town in the middle of the country, south of Kaduna. There I met Bill and Grace Bavington, a doctor-nurse, husband-wife team involved in supervising a rural health service. It was one of the most challenging postings I had seen on my travels for CUSO—the poverty so acute and needs so great. I filmed a sequence of Bill removing a huge goiter on one woman’s neck, and another of Grace and her staff, tending to a long line of malnourished women and children with just about every disease in the book. But their main focus was supposed to be preventative rather than curative healthcare. I filmed them traveling around in their Volkswagen bug, supervising outreach services, setting up health committees, and carrying out home visitations and health education interventions, including messages delivered through a puppet show. I also accompanied them to a village where Bill addressed all the people through an interpreter, standing beside an old chief in a large chair—a king among his subjects. He had four wives and at least 20 children, many of them running around naked. I was finally seeing and filming the true state of much of Africa in 1971, and I admired the Bavingtons for their fortitude in sticking it out here for two years.

From Zonkwa, I was taken to Kano, in northern Nigeria, to catch an evening flight to London on April 4th. As we passed over the very dark Sahara, I drank a little wine with an okay meal before falling deeply asleep, satisfied and exhausted at the end of my first African journey. I had originally planned to stay in Europe for a month, traveling around and seeing different sites. But counting Japan, I’d been on the road for eight months, so I grabbed a cheap charter flight to Montreal and another to Ottawa, arriving on a mid-April day to see the last snow melting. I’d left Canada in August 1968, nearly three years before, and was happy to be in my home country again—especially at the beginning of spring.

After an emotional visit to my hometown, Elmira, to see my parents, siblings, and some friends, I traveled back to Ottawa in an old Volkswagen bug I’d bought, after spray-painting it bright red at my father’s farm equipment manufacturing factory. I moved into a cooperative living arrangement in a two-story house inhabited by a group of university students, where I had a room to myself and lots of company when I wanted it. These guys and gals were cool—a great living arrangement for me as I re-entered North American culture. There were only a few basic rules on contributing to grocery money and taking turns cooking and cleaning. They smoked a bit of pot, and I joined them occasionally on weekends. But by that time, I had pretty well given up such recreation.

To explain further, I had a transformational experience in Sabah taking LSD with my American Peace Corps buddy, Peter, the effects of which led to our creation of the [North Borneo Frodo Society](#) (NBFS)(2). It was based on the belief that North Borneo and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-Earth described in his trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, are one and the same place. Tolkien had joined our society and that summer I followed up with a letter to his publisher in the U.K., proposing to write a book titled, “A History of the North Borneo Frodo Society and It’s Latter-Day Manifestations.” The publisher expressed no interest, unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, because the NBFS had no real history. It wasn’t until 45 years later, when I wrote my first

memoir, *Finding Myself in Borneo*(3), that I used my old file and memories on the NBFS to write its history. In that memoir, I also described a “bummer-trip” I had experienced with an overdose of hashish—the exact opposite of my one and only LSD experience in Borneo. So, along the way, I had grown wary of drugs, though not fundamentally opposed to them. But I had to stay focused on the task at hand.

I started to spend around 12 hours five or six days a week learning how to edit at Crawley Films, an independent studio in Ottawa. I worked under the supervision of Sarah MacDonald, a film editor in her 50s, who went by the nickname “Sally.” She loved detail, as I did. She had a degree in engineering from the University of Toronto and usually edited technical films such as documentaries on mining or engineering projects. But she loved the opportunity to work on something so inspiring as young Canadians trying to do good in the world. I had edited my first film for CUSO in Sabah, using the camera-original film, in a house on stilts built over the South China Sea shore. Now, working with Sally, I was learning the basics. She was a great teacher and conversationalist and I digested the proper processes quickly, editing with a workprint, a copy of the camera-original footage, so that it would be protected from scratches, tears, and fingerprints.

I put in many happy hours cutting and splicing, while learning how to match movement and build sequences. This made my cinematography on my next film even better—more variety of shots, especially close-ups and cutaways, fewer long shots and zooms. I learned the process of matching sounds and doing musical sequences. I marked up the workprint for fades, dissolves, and picture mixes, using a white crayon, which gave instructions to the negative cutter—the person who matches the workprint to the original film, while wearing clean white gloves to ensure no damage.

All my work was done on a bench using a simple viewer and synchronizer with sound heads, or sometimes on a Moviola machine. I used the volunteers’ taped interviews, background sounds, and the local music I had recorded, to construct the soundtrack. My equipment didn’t have the capacity for synchronized sound, but I soon learned how to match “wild” sounds I had recorded, or stock sound effects, to picture. I didn’t want long and potentially boring on-camera interviews anyway.

Through this process, I ended up with six or seven 16mm magnetic soundtracks to match the picture and then supervised the sound studio personnel as they mixed them together, rocking back and forth on large 16mm machines, until it was perfect. Hands-on production of films came quickly to me at Crawley’s and interacting with Sally and others reintroduced me to Canadian culture. Few of my co-workers were like Sally. Most saw me as a do-gooder, not a real filmmaker. In fact, most people I met outside of CUSO circles would never engage with me in conversations about my experiences, nor could they understand why I would want to go overseas to hot disease-ridden countries.

We decided to title my first film *Four Times CUSO*. It starts with the volunteers I filmed in Thailand, India, Zambia, and Nigeria eating breakfast in their four very different locations, with radios playing the news in national languages or local music. Each of the four main sequences followed a pattern of showing the volunteers working, mixing with their students, counterparts, clients, and the general population in leisure activities—a good way to demonstrate the great variations of locations prospective Canadian volunteers might expect overseas.

My boss, Iain, and others in CUSO loved my first professional effort and used it widely in Canada for recruitment purposes. But when some in the African section saw it, they were dismayed with the sequence of Volker Budziak in his glider. It was obvious to them, if not to all viewers, that membership in such a club would be for whites only and CUSO personnel

shouldn't join such organizations. It's not that black Zambians were forbidden to join if they really wanted to, but at the time, it was unlikely that they could afford the fees or would see gliding as a desirable thing to do, when they were having a hard enough time establishing their place in the economy on the ground. Iain didn't pay much attention to these sentiments, fortunately, but it was a good lesson for me on my future choices of recreational sequences.

The Super-8 footage on Richard Carothers in Tanga, Tanzania, proved to be a winner. We blew it up to 16mm for editing and produced a short film titled, *[Tanga Man\(4\)](#)*. It begins with him walking out of a cave, as our original ancestors did in Africa (my idea), mounting his old *piki-piki* (motorcycle), and heading into Tanga. In the activities I filmed and his narration, Richard caught the spirit of the international volunteer movement. He had a low-key, honest-sounding voice that would make Canadians pay attention. He mentioned that he was probably gaining much more than he could ever give to the people of Tanga. Today, it remains my favorite of the CUSO film series I produced, and one of my fondest memories of Africa.

3. An Engaging Trip to Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, and Japan

In September 1971, I left Canada to shoot two more films, stopping in Hong Kong to buy a brand new 16mm Bolex camera paid for by CUSO. My old camera from Borneo days had “given up the ghost.” Then I flew southeast for 3,000 miles (4,828 km) to New Guinea. I didn’t know a lot about the place, only that its people were Melanesian and they live on the second-largest island in the world, located north of Australia.

During the past century, various parts of it had been colonized by The Netherlands, Britain, and Germany. The Japanese had taken over parts of the island in World War II. After their defeat, the western half, West Irian, briefly went back to The Netherlands, then to Indonesia with that country’s independence. The southeastern part, Papua, remained under Australian administration and the northeastern half, New Guinea, became a United Nations Trust territory. But in 1949, the whole eastern half of the island became the “Territory of Papua New Guinea,” and was administered by Australia until the country gained full independence as Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 1975.

Arriving in Port Moresby, the capital of PNG, I met Fred Harland, as well as Peter and Barbara Hoffman. I had met Barbara before—she was an excellent resource person at my orientation in Vancouver before I left for Malaysia in 1968. She and Peter had both been CUSO volunteers in Sarawak, Malaysia at different times and later married in Canada. Fred was the head FSO of the CUSO program, and Peter the deputy.

I filmed a volunteer by the name of Thelma Howard, a community development specialist from Saskatchewan who worked with rural-urban migrants squatting on unoccupied lands around the city, contributing to the growth of urban slums. Her job was to support these migrants and advise the authorities on resettlement schemes.

Fred accompanied me on some of my travels outside of the capital. He also did the narration for the film, which I used as a voice-over for the introduction, transitions, and a wrap-up. I filmed him during one of our flights, looking out at the mountainous country below, and while visiting volunteers, such as George and Margaret Ney from Vancouver. This couple was involved in teaching self-reliance skills in Popondetta, on the southeastern peninsula of the island. The curriculum included manual arts, such as woodworking, metalworking, baking, marketing, and growing rice to earn cash from richer urban dwellers. Rice is not a traditional food crop for New Guineans who preferred yams, taro, cassava, and sweet potatoes.

Margaret taught a social science course specially designed for PNG. It focused on traditional communities and how they evolve with exposure to the industrialized world. George also taught geography with an emphasis on overall world development and urbanization, which was rapidly taking place in PNG.

I flew into the highlands to film Cliff Wiebe, an agriculture extension worker at Kamaliki Vocational and Technical School near Goroka. He had joined a movement to try to stop the aimless rural-urban drift of youth, which was contributing to unemployment and crime. At the school, students had to live in traditional thatched houses and learn new farming skills, as well as bookkeeping and banking. They were given plots of land to work and could keep a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the crops they grew. This gave them incentives to return to their communities, where they had pre-arranged agreements to own land. Cliff spent two days a week following up on how his graduates were doing on their land, giving further assistance, as needed. The program was requested by village elders and the young men’s practical education gave them added status in their communities, allowing them to earn a “bride price” (usually paid in pigs), get married, and become a contributing part of the village structure.

Traditionally, a New Guinean native male had to gain status through fighting endless wars with other communities. I had seen the 1963 documentary titled *Dead Birds*, about such a warfare cycle between two highland tribes in West Irian (West Papua), Indonesia. Retribution for an attack by a raiding party might not happen for months and could involve the killing of an old woman or a child in a garden. Payback followed, but rarely in a predictable way. The fighting could continue for decades, although many of the clashes using traditional spears, bows and arrows, appeared to be more about form and posturing, rather than all-out aggression.

Melanesians first settled on the island over 40,000 years ago and started growing crops around 7,000 years ago. When I visited in 1971, the mountainous interior was still made up of fractured communities. From the air, I could see and film densely populated land with gardens and terraced hillsides. Their methods included ancient irrigation and crop rotation, use of local refuse, ash, and rotting vegetation for fertilizer; and even intercropping with nitrogen-fixing trees—sophisticated farming sustained for thousands of years without the help of western missionaries and outside experts, who didn't enter the interior until the 1930s.

I was told that people in the highlands may understand the dialect of the tribe in the next valley, but not the dialect two mountain ridges away. There are an estimated 800 distinct indigenous languages on the island, but fortunately New Guinea Pidgin—the *lingua franca* called “Tok Pisin”—gradually developed, and continues to be used. It primarily draws on vocabulary from English, as well as German, Malay, Portuguese, and local languages.

I met Dan Hooper, a Civil Engineer from Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick, who was working to help this fractured and divided country by building roads in the interior. I flew with him into Tari and Mendi in the Southern Highlands to capture his work in some of the most remote places in the world. Landing in these outposts was treacherous—clearing mountain ridges of 10,000 feet (3,048 meters) and then suddenly swooping down onto airfields hidden in valleys, often with a one-and-only chance of landing safely. Aborting an attempt at landing could easily crash a plane into the mountain on the other side of the valley. Fortunately, the mainly Aussie pilots were well-trained blokes.

I joined Dan and his crew in their four-wheel-drive vehicles, and filmed and photographed them giving technical assistance to local government personnel as they surveyed, laying out routes for construction crews to follow, joining villages with zig-zagging roads, to unite people who had been strangers, if not enemies, for thousands of years. I captured shots of some of these onlookers and laborers—Huli men sporting bones or sticks in their noses, and some with large colorful wigs topped with feathers and other decorations. Despite their fierce appearances, Dan said he found the local people friendly and cooperative. They provided the manpower for the road-building process.



3.1 - Huli man, Source: Alamy(1)

In a taped interview with Dan, he told me that he and his men had to camp out in the wild for five or six nights at a time, but he claimed it was in no way a hardship. It just added to the greater enjoyment of his job. His assignments gave him broad experience in different aspects of civil engineering, compared to what he would have been exposed to in Canada at the beginning of his career. It also changed his outlook on the world in general. He claimed, “The person who is gaining the most from this experience is myself.”

I included one explanation for New Guineans’ eventual acceptance of Christianity in my film. Cliff Wiebe, the agriculture extension teacher in Goroka, described above, mentioned in his interview—which also became part of the soundtrack—that most of his students believed their ancestors would come back to them as white men. This belief was part of “cargo cults,” a system of thinking that involved performing certain rituals that included “magical thinking”—rigid copying or impersonating something seen or experienced in the past to bring it back. During World War II, many New Guineans saw Americans and Australians with planes and machines enter the land to defeat the Japanese. After the soldiers departed, these cargo cults emerged as local people copied the behavior of the departed soldiers by parading and drilling, using fake wooden rifles. To them, this ritual would cause more white people to arrive with power shovels and scrapers to construct airports and build houses, churches, and hospitals. Then airplanes would arrive with even more goods for them. Some New Guineans had seen their first wheels on missionary and military airplanes. These beliefs persisted and when Lyndon Johnson was running for President of the US in the 1960s, many coastal New Guineans cheered for him because of all the Johnson outboard motors left behind by the American armed forces who had departed! They wanted to vote for Johnson too.



3.2 - New Guinea man with World War II airplane
Photo by Max Diemer

CUSO volunteers were well aware of these myths, a product of colonialism in many parts of the world, but perhaps stronger in Melanesian cultures than anywhere else in the mid-20th century. We were told not to get involved in politics and religion—no proselytizing about Christianity or any religion allowed—just stick to the job. And the jobs were growing more technical. All of the volunteers I filmed in PNG had specific specialized skills to offer. I realized how lucky I had been to be selected to teach English and Geography in Malaysia during 1968-70, without much knowledge of those subjects or a teaching certificate. That would be clearly demonstrated in my next assignment on this trip.

From Port Moresby, I flew to Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, where I felt much more at home, having left that country only 15 months earlier. During my two years of teaching high school in Sabah, I didn't take the time to venture into the deep jungle. On this return trip, I made up for that missed opportunity. I filmed CUSO foresters Bill Dumont and Ron Burrell, alongside their Malaysian counterparts, as they hacked their way with long knives called *parangs* through the thick growth of tropical forests to carry out an inventory of tree species and to start replanting schemes for the Government of Malaysia's Forestry Service. These CUSO foresters were fulfilling a gap in specialized personnel until more Malaysians could be trained. As fresh graduates, they had the challenge of applying everything they had learned at university in a fast-track manner.

During a three-week period, traveling by Land Rover, airplane, boat, and on foot, I filmed jungle overviews, logging operations, the exporting of logs, sawmills, plywood factories, charcoal production, tree nurseries, reforestation, camping scenes, surveying growth, and computerization of data. I also took shots of the volunteers' living quarters and recorded interviews with them for the soundtrack of my film. In Bill Dumont's interview he said:

Many of my friends in Canada thought I was nuts coming over here to a snake-infested, malaria-ridden jungle, the image perpetuated by Tarzan movies. Actually, I found the forests here have less vegetation than some I worked in, in British Columbia. The forest here is fairly open, especially virgin forest, and quite easy to get to. On my first day in the jungle, I was quite apprehensive about the problem of running into a nice big python. I mentioned this to the rangers who accompanied me and they laughed. So, I didn't bring the subject up again.

As a one-man film crew, I found this both challenging and invigorating. Fortunately, the Malaysian forest rangers helped to carry my equipment. My favorite sequence was filming another volunteer, Michael Clarke, as we glided in small boats powered by outboard motors through the coastal mangrove forest in the State of Johor, in the south of the Malayan Peninsula. Mangroves, while traditionally viewed as unhealthy and unproductive places, prevent coastal erosion, improve water quality, and provide habitat for many species of wildlife and birds. They are also nursery grounds for our oceans' commercial fish and shellfish, thereby providing nutrition and income for millions of people around the world. My job gave me the opportunity to learn so much—each assignment like a mini-university course.

On this trip, I also had a chance to re-immense myself in Malaysian culture, speaking my second language, Malay. I filmed these Canadians eating their favorite dishes at Chinese, Malay, and Indian restaurants—sometimes in colorful outdoor night markets. The contrast with New

Guinean highland culture could not have been starker. I'd traveled from the Stone Age to modern Southeast Asia in a matter of days.

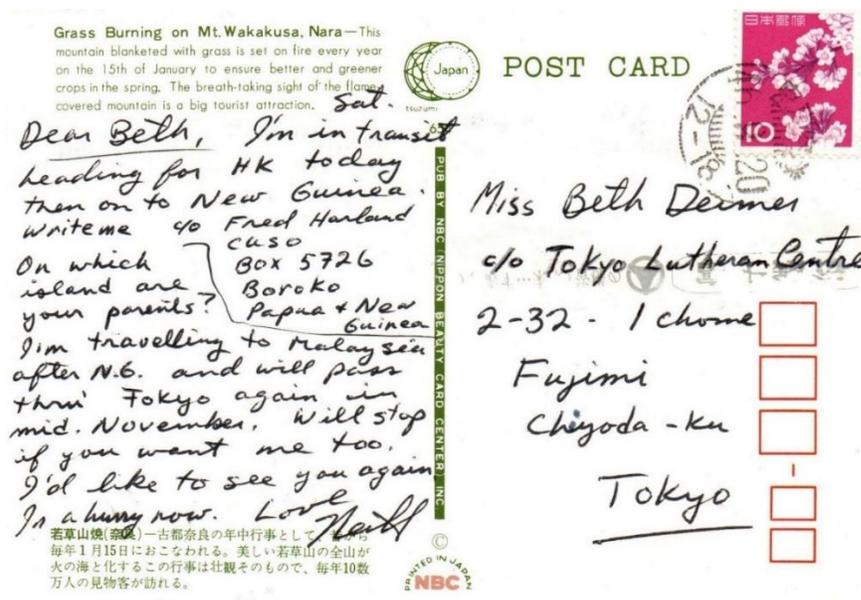
In early November, I flew northeast to Kota Kinabalu, Sabah—900 miles (1,448 km) to do a little more filming of CUSO foresters, and then rented a car to drive to Kota Belud, my Malaysian hometown. I found everything just about the same. What could I have expected? I had left only 16 months earlier. It remained the sleepy little burg I remembered, populated by Chinese, Bajaus, and Kadazans, who all spoke different languages but used the *lingua franca*, Malay.

I stayed with CUSO volunteers, Paul and Evelyn Gervan, who lived in my former bungalow, lodged on a hill overlooking the town. Evelyn had taken over my teaching duties, while Paul taught math and science. They had purchased my old motorcycle as well, and it was still getting them around. The only big change was that they had adopted a monkey—an unusual thing to do in Malaysia, especially one that roamed around free in the house.

I met some of my former students, who were surprised to see their former teacher, now with longer hair and a goatee. They thought beards were only worn by old men. Despite this, they were all so welcoming. They thanked me for making sure Paul and Evelyn had been posted to Kota Belud before I left.

Continuing my correspondence with Beth Diemer in Japan, I told her about all the changes in my life, including becoming a real filmmaker when I reached Ottawa. I even wrote her about the women I dated and met along the way, since we had both agreed to continue with no commitment to each other—to just see how things turned out. That had suited her fine, for she was getting over a love affair with a US-based, Lebanese-born gynecologist by the name of Munir.

During a flight change at Tokyo airport on my way to PNG, I had written and mailed a postcard to Beth. I gave her my address in Port Moresby, offering to stop over on my way back to Canada, if she wanted to see me.

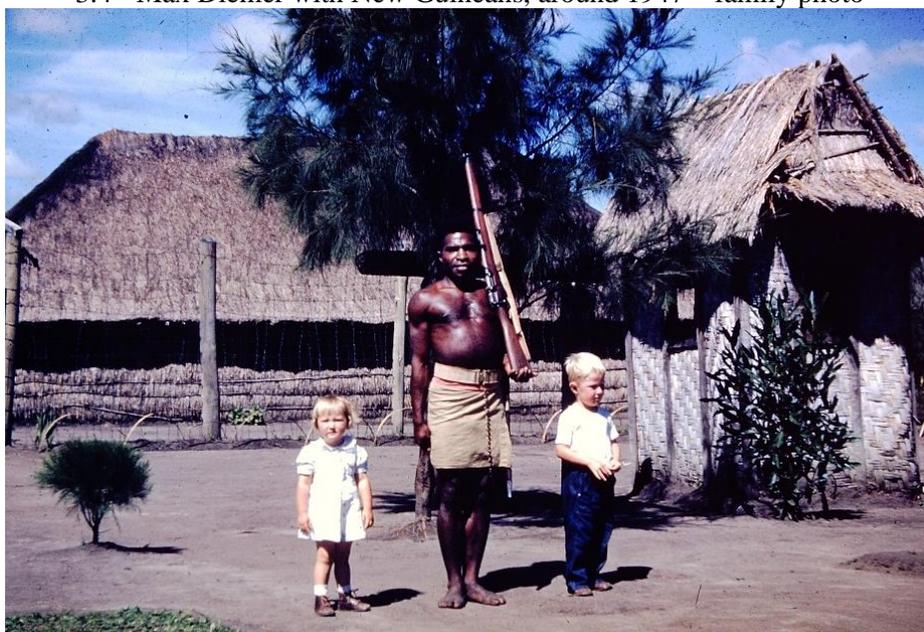


3.3 - Postcard mailed at Tokyo airport

Beth knew PNG well because she had been born there in 1948, in the coastal town of Finschhafen. Her father, Max Diemer, was an American Lutheran missionary in New Guinea, and Beth had spent the first three years of her life in a place called Raipinka, in the highlands. The family, including two boys, Joel and Dan, had to return to Iowa when Beth's mother, Darlene, became ill with tropical sprue. She got better but became ill again and died of cancer when Beth was only seven. Beth and her brothers returned with their father to PNG, where he married another American woman from Iowa. The young children were sent to a boarding school for missionary kids at a place called Wau, in the highlands, and then to Brisbane, Australia for high school. Beth returned to Iowa to complete Grade 12 and university, while her father, step-mother, and two half-brothers remained in PNG.



3.4 - Max Diemer with New Guineans, around 1947 – family photo



3.5 - Beth and her brother Joel with a New Guinea guard in front of the local jail, circa 1950 - Photo by Max Diemer

On that Friday evening in Kota Belud, I went to the verandah of my old bungalow, overlooking the valley and town center—one of my favorite places in the world, where I had prepared lessons, marked papers, listened to Bach or Bob Dylan, watched the setting sun, and observed people ride by on water buffalos. Sitting there, I wrote a letter to Beth at her home address in Japan to be sure she knew I would be coming.

Dear Beth,

I'm sitting on the verandah of my old house in Kota Belud as a rainy Friday afternoon filters into euphoria with Sam the monkey at my back. All is the same but different here. "You can't go home again," wrote Thomas Wolfe. This is just a note to say that I will be in Tokyo on the 22nd of November at 7:50 pm on JL062 and would love to see you at the airport and spend some time with you until the morning of the 24th, when I fly away unless you keep me there....If your place is too difficult, I can stay at a hotel in Tokyo and hope you will find an excuse to spend most of the time with me, if you need one.

Love, Neill

Later, Beth told me she wasn't at the airport to meet me because the 22nd was a Monday and she had to teach during the day. She was living in Omiya, a city 50 miles (80 km) to the north of Tokyo. I had learned to navigate the Japanese train systems in 1970, so somehow I made it with all my luggage to her tiny apartment. Her landlord had prepared bedding in a separate room for me, but I didn't use it. We were so overjoyed to see each other again that we only needed one bed on her *tatami*—a woven straw mat floor. At least in my memory, our lovemaking was the climax, so to speak, of a great trip.

During those years of traveling as a CUSO filmmaker, I had a flexible schedule—like being my own boss. No one back in Ottawa questioned where I was at any time. No trip reports were needed, just the results on celluloid. I felt so welcomed by Beth that I decided to stay for most of a week. We had only spent a week together in that Lutheran hostel in Tokyo the year before, so we needed more time to get to know each other. Fortunately, November 23rd was Japan's national Thanksgiving holiday for celebrating labor and production, a replacement for the traditional harvest festival. We walked and talked, patronizing coffee shops and restaurants. Most memorably, we visited a Japanese garden and took photos of us together, using my tripod.



3.6 - Author and Beth Diemer in a Japanese garden

Photo by Neill McKee

Beth had been pretty skinny when I first met her, but now had rounded into full womanhood, and had longer hair. I preferred her that way. She had become fluent in basic Japanese, and I loved the way she was able to navigate her community. She said she only spoke a simple form—children’s language—dropping most of the honorific word endings that Japanese have to use, according to the status of the person with whom they are speaking. But it seemed to me even her body language had become Japanese when interacting with the local community.

I can’t remember, but at some point, I must have said we should get married. She replied with words something like, “Let me think about it. I’m going home to see my parents in PNG at Christmas time. They are really angry with me over my affair with Munir.”

When her parents left Beth in Iowa at university, and returned to PNG, they told her she was on her own and had to earn a living after university, intimating that she couldn’t come home again except for vacations. After her first year, she had transferred from her father’s *alma mater*, the small Lutheran Wartburg College, to the University of Iowa to study speech therapy, not knowing the course was very technical—full of math and science. So, she switched to Comparative Religion because she had to have a major and wasn’t sure what else to do. She really didn’t know why she was at university. Her father had written her about her major, wondered if she was thinking of following his footsteps to become a Lutheran minister. But that was not to be. Her father had let her know that he was displeased with a previous engagement she had broken off and her recent romantic adventure. Beth didn’t want to blow it again, in a possible failed relationship with me.

For the rest of the week when Beth was teaching, I explored her city and read. I met her at her school to accompany her home. I also met her American friends, Dick and Jeannine Helmstetter, and babysat their small daughter. Dick was a young businessman making a living by manufacturing billiard tables and cues, and I was impressed with his vision and drive. I really liked them. Fortunately, they told Beth, after I left, that I was a winner. Beth was supervised by an American Lutheran missionary in Omiya by the name of Cliff Horn, but I can’t remember meeting him—probably better that way for he might have wondered about me.

During that week, Beth and I discussed how we could get together again soon. I had at least two more films to do for CUSO in Africa, in 1972, and I mentioned the possibility of returning to Japan after that, circumnavigating the globe. But then, just before I left I said, “Come to Africa with me.”

She answered quickly, “Sure I’ll marry you.”

I said something like, “Okay. Let’s do that.”

Beth accompanied me to the airport and saw me off. As we looked at each other through the airport’s glass window for the last time, we both wondered what we had gotten ourselves into—did it actually happen? We had to write detailed letters to try to figure it out. Postcards would no longer do.

All and all, my trip had been very fruitful and engaging, so to speak.

4. A Lettered Love Affair

I arrived back in Ottawa on December 1st, and began working long hours at Crawley Films to edit and produce the Papua New Guinea film. With some difficulty, I quickly ended a relationship with a British woman, Phoebe, whom I had started dating in late summer. She and a friend had an apartment and I had agreed to take over its lease. Before I left, Phoebe and I had talked about our living in the apartment together when I returned, but by then she and her friend had moved out. She said she had written to me while I was traveling, but I didn't receive any of her letters and stopped writing to her. It was a mixed-up mess. When I told her about Beth she blew up and ran out, but returned a few days later to gather some things she'd left in the apartment. Eventually, we made some kind of peace by telephone, but I never saw her again. Our fractured relationship was a fatality of international travel at the time, with no fax machines, let alone computers, emails, cell phones, or social media connections. Few people could afford international calls, so distant love affairs depended on letters.

At any rate, there was no comparison between my previous feelings for this woman and my renewed love for Beth. After my first week back, I'd return home after long hours of film editing, to read one or two letters from Beth waiting for me. I'd cook something, eat, and then reply to her, while listening to classical music and glancing through the front window to watch snow falling around streetlights and people trudging home with parcels. Christmas was in the air and I no longer felt so alone.

In a way, Beth and I completed our engagement by mail—almost like an old fashion arranged marriage. We hardly knew each other, but later when people asked why we decided to get married, having spent so little time together, our reply was, “We had a hunch and sometimes a hunch pays off.” We exchanged ideas on where and how to get married, her wedding dress, the issue of guests, my plans for attending film school, and what she wanted to do with her life in Canada—study French or speech, drama or art, get a teaching certificate, become a children's book writer and illustrator? She didn't know what path to follow besides marrying me. I accepted this because she was three years younger than me and had not really “found herself” in Japan, in the way I did in Borneo. With the Christmas mail slowdown, due to volume, letters arrived late and sometimes not in the right sequence. We started to number them but remained loose about that, and also about putting dates on them. Our communication became confusing.

I had to plan for the two films to shoot in Africa, and my boss, Iain Thomson, also mentioned the possibility of doing a development education film on the life of a typical farmer in Thailand, after that. So, I wrote to Beth about meeting up with her again in Japan. She replied, proposing a wedding in Omiya—a Lutheran affair officiated by Reverend Horn, the missionary who supervised her. She even wrote about the possibility of my staying in Japan to work for Dick Helmstetter in his billiard equipment manufacturing business, until her two years were up in September. Beth felt she couldn't leave her students early, and I was sympathetic to that, because I felt the same way, until I found the Gervans to replace me in Sabah. But I was far from sympathetic about the idea of a Lutheran wedding. Besides, after Africa and Thailand, I would have to spend the summer editing in Ottawa. I had to explain to Beth that over 50 percent of filmmaking takes place after the camerawork.

I had told Beth all about my North Borneo Frodo Society and she borrowed Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*(1), from the Helmstetters, writing to me that she considered the books “essential reading for her new career.” She was winning points with me in an important department—her sense of humor.

We exchanged impractical and impossible ideas, like her coming to Canada for Christmas, and me going to Africa by way of Japan, a hugely expensive detour. Our letters were frank and open. Beth had written to her former Lebanese lover about our engagement, but had not heard from him. She had not completely flushed him from her system and we exchanged lines on this. I understood her feelings since we had spent much less time together than she had spent with him. I sent her a copy of *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran(2)—all the rage with free thinkers in the 60s and early 70s, and Gibran was Lebanese to boot!

Beth wrote to me that the Helmstetters had held an engagement party for us, marking my presence by a photo of me holding their baby daughter. That seemed official enough, so I wrote my mother about a bet I had made with her when I was 20—that I wouldn't marry until I was 30. (By this time, I was 26.) I sent Mom my copy of our signed wager, along with a ten-dollar bill and a copy of one of the photos I took of Beth in that Japanese garden. This was a fantastic Christmas present for my parents. They were overjoyed with the news about this exotic American girl who would soon join the family—the daughter of a “man of the cloth,” just like my mother's father.



4.1 - Beth Diemer in a Japanese garden – Photo by Neill McKee

Before Beth's Christmas break in PNG, she wrote a letter to my parents, enclosing an artistic book she had created with a typewriter and a pen:

Dear Mr. & Mrs. McKee,

Most young girls have the privilege of meeting their prospective in-laws face-to-face and saying little while looking sweet and coy. This business of writing letters is far from satisfactory in this situation but there is little that can be done to remedy it at this point. The main problem which has arisen here is that I have forgotten all the suitable English words to describe just how sweet and coy I really am. Besides, it is best that I not be the one to do the telling. On the other hand, I could tell you about Neill, but you already know more than I do, or at least as much as he probably wants you to know.

More than anything else, I would like to hear more about you, from you. How you feel about anything and everything, what you're interested in. When we've been together,

Neill and I have always been so busy that we haven't done a whole lot of talking about the in-laws. I only know how he feels about you and that is only half the story.

So, I've gotten this far without saying anything (which is as it should be). Let this book say what I would like to say if I could meet you in person, and, as we in Japan say (...Japanese script...)—which means, "Please look benevolently upon my humble being and bestow upon me your gracious favor." It gains a little in the translation.

I am looking forward to...

.. hearing from you ...

.. meeting you ...

.. being related to you.

With love and trepidation.

Beth

The poetry book Beth had made for my parents with comic illustrations of her, me, and them, read like this:

Waiting is a Time of Mixed Emotions

Waiting is a time of sadness

...And a time of fear;

A time of impatience

...And a time of wondering just how long one can stay on cloud nine.

It's a time of nostalgia

...and a time of hope;

A time to watch one's cup running over without being able to drink.

But mostly

...waiting is a time of thankfulness for what has happened

...and joyful anticipation of what's impending.

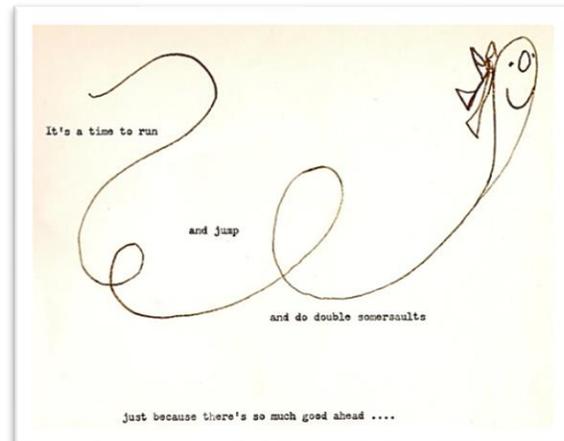
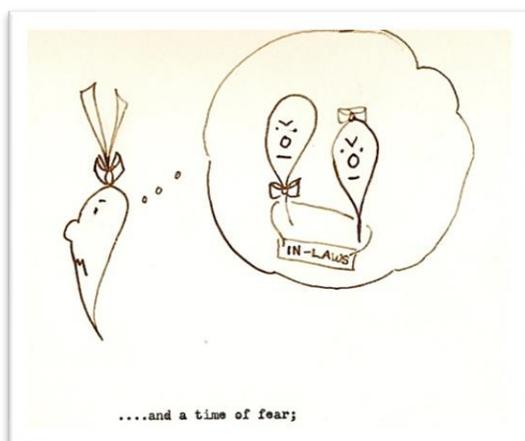
It's a time when almost everything one touches comes out happy

And even the most trying days can't get one down for long.

It's a time to run and jump and do double somersaults

Just because there's so much good ahead

.... And someone worth waiting for.



4.2 and 4.3 – Images by Elizabeth Diemer

My mother was a homemaker and loved to do weaving and other crafts. Beth hit the mark with her letter and illustrated poem. Beth had written to me that she feared not being accepted. But I had replied that my parents would have accepted anyone who married me and wouldn't have been surprised if I brought back a native girl from Borneo.

I went home for Christmas with my large family—my parents and five siblings, a new sister-in-law, a brother-in-law, and a nephew. It was a happy but overwhelmingly materialistic experience for me after what I had seen of poverty in the world, but I tried as hard as I could to participate. On Christmas eve, I retreated to my bedroom to write a long letter to Beth, who had reached PNG by then. It began:

My soul is in New Guinea captured like the snowman outside my picture window at 39 First Street with carols on the stereo and the tree looming over other material representations of love and joy and nostalgia, with my father perched in his favorite well-worn chair, sitting silently reading while others watch *The Christmas Carol* on TV for the sake of Scrooge and his ghosts...but my mind is with you. I love you so much and you are definitely absent. Scrooooo...ge! All is well in Elmira but the flow of mental vibrations takes me to flower out spontaneously on tracks ending only in a South Pacific island where it's already X-mas day and all are warmly wrapped in tropical non-Christmas air.

Beth, you are beautiful. The more mail the better—each letter unrolls another aspect (just like each of Frodo's steps—but not to evil—not to the gloom of Mordor—to a good.) My mother jumped on me at the door—happy to tears about us. She received the pictures and announcement, the old wager plus \$10.00, and needs no other gift. Your book excited her even more—she's showing everyone who comes through the door and I don't mind it.

I realized that for Beth, the biggest hurdle to get over was my lack of Christian belief. She had been born into and nurtured by the Lutheran church and Lutheran schools. The church had even given her a scholarship for university. She still retained a strong faith, and wanted to really know what I believed. After putting it off for a long time, I finally wrote to her about it in my long letter. I began at the beginning and outlined my whole life so far, including my thoughts on religion, right up to my university days. To summarize, I had a relatively liberal protestant upbringing, not caring that much about religion at all. I was a rebel in the early 1960s, but in my late teens, through mentors, I was introduced to good literature and theological books, such as Paul Tillich's *The Eternal Now*(3), Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*(4), and Martin Buber's *I and Thou*(5). Around the same time, I started to read about Zen Buddhism, but not in a very serious way. I was just curious. At age 19, I decided that there was no such thing as an all-powerful loving God, heaven and hell, or an afterlife.

During my time in Malaysia, living in a Muslim Bajau-dominated town, with Christian and animist Kadazans, and so-called Buddhist Chinese, who really only worship their ancestors, I became even more disillusioned about any form of organized religion. It all seemed too formalistic and divisive—each one excluding all the souls who do not follow their own religion's path to salvation, heaven, or nirvana. Few people I met had any real understanding of their own creed—they just repeated its doctrine.

After I sent the letter, I wondered if I had blown up our engagement. If so, I thought it was better to do it before we went any further. I had to be honest about my beliefs, or lack of them. My letters to Beth in PNG didn't reach her until she was about to leave. With no mail arriving, she had grown a little frantic. Somehow my Christmas parcel containing a letter, some cloth, and a copy of *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran made it through to her. Beth read the book and left it on

the coffee table to see what her father would say. When she asked him, his only word was, “Ugh.”

However, Beth also wrote that her parents were happy for us. She had arrived just after her father had completed supervising the building of his modern well-ventilated church in Rabaul, on the island of New Britain, and he was quite pleased with this accomplishment. But he didn’t want to discuss her previous misadventures in love or anything much about me. Beth wrote me saying “my father is just a tough old man who hasn’t learned to express his own emotions. He seems to have lost the joy of life. His whole life is so well-ordered and perfect. His joy is creating things, but he can’t create perfect people.” But later she wrote that her going home was good, “a kind of reconciliation without going through the words.”

Her father told her that he would marry us in his new church, but thank Buddha that didn’t happen! I sent a letter to Beth’s parents, as she advised me to do. When it arrived, her father called her to his study to question her about this marriage. She admitted that I was not a Lutheran and not even a churchgoer. As mentioned in Chapter 3, before she left home for university, he had told her she was on her own and couldn’t come home again, except for holidays. But after reading my letter, he said that she was welcome to return home if her plans with me didn’t work out. In other words, they didn’t have a lot of confidence in her choice of this young non-Lutheran filmmaker—possibly another disaster in the making.

Before she left PNG, Beth received some reassurance about me when she stopped in Port Moresby overnight. She called first and then visited the CUSO office, where she met Peter and Barbara Hoffman. They said they were expecting her since I had written them about her. Beth was somewhat relieved to hear that, needless to say. They also told her I was a “real winner” in CUSO, a former volunteer who had made a good contribution and was now a filmmaker, and that I had all the luck in the world. For instance, it had been raining in the highlands for weeks before I arrived, but when I flew into the mountains, the rain stopped and the sun shone just long enough for me to complete all my filming.

When Beth returned to Japan, she read outdated letters from me, including the one on my religious beliefs, and some others forwarded from PNG, as well as new ones from me in Ottawa—out-of-order letters causing more confusion. Fortunately, she received a letter from my mother containing such emotion and joy that Beth no longer had fears about the in-law issue. Then other positive “reference letters” arrived from some of my married friends in Canada, and Beth started to feel overwhelmed and inadequate. I didn’t know about this until late January, after an air traffic controllers strike ended, which had caused further havoc to our communication.

Meanwhile, I had arranged to give up the apartment at the end of December because I’d be leaving for Africa soon. In January, when I returned to Ottawa from Christmas break in Elmira, I moved back to the cooperative living house, where I had stayed the summer before. There, I received a letter Beth had written to me before leaving for PNG that reassured me:

Dear Neill McKee,
 Once I said, “Wait till Christmas.
 I’ll tell you then.”
 Knowing what I’d say
 and yet afraid to say it
 Knowing that I’ve rushed into this before
 and knowing you too well
 To want to do a repeat performance

Knowing, knowing but fearing speed
 You work so fast
 You knew so soon
 Why? Why? Why couldn't I feel the same?
 How can you accept me as I am?
Never. Never in my life has this happened before
 Never have I not had to prove myself
 Do love me as I am
 As I don't understand.
 Let this be the gift from my heart—
 And let my life prove it
 Move where you want to
 I will go with you
 Fight for what you will
 And I'll stay by your side.
 I may not always believe
 what you believe
 But I shall always believe in you.
 Change—but do not change without me
 I shall change
 But I'll try not to change alone
 I cannot promise not to wander
 But I promise not to try to make it without you.
 In short—I promise to love you
 As I have never promised before
 With all its implications
 And in all my humility
 Because, Neill McKee—I too know
 What you knew first
 I'm beginning to understand
 This thing I thought I understood before
 Only to find there is no understanding
 No definition
 No parenthesis
 There is only You and Me and
 “that has made all the difference.”
 Forever & ever. Amen. Love, Beth

Beth's poem came on two aerograms, numbers 8G-1 and 8G-2. When I absorbed her words, any small speckle of doubt that she would be my life-partner disappeared. She was spontaneous, expressive, open, honest, beautiful, and loving. What else could a man ask for? I wondered, quite frankly, how on earth I had found this woman. *More good luck*, I thought. I also finally received the letters she wrote while she was in PNG, indicating that she'd done her homework well, reading Tolkien's trilogy during her trip. With no mail arriving from me, she had written, “Where is my Gandalf in my hour of weakness?” and a few days later, “You shall be my Tom Bombadil and I'll be your Goldberry.” She also wrote that her dad had told her my lack of religious affiliation was her problem.

On January 20th, Beth wrote a letter telling me she had read *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse—a book I had also boldly sent to her in PNG. It's a novel based on life of Siddhartha Gautama, Prince of Kapilavastu, who became the Buddha: a philosopher, meditator, and spiritual teacher who lived in ancient India, leading to Buddhism in all its forms, including Zen.

Beth wrote, “Will try to do more thinking (about the book) while I’m waiting—probably wouldn’t do too much harm to take up fasting too. On principle, I believe in trial marriages just because they have no bonds beyond the couple’s will to live together. Vows can be a terrible crutch.” But another letter indicated that she still had not given up on the idea of our having a Christian wedding in Japan.

My evolving love life was the good news; the bad news came when I was called into a meeting to be told that CUSO Information was running out of money due to overall budget cuts from the government. They could pay for my Africa trip, but I had to go on contract—no longer a staff member with benefits. I would be advanced money for travel costs, but my fee would only come when I returned.

I worked long hours through January and part of February to complete my film, which we simply called *CUSO in Papua New Guinea*. My colleagues loved it, but it was decided to put off completion of the Malaysia forestry film until I returned from Africa. Around that time, I was asked if I wanted to apply for a CUSO field staff job in Malaysia. I turned this down because my chosen career path was filmmaking. Since I would now be on contract, I negotiated an agreement with CUSO, which would allow me to look for other filming and photographic work while in Africa, and hence cut down on CUSO’s part of the expenses for the trip. CUSO could not decide on the Thailand film we had discussed until the new budget was approved in April.

I wrote a proposal to make a development education film on Lesotho in Southern Africa, documenting how this tiny independent African country was successfully making progress, despite being surrounded by the racist apartheid regime of South Africa. I received a commitment from CIDA that they would put up 50 percent of the money needed, but I had to raise the balance from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). I made up a letterhead for a company that I called “Econofilms” and began meeting various people to sell my services. This was an exciting time for me and I wrote Beth about it. I was thrilled about the prospects of getting funding for this additional work. Much of the filming would have to be done in Africa, and these possible initiatives clouded plans for the time and place Beth and I would meet up again—and where we would marry.

Ever the optimist, I sent a telegram to Beth about my original proposal, “Come to Africa with me.” I added that it could also be somewhere in South Asia. I followed up with short phone call and a detailed letter, including my tentative travel plans. Then, I flew off once more to that immense and challenging continent, Africa.

5. Forty Days in Ghana

I stopped in London to talk to the British volunteer agency, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), about doing photography for them in Africa, and then took a train to Grenoble, France to visit Canadian friends. When I arrived in Accra, Ghana, I was met by Peter Westaway, CUSO's deputy FSO, and he invited me to stay at his place. There, waiting for me, were 13 letters from Beth. Many of them were outdated by my telegram, letters, and my recent phone call to her. More confusion, but within them, I learned she had found a replacement. Her school principal, fellow teachers, and friends all agreed that, of course she should leave her job early and meet me in Africa.

She told me she wanted lots of children and asked me what clothes she should pack. She also mentioned that she didn't want a diamond ring from racist South Africa—a great sign, I thought, and I couldn't afford one anyway. She admitted that the fantastic spiritual wedding in a Japanese garden was all in her head and not in mine at all. She recognized that it was best if our marriage took place on “neutral ground,” but she still hoped for a Christian ceremony of some sort. I had suggested getting married in Lusaka, Zambia, where I would be around the end of April. I told her I'd ask Dave Beer, CUSO FSO in Lusaka, if he knew how such a marriage could take place.

More letters arrived from Tokyo and I answered all of Beth's concerns, questions, and her affectionate words. We agreed to send out a wedding invitation for April 29th in Lusaka. I sent her a long invitation list of relatives and friends from Canada and elsewhere.

I had planned five weeks in Ghana and CUSO had tentatively scheduled me to spend two more weeks in Nigeria—a return trip I dreaded. I was already experiencing a big difference between the two countries, although they are near neighbors and both former British colonies. Ghanaians seemed much easier, happier, even joyous in their philosophy of life.

On the negative side, Ghana had just gone through a military coup. The country had gained independence from Britain in 1957, and started as a multi-party democratic nation under Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, a pan-Africanist who many on the continent looked up to. He was a socialist who believed in central planning and receiving aid from the Soviet Union. Peter took me to a place beside Accra airport, where I could take a shot of rusting snowplows. Soviet-style planning dictated that all airports should have snowplows, even in a city only 5.6 degrees north of the equator—a package deal, all or nothing.

In 1964, Nkrumah had engineered a constitutional amendment to make Ghana a one-party state and declared himself President-for-Life. But he was overthrown in a military coup in 1966. The military allowed a parliamentary government to form again in 1969, but on January 14, 1972, Prime Minister Dr. Kofi Busia and the parliament were overthrown by Colonel Acheampong—just a month before my visit. As an indication of how easy Ghanaians are, Peter Thompson, the head CUSO FSO, told me to come anyway. After I arrived, it only took a few days to obtain permission to film and get a press accreditation card.

It also only took a few days for me to come down with chills and a fever. I figured it was malaria and since I had to get to work, I decided to hit my body with five chloroquine tablets all at once. That did the trick. I stayed on the tablets for the rest of my time in Africa. I'd been lucky never to have been struck by the disease before, throughout my sojourn in Borneo and previous travels through Asia and Africa.

On my first trip out of Accra, I hitched a ride with a couple of volunteers who were heading north toward the Afram Plains. They dropped me at a mission station, where I stayed overnight. I managed to get a peanut butter sandwich for supper and a cup of instant coffee for

breakfast. I had intended to photograph a CUSO volunteer stationed there, but found he had just left for Accra. Dissatisfied with his placement, he wanted either a different job or to return to Canada. It must have been frustrating for him, but I was also frustrated. Telephone networks were rudimentary in those days—few landlines and no cell phones.

The next morning, an American Peace Corps volunteer gave me a ride in the mission's Land Rover to a dock on Lake Volta, where I skirmished with two tsetse flies while boarding a rather rickety-looking boat. I knew that these pests sometimes carried trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness). They finally grew tired of my waving arms when we reached open water bound for Kpando, a small city on the other side. Volta Dam, now called the Akasombo Dam⁽¹⁾, is a hydroelectric project which opened in 1965 to provide energy for aluminum smelters and much of the country's electricity. It created the lake, a huge body of water, displacing many villages and wreaking havoc on the environment and human health in the surrounding population due to water-borne illnesses, such as schistosomiasis (bilharzia). These were the kind of choices many developing countries had to make in their rush to modernize during the 1960s and 1970s.



5.1 - Transport on Lake Akasombo



5.2 - Market at port, Lake Akasombo

Photos by Peter Westaway

When we docked at Kpando, I bought a can of meat and a loaf of bread in the nearby market to fill my stomach, and then caught a taxi to the technical school to see a CUSO couple, Bill and Jean Campbell from Halifax, Nova Scotia. I found them to be practical and stalwart souls who would never abandon their posts despite all the diseases around them. Bill had been an auto mechanic in Halifax and now taught auto mechanics. He focused on practical experience, using basic tools, to train the students to repair cars and trucks—nothing fancy because they wouldn't find any special tools on the job when they graduated. He told me in his interview that the students posed a lot of questions, which made him think a lot. He said the experience would improve his work when he returned to Canada.

Jean had been a secretary and taught typing, stenography, bookkeeping, and other office procedures—skills that the country needed rather than more unemployed university graduates. I filmed her teaching rows of young women in purple dresses and young men in white shirts and short pants—uniforms that hid the different income levels of the families they came from. I also took sequences of Bill and Jean in the community, including shopping in the open market. There was nothing pretentious about the Campbells—my first good subjects for the film on Ghana. On

my last day at Kpando, I was lucky to be able to film and tape a celebration, complete with Ghanaian music and dancing—the highlight of my brief stay.

From Kpando, I grabbed a “mammy wagon”—a brightly decorated truck with slogans painted on the back—to the Akosombo Dam, where I photographed another CUSO volunteer. I also negotiated with the security guards to take a shot of Lake Volta from the verandah of deposed President Nkruma’s villa. Achieving this without being jailed as a spy was tricky, especially after the military coup. I continued to find Ghanaians to be accommodating and spontaneous people. If they wanted to dance, they danced, and if they wanted to sing, they sang. Sometimes they could be overwhelmingly extroverted but seldom argumentative. On my travels through their country with CUSO volunteers, I only once ran into drunken soldiers at a roadblock carrying Soviet AK-47 semi-automatic rifles. They gave us a hard time but we kept our cool because they were intoxicated with more than military power, following the coup.

At Akosombo, I was picked up by two volunteers who were heading north in a VW van. They were a godsend since I didn’t have the time or energy to take mammy wagons or rickety buses, guarding my equipment all the way. After a day of driving, we reached Tamale, where I stayed overnight with a volunteer, Brian O’Dwyer, and arranged to film him the following week.

At Tamale, I received a pile of letters from Beth, forwarded to Brian by the CUSO office in Accra. I’d written her on my travels but our letters took at least two weeks to reach each other—a time gap of a month for reactions to each other’s thoughts. Most of her letters were on travel details, issues in her school and community. I couldn’t tell her any more details on our planned wedding since I hadn’t heard from Zambia. I just wrote to her that she should try to arrive in Zambia around April 21st and I’d be at the airport. *What more assurance did she need from me?*, I thought in jest. I did receive another poem on her upcoming last 15 days of teaching, which reinforced my thoughts that she was the woman for me:

Let us consider the last 15 days
and are they worth it?—
The consideration and the time?
Will I be happy to see them pass?
I am such a silly lass.
It’s not teaching I abhor,
teachers’ meetings are a bore
and getting up at half-past four.
But taken by a greater quest,
my eyes turn ever to the west.
Still 15 days of toil and stress,
till I shall join my happiness.

The next day, I traveled by means I never recorded and can’t recall—perhaps I hitched hiked—for another five or six hours to the village of Wiaga, about 42 miles (68 km) west of the northern city of Bolgatanga. Wiaga is located only 50 miles (80 km) from the border with Burkina Faso, then called the Republic of Upper Volta. I had entered a scorching dry land in the hottest season of the year.

At Wiaga, I filmed and photographed four CUSO volunteers—two agriculturalists and two nurse-midwives—stationed at a small mission. George Martin from Grunthal, Manitoba, and Helen McCall from Montreal, Quebec, were the two I decided to focus on and interview for my film’s soundtrack. The nurse-midwives were delivering maternal and child health services and

the agriculturalists were teaching the local farmers to grow better crops, and improve traditional grain storage systems—cost-effective methods of preventing insect and water damage. George said that Ghanaian farmers were collaborative and happy to receive help and advice—probably more so than their counterparts in Canada.



5.3 - Building silo near Wiaga
Photo by Peter Westaway

My experiences in Wiaga and the surrounding countryside are best recounted in excerpts from letters I wrote to Beth:

Wed. March 15, 1972

The last three days I've been in a very different world. The savanna—dry grassland and semi-desert. I just had a bath using half a bucket—while I had visions of you in your local public bath. I have been filming in temperatures up to 130 F, and at night in the CUSO bungalow, it creeps down to 95 F....The people here are very poor, with disease all around. It really blows your mind. The CUSO volunteers here have a hell of a job to do.

Fri. March 16, 1972

Yesterday was a day to remember. Went with one of the nurses to a bush clinic to film. On the way, one of my microphones and my light meter got shook up and have ceased to function. Must do without. The clinic went on for so long—people coming from all around with every disease in the book. The line never dissolved until 1:30 pm. I admire this CUSO nurse, Helen, who just stayed on the job, taking it all in....Then we headed back and the car broke down four miles from the nearest water. It was 120 F in the sun and 103 F in the shade, so we trudged along the road with dry mouths. A government vehicle passed and we called it every name in the book—bastard didn't stop. A sorcerer's curse was certainly put on us. After a couple of hours, we made it to a small town where I

downed four warm Cokes—well water not to be trusted. Finally, we made it back to the mission and I drank four quarts of water and a quart of beer, ate, and relaxed in the not very cool evening. God, in a week I'll be back in the cool tropical south by the sea. Really need green trees around me to be happy. Hey, I've lost 10 pounds in three weeks—all sweated away!

Sat. March 18, 1972

Just sitting here in the “cool” of the evening with the CUSOs, and a group of people came along to ask for milk. A man and a woman carrying a 3-month-old baby for 36 miles (in this temperature) to get help because the mother had died. What a tremendous respect for the right to live! As I write, warm milk is entering its tummy. Tears in my eyes. But I know there are so many like this around here just the same....Tomorrow I will leave this place. It's too easy to forget the reality. The Government of Ghana has forgotten these people. Only a few missions with limited resources....It may seem kind of crazy that we are so close in time to being together and yet I say little about it. All I can say is that it will be good. We are now in such completely different and opposite worlds, but we will soon be in body and mind in the same world and will experience it together. I hope that will be a lasting experience....As the time gets nearer, I'm more anxious. I want and need your love. I will give you mine.

From Wiaga, I returned to Tamale to film and photograph Brian O'Dwyer from London, Ontario, an affable fellow who was teaching at a business college. In his interview, he said that a lot of his work involved imparting skills in logical thinking—organizing thoughts on paper and in speeches, writing telegrams, and using the telephone. There was only one telephone in town at the time, located at the post office. Few of the students had any significant practice with these elements of modern society since they came from poor urban and rural backgrounds.

Brian's classes were full of bright smiling faces and especially attractive girls. He loved teaching here—no sulking North American adolescents. He was so uplifted by the keen attitudes of the students and his work, in general, that he said in the interview he was considering teaching as his vocation when he returned home to Canada, in spite of the differences in attitudes. He claimed, “Ghanaian people effervesce and that's certainly the most enjoyable part of being here.”

I filmed Brian casually interacting with his Ghanaian colleagues. Then he took me all around town on his motorcycle. I filmed him in a market and took a sequence of him patronizing his favorite restaurant called, Old Man's Chop Bar. The old man who ran the place served roasted guineafowl, which had the taste and texture of tough chicken. I filmed Brian eating and drinking with the locals—an essential cross-cultural exchange, he told me. This rudimentary facility was such a shock compared to the Chinese, Indian, and Malay restaurants I had frequented during my volunteer days in Malaysia. I tried the local *fufu*, a white meal made of yams or cassava which is pounded into a fine flour and then boiled into a sticky glutinous mass. It's dipped into groundnut (peanut) stew, and eaten with your hands. The problem, I found, is that I couldn't chew it, so when I tried to swallow it, it discharged out of my throat. I can't recall, but I believe someone brought me bread.



5.4 - Musicians and customer, Old Man's Chop Bar
Photo by Peter Westaway

The episode in the *pito* bar became a great finale for my Ghana film. I sampled the old man's *pito*, a beer produced from fermented millet or sorghum. He made it himself and served it in calabash gourds while we sat on benches placed around a dirt floor. That evening, I wrote to Beth about my experience:

Men and women sit around in a village-type place and drink *pito* from large calabashes. Of course, I had to drink it too and my head started to float. One man sang a beautiful song for his share of *pito* and I was able to film and record him. Then another man invited me to film and tape him playing his xylophone, called a *gyil*, with wooden bars and resonating gourds hanging below. Ghanaians are not modest. Every minute someone shouts, "take me" when they see the camera. Their photo studios are full of posed pictures of people beautifully dressed, wearing seven watches, and holding a transistor radio—really funny stuff.

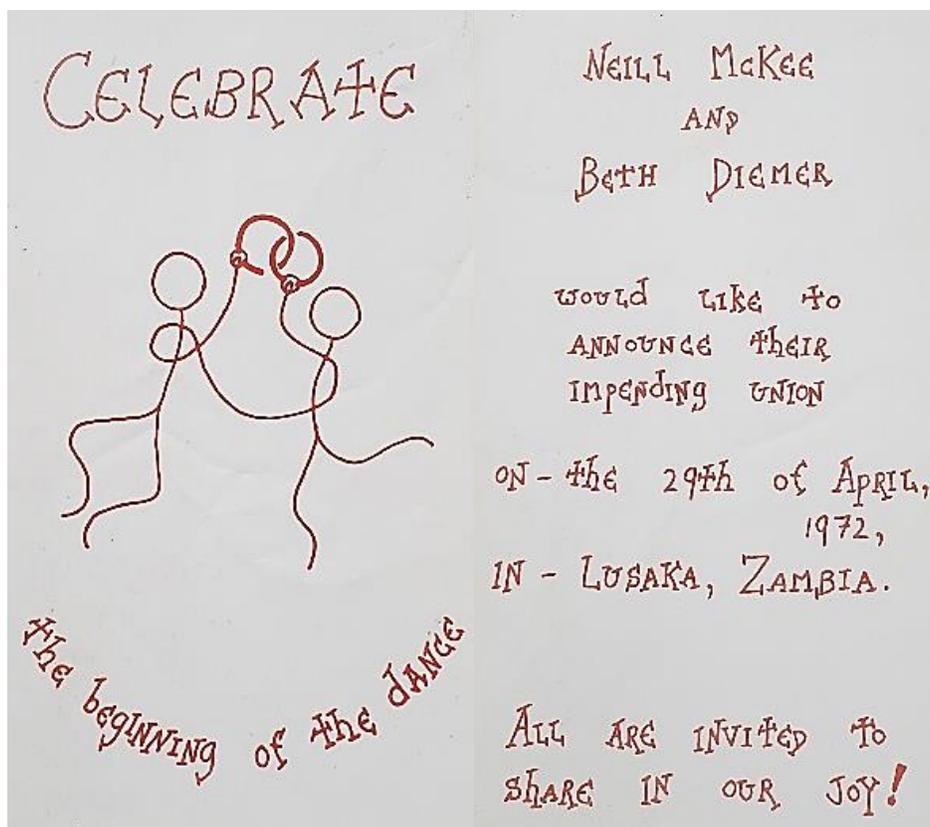
On March 24th, Brian must have managed to get me to the airport for the flight to Accra, which I can't recall at all. My mind remained foggy due to all the *pito* I had consumed at the Old Man's Chop Bar. When I arrived, I found a deluge of letters, including an important one from CUSO-Nigeria. I was told to cancel my trip there because school holidays would last for most of April. I was overjoyed with that news. I would finish up my business in Ghana by photographing a few more volunteers and shipping my exposed film to Ottawa.

I had many letters from Beth to answer. There was one about her Rev. Horn trying to find a Lutheran minister to marry us in Zambia. I pushed back:

As for your mention of a Lutheran minister—choke! I don't particularly want Cliff to arrange anything. He probably won't know the man personally and he may be a real shithead. You must remember I don't even know Cliff, for that matter. Sorry if this

makes you angry at a time when I only want to make you happy, but I am not a Christian in any sense of Lutheran or Methodist or whatever.

I made it clear that neither of us would know what our wedding would be like until we reached Zambia. A few days later, I found out Beth had already accepted that when I received a copy of our wedding invitation, which she had sent out to 300 people. There was not a traditional religious word on it. Yippee! I liked the “beginning of the dance” idea. This woman was reading my mind—mental telepathy over 13,000 miles.



5.5 and 5.6 – Our wedding invitation

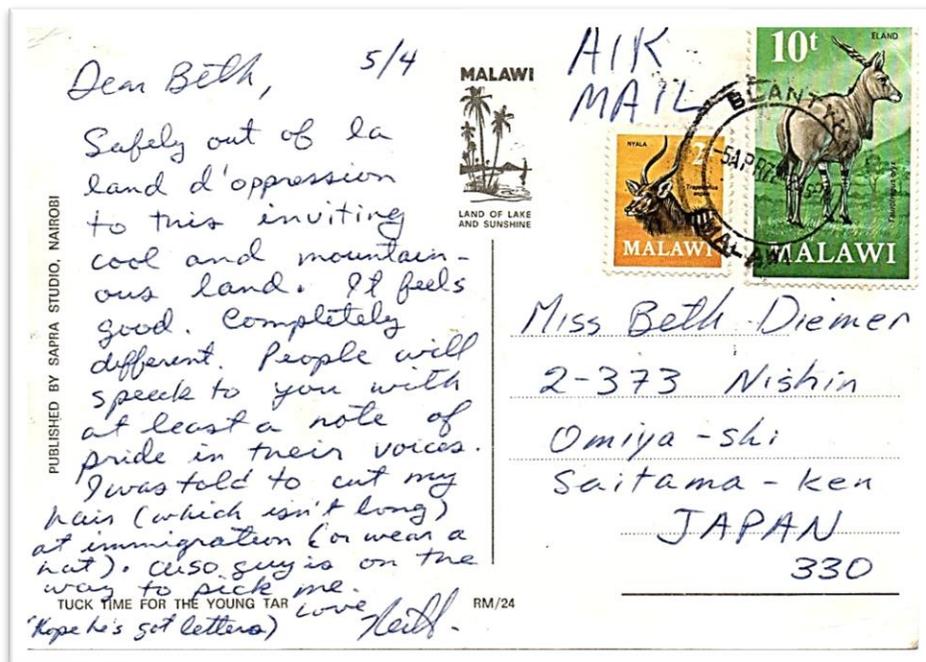
While watching Ghanaian children playing on the beach the evening before I left, a warm feeling came over me about my productive forty days in Ghana, and our coming union.

6. Our Marriage and Travels in Southern and Eastern Africa

On Easter Sunday, April 2, 1972, I flew from Accra to Johannesburg, South Africa, to reach my next stop, the Republic of Malawi. After gaining some time from the cancelation of my Nigeria stop, I decided to attend a CUSO regional staff meeting in Malawi and get started on my second film before Beth would arrive in nearby Zambia. The FSO for CUSO-Malawi, Don McMaster, was not too happy to learn that I would be traveling through South Africa, where the policy of apartheid remained in place. But I have never been a purist in such matters, and I chalked it up to my necessary first-hand education. Besides, the immigration people at Johannesburg gladly stamped my arrival on a separate slip of paper, not on a page of my passport, so it would not stop me from entering Zambia and Tanzania later, where evidence of being in South Africa would prohibit entry.

I stayed at the airport's Holiday Inn overnight and tried to board a flight to Malawi the next morning, but was informed I needed a visa. I had no choice but to turn back and go to the Malawi Embassy, where I was told I didn't need a visa because Malawi is part of the Commonwealth, like Canada. So much for South African efficiency. The delay at least allowed me time to buy a new light meter, so I wouldn't have to guess at aperture settings, which I was getting pretty good at. I also had a chance to see apartheid up close. Everything was segregated: buses, parks, restaurants, public urinals—those for whites had smart signs, "Here Gents," while those for non-Europeans were just labeled "Toilet." Signs reading "Europeans" and "Non-Europeans" were posted just about everywhere. I took some photos of the signs, while frequently checking if I was being tailed. I thought to myself, *What a quick transition I have made from singing and swinging Ghanaians to this place of racial oppression.*

The next day, I flew to Blantyre, the commercial capital of Malawi. From there I sent another postcard to Beth.



6.1 – Postcard from Malawi

Actually, compared to Ghana, Malawi gave the air of being a conservative place, where longish hair and beards were not welcome, as noted in the postcard I sent. Formerly the British protectorate of Nyasaland, Malawi gained its independence in 1964. The constitution was revised in 1966 to make the country a one-party state and a republic, at which point Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda became President. In 1970, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) revised its constitution, making Dr. Banda its life-president, and the following year he managed to get Parliament to change the country's constitution, once more, to make him President-for-Life—a growing trend on the continent. When I arrived in Malawi, it was starting to operate like the personal property of Dr. Banda, a renowned anti-communist who maintained diplomatic relations with South Africa. At the time, his government was just beginning to use detention without trial, torture, and assassination to suppress all political opposition.

I saw no “singing and swinging” Africans here—mostly men in old-fashioned threadbare European suits, sporting white shirts and ties. Women wore what we called “missionary dresses”—boring Western clothes—rather than the colorful flowing robes and headpieces which adorn the women of Ghana. One of the best things about Malawi is climate. Much of the country is perched on a plateau of rolling hills and mountains—perfect for photography. The rainy season had just ended and I learned CUSO's regional meeting had been postponed, so I got right into filming the work of Maitland and Elaine McNeil, a photogenic doctor-nurse couple from Saskatchewan, working in rural health services with the Ministry of Health. They invited me to stay with them in their small bungalow.

With two small children to look after, Elaine didn't have a formal CUSO job posting, but she volunteered three mornings a week at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Blantyre and pitched in whenever she could, helping nurses and midwives in the outreach clinics. (This work must have ignited a fire in her for it led to a career in international development, managing Canadian-funded health and other education projects in Malawi and other sub-Saharan African countries for decades to come.)

I took a brief sequence of Elaine at work but fully documented Dr. McNeil as he traveled through the undulating green countryside, holding village meetings with chiefs and political leaders, advocating to villagers through a translator on the importance of health care. The area was filled with run-down outreach clinics that had been built during British times, 20 to 40 years ago. Each clinic was staffed by only one medical assistant, with a limited supply of medicines, who had previously received little support or supervision, while attending up to 300 patients per day.



6.2 and 6.3 – Film images of Maitland McNeil advocating with local leader and attending to a sick child at an outreach clinic

I became inspired by the McNeils' dedication to making the situation better. A consortium of NGOs, including CUSO, contributed to building new clinics, along with efforts by the communities themselves through their labor and donation of materials. Maitland spent his hours supervising building projects, retraining and supporting health assistants on clinical diagnosis and care, and holding education sessions with patients and the communities so they could understand the causes of their children's illnesses and deaths. He also taught students at the College of Medicine and supervised them after they graduated.

While filming the McNeils and listening carefully to all the discussions, recording interviews with them, and talking informally in the evenings, I gained knowledge about health issues in Malawi. They had arrived in the country when health outcome statistics were grim. In 1971, under-five deaths of children were very high—[203 per 1,000 live births—but that was reduced to 29 per 1,000 live births by 2020\(1\)](#). Did that cause population growth in Malawi to sky-rocket? [In 1971, population growth was escalating with a fertility rate \(births per woman\) of 7.32, and that also was reduced to 3.98 by 2022.\(2\)](#) It's well established now that parents around the world will practice family planning if they are confident their children have a better chance of survival. The system the McNeils helped to set up was part of a sustained national and international multi-agency effort that gradually reduced under-five mortality and contributed to a leveling off of population growth.

My time in Malawi with this couple also included some fun. Compared to the CUSO workers in northern Ghana, on weekends the McNeils had a chance to hike and explore mountainous terrain, and swim in rivers. I filmed them in their small car, heading to an area near the scenic Mount Mulanje with their older son Colin, Maitland, and Elaine in the front, and baby Sean with their Irish Setter named "Pumpkin" in the back with me. We reached a waterfall where Malawian children swam and slid down natural slides into pools of fresh clean water, and I took shots of the family joining in the fun.

On a cloudy Sunday morning, Maitland, Elaine, and Colin went to church, leaving me to babysit Sean and Pumpkin. I read my letters from Beth, containing her plans to fly from Tokyo to Lusaka, Zambia, via Cairo and Nairobi. In my last letter to her during this long separation, I told her that, so far, none of my plans for doing work for other NGOs—neither the film on Lesotho, nor the one in Thailand, had worked out. I hadn't given up, but it looked more and more like I'd be completing the CUSO filming and then we'd head to Europe and Canada by mid-summer.

I also mentioned that Dave Beer, in Lusaka, had reported to me that in Zambia there was a required waiting period after posting marriage banns, inferring she had to be prepared for changes. By then, I think Beth knew to expect just about anything. I thought about our coming life together, inspired by the married life that I was witnessing in the McNeil home:

GRAY BUT HAPPY SUNDAY—April 9, 1972—Month of our becoming
My Dear, Doctor McNeil, his wife, lovely she be, Colin and car have gone to church. It's 8 am and Bob Dylan sings *I want you* and makes me drift lightly over the hills of Malawi to the hills of North Borneo where I first heard the tune. I want you indeed. The time gap closes. Sean, four months old, sucks his bottle between smiles beside me. Pumpkin, the big Irish Setter licks his balls while looking for tidbits of attention. A very human dog. I'm in a lovely little house in Blantyre....Another baby smile comes my way to the tune of Dylan's *Your brand-new leopard-skin pill-box hat*. Sure, hope all our babies (all!?) smile like this one.

On April 21st, a few days after I had arrived in Lusaka, I went back to the airport to see Beth walk through the arrival doors. She came running and hugged me, saying, “You’re here!”

“What did you expect?” I said after we kissed. “It has all gone as planned, sort of, no?”

Beth, looking even more beautiful than I remembered her, now with longer hair, said something like, “You don’t know what I was going through. It all seemed like a fantastic dream, which could have turned into a nightmare if you weren’t here to meet me.”

She told me later that it was the kind of marriage that just happens in crazy movies. She only had about \$1,000 and a ticket to Rome in her purse. Her parents had even sent her \$300 in case she needed it—something that they would never have done if they trusted all would go well with this strange filmmaker in Africa. But I thought, *How could I have led her on from afar through such an elaborate scheme, and for what purpose?*



6.4 - Beth and the author the morning after her arrival
Photo by Neill McKee

We stayed with Barrie Fleming and his partner, Jalna. Barry was the deputy FSO of CUSO-Zambia. I had applied for a marriage license at Lusaka’s District Office for April 29th, but Beth brought some news—our friends, Dick and Jeannine Helmstetter, were going to fly in from Tokyo, arriving after that date. Ha! Exactly my point of being flexible. These were the only international guests who accepted our invitation, so we had to change our plans. After all, they were coming at their own great expense.

The next day, Beth and I went back to the District Office to change the date to May 2nd, a Tuesday. Then we shopped for wedding rings. We had over a week to wait before the Helmstetters would arrive. I had a brilliant idea, and said to Beth, “Let’s go on our honeymoon first. We can stay at Victoria Falls.”

Beth looked at me and said, “You had all of this planned, didn’t you?”

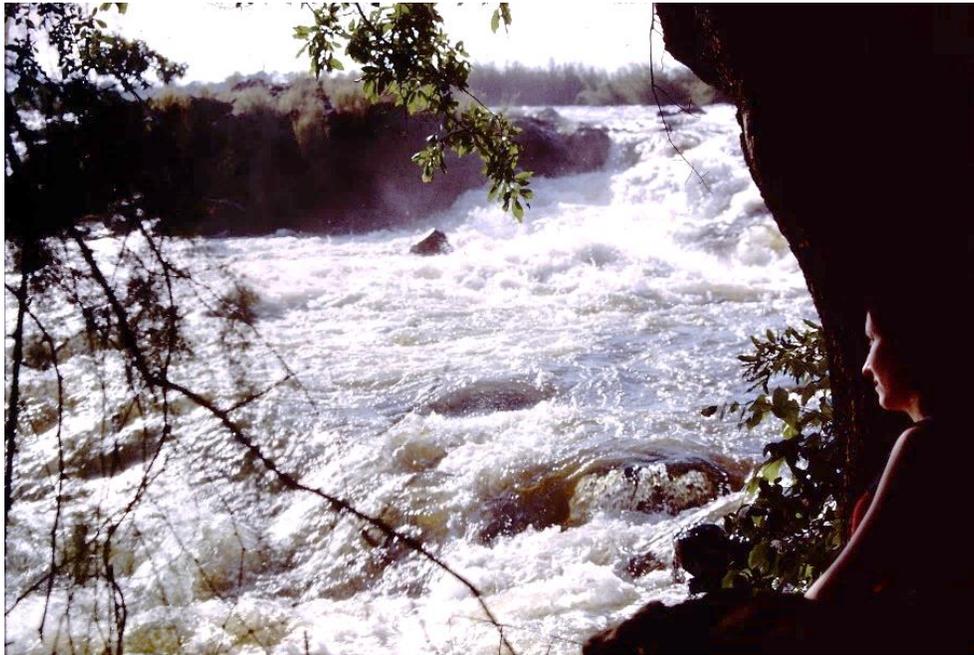
“Not really, but why not have our honeymoon first? We’re already sleeping together.”

“Yes, let’s go!” Beth replied.

She was getting the hang of it—a good sign of things to come. Gone were all of the elaborate visions she had written to me about—a religious wedding ceremony in a Japanese

garden. I must admit that neither I nor Dave Beer had done any real scouting for a Lutheran minister, or any other kind of preacher who could hold a religious service after the civil one. Beth seemed to have accepted this new reality.

We took a bus to the town of Livingston to stay in a hotel right beside the Zambezi River. It featured *rondavels*—circular African-style houses for rooms. We cooked outside on an open-pit fire. We hiked along the bank of the river upstream and sat for hours watching vast quantities of water tumble 354 feet (108 meters), producing a mist that stretches high above the river. There were no guard rails along the river bank, at the time. One slip and you'd be swept over the falls in seconds, possibly making the mist faintly red as your body hit the rocks below. In the local African language, Lozi, the falls are known as *Mosi-oa-Tunya*—"the smoke that thunders."



6.5 - Beth gazing into the rapids above the falls – Photo by Neill McKee

We spent our time by the river getting to know each other better, and laughing at our reckless decisions. As the week progressed, I could see that this hunch was paying off. Beth was the woman for me, and it was a good decision to get married on neutral ground, far from family expectations and pressures. In Japan or Papua New Guinea, I would have been a stranger. In Canada, Beth would have been surrounded by my family and friends, and worried that she was not living up to their expectations as a good match for me. Yes, this exotic neutral ground did the trick.

When we returned to Lusaka, we went to meet the Helmstetters at the airport and then we all checked into Ridgeway Hotel. I laughed when Dick told me he was charging his trip to a search for new exotic hardwoods for his billiard tables and cues. Dick and Jeannine both possessed a sense of humor and adventure I much enjoyed, and we became good friends during their brief stay. They acted as witnesses for our marriage. Another volunteer, Dirk Jol, an artsy CUSO architect with longish hair, who worked for Lusaka town planning, acted as our official pro-bono photographer. Everything happened as planned, almost. I described the whole affair in a letter to my family, the day after the wedding:

Dear Folks,

May 3/72

Well, Elizabeth Ann McKee, my bride of 29 hours and 4 minutes, washes my wedding shirt out in the bathtub as I sip a cup of tea and write you a letter before we take off tomorrow for a second (post-marriage) honeymoon-cum-photography trek. The marriage went off with great smoothness except for a few minor hitches—like the ceremony had just started when the District Secretary began to look closely at our marriage license to find it had expired, at which time we all swallowed our tongues. The clerk had assured me 15 times that it had been amended, but the District Secretary didn't seem to know about it. We waited 14 minutes, listening to a loud ticking clock on the wall as he made many phone calls. Permission to proceed was finally granted.

Then our photographer asked me to stand when the official told me to sit. Back on my chair, he asked, “Will you, Nelly McKee, take this woman to be your husband?” to which I, of course, answered, “Sure!” He did get the words right on the question posed to Beth and she also agreed. We officially became man and wife at 11:54 am. My wedding ring fit well, but Beth's had to be held on by a band aid and some string because she wanted a plain one and they only had men's plain style and couldn't fix it in time. Anyway, the bride wore a short white wedding dress—a vogue fashion she had ordered to be made in Japan—with a white band in her hair and sandals—very classy. The groom sported a brown \$6.00 jacket made in Hong Kong, a lovely white shirt with golden patterns and puffy sleeves, the tie Marg made and gave me at Christmas, and sandals with a pair of old brown socks covering up the hair on my feet—yes, Hobbit hair.

After we finally escaped the throngs of people (joke), we went for lunch in a coffee shop, and then Beth and Jeannine went shopping in the afternoon, while Dick and I went to arrange things for dinner. Dick and Jeannine are these fantastic people who live in Japan where Beth lived and they came to Zambia for three days to be our witnesses. I didn't believe it until I saw them step off the plane. Not only that, Dick is a connoisseur and gourmet cook (and an owner of a pool cue manufacturing business). He arranged and paid for a wonderful meal for 10 in the hotel we are staying in, including some CUSO people: Dave Beer and Irene, Barry Fleming and Jalna, and Dirk Jol and Josette. We gorged ourselves on *pâté maison* and champagne, *sole bonne femme* and white wine, *fillet mignon* with croquette potatoes and vegetables in season with red wine, plus baked Alaska (with wedding cake trimmings) and liqueurs and coffee. The food, the people, and the music were all excellent. The party made up for the disjointed ceremony in the morning. But the day ended when Neill McKee fell into a deep slumber while Elizabeth was brushing her teeth... Great way to begin! Glad we had our honeymoon first.

We have just seen Dick and Jennine off at the airport—life-long friends, I believe—and now have a few hours to relax before we travel. Our plan is to be in Zambia until the 15th, when we will fly to Botswana for two weeks.

Love, Neill and Beth

By this time, my parents were prepared for such news from their wandering “prodigal son” and I'm sure my letter provided lots of laughter for my family. They were probably just relieved to hear we were legally married. She wisely treated her own parents to very few details of our very non-Lutheran honeymoon and marriage.



6.6 to 6.9 – Our crazy wedding - Photos by Jol Dirk



6.10 - Back row L to R: Beth and Neill, Jeaninne, Josette, Jalna, Dick;
Front row: Barry, Irene - Photo by Dave Beer

We hitchhiked around Zambia to photograph more CUSO volunteers, and for some reason had no trouble getting rides. It was an anomaly to see white people hitchhiking in Zambia, especially women.



6.11 – Beth trying her luck at attracting rides – Photo by Neill McKee

Next we then flew to Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. There we were met by Helmut Kuhn, CUSO FSO, who took us to photograph some volunteers and sites, before we took a train through this comparatively dry and cold southern African land. It was mid-May, with winter fast approaching in the Southern Hemisphere. We arrived at a place called Shashi River School, located in an isolated village called “Tonota” in the northeast of the country, where I filmed a CUSO teacher, Janis Kazaks.

The secondary school had about 600 students—450 in the academic program and 150 in the brigade or vocational stream. It was first established by disenchanted white South Africans who left their own country to build a relevant system of education that they could not create at home, due to apartheid. Janis concentrated on teaching English, mathematics, and development studies—the three subjects taught to the brigades in their academic section. He also taught the brigade students economics, and imparted skills to allow them to constructively criticize development trends in their own country, as well as the neighboring racist regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia.

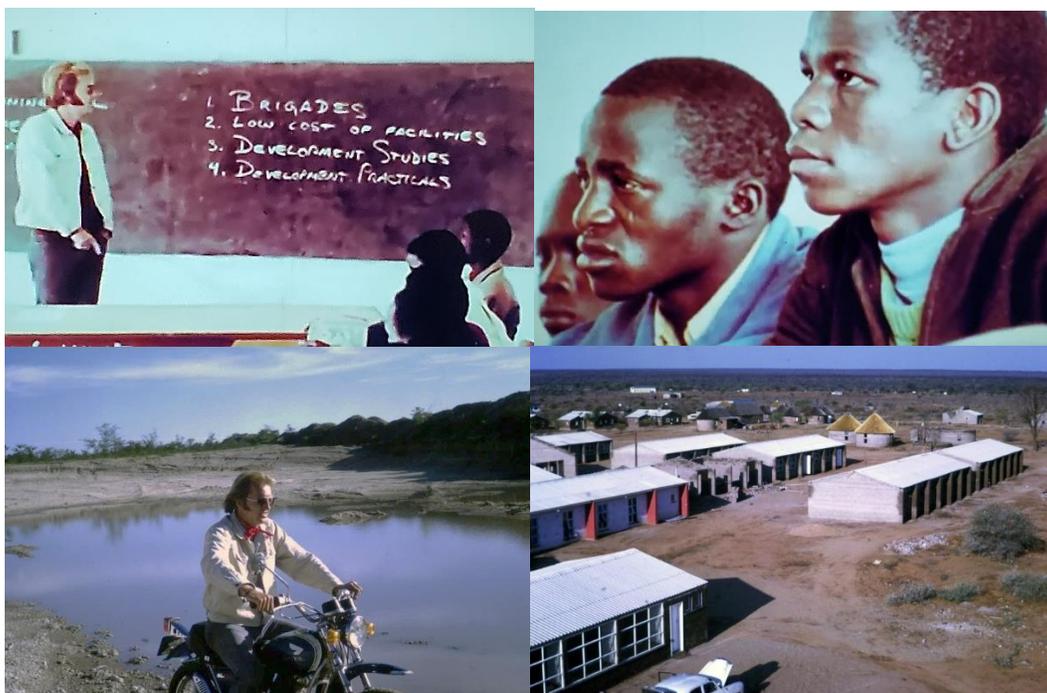
Beth and I stayed in a guest room and we shared some meals with Janis and his partner Angela, in their *rondavel*. Living conditions were pretty primitive with no refrigeration. One time, Angela had to scrape a green film off a cow’s liver before cooking and serving it to us. One principle of education at Shashi River was that conditions for both teachers and students should

be the same—very basic. If students become used to modern facilities it could inhibit their return to rural areas.

Beth did some sketching, but froze half the time, even while wearing all the clothes she had with her. I joked that she had thin blood and poor circulation from growing up in Papua New Guinea. She told me that she hoped my Lesotho film project wouldn't come through, since that mountainous country is even further south with snow in winter. I asked her with a smile, "So you're coming with me to live in Canada?"

I filmed Janis and his students in a classroom, and then followed the brigade students through their day. The young men were learning new carpentry and building skills, while the young women worked in textiles, weaving material and making handbags, placemats, rugs, and bedspreads. Others learned tie-dye and sewing skills. All their products were sold through Botswana Craft, a government-run retail outlet. Other brigade students worked on a cooperative farm set up by the school to help them learn new agricultural methods. Even the academic students had to get their hands dirty by taking "development practicals," a fancy word for gardening and other activities in which students learned the necessity of doing physical work to build their country. I also filmed students and teachers doing voluntary work, digging an irrigation ditch on Saturday morning, as well as a recreational activity—female students playing basketball.

The experience at Shashi River allowed me to think more deeply about the overall role of education in international development. But what I remember most about the school is the determined faces of these students and their joyous voices, for they sang in harmony while they worked. This would become good background music for the soundtrack of my film. Janis on his motorcycle, reminded me of Peter Fonda in the movie, *Easy Rider* (1969), all the rage at the time.





6.12 to 6.17 – Film images of Janis Kazaks and Shahi River School

My next assignment took us to Tanzania to film Trevor Chandler, a CUSO volunteer teaching biology and apiculture at the Forestry Training Institute at Olmotonyi, a few miles outside Arusha on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. He was tasked with upgrading the training on beekeeping in the country and initiating a long-term research program. He mentioned in his interview that beekeeping in the area probably goes back to the dawn of the first *Homo sapiens* and that mankind and bees evolved together in Africa. Humans probably learned how to harvest honey here, thousands of years ago.

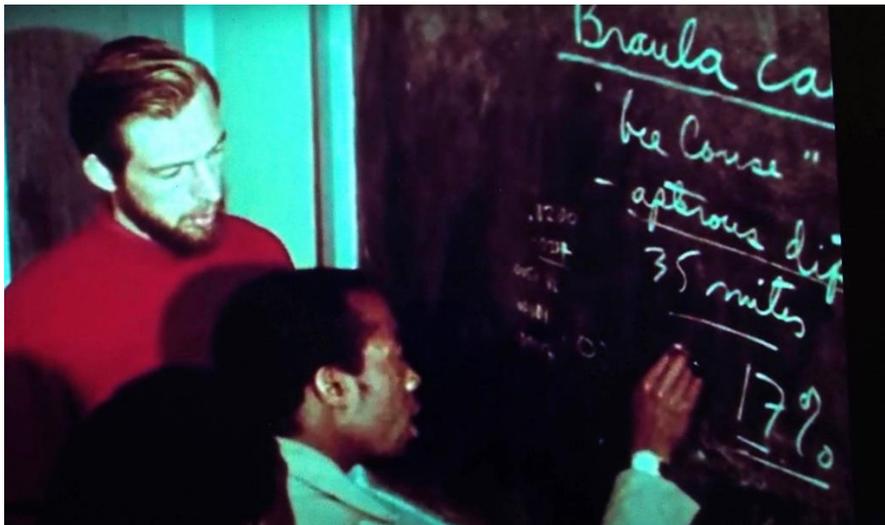
He spent a good deal of time working with Tanzanian instructors, upgrading their knowledge and the curriculum, and giving them access to new information sources. Trevor said that during colonial times, many Africans saw education as a key to escape physical work, allowing them to become bureaucrats in government offices, so he emphasized the importance of practical duties. He wanted his students to spend as long as possible “getting to know bees, getting to like bees, getting to think like bees.”

I also recorded a statement he made, which I knew I had to use: “Research on the African bee is one of the most exciting frontiers of research in the world today.” I didn’t know what he meant by “exciting” until I filmed him opening beehives at one of his experimental sites. I wore a protective hat, face screen, a full-body suit, and gloves, but the sound of my whirling movie camera excited the bees so much that I had to run away as quickly as I could, while carrying the camera and tape recorder. These aggressive insects hit the sleeve of my suit, as well as the underside of a leather belt that held the monopod, on which my camera was mounted. I received about 10 nasty stings on one arm, but fortunately, no stingers lodged in place. My arm swelled for some time, but then just felt itchy.

Trevor thought the whole episode was hilarious. He said that the African bee is the meanest of bees in the whole world. He told me he had plans to capture a much milder species, further up the slopes of Kilimanjaro, and bring it to the research station to breed a less aggressive bee—his plans too late for me!



6.18 - Suited up for filming African bees
Photo by Trevor Chandler



6.19 - Film image of Trevor teaching biology of bees

Beth and I were guests of Trevor and his wife, Dale, in their English-style country cottage, where we sampled his experiments in making a new type of mead, available for export someday, or so Trevor hoped. Beth had access to the tennis courts and other recreational facilities at Olmotonyi, but by this time she was getting pretty tired of her new role of washing our clothes, helping in the kitchen, doing a little sketching, and being a cheery guest in other people's homes. She must have wondered about her decision to leave a busy teaching job in Japan to become a traditional wife. Frankly, at this point I was glad that none of my other filming projects had come through—one more stop in Africa is all that she and our marriage could bear.

At the end of June, we flew to Entebbe, Uganda, to film Ed Tingley, a hard-driving, no-nonsense, 50-something mechanic who opened his interview for the film by stating, “My coming to East Africa is a paradise compared to Port Churchill, Manitoba. I was there for 15 years and before that at Eskimo Point, Rankin Inlet—pretty well all-over northern Manitoba and Ontario in isolated territory. So, coming to East Africa was just another posting to me.”

I directed him to say East Africa instead of Uganda because CUSO didn’t want it widely advertised that we were still operating in Uganda during Idi Amin’s horrific military rule. Unlike the U.S. Peace Corps, CUSO (an NGO), made its own decisions on when to close down a program with a change of government or other factors. Field staff and volunteers stayed as long as their physical safety was not at risk. It took us three days to get five separate ministries to okay my mission and I must say, I never felt safe. Roy Fischer, the CUSO FSO, put us up in his house and drove us around. One time our vehicle was trailed by aggressive soldiers looking for someone to stop and threaten to extract small monetary rewards for their “service” to the country. Roy sped us into his driveway and his guard closed the gate.

Ed Tingley was the kind of volunteer who didn’t care who ruled the country; he just wanted to make sure everything was running properly at the Mechanization Unit of the Department of Agriculture. He was in charge of workshop operations, training of mechanics, and keeping bush clearing machinery running up-country. In his interview he said:

I have quite a bit of paperwork. That’s something I never did agree with—me and paperwork don’t get along too well, and the telephone and radios. If I can dodge ‘em I do, but most of the time somebody catches me and I have to perform on them. The radio bugs you all the time. You just get busy with something and then something’s broken down somewhere, or there’s no fuel or money, so you madly try to take some action at it. No coffee breaks in bush clearing.

I think the Ugandan employees actually liked this rough and tumble guy, who loved to pitch in and get his hands dirty, compared to their former British overlords. When I asked Ed what aspect of his job gave him the most satisfaction, he simply stated, “What I like mostly about my job is that I am succeeding in getting several employees their mechanical certificates, which in turn will help them in making their living.”

I figured that Ed could be a tough boss but would also love to share a few beers in the evening with his colleagues. I’d known this class of hard-working, hard-drinking, skilled laborer while working in my dad’s agricultural machinery manufacturing factory during the summers in my teenage years. I just didn’t expect to find one in Africa.

Finishing filming in Uganda, I reflected that I’d seen and documented a wide variety of CUSO volunteers working in several countries under much more difficult circumstances than I had ever encountered during my two years in Malaysia. I had also gained a good deal of knowledge about various issues in international development.

When Beth and I flew out of Entebbe for Rome on Sunday, July 9th, 1972, we had no idea we would return one day to spend seven years in East Africa, including Uganda. Our future moves were certainly not on our minds. We only wanted to put our feet on the ground in Canada.

7. Serendipitous Transitions

We spent a few days in Rome visiting the usual sites—the Vatican, the Colosseum, etc. Beth was really looking forward to Rome, after a rather boring time for her in Africa, but I was exhausted from three months of filming, and never liked being a tourist anyway. We soon boarded a train to go over the Alps to Munich, Germany, and another to a U.S. military facility in a small town on the border with Czechoslovakia. There, we visited Beth's best friend Dorothea from their days together at the University of Iowa, and Dorothea's husband Gordon, a specialist in Slavic languages. He was monitoring Russian military radio instead of serving in Vietnam—a laudable alternative, I thought.

After a brief stop in London to see a play or two, and obtain a Canadian immigrant visa for Beth, we flew to Ottawa, where I dropped my gear, and took trains to Guelph, Ontario. Then we hitchhiked to my hometown, Elmira. When we arrived at my parents' home, they were away. But I knew where they kept the spare key, so we entered. When they returned, Beth greeted them at the door by offering tea. Needless to say, they loved their new daughter-in-law. She was quickly adopted by my family.

My friends, a married couple by the name of Ed and Toni Panagapka, who had plenty of children, also were enchanted with Beth and held a big party for us at their house. It was there that Beth finally broke down in tears. The trigger was a married couple—strangers to me too—who argued over whose job it was to throw out the left-over pizza from their refrigerator—an enormously trivial thing to be arguing over, Beth thought. Is this what eventually happens in marriages? After our lengthy journey and staying with so many people, she longed for the mental and physical space for just the two of us, so we soon headed to Ottawa in my old Volkswagen, piled high with her belongings shipped to Elmira from Japan. We set up house in a small third-floor apartment at the edge of Ottawa's small Chinatown, with its Asian restaurants and grocery stores. Beth had a few Japanese dishes in her repertoire, and I had only done basic bachelor-type cooking. I suggested to her that she should learn to make more Asian dishes, my favorite.

Besides learning to cook, Beth began to explore what she had started in Japan—Japanese painting and calligraphy, under the instruction of a local Japanese-Canadian artist. Our apartment also followed a Japanese theme, including a simple low-level plywood dining table I made, which required us to sit on the floor. When we invited friends over for dinner, including my film editor friend Sally and my CUSO colleagues and their wives, the table proved too uncomfortable for some. My boss, Iain, expressed his level of discomfort by flopping over on the floor halfway through the meal in feigned agony. Later, I found a few old chairs with backs in the basement, and removed the legs. I painted them blue and Beth did a great job of covering the seat pads in bright yellow and orange cloth. At least older people would have a backrest, even if they had to figure out what to do with their legs, while trying to avoid playing footsie with others.

I got down to editing my two films, which eventually we titled *CUSO in Ghana* and *CUSO in East and Central Africa* (1). I worked at Crawley Films with Sally again, learning even more about editing films. I had already given up the idea of going to film school. Before departing for Africa, I had visited Ryerson Polytechnic College in Toronto and showed them *CUSO in Papua New Guinea*. They told me there wasn't much they could teach me about film production that I didn't already know, and I wasn't interested in becoming a film critic or film historian. I was already enrolled in the best film school of all—an actual working studio. But I began to wonder how I was going to make a living after these two films were finished. None of my freelance film proposals had come to fruition, and CUSO had enough recruitment films for now.

As I considered our future means of earning a living, I received a serendipitous message from Peter Hoffman, the CUSO FSO I had met in Papua New Guinea. He and his wife Barbara had moved to Malaysia to take over the program there, but Barbara was now pregnant with their first child and had a complication that prohibited her from traveling. So, they were looking for a deputy to help Peter with the now very large CUSO program in the country. It would mean being based in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, my old stomping ground, and frequently traveling to Sarawak and West Malaysia—an attractive offer for me to be back in the country I loved. Beth only wanted to settle down in Ottawa and stay there, after living in, and traveling to, so many different places, but I reminded her of the lines in her poem, as reported in Chapter 4:

Let this be the gift from my heart—
 And let my life prove it
 Move where you want to
 I will go with you
 Fight for what you will
 And I'll stay by your side.

Now a married man and feeling the need for more security, I decided we should return to Malaysia. CUSO's personnel director wanted an interview with both of us, knowing that some marriages can fail when subjected to the stress of living and working in developing countries. I was a bit nervous in the interview, probably because my preference would have been to continue making films. But Beth, having been born and spending part of her childhood in New Guinea, passed our interview with flying colors. In addition to Peter's recommendation, I figure Beth's honest answers probably got me the job.

In February 1973, after only six months in Canada, we flew to Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, to begin a new chapter in our lives. There, we were welcomed by Peter and Barbara and I was briefed on my new job. Then I had to take over while they flew off to Canada for medical care.

My time as a CUSO FSO is fully documented in my memoir *Finding Myself in Borneo*, so I won't go into it in detail here. I can't say taking this job was a completely wrong choice, for I have always found that whatever choices you make, you usually learn something new, and something about yourself, which leads to personal growth. I liked working with the Malaysian government people I met and scouting new jobs for volunteers, running in-country orientations for new arrivals, supporting volunteers in the field, editing our CUSO in-country newsletter, and rekindling the North Borneo Frodo Society by recruiting new members. But the overall job wasn't exactly my cup of tea. It involved too much paperwork and bureaucracy, counseling of unhappy volunteers and sorting out their problems. In university, I had studied psychology and had counseled some gay friends, but I had given up that idea of a future for me when I headed to Borneo as a teacher and became a filmmaker.

CUSO's Information Section agreed that I should take the filming equipment with me to Malaysia in case they had some work for me to do while based in Asia. It wasn't until 1974 that I had a chance to get my creative filmmaking juices flowing again in Kuala Lumpur, when I had time to complete the film I had started on my visit to Malaysia in 1971, *CUSO in Forestry...Malaysia (2)*. I had to do some more filming of volunteers in the field, more shots of the forest industry, and an introductory sequence set to music. I worked in a Kuala Lumpur studio to complete the editing, happily cutting, splicing, and viewing for hours on end, often losing track of time.

Also in 1974, CUSO-Ottawa asked me to travel to Laos to film a silkworm project. CUSO volunteers were assisting in restarting the silk production industry as the Vietnam War began to wind down. In 1973, a peace treaty was signed between warring factions in Laos, and on April 4, 1974, the Provisional Government of National Union was established. I was there on a street in the capital, Vientiane, on the day the communist Pathet Lao (Lao People's Liberation Army) entered the city. As I raised my movie camera with its long zoom lens for a good shot, two soldiers across the street raised their semi-automatic rifles, so I graciously lowered my own imposing “weapon.” I don’t remember what CUSO did with my footage of the silkworm project, but I have a clear memory of those soldiers and their guns.

From Laos, I traveled to Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, a country still recovering from its brutal 1971 war of liberation from rule by Pakistan. Arriving in the capital, Dhaka, I recall being put up in a small hotel where I found it impossible to sleep due to the noise all around me, including the frequent call to prayer broadcast over a loudspeaker system on the mosque right beside my room.

I traveled south to a district to film a rural health care extension project, but I don’t remember how CUSO used that footage either. I do have an indelible memory of a senior CUSO volunteer driving me around Dhaka. On a lark, he took me to the gates of a prison where there was a small cement house surrounded by ravens. He flung open the wooden doors and then roared with laughter when a flock of ravens flew off the half-eaten corpse of a former prisoner. It had been placed there for his relatives to collect. I didn’t take a photo to commemorate my guide’s weird sense of humor.

In mid-1974, Peter and Barbara, with their daughter Janne, left Malaysian and I took over the whole program, based in Kuala Lumpur, while waiting for the next director, Roger Campbell, to arrive and be fully briefed. By December 1974, my second two-year stint in Malaysia was coming to an end and Beth was pregnant with our first child. I didn’t want to continue as an FSO but I wasn’t sure what I would do next to earn a living for my family. The world closed in on me; I became depressed.

Then a second serendipitous event occurred. A journalist by the name of Clyde Sanger visited us in Kuala Lumpur. I’d known him from my first stay in Ottawa when I attended some development education film showings. Clyde was now the public affairs head for an interesting international research outfit in Ottawa, which I had heard good things about. He told me his organization may be interested in hiring a filmmaker like me—one who could work economically, taking still photos as well. After he left, I applied in writing and received a warm reply to come and see him when I reached Ottawa. The job was coming together and I was the most likely person for it.

My depression lifted.

PART TWO
JUGGLING FILMMAKING AND HOMEMAKING

8. Stretching the Earth, and the Filmmaker

On a snowy March day in 1975, I entered the offices of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)(1) in downtown Ottawa, where I met Clyde Sanger and his division's director, David Spurgeon. Within a couple of days, I was signed on. After most of a two-year pause, I happily went back to full-time filmmaking.

Beth and I rented a small apartment in Lebreton Flats, a working-class neighborhood of Ottawa, just downhill to the west of Ottawa's commercial center. In early June 1975, we managed to put a deposit on a house at 136 Irving Avenue in the Hintonburg neighborhood west of center. It was only 2.3 miles (3.8 km) to IDRC, and I kept in shape walking to work, even in the dead of winter with icicles growing from my mustache and goatee. It was our good luck to find this house located one block away from Crawley Films, where IDRC rented facilities for me, making my commute only one minute on foot when I was editing. For the first year, we kept the tenant who lived on the second floor so we could afford the variable rate mortgage, which floated upward to 19.5 percent in the first few years—the astonishing cost of inflation in the 1970s. Nevertheless, this old brick house became our happy home for our years in Ottawa.



8.1 - 136 Irving Ave, Ottawa – Photo by Neill McKee

IDRC was created in 1970. It's a Canadian public corporation funded annually by a vote in Parliament and is overseen by an international board of governors. It was the brainchild of former Prime Minister Lester Pearson and Maurice Strong, an entrepreneur who also became a United Nations diplomat. These visionaries assembled the board and hired the organization's first president, David Hopper, an agricultural economist with a background in the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations in India. The main idea of IDRC was, and remains today, to build the research capacity of developing countries so they can solve their own problems.

When I joined the organization, it was rapidly expanding. By the end of the 1970s, it had about 500 employees of multiple nationalities in Ottawa and in offices or sub-offices in every region of the world. IDRC was loaded with Ph.D.'s in social science, education, agriculture and nutrition, as well as public health specialists and medical doctors. Dr. Hopper made it clear to employees that we were not civil servants, which would make hiring and employment contracts very rigid, although we all earned civil service pensions and other benefits.

The organization's program divisions then included Agriculture, Food, and Nutrition Sciences; Population and Health Sciences; Social Sciences; and Information Sciences. The Communication Division, in which I was housed, supported all these program divisions through the production of scientific and corporate publications, as well as more popular reports and stories on IDRC's work through the quarterly magazine *IDRC Reports*, and in newspapers and magazines in both Canada and the developing world.



8.2 - Malaysian researcher interviewing a woman on reproductive health – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

IDRC has its own hiring procedures, which circumvent a lot of the government's red tape. I was hired without even a competition for my job. If IDRC was forced to apply typical government job descriptions to my post, it would have had to be broken down into at least five separate jobs: photographer, cinematographer, sound recordist, film editor, and production supervisor. The organization never could have afforded such a team. I was not given a job description—just get on with it. So that's what I did. On my advice, IDRC purchased CUSO's 16mm movie camera and sound equipment, still in my possession, and after familiarizing myself by studying descriptions and reports on the most interesting and photogenic research projects, I was off to Latin America and the Caribbean on June 22, 1975, a part of the globe I had never seen.

During the next seven weeks, I shot sequences for a general film on IDRC's work, and took 35mm still photos to expand our collection. Susanna Amaya and Jaime Rojas from our regional office in Bogota, Colombia, took turns joining me for various parts of the Latin America portion of the trip, acting as my interpreters. Jaime took some stills and assisted in sound recording.

We were asked to write trip reports and I became good at that, detailing my travels, sometimes in an entertaining way. Luckily I saved these over the years and our many moves. I found Latin Americans to be warm and welcoming. Most people addressed me by attaching an honorific “Doctor” to my name, although I only had a B.A. We started in Mexico City and made our way south through Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela; then I continued by myself to Trinidad, Guyana, and Haiti. I took background film sequences and photos of people in cities and rural areas going about their daily activities, as well as general scenery. I also taped interviews with researchers for film script material and filmed and photographed them in labs and in the field, as they carried out:

- research in Mexico on sorghum and triticale, a wheat-rye hybrid, then touted as a “miracle” grain for the future;
- experiments in Guatemala with coffee pulp by-products as cattle fodder (quite naturally, the coffee pulp made the beasts pee a lot!);
- studies in Colombia and Venezuela on the best models for improved low-cost housing and other services for slum dwellers;
- research in Colombia on cassava, also called manioc (*yuca* in Spanish), a root crop grown in almost all regions of the tropics, from which a starch is extracted called “tapioca” in English;
- investigations in Trinidad on appropriate biological crop pest control methods—an alternative to pesticides;
- saving and processing fish by-catch caught in nets while trawling for more valuable shrimp off the coast of Guyana;
- studies on the effects of a comprehensive rural development scheme near Cáqueza, Colombia;



8.3 - Children near Cáqueza, Colombia – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

However, the most memorable portions of the trip were visits to the health care delivery projects in Haiti, Venezuela, and Panama, but especially in the latter two countries. Before I left Canada, I had already begun talking to Dr. John Gill, who would soon become the director of the Population and Health Sciences Division, and Dr. Yolande Mousseau-Gershman, about doing a film on rural health workers to accompany a 1975 IDRC monograph titled *[Doctors and Healers](#)*(2), an interesting book on the concept of “barefoot doctors.” This was a movement started in China during the 1960s. It spread to many different countries and was further popularized in the 1977 book *[Where There Is No Doctor](#)*(3) by David Werner. The main idea was that, around the world, doctors and health ministries were concentrating on setting up big hospitals and research facilities with expensive equipment, focusing on curative rather than preventative medicine and community health care. Establishing these high-tech institutions made doctors and pharmaceutical companies richer, while they neglected people living in rural areas or urban slums, who had little or no access to such facilities due to physical or monetary barriers.

When I arrived in Panama, I rolled my camera to document a revolutionary project. At the time, the country had about 9,000 small and scattered communities, making it difficult to deliver health care to most of this population. I concentrated on Marciane Jurado, a health worker in the Province of Colón, on the isolated and poorer Pacific Ocean side of the country. With little training, she monitored the growth rate of children; organized community health meetings to formulate plans of action; gave advice to villagers on food and nutrition; and addressed sanitation and hygiene problems, as well as clean water supply. She and 39 other rural health workers, at the time, had become an integral part of the provincial health team. The system continued to expand, thereafter.



8.4 - Marciane Jurado in training – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

This pilot project was the brainchild of Dr. Hugo Spadafora Franco, an Italian-Panamanian physician and former guerrilla fighter. But political turmoil in the country eventually led to his murder, in 1985, by the American-backed government of Manuel Noriega. Despite this, improvements in health continued in Colón Province, where the infant mortality rate dropped from 81.4 per thousand live births in 1960 to 13.5 in 2003, beating the national average. I’m sure

there were many causal factors, but giving communities more responsibility in—and ownership of—their health care delivery was a major one(4).

On our visit to Venezuela, we flew south from Caracas to Puerto Ayacucho on the Oronoco River in the Amazonas Region. From there we joined a health team and made our way over rough roads to a small village 60 miles (97 km) upriver to film Omanyo Prato. He was an Amerindian medical auxiliary who traveled by dugout canoe, powered by a 30 HP outboard motor, to reach scattered communities living in large grass huts along the river bank. He had received only six months of training and worked alone, taking and checking malaria swabs, offering basic medicines, and giving health and hygiene talks to the people. Only the worst cases were transferred to the regional hospital at Puerto Ayacucho, a long boat trip through many dangerous rapids in crocodile-infested waters. Movement is always more dramatic on film, so I followed him in another boat to get the shots I wanted. Fortunately, we stayed afloat and met no crocodiles.



8.5 to 8.7 - Omanyo Prato delivering health services to his people
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

At the time, this project was promising. But Venezuela gradually descended into political and social chaos, while infant mortality rates increased, and many other health indicators declined. Today, the Amerindian population remains at the bottom of a heap of broken promises. At least I caught, on celluloid, a much happier time when it seemed that the indigenous people of the Oronoco had a chance for a brighter future.

After six weeks on the road, I returned to Ottawa on August 10th, and just in time. Beth was about to give birth to our first child. Like an empathetic modern husband, before leaving on my travels I had attended evening classes, practicing rhythmic breathing. The idea was to breathe along with Beth during contractions, to help her overcome the pain. But when the day of reckoning came, after six hours in our local hospital, breathing deeply and pushing, Beth finally gave up and accepted an epidural. Our son Derek was born soon afterward and Beth fell asleep with him cradled in her arms, while I watched over them.

Beth has always been a plan-ahead person, and she knew that the delivery of hospital food followed a strict schedule, so she had packed two hard-boiled eggs to eat as soon as she could after delivering, to help restore her strength. She'd missed dinner and looked forward to those eggs when she woke. Unfortunately, I was so exhausted from my recent long trip, and all that breathing, I ate them during her slumber. At least those were my excuses, although not justifiable according to Beth. As I recall, I went out immediately to look for hard-boiled eggs but came back empty-handed. Everything was closed. To this day, she continues to mention my sin in conversations with friends. Fortunately, our marriage didn't end over two eggs and we had a healthy son to raise together.

I write "together," but six weeks later I was back on the road—this time to West Africa. I was accompanied by Bob Stanley, our senior writer. We began in Dakar, Senegal, the location of IDRC's West Africa Regional Office. Bob was an easy-going companion throughout the trip. His French was better than mine, so he acted as an interpreter in Senegal and Mali, formerly colonies of France. My method was the same as on the previous trip, covering all I could in 16mm film and photos:

- improving sorghum cultivation and small-farmer grain storage methods at an agriculture research station in and around the town of Bambey, Senegal;
- research on resolving rural land tenure issues near Kaolack, Senegal;
- documenting family planning improvements in Bamako, Mali;
- recording the beginnings of an oysterculture pilot project near Freetown, Sierra Leone.



8.8 - Malian women at a family planning clinic 8.9 - Harvesting millet near Kaolack, Senegal
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

Our trip went smoothly except for an unfortunate incident. One afternoon a week into our travels, our driver from the IDRC office in Dakar, a Muslim man we all called “Pap,” was in a hurry to get home from our final rural location. He explained that the youngest of his four wives was about to deliver his latest offspring and I, as a new father, had empathy for that. IDRC’s Deputy Director, Tim Dottridge, had told us he was a trustworthy driver, and Pap, a hefty man, stood about six-foot-five (almost two meters), so who could argue with him about our speed on a gravel road? Suddenly, our Toyota Range Rover hit an ungraded washboard patch as we rounded a curve, and the wheels lost traction. The vehicle glided sideways and hit a small bank on the opposite side of the road. Then we went flying into the scrub bush, turning upside-down and landing back on all four wheels.

Fortunately, I had just told Bob, sitting in the front seat, to buckle up his seatbelt a couple of minutes before the accident. I had mine on and also had the habit of holding my camera equipment on my lap over rough roads. We all miraculously escaped injury—only a few scratches. Pap and Bob got out to inspect the situation. They discovered one flat tire, but the jack was nowhere to be seen. Probably it had flown into the bushes and it was growing dark. I remained in the vehicle, testing all my equipment, and thankfully found no damage. But there we were, stuck in the middle of nowhere, about 60 miles (97 km) from Dakar, among thorn trees.

Pap was distraught but not defeated. He went out to the road and soon brought a whole group of villagers to lift the heavy vehicle with a long hardwood pole, in order to change the flat tire. Then he proposed that we should slowly drive back to Dakar in the wounded vehicle, which no longer had a windshield or windows. Bob and I glanced at each other and opted to hitchhike back to Dakar. We were soon picked up by a fellow in a small truck. Unfortunately, he drove at the same speed as Pap, even on curves. Fortunately, we all made it back to Dakar that evening. I remember hoping that Pap would at least learned a lesson about washboard-type gravel roads, which I knew something about from my youthful days of driving in rural Ontario.

Bob and I had intended to cover some projects in Nigeria. But the regional office had asked the Canadian High Commission in Lagos to seek permission to film. I knew that this had made it a government-to-government affair, and that approval would be difficult and delayed. After my earlier experience in Nigeria, when filming for CUSO, I was not disappointed to miss going back to Nigeria, but knew I’d have to make it up on a later trip. We returned home a week early, around October 20th.

It was great to be back with Beth and our infant son Derek. He was now seven weeks old and could focus his eyes on his father. I spent as much time with him and Beth as possible, while sneaking over to the studio to see the results of my filming, and going to the office to start the photo sorting. Then, in less than a month I was off again, this time to Egypt and East Africa with Clyde Sanger, the man who had hired me. In formal terms, he was my supervisor but he was the most informal non-hierarchical boss I ever had. We traveled well together for five weeks through Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, and Tanzania, gathering film footage and photos, as well as information for stories Clyde wrote for our quarterly, *IDRC Reports*, and English language newspapers in the capitals of the countries we visited. He knew most of the editors and senior journalists.

Arriving in Cairo on November 15th at 4:00 am, a pre-arranged car with a driver took us to Alexandria, where I filmed and photographed a university-based research program on restoring old shelterbelts and planting new ones, using casuarina trees. Shelterbelts are rows of trees that are planted alongside farmland to protect crops on the Nile Delta. They help to keep back invading sands from the Sahara Desert. I took shots of farmers plowing fertile land beside rows of more mature trees, as well as nursery operations at the university and planting of seedlings.



8.10 - An Egyptian farmer ploughing next to casuarina shelterbelts – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

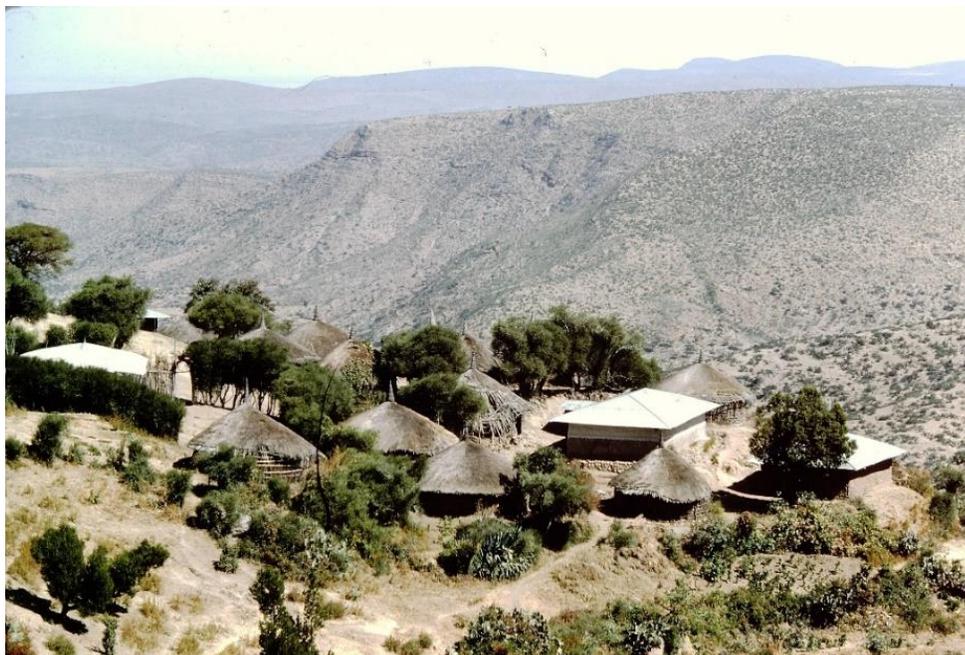


8.11 – Egyptian farm girls
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Returning to Cairo by train, we boarded a flight to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, foregoing a visit to the pyramids. We were purposeful travelers, not tourists. On arrival in Addis Ababa, we were immediately invited to the Canadian Ambassador's house for lunch. We had informed the embassy of our coming, but were surprised by this invite. We surmised the man was lonely because few people visited the country. A drought and famine in 1972 led to the ousting of Emperor Haile Selassie, in 1974, by General Mengistu Mariam, who ran the country through the so-called "Derg," a socialist-military junta. Few western countries wanted to help his Soviet-leaning government but IDRC was independent enough to remain loyal to the scientists it was supporting.

One of the reasons for the famine was that for thousands of years Ethiopians have eaten *teff*—pronounced properly by practically spitting out the "t"—a very fine grain. It's loved for its taste, especially in the form of *injera*, a fermented flatbread with a slightly spongy texture. But the problem with this staple food is that it keeps Ethiopians poor and hungry because up to 50 percent of *teff's* minuscule grains are lost before and during harvest. For a few years IDRC had been sponsoring projects on collecting and cross-breeding sorghum, another native African drought-resistant plant with larger seeds that don't blow away in the wind and are easy to recover if they drop to the ground.

We traveled by road to Alem Maya and Dire Dawa, over 300 miles (500 km) east of Addis Ababa to film and photograph sorghum research. I captured on film the dry landscape, with great ridges and deep valleys. The land seemed primitive, and it was, for not far to the north is Hadar, the place where, in 1974, paleoanthropologists, Donald Johanson and Yves Coppens, noticed a slender arm bone sticking up from the ground. Careful digging uncovered 40 percent of Lucy, a hominid skeleton roughly 3.2 million years old. She was later classified as *Australopithecus afarensis* and given a place in the human family tree. These scientists had a great aptitude for marketing—their "Lucy" nickname came from the popular 1967 Beatles' song, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."



8.12 - Village and landscape near Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC



8.13 - A typical house near Dire Dawa, Ethiopia - Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Dr. Brhane, Project Leader, and Dr. Melak, Dean of Agriculture at the university, made sure we filmed typical village life, including processing and cooking sorghum in the form of *injera*. I recall tasting a sample made by Mrs. Brhane but served in the traditional way—a pile of spicy meat with sauce placed in the middle of the large pancake, and all of us dig in with our hands.

8.14 – Mrs. Brhane displaying her injera
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC



8.15 - Dr. Brhane and an assistant looking over new sorghum varieties

Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Dr. Melak also took us to the ancient walled city of Harar, further south, where for the past 500 years the inhabitants have sanitized the city by feeding its organic refuse to hyenas. That evening, we witnessed one of the famous hyena men sharing pieces of meat with a hyena, teeth-to-teeth, while I snapped photos, or so I thought. I had not properly attached the roll of film to the crank handle, so the film never advanced—the first and last time that happened in my career! I blamed this lapse on the excitement and fear the beast induced in me, especially when Dr. Malek fed the hyena with his hands.

In the research I filmed and photographed, and Clyde took notes on for stories, we learned what was being done to restore sorghum's proper place in Ethiopian diets. It takes a long time to change human eating habits, but today, in Ethiopia, sorghum is the third most important cereal crop after *teff* and maize. It's a staple food millions of poorer Ethiopians depend on, especially in drier areas of their country. It's used for human foods such as *injera*, bread, porridge, infant food, a snack called *Nifro*, and local beverages known as *Tella* and *Areke*. Also, the leaves and stalks are used for animal fodder, cooking fuel, while the stalks can also be employed for the construction of houses and fences. The work IDRC supported in the 70s and 80s, contributed to this success.

Next, we flew to Nairobi, Kenya, where our Eastern Africa Office is based. Clyde had been a journalist in Nairobi in the 1960s and knew his way around. He managed all the permissions we needed through his friends in the Minister of Information. Regional Director Tony Price and his deputy Trevor Chandler (the former CUSO bee biologist I'd filmed on the slopes of Kilimanjaro in 1972) facilitated our visits to film and photograph several Kenya projects:

- research on breeding disease-resistant strains of triticale;
- a pilot project using eucalyptus trees to prevent soil erosion;

- a community-based gravity water scheme to reduce the daily workload of women and girls, who have the main burden of delivering water to households in Africa.



8.16 - Community-based gravity water scheme built by villagers in Kenya – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

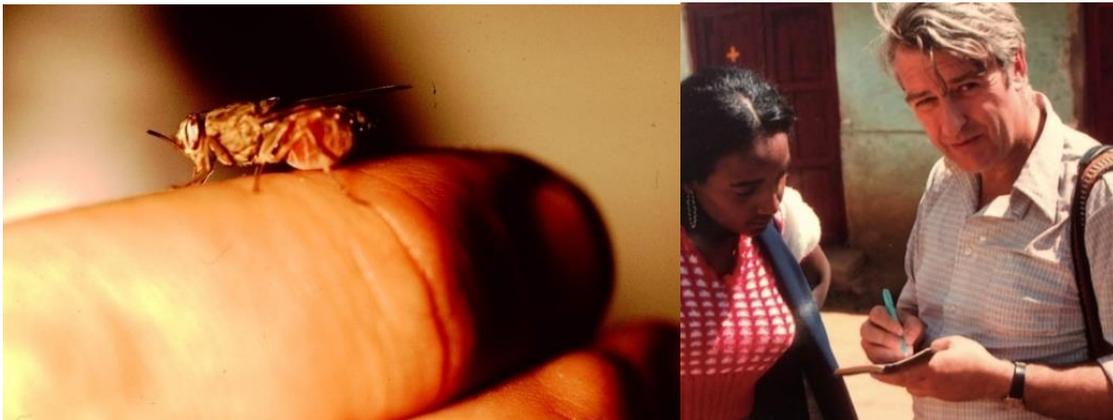
We also visited the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) to film and photograph research on preventing various animal diseases, including trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness), caused by a bite from tsetse flies that have been infected by a parasite of the genus *Trypanosoma*.



8.17 and 8.18 - Researchers at ILRI studying trypanosomiasis – Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

Trypanosomiasis can be fatal to all vertebrates, including humans. Infections in wild animals easily transmit to domestic animals, leading to their sickness and death. Domestic animals are like a bank for small farmers—an investment that they depend on for protein and income. This time, I had an excuse for filming African animals in the wild and in captivity, for they act as a reservoir for the type of trypanosomiasis (*Trypanosoma brucei gambiense*) most harmful to humans. It starts with severe headaches and insomnia, enlarged lymph nodes, anemia, and a rash. Later stages involve progressive loss of weight and damage to the central nervous system. Without treatment, the disease is invariably fatal.

During our stay in Kenya, I had a great chance to see the country from the air, flying with researchers to a sheep ranch, then driving to the land of the famous Masai tribesmen to film cattle being inoculated and dipped in a bath of insecticide to help prevent transmission. Clyde and I wanted to film tsetse flies in action, infecting humans. After many failed attempts, we caught two in a forest near the Tanzanian border, using Clyde's bare arm as bait. Somehow we managed to get the little beasts into a brown paper bag, and carried them with us across Kenya, until they were good and hungry. Then we released them in my hotel room and I got some good shots of them gorging on Clyde's arm—anything for science!



8.19 - Tsetse fly filled with Clyde Sanger's blood.
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

8.20 - Clyde before being bitten
Photographer unknown

Flashing forward, [trypanosomiasis, a disease that caused devastating epidemics, is now a rare human disease due to international coordination on tracking, diagnosis and treatment](#), although it continues to infect wild and domestic animals(5). Much progress has been made, but the struggle continues.

We also had photographed the beginnings of a project on triticale in Ethiopia and were interested to see how a longer-running project was working out in Kenya. Earlier in the year, I had filmed IDRC-supported research on triticale in Mexico, and I wanted to see the process of adaptation to Africa. It's a perfect crop for Africa's periodic droughts and the fragile state of African soils, which are severely and continually degraded by desertification, leaching, and erosion. Despite this, African farmers rarely adopted triticale, whereas utilization and harvests in Mexico and other parts of the world increased exponentially: [167,000 metric tons by 1980 and 4.5 million metric tons by 2013. But compared to wheat's 713 million metric tons that year, triticale production still appears modest.](#)(6) Sometimes in some places research pays off, sometimes in other places it doesn't.



8.21 - Ethiopian researcher and farmer inspecting a triticale trial on his land
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Likewise, sometimes our arrangements worked, sometimes they didn't. We flew to Blantyre, Malawi to film a water gravity scheme on Mount Mulanje, the place I had filmed the McNeil family on an outing in 1972, when I was making films for CUSO (see Chapter 6). On arrival, we found out another film crew had recently covered the project, and the government had clamped down on such permissions, so we failed to achieve our objective. Clyde, who had sensed that it might not be possible, had organized the filming of the similar scheme, briefly listed and pictured above, when we were in Kenya.

People in Malawi evidently had become more and more paranoid since my visit in 1972. Dr. Banda, the anti-communist president, had spies everywhere. Our contact, a British expat giving technical assistance to the water project, was terrified when we showed up without filming permission. He was even more paranoid about an IDRC health and water bibliography he'd received in the mail. It was in English, but the cover was designed in cardinal red with some Chinese writing because many of the sources within came from China. It was as if IDRC had sent him a copy of Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*. He gave it back to us, asking us to take it off his hands. We laughed when he told us this, but he didn't appreciate our levity on the matter. We gladly took the book from him, but wondered why he had not simply shredded or burned it.

Next, we made a brief visit to Dar-es-salaam, Tanzania, a country that had no problem with information or lessons from China. President Nyerere, a socialist, remained in power. We covered an experimental intercropping program, an adult education class, and an attempt to adapt a compost toilet model from Indochina, which kills bacteria and parasites in human feces with solar radiation. The objective was to use the output as field manure—a pretty “far out” attempt, I thought. How could you convince Africans to carry their own feces and dump them on their fields?

We arrived home on December 22nd, just in time for Christmas, and my son Derek didn't have a clue who I was, for I had been gone for most of his short life.



8.22 - Candles more fascinating than strange people – Photo by Beth McKee

We took him to Elmira, to see his McKee grandparents, and then to Iowa in early January 1976, where he was baptized “Derek Daniel McKee” by his maternal grandfather, Rev. Diemer, who was home on leave from Papua New Guinea. Beth remained a Lutheran and I was doing my fatherly duty. Rev. Diemer and I never discussed my religious beliefs. I'd first met him during Christmas 1972, in Iowa, before Beth and I went to Malaysia, and thought it was wise not to bring up the subject of religion.

On our return to Ottawa, I prepared for my longest trip of all, to Asia and back through Iran and West Africa. Fortunately, the long journey was broken in the middle by a visit from Beth and Derek, who flew to Singapore to join me, courtesy of IDRC, while I covered projects there and in Malaysia and Thailand. At the time, the organization had a rule that if an employee traveled for work over 100 days in a year, it would cover the cost of the spouse going on the next business trip. By then my son was getting the hang of things and not playing strange as much when the funny man with the dark mustache and goatee popped up, even on the other side of the world.

I had a daunting task to achieve in Asia, due to the expectation expressed by Nihal Kappagoda, IDRC Regional Director. Besides agriculture, aquaculture, health, and family planning research, I was asked to cover new studies in slum rehabilitation, resettlement projects that provided sites and services—fancy words for water supply and toilets—and low-cost transport for the massive influx of Asian populations from rural areas to cities. Rather than providing a boring list, let me express my work during those weeks in a less detailed, more entertaining way:

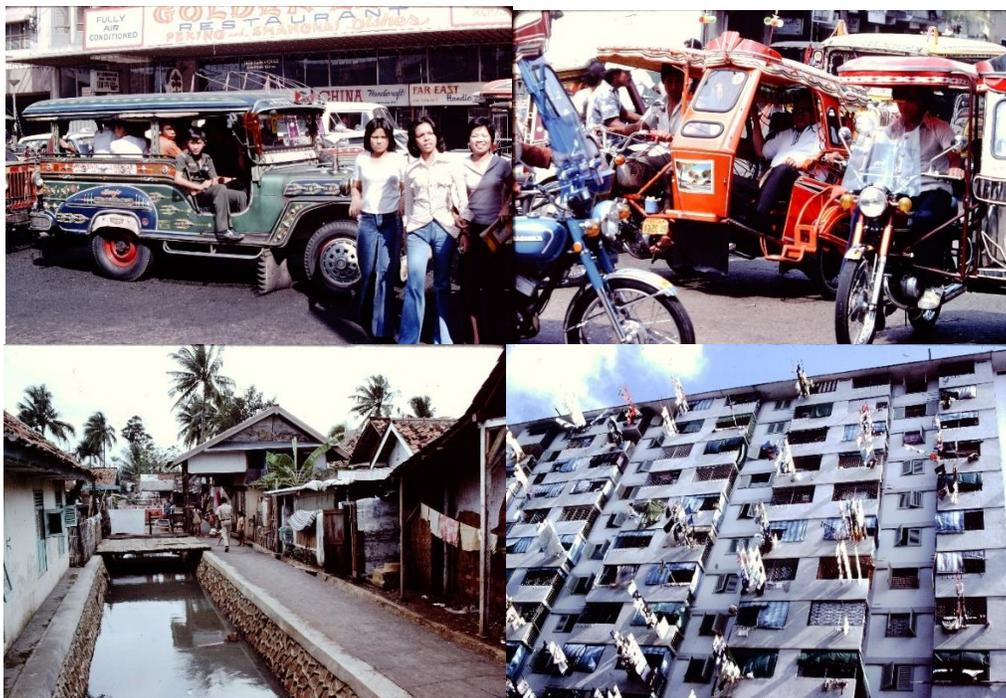
Arriving in Singapore, Nihal assembled his legion, who fired off cables to project leaders in the region. Then I flew to the Philippines to cover small-scale industries, cropping systems, milkfish aquaculture, and other fisheries. Not to forget plant varietal screening and processing beans,

jeepney transportation, improving slums, and resettlement schemes.

Next to Hong Kong for low-cost housing and an information center,
then to Indonesia for research on making village life better,
more on transportation by trishaws and three-wheel scooters,
cassava processing for use in various animal fodders.
Back to Singapore to meet my wife and son,
and to rest a few days halfway through my run.

Then to Malaysia but with no time for browsing,
while filming family planning and low-cost housing.
A visit to a cassava microbiological project organized,
and then another to one on rural water supplies.
Finally, in Kuala Lumpur, we toured old haunts,
and dined at some of our favorite restaurants.

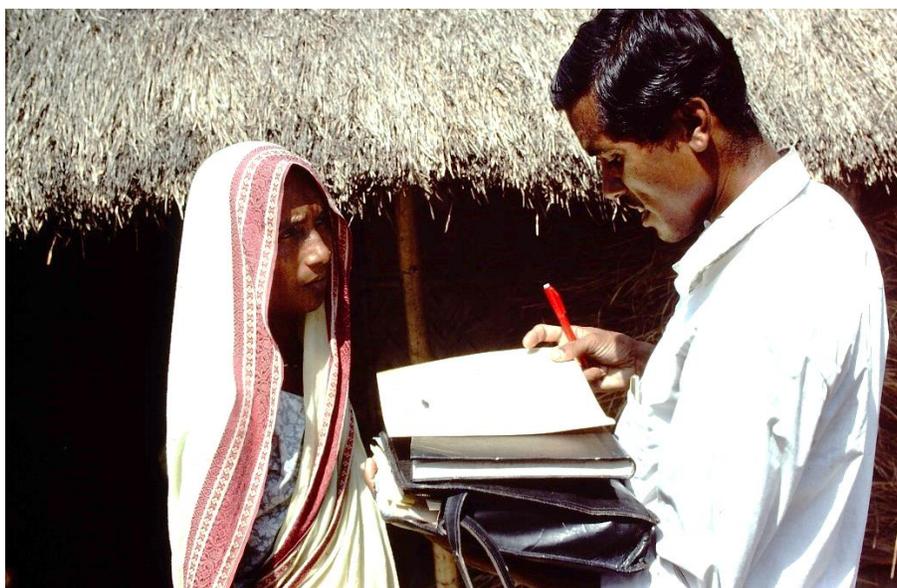
Next to Khon Kaen, Thailand to film health volunteers—
villagers trained to deliver basic services to their peers.
In Bangkok, a national youth corps, and boating on klongs
for shots of slums, temples, factories, and fish ponds.
Then a nutrition project and contraception distribution,
ending on affordable transport, and a housing solution.





8.23 to 8.30 - Some scenes I filmed: low cost transport and housing, plus rural health workers in training – Photos by Beth McKee

From Bangkok, Beth and Derek flew back to Singapore to pick up two daughters of a Chinese-Malaysian family, the Yaps—friends from Sabah, whom we had helped to emigrate to Canada. It was an exhausting trip for Beth because Derek hardly slept until he got home. I continued on my mission, traveling to Bangladesh to film a rural health project in Companyanj, a district south of Dhaka, and then to Teknaf, at the very southern tip of the country. I was accompanied by Dr. Mujibur Rahman from the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh. There I filmed the operations of a new *Shigella* dysentery project.



8.31 - Bangladesh researcher surveying woman in Companyanj

Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

From Bangladesh I flew to Hyderabad, India, to cover an agriculture project, and then headed to Tehran, Iran, where I caught a flight to Shiraz, Fars Province, in the south-central part of the country. There I met Dr. Hussein Ranaghy, a visionary medical doctor based at Pahlavi University. He was training female primary health workers to treat children's respiratory diseases in the winter, and diarrheal diseases in the summer, as well as monitoring children's nutrition and growth, delivering advice on feeding and hygiene, inspecting water supplies throughout the year, plus giving talks on health in schools. In 1976, there were 12,000 doctors in Iran for a population of 33 million, with half of them in the capital, Tehran, and most of the rest in other cities or large towns.



8.32 and 8.33 - Woman health worker addressing a class of pupils, both boys and girls
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

I focused on Mrs. Bonar, one of 46 such health workers in the area. Their services were linked with a cadre called *bedar*—health technicians who could deal with 90 percent of cases referred to them, sending only 10 percent to physicians, including new graduates doing obligatory national service in small towns all over the country. Only a very small percentage of patients ended up in hospitals.



8.34 - Mrs. Bonar talking to a mother on child health
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

This seemed like a well-designed, forward-looking system—the sign of an advanced and organized ancient culture. I had time to visit and photograph Persepolis, situated 37 miles (60 km) to the southwest of Shiraz, ruins that date back to 515 B.C.E. This was, unfortunately, my only visit to Iran, for less than two years later, the Islamic Revolution began. At the time of my visit, Mrs. Bonar, dressed in a white doctor's coat with only a kerchief on her head, was training a younger woman to take over from her. Some of the younger women didn't wear head scarves. I never did learn if the project was stopped by the repressive government that took over. Were these women forced to remain at home?

By this time on my long journey, I had reached a saturation point. But I wanted to finish all my travels and start editing the film footage and sort out all the photos, so I decided to soldier on, as planned, to Nigeria, where I encountered a series of late and canceled flights. I did manage to film and photograph research on a special sorghum and millet mill and test kitchen in Maiduguri, a city in the northeast; then I flew south to the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in Ibadan, where I filmed plant breeding experiments to prevent cassava being infected by a blight disease, and the making of more nutritious food products with cassava flour, tapioca, known as *gari* locally.

From Nigeria, I made my way back in Senegal, where I found myself driving northward along rural roads with Pap, the driver who had crashed IDRC's Range Rover with me and Bob Stanley, only six months earlier. The vehicle had been restored and Pap had not been fired. Thankfully, Pap had learned to slow down on washboard gravel roads. We were laughing about our previous misadventure, me communicating with him in my basic French, when suddenly Pap halted the vehicle, looking this way and that, and muttering under his breath. We were lost in the Sahel. But this new challenge led us to the site of Fulani tribesmen at a well with a massive congregation of their cattle and goats—a spectacular sight to film.



8.35 - Fulani tribesmen with their herds – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

We finally arrived at Mbidi Forestry Station to cover rangeland reforestation research, using various species of trees, which would hold the soil in place and increase rainfall—attempts at developing a more humid micro-climate in an increasingly parched landscape. I also filmed and photographed the harvesting of gum arabic from *Acacia senegal* trees—a valuable sap used as a stabilizer in foods and soft drinks, as well as an ingredient in traditional printing, paints, glues, cosmetics, and other industrial applications.

Not to be outdone by such a practical conclusion to my extensive travels, the workers at Mbidi organized a more entertaining ending, when I had a chance to film a tribal dance, complete with prancing camels. Afterwards, we feasted on goat legs roasted over a fire, and then I fell asleep on a simple mat in the open air, while gazing up at a majestic display of stars over the Sahel.

My travels were over, for the present. According to the trip reports I wrote and kept all these years, I had visited 77 project sites in 26 countries, and by the time I reached Ottawa, I had survived 104 take-offs and landings. Clyde wrote the script for my first IDRC film and we decided to give it the title, *Stretching the Earth*. Clyde also wrote an article for our magazine on my travels during the past 10 months, which he titled, *Stretching the Filmmaker*.

9. Healthy Filmmaking at Home and Hearth

I recall the remainder of 1976 and most of 1977 as a wonderful period for me and my family. We gave our upstairs tenant notice, took over all of our old house, and I finally had time to make some improvements on weekends. The upstairs kitchen served as Derek's bedroom, furnished with a handy, much-needed sink for an infant. Our backyard with its tall cedar hedge became our private park and picnic place, where Derek could practice his walking skills. With warmer weather, Beth made inroads in the community, meeting other women with their young children in parks, gradually forming a playgroup that gathered in a nearby community center, where they met on rainy days and in the winter. This was exactly the kind of home she had been seeking. She wanted nothing more than to settle down here for the rest of her life. She applied for and became a Canadian citizen in October 1976, in a ceremony with a judge and a Royal Canadian unmounted policeman—so Canadian, eh?



9.1 - Beth becoming a Canadian – Photo by Neill McKee

Beth had gladly left the United States in 1970, shortly after the Kent State University massacre, when Ohio National Guardsmen killed four and wounded nine unarmed students as they protesting America's involvement in the Vietnam War, and its expansion into Cambodia. She was overjoyed at becoming a Canadian, and so quickly.

We also reconnected with former Malaysia CUSO volunteers, now making a living by working for international development organizations in Ottawa. Peter and Barbara Hoffman, who we worked and sometimes stayed with on my second Malaysian sojourn, had bought a house about 10 minutes from us by car, and were juggling jobs and raising their two children, Janne and Chris. With such people nearby and new friends, I figured that Beth was never left completely alone while I was away.

I recruited H el ene, a spunky young French-Canadian woman. She quickly learned the ropes and got down to work running the photo library and projecting slide shows for visitors in our beautiful little theater. This allowed me to spend more time at the studio, cranking out films. Besides our global 22-minute film, *Stretching the Earth*, with the help of my colleagues, we produced several regional briefing films: *Common Task* for Latin America, *Continent in the*

Making for Africa, and Asia: The Search for Solutions. We also made French and Spanish language versions for use in Canada, West Africa, and Latin America. I continued to hire the services of my editor friend Sally MacDonald.

I was keen on fully utilizing the footage I had taken on rural health systems in Panama, Venezuela, Thailand, Bangladesh, and Iran during my marathon travels. But the Health Science Division decided we should include an initiative in Canada as well, which wasn't funded by IDRC. In February 1977, during our usual deep freeze in Ottawa, I flew to Regina, Saskatchewan, into an even colder arctic chill, to do a sequence for the film. At Regina airport, I rented a car to drive to the Qu'Appelle Valley 30 miles (48 km) to the north. As I entered the Piapot Indian Reserve, now called Piapot First Nation, I looked down on a small group of buildings in the wilderness and wondered, *What could the Cree people be doing here "Now that the Buffalo's Gone,"* as Buffy Sainte-Marie sings. She had been born into poverty on this reserve, in 1941, before being adopted by Albert and Winifred Sainte-Marie of Massachusetts.

When the Cree leaders and the Government of Canada started the health system here in 1964, they were wise enough to understand that health was not just a segment of someone's life. They needed a broad educational approach that covered everything from how and where people placed houses and found a source for clean water, to their daily food needs. I interviewed and filmed Eugenie Lavalie, an elderly health worker who had joined the system shortly after it began. She had recently retired but had trained a younger woman, Violet Piapot, to take over. I filmed Violet weighing children and keeping health records on each child in the community, visiting the local primary school to give health talks, and assisting the supervisory nurse from Fort Qu'Appelle with immunizations.

In my interview with Eugenie, she talked about the holistic approach she took to health care, involving the community in each step. Reflecting on her years of service, she said, "I used to go by seasons: accidents in the winter, and in the spring it was X-rays for TB, and stuff like that, and clean-up. In July, it was gardens and in August judging of the gardens—everything pertaining to health is what I worked on."

When I returned to Ottawa, I completed the editing and production of a film we titled, [*Rural Health Workers*](#)⁽¹⁾ using the Saskatchewan footage, along with that from the five similar projects I had visited. Through this work, I came to understand the importance of expanding the delivery of basic health services to millions of people in places where few doctors will go. IDRC funded pilot projects that were at the forefront of this movement.

This film was my first production on a specific IDRC program, one of the Health Sciences Division, and it would lead to many more. The second request I received was a challenge. It came from the Information Science Division. They wanted me to make a film on the worldwide agriculture information system, which IDRC supported. In May 1977, I traveled to Costa Rica, Colombia, and Venezuela for this purpose. Jaime Rojas of our Bogota office assisted me. Fortunately, my division had just purchased a synchronized camera and sound system for me, one of several filming packages first acquired by the Canadian Broadcasting System (CBC) for use in covering the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal. Here was my chance to try out my Éclair 16mm camera and high-quality compact Stellavox tape recorder.

To enliven the film, I opened and closed with an end-user of the information, a subsistence farmer in rural Colombia, plowing fields with his cattle and talking to an extension agent. My newly purchased filming technology brought the scene alive. The four parts of an agricultural information system: researcher, planner, extension agent, and end-user, were emphasized in our

14-minute film. In [Thought For Food\(2\)](#) I outlined that these four linked components are the basis for success in any development research discipline, including health and social sciences.

For this film, I employed basic animation to demonstrate agriculture information dissemination between the sub-national, national, regional, and global levels—all seeking to avoid duplication of efforts. Without animation and the inclusion of the farmer, my film would have been totally boring—only meetings, printing presses, documents, libraries, and rooms of those now ancient computers with magnetic tapes running and spitting out paper records.

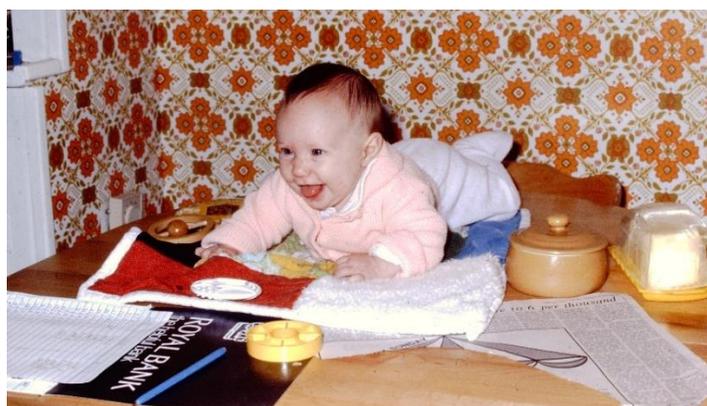


9.2 - A farmer ploughing his fields
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC



9.3 - Trying out my new filming equipment
Photo by Claude Dupuis/IDRC

I arrived home in the first week of June, and just in time, for our daughter Ruth popped into the world. I write “popped” because Beth’s water broke at home and I had to frantically find a babysitter and rush her to the nearest hospital. She was wheeled up to the delivery area while moaning through contractions. There was no way to use those breathing exercises this time, for I peeked under the covers and shouted to the nurses, “Hey, I see the baby’s head coming out!” The hospital staff ran over to take a look and immediately wheeled Beth into the delivery room. It only took one or two pushes and Ruth popped out, screaming about such an abrupt and unceremonious entry into this world. Our doctor, who liked all things natural, didn’t make it to the birth, but he showed up about an hour later, carrying his motorcycle helmet. He said it would be okay to leave in the morning, after Ruth received some standard medication. Beth hated hospital routines and food, so, we took our new baby home around 10:00 am.



9.4 - Ruth a few months later – Photo by Neill McKee

Ruth Alma McKee was baptized at the end of June by Beth's Lutheran minister, Pastor Rath. I found this man to be somewhat traditional and authoritarian, like Beth's father, so I only attended church at Christmas and Easter, and never took communion. I don't know what names he called me, but I privately called him "the Wrath of God." He didn't want me involved in Ruth's baptismal service.

Inspired by the birth of our daughter, I took out the back wall of our westward-facing kitchen and installed a sliding glass door. Outside I built a deck high above the ground and stairs down to the thick green June grass. On the deck's railing I fixed a steering wheel so Derek, almost two by then, could drive the whole deck as far as his imagination could take him, and Ruth also, when she was ready to fly.

By then we started going to our favorite place on the Ottawa River for picnics with my editor friend, Sally. She would pack an old picnic basket with crackers, cheese, and other goodies, including a bottle of wine. We would drive to a spot near a large tree with low branches, which the kids could climb, as they got older. The Ottawa River is about a third of a mile (500 meters) wide at this point, with dangerous rapids, so we didn't swim. Looking upriver to the northwest, we viewed long-lasting orange sunsets, and to the east, we could see the foaming water as it rushed towards cliffs, with Canada's parliament buildings perched on top.

This stretch of the river had hosted the history of our country—Huron, Algonquin, Iroquois, and Outaouais tribes, who during 1613 to 1615 guided Samuel de Champlain, the first French explorer to penetrate the interior; followed by young Frenchmen—*coureurs de bois* and *voyageurs*—many of whom married native maidens and trapped and traded while mapping the continent. Then Scots and Irish traders, farmers, miners, and lumbermen, who floated great timber rafts downstream to sawmills. Sally had read all the history and loved to refer to it in our conversations. We breathed in the fresh air and her stories, as we sipped wine and watched the children romp around us, hopefully avoiding all the Canada goose droppings. Picnics with Sally became a delightful part of our children's experience of growing up in Ottawa and memories Beth and I will never forget.



9.5 - Our picnic spot and willow tree bedside the Ottawa River
Photo by Neill McKee

That summer I also returned to my childhood by doing some fishing in a small boat with Robert Yap, the Malaysian immigrant, whom we had helped settle in Canada, along with his family. We caught a few pike and bass—a meager reward for a long day’s effort. An even worse outcome was the excruciating back pain I felt when I stepped out of the boat. I had had a back injury while working in my dad’s factory in my teens, and another from my first parachute jump during my university days, but had escaped any acute reoccurrence until that fishing trip. I had been jogging most mornings to keep in shape, but without doing proper warm-ups. I believe my new injury was also an outcome of all my travels, which entailed slogging heavy filming equipment around the globe.



9.6 – Our meager catch soon to be made into Chinese fish ball soup
Photographer unknown

I was glad not to have to travel again right way. Although only 32 at the time, my back felt like that of a 60-year-old. I tried proper exercises and laid off jogging for a while. Eventually, I took classes in a body awareness through proper movement—the Feldenkrais technique. I also found a medical doctor who carried out chiropractic manipulation and prolotherapy—injecting a special solution into the ligaments up and down my spine to strengthen them. My back recovered, but I had to be careful to only sit on chairs with proper back support and I began to carry a lumbar cushion with me wherever I went.

The other therapy that saved me was Transcendental Meditation (TM). My younger brother Philip had taken it up and even traveled to Spain to study at Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s TM institute. In 1968, the Beatles had visited this Maharishi in India for spiritual replenishment, and by doing so, they helped spread TM worldwide. Philip taught me the basic method and gave me my secret *mantra*—a sound I repeated in my head for 20 minutes, two times a day, while breathing deeply, sometimes falling asleep, which was okay, according to Philip. Eventually, I learned how to do this just about anywhere, even in busy airports. Learning TM helped me survive the busy years to come.

After spending a period of healthy recuperation in Canada with my growing family (except for that brief trip to Central and South America), it was time to take my lumbar cushion and *mantra* and leave home and hearth once more.

10. Getting an Education on Education

As a kid in the early 1950s, during the post-war baby boom, I sat in crowded classrooms, drilling on the alphabet, copying letters and numbers from the blackboard into small brown notebooks, cutting colored paper and pasting designs prescribed by the teacher. I graduated to doing arithmetic on blackboards and reading storybooks with simple images, while daydreaming about playing cowboys and Indians, hiking in the woods, fishing, and catching rabbits in traps. I don't think my teachers knew who I was or what was going on in my mind.

In February 1978, I found myself in a very different primary school in the Naga Valley on Cebu Island, Philippines—probably one I would have done much better in, as a child. I saw no crowded classrooms. Children were broken up into small groups, helping each other work through learning modules. Older pupils facilitated small groups of younger ones in open learning kiosks with thatched roofs, while the teacher moved from group to group—observing, answering questions, making corrections, and sometimes taking a pupil aside to work with him or her alone.

These schools buzzed with excitement as my new synch-sound camera rolled, while an American based in Hong Kong, Frank Green, recorded the sound. We followed the on-the-spot direction of Don Simpson, IDRC's Associate Director of Social Sciences for Education, and Rosetta Mante, the director of the project. This project was run by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO-INNOTECH)(1). Filipinos, I found, loved long names and acronyms. They called it Project IMPACT, which stood for "Instructional Management by Parents, Community, and Teachers." Rosetta and her team had dreamed up the project with Don and Pedro Flores of IDRC's Singapore Office. They believed that cost-effective innovations in primary education could be found to overcome the problems that blocked progress.

What problems? With exploding populations in most developing countries, there were many obstacles to children's enrollment and retention in school. For one thing, there were not enough teachers and classrooms at the time, and teachers' training and salaries soaked up 80 percent of education budgets. I had seen it myself when I was a volunteer teacher in Sabah, Malaysia, only 600 miles (965 km) from Cebu. When I was sent there, I knew little about education because I was never trained as a teacher. I had to learn on the job. I took up filmmaking instead of teaching as a profession, after leaving Borneo. One reason was that I always found schools too structured, routine, and boring. But the schools I captured on film in Cebu appeared exciting and vibrant—something very different.

We filmed meetings in Manila and in the project's headquarters in Cebu City, as well as steps involved in the production of illustrated color-coded modules adapted from the national curriculum. They were reproduced using inexpensive typed-up templates run through ink-based copiers—no expensive printing at all. These step-by-step learning modules were easy to revise and for the children to work through in the Community Learning Centers, as they were called instead of schools. Over 1,000 pupils were enrolled in five centers in the Naga Valley, a lush tropical location that provided a great background for our film.

If they had to drop out of school for a period—as many children did for the harvest season, caring for farm animals, helping to babysit younger siblings, or working in their family's business—when they returned, they could be tested for recall and fitted into the appropriate module for their level, instead of being required to return to, and perhaps struggle in, a fixed grade.

Traditional educators might look at these centers and shake their heads. To them, the learning environment would look chaotic with no walls between classrooms, and children scattered all around the schoolyard. But beneath the apparent chaos lay a system in which pupils signed individual contracts for learning objectives, and teachers were not faced with a mass of children, not knowing what was going on inside their heads. Pupils could be shifted to different groups and configurations, and older pupils learned leadership skills as peer group leaders. The system involved a lot of reading assignments and far less rote learning than traditional primary education.

Radio lessons were also beamed in from project headquarters, and then pupils would continue with the content they were exposed to over the airwaves. We captured a scene of a pupil practicing by reading a module to her mother at home. Literate parents were encouraged to become part of the system.

Involvement of families, communities, community leaders, and local educational officials was paramount for the success of Project Impact, and we filmed meetings of all this. We also captured sequences of a local carpenter teaching basic skills, and students working with a tailor in his shop. Now, why didn't that happen when I was a kid? We had such a variety of businesses and industries in my hometown to demonstrate, as well as farms all around us. I don't think I would have daydreamed so much.



10.4 - A Filipino boy wondering how the girls got so smart
Photo by Clyde Sanger/IDRC

From the Philippines, we flew to Jakarta, Indonesia, and then onto the city of Solo to film a similar educational experiment in a rural area. There were differences, of course—flexibility was needed, but both systems employed the modular approach to pupils' progress and peer group learning. Also, both included lots of physical exercises and cultural education, such as music and dancing. In fact, I used a sequence of a graceful group of Indonesian girls dancing to traditional gong music for the end of the film.

Preliminary results of the project demonstrated a 30 to 50 percent savings in imparting primary education to pupils. One of the greatest fears about this experiment came from some traditional teachers who saw that they might be replaced in such a radically different system.

This did not happen, for eventually more and more teachers were trained and classrooms built. Elements of Project Impact spread to other countries, such as Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Jamaica.

[A 1981 evaluation report\(1\)](#) of Project Impact revealed that:

The graduates of the Impact schools were equipped with the needed knowledge, skills, and attitudes for further schooling, and that they compare favorably with graduates of conventional schools as shown by evaluation of their performance or achievement, self-concept, and attitude. Likewise, Impact leavers compare favorably with non-Impact leavers in achievement, self-concept, and in the nature of their post-school experiences. The learning modes in the Impact system enabled learners to gain as much knowledge and as many skills and positive attitudes as are gained by those who are under the direction of professionally trained teachers. The Impact modules met the objectives of basic education as well as professional classroom teachers. The Impact learning system, which is more economic than the conventional school system, is just as efficient as the conventional system and the fear of the parents about the inefficiency of programmed teaching and of the modules is not supported by the achievement and the outcomes of this evaluation.

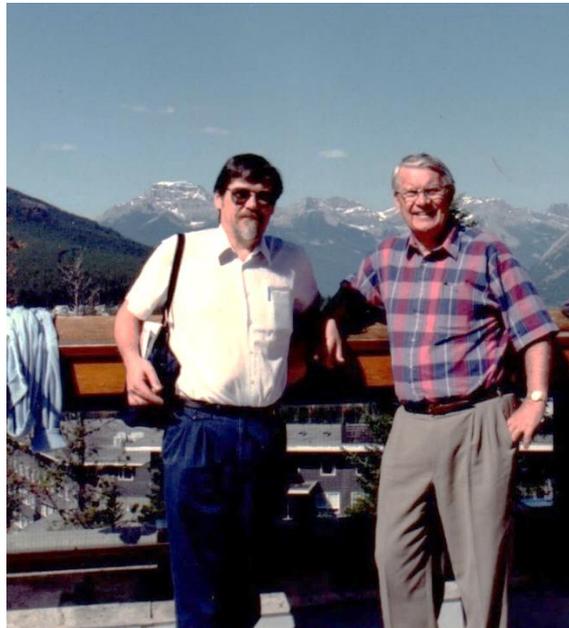
My brief exposure to this educational innovation widened my horizons. Bit by bit, I was gaining knowledge into new ways of thinking about world development. My job was like attending a “university of the world.” But the best thing about making this film was working with Don Simpson. He was one of the only Ph.D.’s in IDRC who wanted to stick with me through the whole filmmaking process. His attitude was that he was learning as much about filmmaking as I was about education. He even helped to lug around my heavy equipment when required. And in the evenings, over dinner and drinks, we had in-depth talks about education and development, as well as a lot of laughs.

When we wrapped up the filming and returned to Canada, I started the final creation process. By this time, I had graduated to using a Steenbeck editing table, then the greatest thing for filmmakers. It was easy to while away the hours at Crawley Films. Don joined me in seeing our rough footage once I synchronized all the sound, and later returned to write the narration. For Don, the dissemination of results of development research was just as important as the interventions themselves. Visibility brings attention and discussion, and possibly more resources from other sources. IDRC’s job was to think up big ideas that have consequences and possible impact, not only to contribute to the publication of more academic papers to further careers. We titled our film [Project Impact: the Overview \(2\)](#), and also made another more instructional film for implementors titled [Project Impact: the System\(3\)](#), in which we detailed the elements of the innovation in the Philippines.

I had first come to know Don in my CUSO filmmaking days. In the early 1970s, he was running an international resource center at the University of Western Ontario (UWO), in London, Ontario, linking that institution by computer with resources at the University of California’s system—not easy to do in the 60s and 70s. He incorporated my films into orientations for CUSO volunteers before they left for their overseas posts. Don started as a high school teacher but completed his doctorate in history, writing a dissertation on the African Canadian population of Southern Ontario, which later was published as a book, *Under the North Star: Black Communities in Upper Canada before Confederation* (2004)(4). In this book, he detailed the life and times of many people who came to Canada to escape slavery in the US, as well as how many returned to fight in the Civil War. Many remained in the U/S. after slavery was outlawed, but many returned to Canada to become community leaders. Due to Don’s interest

in people who struggle in the face of discrimination and hardship, he developed a deep love for Africa. He helped set up the NGO, Crossroads Africa, and was the first CUSO regional director in West Africa, based in Ghana. After leaving IDRC, he became the Director of the International Business at the Ivey School of Business at UWO.

There were periods that we were not connected, but we kept meeting up in various places. One was in 1991, when he was director of an innovative program at the management center in Banff, Alberta. Then we lost contact until, in 2002, as I was walking through Union Station in Washington, D.C., I saw the familiar face sitting in the station's central hall restaurant, with all his papers spread out on the table. Sure enough, it was Don. From that time, we kept in touch and I followed his many activities and transitions. While I write, he continues to work on collaborative initiatives through his company, Innovation Expedition, with the many people in his extensive network of people interested in finding solutions to complex problems, which involve diverse stakeholder. I had the pleasure of working with him once more during the last assignment of my career.



10.5 - Author with Don Simpson at Banff, Alberta, 1991
Photo by Ruth McKee

Through making Project Impact, I was educated about education and innovation, while Don Simpson's request for my services led me to make many more films on specific projects.

11. Making Films on Food for Africa

The rest of 1978 and 1979 were busy periods for me. The Agriculture, Food, and Nutrition Division (AFNS) asked me to do a film on cowpeas, often called “black-eyed peas” in North America, where that variety is most popular. Andrew Ker was the IDRC researcher and project officer who pushed me to make this film, and he had the full support of his director, Joseph Hulse, who we secretly called “Joe Pulse” because of his love for legume research. (For non-agronomists, a pulse is the edible seed from any legume plant.)

Actually, cowpeas are beans, not peas. The cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) was domesticated in Sahelian Africa around 3,000 to 4,000 years ago and remains a very important food in the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia. It was brought to the Americas by Portuguese explorers and settlers. The plant does well with few inputs, such as fertilizer, because its root nodules are able to fix nitrogen from the air. This makes it a valuable crop for subsistence farmers who may not have enough manure and cannot afford chemical fertilizers. Other crops, such as sorghum and millet, also benefit from the nitrogen produced from this natural fertilizer when they are intercropped with cowpeas. After harvesting the beans, the rest of the nitrogen-rich plant is a valuable food for animals. In some areas, people also cook and eat it as well. The whole plant is an ideal food, providing protein, starch, minerals, and fiber.

Filming the cowpea story took me to Upper Volta (now called Burkina Faso), in West Africa, as well as back to the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in Ibadan, Nigeria. We covered all aspects of research: breeding new species that are insect and disease resistant, field trials with farmers, and intercropping. When we finished the film, we titled it [*Pods of Protein*\(1\)](#). It was very technical and instructive, aimed at budding agriculture researchers and extension workers.



11.2 and 11.2 - Researcher cross-breeding cowpea varieties at IITA
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

There’s not much more to write about in shooting a film on cowpeas, but that’s not so when it comes to my further experience with the way things work in Nigeria. I traveled east by road from Ibadan to Lokoja on the Niger River, with a British team member whose name I didn’t record, but I believe it was Jack Owen. On arrival in Lokoja late in the evening, we went to a large government-owned hotel where Jack asked for two rooms for us and one for our driver.

The Nigerian man behind the counter had been dozing and we woke him up. He replied, “We don’t have rooms.”

Jack continued, “Well, do you have one room for us and one for our driver?”

“We don’t have driver’s rooms.”

“Do you have one room for all of us?”

“We don’t have any rooms in the hotel for you.”

“What about the large annex I see over there? You must have room there.”

“They are occupied.”

“But there are hardly any vehicles parked at the hotel. Are you sure there aren’t any free for us?”

“No. We don’t have rooms.”

Jack looked at him blankly, while I stayed silent. He knew the culture better than I did. He continued this line of inquiry for some time, never losing his cool. After about 10 minutes, he motioned to me to step back from the counter to discuss our strategy. In a hushed tone, Jack said to me, “This will take a while longer.” He took his wallet from his pocket and asked me to do the same. He pulled out a wad of Nigerian Naira (one Naira then worth 60 cents U.S.). We walked back to the counter where he started again, “Do you have one room for us and one for our driver?”

The man looked at the money, and said, “We don’t have any clean rooms. The cleaners have not come.”

Jack replied, “Well, can we see a room? It’s late and we aren’t fussy.”

The man behind the counter continued with more excuses for a while, but finally said.

“There’s one room that is possible but someone is sleeping there.”

“So, it’s rented?”

“It’s occupied.”

“Can we see it?”

Finally, the man gave up and told an old attendant to take us to the room. There he banged on the door and woke up the occupant. The sleepy man gathered his things and left, and the attendant went to fetch clean sheets and towels—real service. It was too late for dinner in the hotel and decent restaurants would be hard to find, Jack told me, so we had to go to bed hungry. Fortunately, the room had mosquito nets.

While the old man was gone, we discussed the matter. It was apparent that relatives of the hotel staff were occupying some of the rooms without payment. Our inducement of flashing cold hard cash was the only thing that could break the barrier. We went back to the counter and paid while the old man went to find a suitable room for our driver. I thought, *Hopefully, he won’t have to sleep with someone’s relatives.*

The staff of IITA, including the Nigerians I worked with, were very pleasant and accommodating. There were many enjoyable moments during our travels, but this experience overshadowed them all, and I became pretty good at acting it out for colleagues and friends when I got home. It took another decade before Nigeria began to privatize hotels and other state-owned enterprises. This was my third trip to this troublesome country and I figured, three strikes and you’re out.

It’s not enough to grow and harvest beans and grain. I knew a little about that from my CUSO filming days in Ghana, and I received a full education in post-harvest technology when I was asked by IDRC’s expert in the area, Bob Forrest, to make a film on it in Kenya. There, I had a completely different experience with government-run operations. I worked with a team of Kenyans in the Crop Storage Section of the Training and Extension Service, Ministry of Agriculture. They supplied a qualified sound technician, David Malungu, and I quickly trained

him on my sound equipment. The leader of the team was James Kwanzu, a seasoned extension officer, and Christopher Warui, an entomologist, wrote the script with me. We traveled for three weeks from the coast to the highlands, the Rift Valley to Lake Victoria, as well as the drier lands further north. This was the first time I had seen the full glory of Kenya and experienced Kenyan culture, hospitality, and teamwork—a rich experience I shall never forget.

When a non-African looks upon a traditional Kenyan village, he or she will notice some larger round houses (*rondavels*) and a lot of small ones. Some of the smaller ones may be for second or possibly third wives, but many are grain storage bins. For most Kenyans, the grain is maize—what we call “corn” in North America. If you tell a typical Kenyan that this grain came from the Americas and was first cultivated by Amerindians, you’ll get an expression of disbelief. Most Kenyans, as well as many other eastern and southern African people, do not feel that they have eaten until they’ve had their daily allotment of maize meal, cooked for breakfast as porridge, and for other meals as *ugali*, a drier form, which you mash with your hand, mixing in some braised collard greens called *sukuma wiki*, and beans if you have them, or meat for special occasions. Other traditional grains and starches, such as sorghum and cassava can be substituted to make *ugali*, but if they are given a choice, most Kenyans will choose maize.



11.3 – Christopher Warui, entomologist, inspecting quality of maize in a village storage bin
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

In our film, we focused on maize storage, from the subsistence farmer to large government reserves, or temporary storage silos used before export. We made the film instructional and slow-paced, so the Swahili version could be used to educate rural audiences through the Extension Service’s mobile cinemas. The team worked together to translated the English script to Swahili, and I recorded James doing the narration before leaving the country—a most efficient operation.

During this trip, I learned about the millions of dollars of food wasted in Kenya each year, due to poor storage methods, and the ways the extension team was teaching farmers to prevent this loss, such as: proper drying methods before storage; raising the small storage bins off the ground with poles; installing metal guards on the poles to block invasion by hungry rats and mice; keeping the ground around bins bare and clean to deter insect damage; and preventing the development of mold by making proper ventilation holes, and rain-proofing roofs and sides.

I also filmed entertaining sequences, like a woman singing her head off while harvesting maize, and many more scenes demonstrating the natural beauty of the country. I don’t think I

wholly appreciated Africa before this trip. In the evenings, I joined my Kenyan colleagues in eating *ugali* and a *sukuma wiki*, but I have to admit it got a little boring. I never grew partial to African food after my years in Asia.



11.4 - On location with my Kenyan crew
Photographer unknown/IDRC

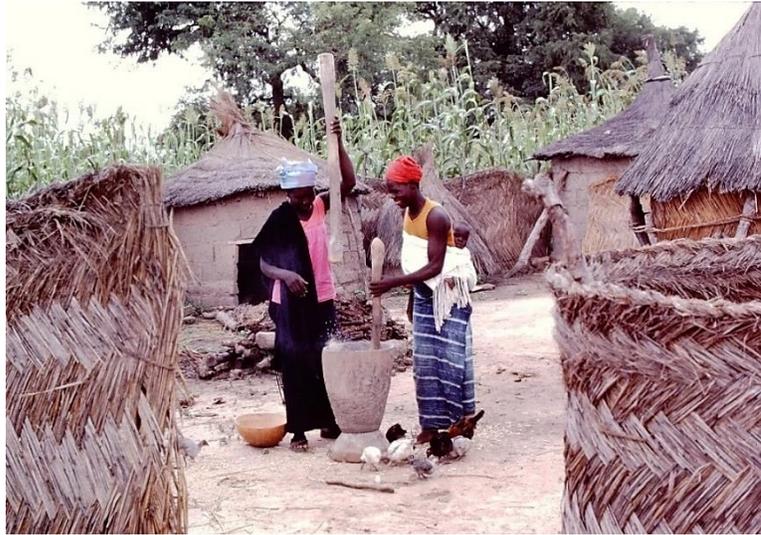
When I returned to Ottawa and completed the film, we titled it [*When the Harvest is Over*\(2\)](#). The Swahili version, especially, was used by the Extension Service team for years and viewed by thousands of farmers in evening shows and discussions. It was my first attempt at making an instructional film, educating villagers on means of improving their lives, and higher-level managers on improving their systems.

With my “certificate” in proper grain storage, I proceeded to learn about the next stage of African post-harvest technology. A few months later, I flew to Johannesburg with one of our science writers, Rowan Shirkie, where we rented a car and drove through the northern farmlands of South Africa, still firmly held in the hands of white South Africans—the racist apartheid system continued in that country. As we headed northwest, the countryside became drier with more thorn trees, rather than the lush land held by the whites. Given our political opinions on the matter, we felt like spies.

We entered Botswana near the town of Lobatse and drove on until we reached Kanye, a medium-size African town made up of tin-roofed rectangular houses and thatched-roof *rondavels*. It was surrounded by dry farmland with fields of sorghum and millet—indigenous African crops, rather than maize. These African grains do well in this drier climate. The problem was these grains are covered with a hard hull, which has to be soaked in water to make it easier to remove. The dehulling process frequently involved two or three women working together, rhythmically pounding their pestles into a single mortar, while singing to relieve themselves of the monotony and backbreaking labor needed to feed their families.

After dehulling, they had to let the rough flour dry in the sun and then winnow it several times to separate the yellow and bitter-tasting hull from the desired white kernels of sorghum. Then, the rough flour was pounded once more to make it fine—just the right texture for making

porridge or drier dishes. It would take a woman an hour to process just one kilogram (2.2 lbs.) of flour, and some of the moisture remained in it, making it spoil if it wasn't used immediately. To avoid these tedious tasks, some women had started buying imported maize meal from stores—a big expense for them. This, in turn, led many women to find ways to earn money for their families, such as working in textile cooperatives or retail stores. These were good reasons for developing a new technology to dehull the grain.



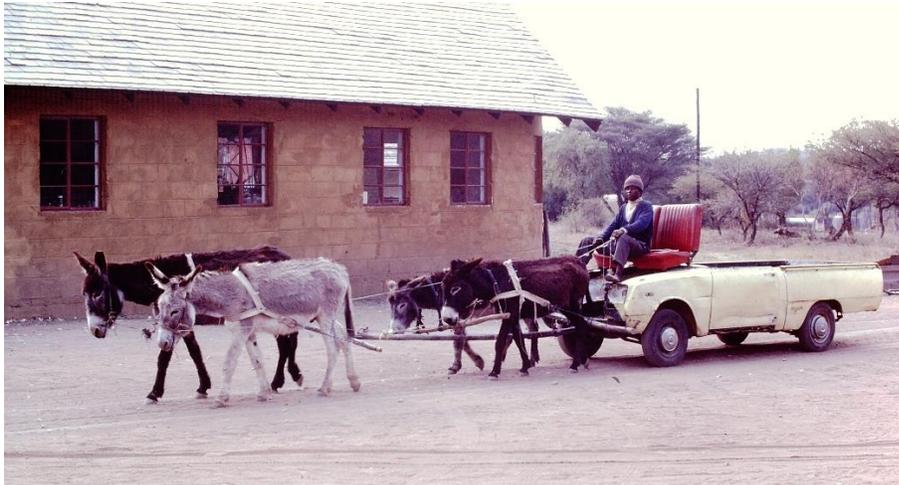
11.5 - African women pounding sorghum with a tradition mortar and pistil
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

The project was centered at Kanye's Rural Industries Innovation Centre (RIIC). By the time of our visit, the RIIC team had already made good progress on the development of a grain mill that could dehull sorghum and millet without losing much of the good nutrients inside. The team had scaled down a larger Canadian-designed version of a grain dehuller, used by the Botswana Agriculture Marketing Board. The larger model was successfully operating to satisfy urban markets such as the capital, Gaborone, but was doing little to stimulate wider rural grain production. The RIIC team had made improvements to the rotating grinding stones used in the machine, which was driven by a small diesel engine. It could also dehull millet, maize, and cowpeas.



11.6 - RIIC's mini-dehuller- Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

I filmed a line of customers waiting for service outside the mill—a good sign—and interviewed a woman by the name of Mrs. Msese. She brought 20 kilograms (44 lbs.) of sorghum grain to the mill to be processed—a very satisfied customer. A half-day's work had been done in just a few minutes. She didn't have to carry the heavy grain to the mill or return home with the flour sack on her back, for the RIIC engaged local drivers. One of them had a cart made from an old car, pulled by donkeys, which could be rented for a small fee. What could be more appropriate than this technology?



11.7 - Kanye's version of appropriate, low-cost transport
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

So, did this pilot project in Kanye have any impact? I found [a year 2000 report by ICRISAT, the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics\(3\)](#), online which made me smile. Its summary reported:

By 1982, 17 sorghum mills, each including at least one dehuller and hammermill, had been established. RIIC supplied the machines and offered a training course in machinery maintenance to entrepreneurs buying the machines, and to operators hired to run and maintain the equipment. Twenty new mills were established in 1990, and 33 mills were established between 1991 and 1995. Between 1996 and 1998, another 75 dehullers and hammermills were installed. New mills were being established virtually every month. Almost all these mills sought to produce sorghum meal for the retail market. The industry for the production of sorghum meal had become highly competitive.

The majority of these mills now buy grain for processing and sale through local retail shops and supermarkets. The status of sorghum has changed from being a food security crop largely consumed in the rural areas, to become a commercial crop competing in the urban food market. The development and expansion of the industry was due largely to the ready availability of suitable processing technology, provision of capital grants for commercial investment, and consistent access to high-quality grain.

In truth, much of the sorghum now consumed in Botswana is grown in South Africa. I suppose that's okay for apartheid ended in 1994 when Nelson Mandela came to power with a democratically elected government. Since the time of my visit, Botswana has become a relatively

rich African country due to the discovery and mining of diamonds, starting in 1982. That has led to the over-reliance on diamonds in the economy, and the increasing poverty of many due to inequalities in wealth distribution. I prefer the “technological gem” that IDRC helped to develop in Kanye. True and impactful development has to take place from the bottom up and must focus on improving the lives of women, especially. We called our short film, [*An End to Pounding*](#)(4) a title that would resonate well with African women.

A big surprise for me was to meet Richard Carothers at RIIC in Kanye. He is the man I dubbed “Tanga Man” in the CUSO film I made on him in 1971 (see Chapter 2). He was solving various problems in appropriate technology, and gave some advice to the crew working on the dehuller, although it was not his focus. He had adapted to the culture—living humbly in a thatched roof hut and was learning Setswana language—his usual style of operation.

Following the release of *Tanga Man*, Richard kept popping up in my life out of nowhere. First, we met up again in the early 1970s when I was back in Ottawa, editing films. Then, in 1976, on that East African filming and photography trip with Clyde Sanger, I bumped into him at a gas station in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. He was fueling a motorcycle he had borrowed while on a vacation from Canada. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Now we met again in rural Botswana and spent the evenings reminiscing and talking about his work and life in Kanye. After that, I bumped into him in an Ottawa restaurant when I was on leave from one of my overseas postings. Today, Richard owns his own plane and takes me for rides when I meet him in Canada. A lifelong friend with a similar experience and outlook on life to mine, he’s one of the best results of my African journeys.



11.8 and 11.9 - Richard Carothers and his airplane – Photos by Neill McKee

12. Documenting Oysters in Mangrove Swamps and Seas

In late January 1979, Beth and I took a break in Jamaica, leaving Derek and Ruth with neighborhood friends whose children were their playmates. We perched ourselves in a small hotel on a hill overlooking the Caribbean Sea in Port Antonio, a town on the northeast coast of the island. We read books, ate, walked, made love, and slept. This was Beth's first real break from motherhood and she missed the kids, so believe it or not, we returned a day earlier than planned—a dedicated mother. She had even arranged for postcards to be dropped in our friends' post box every day, each one with a different letter spelling out their names—a dedicated teacher.



12.1 – A much needed break from motherhood – Photo by Neill McKee

I had arrived in Jamaica a week before Beth to film some sequences on an IDRC experiment in oysterculture. William Herbert (“Bert”) Allsopp, Associate Director for Fisheries and Aquaculture in the AFNS Division pushed me to do films on his projects. He was a distinguished Afro-Guyanese man born in British Guyana. He spoke with an impeccable British accent, having received his education in Britain, like many Guyanese of his generation. Bert Allsopp and project officer, Brian Davy, were great advocates for popularizing their science of fisheries and aquaculture.

I had visited the Sierra Leone oysterculture project in 1976, when it was just getting started, and returned to do more filming, for it was more advanced than the one in Jamaica. I was welcomed by Abu Bakar Kamara, Project Leader, whom I interviewed on oyster farming rafts in mangrove swamps—anything to liven up the subject, for oysters just sit there—no movement or sound to record for my movie camera.

I also interviewed his biologist, Cho Wellesley Cole, whom I found to be an attractive and articulate young woman. When I met her, she told me, “I’m Canadian too.”

I asked, “What do you mean? Your accent is more British than Canadian.”

She smiled, “My ancestors came from Nova Scotia in 1792.”

“Really?”

“Yes, they were slaves in the American colonies, and they escaped to Nova Scotia to be on the British side around the time of the Revolution. They were among over 1,000 of these people who decided to return to Africa. We’re called Creoles, and we helped to found the first permanent ex-slave colony in West Africa.”

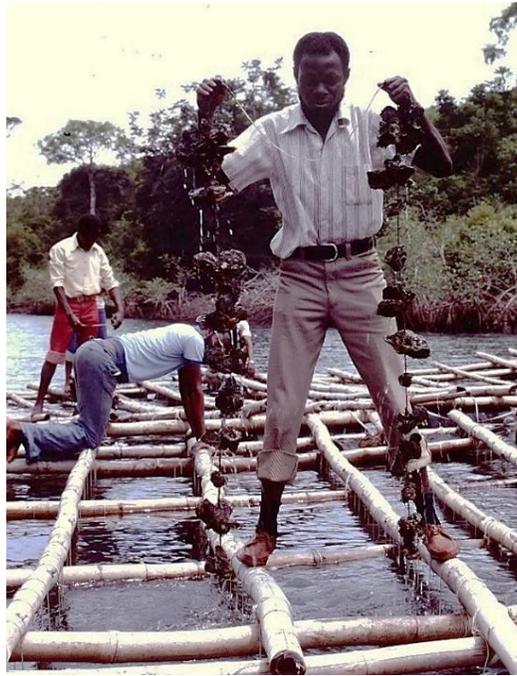
That made sense. Sierra Leone was colonized in 1787 by freed slaves from England, as well as Nova Scotia, and others who arrived from Jamaica in 1800. The territory became a British crown colony in 1808. I shouldn’t have been amazed that Cho knew her people’s history so well. The Creoles had become some of the most educated people in the country.



12.2 and 12.3 - Cho demonstrating the difference in size between natural and cultured oysters – Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

The capital of Sierra Leone, Freetown, is located on the Freetown Estuary, consisting of 100 miles (161 km) of coastal mangrove forest, a natural habitat for oysters, which lodge on mangrove roots. Since fish supply is seasonal in this part of West Africa’s coast, oysters became an important source of protein for the coastal population. But the problem with relying on the natural growth of mangrove oysters is that they spend half of their life out of water at low tide, and therefore only grow to a small size. Another problem with harvesting them directly from mangrove roots is that people in small canoes use large African knives known as “pangas” to cut the roots and bring the oysters home to shuck. Continual cutting is damaging the mangrove trees. An improved method of growing and harvesting oysters was needed.

In Sierra Leone, the experiment involved culturing oysters on strings hanging from bamboo rafts, which floated on oil drums. This new system allowed them to be submerged in water all the time, with the result that they grew three times as large in less than half the time. Two oysters three inches (8 cm) in length, can provide enough meat to satisfy an adult’s daily protein need—all nine essential amino acids plus many of the vitamins and minerals.



12.4 - Abu Bakar Kamara, Project Leader, demonstrating his pride and joy – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

I left Freetown with a good amount of excellent footage on a flight to Lagos, Nigeria, to catch another flight to Nairobi, on the eastern side of Africa—a 10-hour trip of 5,668 miles (3,522 km) in all. I feared the stop in Lagos, worrying that my luggage, including my exposed oysterculture footage, would be lost. Sure enough, when I arrived in Nairobi, the suitcase containing my precious footage, unused film stock, and my lights for interior shots were nowhere to be seen. I stayed at the airport, waiting for it to come out, and then insisted on going through the hole where the luggage came out and taking a ride on a small vehicle to the offramp of the jet I had arrived on to see if it might be there. (This was long before international terrorism had reached its peak, so I could get away with such antics.) I had no luck. The Kenyan airport staff were accommodating but probably amused by my behavior. There was nothing more I could do. This demonstrates how precarious filmmaking was before the days of instant playback on high-quality video.

The next morning, I had to catch a flight through Johannesburg, South Africa, to Swaziland (now called “Eswatini”) to film an agriculture project. I stopped in Johannesburg to buy new filmstock and rent a set of portable lights. To make a long story short, on returning to Nairobi airport about a week later, I walked into the luggage area and spotted my missing suitcase sitting in a corner with other lost luggage. Luck returned to me once more—my oysterculture sequences were saved!

Filming oysters took me to other locations during 1979, including a shoreline near Nanaimo, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, where I filmed and interviewed Daniel Quayle, one of the world’s experts on molluscan biology and bivalve culture. He became a technical advisor for my film. He had been the Director of Fisheries for the Province of British Columbia (1956-57) but didn’t like bureaucracy much, so he retreated to the Pacific Biological Station at Nanaimo, where he was located for most of his career. I didn’t know at the time, but on writing this book, I

found out he'd been a pilot in World War II and had been shot down over Germany, spending a year and a half as a prisoner of war(1). I now understand why this tall and gentle soul loved the quiet shores of British Columbia and its peaceful oysters. But at the time I met him, he remained adventuresome in retirement, flying off to the tropics on consultancies for IDRC and other agencies, after a long and successful career.



12.5 - Dan Qualye choosing fresh oysters
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Dan had a great sense of humor. He picked up and shucked a large fresh oyster on the shore full of the creatures, offering it to me and saying, "Here you go."

I said, "What do you want me to do with it?"

"Eat it."

"Just swallow it?"

"Sure," Dan replied.

I said, "You go first."

He swallowed it and quickly shucked another, offering it to me. It went down with difficulty. I almost threw up. I must admit, I have never liked oysters on the half shell, no matter how fresh they are. Dan agreed that my preference for cooked oysters was safer because in the tropics they are more than likely to contain all sorts of contaminants that could lead to severe diarrhea and even death, especially if raised and harvested near human settlements. I stuck to cooked oysters throughout my travels.

Next I flew to Tokyo, Japan, where I met up with Frank Green, the filmmaker I had hired as a soundman for Project Impact. Somehow I persuaded my new director, Reg MacIntrye, that I needed a soundman for this film, even though oysters make no noise. We made our way to Hiroshima, where oysters have been farmed for at least 400 years and where I could film large-scale operations, although not in tropical waters.

Through Bert Allsopp, we made contact with another world expert, K.Y. Arakawa, who arranged for us to be taken around, filming from a boat on the Inland Sea, a vast expanse of saltwater sheltered from the winds, currents, and high tides of the Pacific. Here they use old

oyster shells hung on racks to collect the spat, during the summer. The spat, or seed, are minute oysters that attach themselves to any hard surface; then they are separated and hung on long lines from bamboo rafts in deep water to let the oysters grow for two years before they are harvested, using boats with mechanical winches to raise the heavy strings. We filmed men chopping off the bottom stoppers on the strings, allowing the whole line of oysters to quickly tumble onto the collection ships' decks. I learned that one raft usually carries 600 strings, producing an average of 360,000 oysters from which three tons of oyster meat is harvested.



12.6 - Harvesting of cultured oysters on Hiroshima Bay, Japan – Photo Frank Green/IDRC

We filmed thousands of oysters pouring off boats onto conveyor belts, going through mechanized washers, and then to lines of Japanese women shuckers. The women were experts at this task, using their traditional tools and methods, which allow each one of them to shuck up to 3,000 oysters per day. There were over 600 family businesses like this in the area. We included Japan in the film to show the potential of oyster farming. Could the same be replicated in tropical waters in societies with much different cultures?

This visit also allowed us a chance to see the Hiroshima Peace Park and Museum, ground zero for the August 6, 1945, atomic bomb dropped by the United States Armed Forces, which led to the death of 140,000 people. After staring at graphic photos on the horror of that day and its aftermath, we sat on a bench in the park and meditated, marveling how the people of Hiroshima, so productive now in so many endeavors, such as oyster farming, had risen out of the ashes.

Next, Frank and I flew south through Hong Kong to my old stomping grounds, Sabah, Malaysia, to film another IDRC experiment in oysterculture. The project leader, Lim Aun Luh, a Chinese Malaysian, had devised a complicated system of growing spat on coconut shells or on asbestos-cement strips placed in racks. Then after five weeks, they moved the trays to growing areas in deeper water. After a period, the larger oysters were cut off the culch and placed in trays

for further growth. In only a year in this climate, an oyster could reach marketable size. But to me, the process seemed to entail too many steps to be done economically, at scale.



12.7- Cleaning oysters in trays at low tide in Sabah, Malaysia
Photo by Frank Green/IDRC

This visit was well worthwhile, for we learned about and filmed problems that can occur with tropical oyster farming, including biofouling—the buildup of seaweed, barnacles, and other growth on oyster shells. These problems occur when oysters are submerged continuously. We also filmed attacks by predators, such as small snails (called “oyster drills”) and crabs, which can kill off stationary oysters, especially those sitting in trays. In addition, there was competition for space from Sabah’s timber extraction industry—loose floating logs could do great damage to trays. Also, expanding coastal settlements meant possible fecal contamination. Oysters are great water filters and they collect dangerous bacteria.

My second line of doubt about this Malaysian experiment was cultural. The Muslim population of Sabah—mainly coastal dwellers—was increasing rapidly with migration from the Philippines, and more fundamentalist Muslims, at least at the time in Malaysia, considered all types of shellfish—prawns, shrimp, lobsters, crabs, and oysters—to be *haram*, forbidden food, even though there is no such verse on this in the Quran or the Hadith. In fact, there’s a verse in the Quran permitting the eating of all seafood: “And it is He who subjected the sea for you to eat from it fresh flesh and to extract from it ornaments which you wear. And you see the ships plowing through it, and [He subjected it] that you may seek of His bounty; and perhaps you will be grateful.” (Surah Nahl, Chapter 16 verse 14).

Having lived in Malaysia for four years, I knew that this was a losing argument, especially with the growing trend of Saudi Arabia’s brand of fundamentalist Islam in the country, fueled by oil money for new mosques and religious teaching. Most of the Christian and animist Kadazan and Murut natives continue to live inland and have little access or taste for seafood, so the end consumers of oysters would be largely the urban Chinese population in cities and towns, who loved shellfish served in many dishes. But most of these people were not protein deficient, so the

project's aims seemed to be more about advancing science rather than solving immediate problems in human nutrition.

When I returned to Canada and edited the film, I ended it with a sequence of a Chinese Malaysian family happily eating fried oysters and rice with chopsticks, set to traditional clanging Chinese musical instruments as the credits rolled. We titled the film, [*Oyster Farming in the Tropics*\(2\)](#).

I searched for signs of success in Sierra Leone and Malaysia today, but could not find anything resulting from IDRC's support that had been brought to scale. Perhaps my doubts on the Sabah experiment were right. In 1991, Sierra Leone descended into 25 years of civil war, military coups, and political unrest, causing the deaths of thousands of people and the displacement of over two million. On top of that, the Ebola virus struck the country in 2014, and by the time it was contained in 2016, it had infected more than 14,000 Sierra Leoneans and killed almost 4,000, devastating the country's economy. I did find some evidence of [an oyster farming private sector project being supported by British foreign aid](#)(3). Today, oysters remain a favorite dish among the coastal people of Sierra Leone, so as the country goes forward more peacefully, the findings of IDRC's work there may eventually be put to use.

What about the trials in Jamaica? In my internet investigation, I was surprised by what had happened since 1979. I found a video report online about a successful start-up: [Oyster farming by the Green Island Friendly Fisherfolk](#)(4) on the northwest coast of Jamaica. Due to overfishing and climate change—warming water temperatures, storm surges, and rising water levels—fish catches in the area have decreased. In 2017, the Jamaican Government's special climate change adaptation fund came to the rescue with assistance in financing, technical training, business methods, and marketing plans for the community. I read a [newspaper report](#)(5) of how such activity was expanding and that [experimental oyster farming was taking place in Kingston Harbor](#)(6). The object was to expand the practice substantially and thus restore the quality of the coastal waters, using the natural filtering system of oysters.

So, the lesson here is that we have to be patient with oysters, for oysters have always been patient with humans. Anthrozoologists estimate that the first oysters appeared in the Triassic period, over 200 million years ago, when dinosaurs ruled the Earth. Maybe oysters can be used to help clean up the mess we have made of the planet or maybe they are just patiently waiting for our disappearance to clean up after us, and live for another 200 million years, along with more respectful Earth mates.

13. Filming Fish from the Earth's Vast Oceans

During the same period, I had been asked to produce another general film on IDRC for its 10th Anniversary celebration in 1980. By then, Dr. Hopper had left to become the Vice President for South Asia of the World Bank, and Ivan Head had taken over as President. He had been a legal scholar and foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau. Mr. Head's appointment was seen as a move to ensure that IDRC would retain its annual grant from the Parliament of Canada during more conservative-leaning times. He thought that a new film would help. So, I had to get back on the road again to cover more recent developments. The shooting script we wrote required stops to do sequences on projects such as:

- research on the effects of industrial development on women working in factories in rural Malaysia;
- a study on the effects of breastfeeding and birth spacing in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico;
- a pilot project on sanitation technology and hygiene education in the indigenous populations of Guatemala;
- cropping systems and fish marketing research in Sri Lanka;
- shelterbelt research and an agriculture information system in Tunisia;

In addition, I returned to Alexandria, Egypt, to film a fascinating study on the use of Damsissa (*Ambrosia maritima*), a naturally-occurring plant with promising molluscicide effects to control snails that live and reproduce in the canals and ponds of the Nile Valley. These snails host parasitic flatworms (blood flukes) of the genus *Schistosoma* that cause the debilitating disease of schistosomiasis (bilharzia), in people who come into contact with the water in those canals and ponds. On that visit, I also had an opportunity to take a few shots of the pyramids and a display in a museum in Cairo of Damsissa being used for the same purpose in ancient Egypt. As I gazed at these artifacts, I wondered, *Does our quest for knowledge just go in circles?*

My stop in Alexandria also gave me a chance to take a few shots along the seafront of this famous city of Lawrence Durrell's novels, *The Alexandria Quartet*. It was winter and the waves of the Mediterranean crashed against the shore that day. Here is a place where western



13.1 - Fisherman fighting winter wind, Alexandria, Egypt
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

thought had crashed into, and perhaps been absorbed by, eastern mysticism and religion for over two thousand years. I thought of the ideas behind Durrell's writing, the convergence of East and West, and about all I had seen during my journeys in the past few years on land and sea—a moment of reflection while being splashed by cold Mediterranean water.

During that period, I also experienced warmer waters of the South Pacific. Clyde Sanger, who had moved to the Commonwealth Secretariat in London, had asked IDRC if they would allow me to make a film on their projects around the world. That added even more travel and work to my agenda, for no extra monetary compensation. But Clyde was responsible for bringing me into IDRC and giving me this great job. He also told me my film would be shown at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka, in 1979, and that Queen Elizabeth would be there. So, how could I refuse? (Clyde later reported that, indeed, my film, *Making Ends Meet*(1) was shown to the heads of state. He even invited Margaret Thatcher to take a front seat, but she refused to budge from her back row, saying, "I will stay where I am." I read that she was rather cool to this club and black and brown men. The Queen didn't attend the showing, but I like to think she had a private screening.)

For the Commonwealth, I had to travel as far as Fiji and Western Samoa to film African, Indian, and Caribbean professors teaching university students various subjects, such as development management and pest control on coconut palms. To me, this was the Commonwealth at its best—true south-to-south exchange. But the project that sticks in my memory concerns the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which was formulated between 1973 and 1982. It finally came into force in 1994, establishing a legal framework for all coastal marine and maritime activities. Since that time, each country with ocean shores has assumed jurisdiction over the 200 miles of water off their coasts.

For this filming, I traveled to the Solomon Islands, a nation that was soon to gain sovereignty over an area of sea 50 times larger than its landmass. My work entailed filming surveillance of the ocean by a number of means: mapping, patrol boats and planes, radio communications. I also did an interview with a British consultant on the legal and tax framework needed to implement the Law of the Seas program.



13.2 - Tuna fishermen heading out to sea, Solomon Islands
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

I always liked fishing as a kid, and I had the great pleasure of joining the Solomon islander crew of a tuna fishing vessel. I filmed them throwing a trail of bait behind the boat to catch the attention of schools of tuna. The tuna following the boat would strike all at once. The fishermen had only to throw in their lines armed with barbless hooks, whipping the huge fish onto the deck, one after another, some almost hitting me. I was told to stand back but wanted to film close to the action.

Also, during this period, I was asked to take more footage for IDRC's fisheries and aquaculture section. I traveled to Guyana, a country on the northeast coast of South America. Most of its population originated as slaves from Africa or indentured laborers from Indian, plus a few Europeans, Chinese, and indigenous tribes located in the interior.

I had visited Guyana in 1975 on my first filming trip for IDRC. At that time, I caught a ride on a small shrimp trawler, the "Arasuka No. 2," a Japanese-owned vessel. As it plied into the Atlantic Ocean on the continental shelf off the coast, I wasn't prepared for the rolling waves of the open ocean. My stomach also rolled and I had to lay on the bottom bunk bed assigned to me and make quick dashes to the ship's washroom to puke, until there was nothing left in my stomach. One of the crew members made sure I drank water, but otherwise they just left me alone. Finally, in the mid-afternoon, I heard a shift in the ship's gears as it slowed down, and then the sound of winches. So, I pushed myself to get up and see what was happening, cameras in hand. I was just in time, for the crew was pulling in the nets.

True to what I had read before traveling, the shrimp that the nets had dragged off the ocean's bottom only accounted for about 15 percent of the catch. The crew had the job of separating the shrimp and packing it below deck in cold storage, while using shovels to throw all the other dead species back into the sea, where they fed sea birds swirling around our boat and the sharks trailing us—"garbage men of the sea." Some small sharks were also caught in the nets and were tossed overboard too.

I managed to get all the shots I needed to graphically demonstrate this waste. This was only one trawler out of 200 operating from Georgetown, the capital of Guyana. If you added up all the discarded fish, it amounted to about 200,000 tons of edible protein thrown overboard each year. Shrimp thrive in coastal tropical waters around the world, and, at the time, shrimp trawlers threw away between 16 and 21 million tons annually—a staggering figure almost equal to the amount of aquatic protein then being consumed annually by people in developing countries.

Starting in 1975, new rules required Guyana-based trawlers to keep at least the last day's by-catch instead of discarding it. I had been lucky to catch a ride on this trawler. It had returned to shore to pull in a disabled trawler and only needed to return to sea for two days to fill up its hold. Normally these vessels stay out for three to four weeks, bringing in the valuable shrimp, mainly for export, and throwing away the so-called, "trash fish."

Fortunately, on my return to Guyana in 1980, I had the earlier footage and didn't need to go out to sea again. Besides, I found much progress to film in the pilot fish processing plant. IDRC had brought in experts from the Canadian Federal Fisheries Laboratory to help the Guyana State Corporation acquire equipment and train people on new processing techniques. The fish factory now employed at least 100 people, but still couldn't meet the demand from local or export markets. By this time, trawlers were required to bring in two tons of by-catch fish per trip. The plant could only process 10 percent of that, and had to sell the rest to local fish traders and hawkers. The government had banned all fish imports.



13.3 - Guyanese fisherman saving by-catch – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

I rolled my camera and filmed all I could see: the processing of salt fish, a Caribbean favorite; fresh frozen fish fillets cut from sea trout and other larger species; fresh frozen dressed fish; minced fish; fish paste for a sandwich spread; shark flesh marketed as “white flake” and shark fin to make that famous Chinese soup; and even fish jam, pickled fish, and fish sausage. While filming, I had to take a few breaks to go outside and breathe fresh air because fish plants naturally reek of dead fish.

I also managed to take shots of employees teaching people new fish recipes at an exhibition, hawkers selling by-catch in the Georgetown market, and dried salt fish being loaded onto boats for transport upriver to the protein-starved interior population. I filmed an interview with Fred A. Peterkin, Project Coordinator, an Afro-Guyanese man who spoke with a British accent, just like Bert Allsopp, the head of IDRC’s fisheries and aquaculture section. He told me of his dream of developing a system of refrigerated collection tanks on trawlers, and offloading by-catch onto collector vessels at sea, thereby vastly decreasing the amount of wasted protein from shrimp trawling operations.

Did Fred Peterkin’s dream ever come true? When writing this chapter, I searched for evidence and could find no such collection systems. The wastage of this valuable source of protein continued in Guyana and around the world according to a 1994 [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\) report](#)(2) and a [report by Oceana Canada in 2017](#)(3). But I did find that the country has become a [major private sector fisheries center](#)(4), and a fish processing and exporting center to the Caribbean Region and [to the U.S.](#)(5) This is positive but not exactly what IDRC had intended when it helped to set up that government-owned fish processing plant in Georgetown. Pilot projects can have many unpredictable outcomes. However, I did find evidence of another positive result: [Guyanese now consume more fish per capita than any other people in the region](#)(6).

We titled our 13-minute film *Fish By-Catch: Bonus from the Sea*(7) and it won the *Prix Gestion des Ressources Naturelles* (prize for natural resources management films) at the 9th International Scientific and Technical Film Festival, Brussels, 1982. As I recall, this was my first film award.

However, my fondest fish filming memories are on trips to the Philippines, where I visited the research site of the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) near Iloilo, Panay Island. There, I captured the story of the milkfish (*Chanos chanos*), the most important aquaculture species in the country. It's a silvery marine fish that is the only living member of the family *Chanidae*, which dates back to the Cretaceous Period (145.5 to 65.5 million years ago). It is believed that milkfish aquaculture began around 800 years ago in the Philippines and spread to Indonesia, Taiwan, and the South Pacific. In 1521, during his stay in these beautiful islands, Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer, recorded milkfish ponds in the last few pages of his diary. He was killed on Mactan Island by natives who resisted his aggressive Christian evangelism, but his crew escaped to continue the first recorded circumnavigation of the globe.

IDRC-funded milkfish research began in the early 1970s, and by 1974 a Filipino-Canadian team had succeeded in inducing artificial spawning of an adult milkfish using hormonal injections and fertilization of its eggs with milkfish sperm. This was important because the supply of fish fry was always limited and the full lifecycle of the milkfish in the wild remained a mystery.



13.4 - Harvesting milkfish at SEAFDEC, Panay, Philippines
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

I had to return several times and hire others to capture all angles of this project. I filmed induced spawning of captured adult milkfish, but also took scenes of villagers with large fine nets mounted on floating bamboo frames, plowing through the shallow water near the shore at dawn, scooping up these minute fish fry—almost transparent except for their eyes—and transferring them to containers onshore. Some of the fry that escaped the villagers' nets would head back into the sea and return as adults, six or seven years later, to spawn and produce more fry.

At the time, this traditional operation of capturing wild fry provided seasonal employment for over 200,000 coastal people during April and May each year, but fewer than half of the fry survived the capture, transfer, and distribution process, and many more that did reach fish ponds never made it to marketable size due to poor rearing methods. It was a tremendous waste of natural resources in a country where 50 percent of the population suffered from protein deficiency.

The research IDRC supported at SEAFDEC was very technical. I took various film sequences on improving pond culture with the right bottom soil chemistry to induce the growth of zooplankton, which milkfish feed on, and the best methods of ensuring fry survival. But I added some artistic touches and music sequences to maintain audience interest. On my last visit, I recreated a sequence for the success of August 1980, when the project achieved natural spawning of a four-year-old fish in captivity—a huge breakthrough. I commissioned artwork to demonstrate the intention of setting up milkfish hatcheries and nurseries onshore in combination with these floating cages offshore, where milkfish would grow to sexual maturity.

SEAFDEC arranged an army helicopter so I could take aerial shots. I flew with a pilot nicknamed “the General” in a huge military craft with a five-man crew, open doors, and two machine guns at the ready. Fortunately, we did not have to fly over the interior of Panay Island, where the New People's Army, a wing of the Communist Party, was operating. I filmed some of the vast stretches of milkfish ponds on Panay Island's shores, floating cages, and mangrove forests along the coastline. The General was very cooperative. With our headset communication system, I directed him to go very low and slow to reduce vibration, and he even held the helicopter stationary when I asked him to.



13.5 - Milkfish pens at SEAFDEC – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

SEAFDEC also hired an underwater cameraman to film milkfish in off-shore floating cages where studies in maturation and spawning were taking place. I was surprised to see a whole film crew arrive from Manila: the cameraman, a coordinator, an assistant, and a representative of the man who owned the camera, along with his two wives.

The milkfish, known locally as *bangus*, is the national fish of the Philippines. The main object of the project was to learn the best methods of more intensive milkfish aquaculture rather than expanding areas of pond production, which would only destroy more coastal mangroves—the breeding grounds for many fish and shellfish species. To show the potential of the industry, SEAFDEC hired a helicopter to fly me over some of the 37,000 acres (15,000 hectares) of milkfish cages in Laguna de Bay, a large freshwater lake near Manila.



13.6 - Milkfish pens in Laguna de Bay, Philippines – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

I also took shots of *bangus* in markets and restaurants serving a wide variety of *bangus* dishes. I loved the taste of this fresh seafood and the spirit of the people I ate with after we completed those sequences—camaraderie and satisfied bellies. Our celebration at the restaurant on the completion of the mission was needed because it took us many days to get security clearance for me to fly over this area, which was near some military installations. I had to fill out a 10-page application, which included much of my personal history and even the names of my neighbors in Ottawa. Finally, when it was completed, the document read “Mr. McKnee” to film “Manila Bay.” The fact that they had the wrong name and wrong bay didn’t seem to matter. I love Filipinos for their relative informality and ability to get around rules.

Was all this research successful? When writing this book, I googled “milkfish breeding and farming in the Philippines” and a flood of information appeared. Milkfish aquaculture production expanded from about [110,000 tons \(99,790 metric tons\) annually](#)(8), when the IDRC project began, to over [400,000 metric tons per year](#) by 2019(9). This was mainly due to the vast increase in fry production in hatcheries—over [860,000 a billion by 2019 with a goal of 1.5 billion by](#)

[2024\(10\)](#). This increase was mainly due to the country's Bangus Fry Sufficiency Program, which benefited by the [IDRC-supported SEAFDEC research\(11\)](#).

Furthermore, the Department of Agriculture planned to establish 299 community-based hatcheries across the country. SEAFDEC planned a new brood stock facility and hatchery, which employs [thermal manipulation technology to ensure the water remains at the right temperature for year-round spawning, and continues other studies, such as the effects of climate change on the industry\(12\)](#).

When I finally finished the film titled, ***The Mysterious Milkfish(13)***, I invited Canada's famous science television host, David Suzuki, to the studio and sent him sequences of the film for use on his program, *The Nature of Things*, on the nation-wide Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Not bad publicity for IDRC. Suzuki continued with showing a few more of our projects. Also, in 1983 *The Mysterious Milkfish* was given an Honorable Mention at the 26th San Francisco International Film Festival.

By then, I had also received an "honorable mention" at the showing of my new IDRC overview film, ***Choices: The Role of Science and Technology for Development(14)*** on the occasion of IDRC's 10th Anniversary dinner, in later 1980. It was held at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, and Prime Minister Trudeau was the guest of honor. After the showing, I had a chance to take a bow and talk to him briefly, reminding him of our first meeting at the garden party in New Delhi, in January 1971 (see Chapter 1). I don't think he recalled our previous encounter but, being a good politician, he didn't say anything that would show any memory lapse.

I met Pierre Trudeau once more at a judo studio in Ottawa in the mid-80s, a single father then, following his divorce from Margaret. He was attending the judo lessons of his young sons, Justin and Alexandre (Sacha), as I was for my children, Derek and Ruth. I reminded him of the film show and he fondly remembered it, but I didn't complain about what our kids had told us: Justin and Sacha had used the offensive tactic of spitting on them to win their matches. I can only hope that Justin, who went on to become the 23rd Prime Minister of Canada, had learned how to refine his fighting techniques to adhere to proper rules of competition.

14. Meanwhile on the Homefront

Despite my busy travel schedule during those years of filming and photographing the worldwide programs of IDRC, I always made it home for our children's birthdays. Beth put a great deal of energy into these celebrations, baking and icing cakes in colors and shapes ordered by Derek and Ruth, such as a clown's head, a butterfly, a fat cat, a dinosaur, a Raggedy Ann doll, a world globe split into quarters forming Bartholomew's Regional Projection, Canada's coat of arms, or individual cupcakes, all decorated to the tastes of our children and each of their friends. My job was to photograph and sometimes film the occasions, as well as to supervise the chaos on my backyard creations: a climbing frame, a shallow pool, and a set of swings.



From the family Album—birthday parties galore! – Photos by Neill McKee

Beth also grew as an artistic calligrapher—not one who was satisfied with filling out certificates and diplomas with names of people she had never met. She got her start in oriental calligraphy, which is an art, and helped to found the Calligraphy Society of Ottawa, which grew into a large group of colleagues and close friends. Some of them had the objective of advancing occidental calligraphy from a craft into an art—embellishing beautifully written poetic words with complementary designs.

In the early 1980s, we had a carpenter insulate our third-floor attic of our old house, cover the wooden floor with tough indoor-outdoor carpet, and install a large window to improve the light in Beth's new studio. Beth painted the walls and ceiling at the other end—a magical scene with a large tree and green hills—and had our children paint flowers around the bottom. They and their friends were allowed to place our old stiff sofa cushions on the stairwell leading down to the second floor, and take turns sliding all the way down. The walls of the stairs were painted light-gray and acted as a free space for the kids' graffiti—the only walls they were allowed to

draw on. We put our children into French immersion preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school—determined that they become bilingual in our bilingual country—and Beth babysat other people’s children after school, using the magical attic as a play area in cold or wet weather, and a great place for rainy-day birthday parties.



14.3 and 14.4 - Mayhem in the magic attic – Photos by Neill McKee

On the issue of religion, Beth finally gave up on the Lutheran Church and convinced me to go with her and the kids to a downtown Anglican church. She had heard a former Lutheran minister from Germany was an assistant rector there. I can clearly remember that early summer Sunday in 1980. The sun radiated through stained-glass windows as the rector took us through the rather formal proceedings, compared to what I had known during my plain Methodist-United Church upbringing. There was a lot of bobbing up and down, which I followed, and kneeling, which I avoided, but I sang the hymns—many familiar from my childhood. The first attention-grabbing part was the sermon. The rector had just returned from a conference in the United States, where Ronald Reagan and his so-called “Moral Majority” had recently taken over. The rector railed against such conservatism and fundamentalism in any religion, including the recent Islamic Revolution in Iran. The message made me wake up and pay attention. Here was a clergyman not afraid to speak his mind on social and political issues—making his church relevant in the world.

However, the best part of the service followed, when the assistant rector, Reverend Paul Busing, prayed. He was slow and quietly powerful in his German-accented delivery. His prayer was like a meditation on correcting the ills of the world without the usual platitudes and Bible references. At the end, Beth and I looked at each other and smiled in wonder. It is not that I suddenly reverted to Christianity, it was the fact that this brand of religion had a lot in common with my own philosophy.

Beth had found her “father figure” in this church, whom she admitted she needed. We learned he had studied under Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany in the 1930s. Father Paul, as we called him, had escaped Germany with his half-Jewish wife, Erika, as Hitler and the Nazis took over. I had read some of Bonhoeffer’s writings in senior high school and university and was enthralled that I now knew someone who had studied under that great man who, in 1945, had been executed for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

Father Paul preached to Lutheran congregations in England for a few years and then he and Erika emigrated to Canada. For a period, he stuck to Lutheranism in small churches in the Ottawa Valley, but gradually grew weary of what he called “the tyranny of the congregation”—meaning the control each congregation had over how things should be done. He switched to the Anglican Church in which the clergy have more protection due to its ecclesiastical structure, like the Episcopalians in the U.S.

We soon struck up a friendship with Father Paul and Erika, and a small group of parishioners formed a reading group that met once a month in our house to discuss books with religious or spiritual themes, usually ending up by discussing social and political issues. The group built their meeting dates around my travels, as much as possible. So, here I was in an enlightened Christian community where all my doubts about organized religion were accepted. Father Paul was a man who would also openly express his own doubts.

Beth had found the spiritual community where Derek and Ruth could get their grounding in the Bible. That was important to her and our children loved it. I also thought that it is hard to really understand Western history and literature without such background. Our kids joined the junior choir, which was directed by the church’s musical director, a gay man whose partner also attended the church. When I was home, I’d usually attend church with them and then we’d go to a Chinese restaurant for *dim sum* on the way home—a great family ritual.

My film editor friend and teacher, Sally McDonald, also became part of a family ritual by coming over to our place almost every Saturday morning for pancakes. I was in charge of making them, hollering “PANCAKES!” to the kids playing upstairs when they were ready. Sally lived in a small apartment down the street and had become an honorary aunt, often treating the kids to small gifts when she visited.

During the years 1979-82, I was busy with travel, covering many projects, so I hired Sally as my editor for *Fish By-Catch* and *The Mysterious Milkfish*. She was always interested in detailed discussion and asked technical questions on every project I filmed. I suppose that came from her education as an engineer, but she also loved to engage in just about any social, political, or historical topic. She’d get on the nerves of some of the other employees at Crawley’s, especially men, for her incessant questions and challenges in conversations. But I found such discussions interesting for they led me to new lines of thought.

When Sally wasn’t working, she took university-level courses in geology and would often take off camping to explore the Canadian Shield in her canoe. It’s a large area of exposed igneous rock that forms the ancient geologic core of North America, stretching north from the Great Lakes to the Arctic Ocean. She usually traveled by herself through the rivers of the southern part of this wild forested land, picking rock samples and carefully numbering them. I’m sure she kept a detailed record of the location and type for each rock. When discussing her trips she described the colors of the sky, rocks, and forests as grayish blue-green—her favorite hues. One summer she joined a party to journey down the Mackenzie River to the Arctic Ocean. For her, this was like entering heaven.

In early 1982, I sent her to Southeast Asia to do a film script on post-harvest technology. I met her in Kuala Lumpur, while on another assignment, and she seemed fine. But in Bangkok, she experienced a pain in her gut and loss of appetite. When I met her back in Ottawa, I encouraged her to see a doctor, thinking it was something she contracted in the tropics. But Sally was old-school—preferring not to complain or discuss her health issues with others. Health was a private matter. As the weeks went by, she continually denied there was a major problem. I

could see she was losing weight and kept bringing up the issue with her, as did her friend, Judy Crawley, wife of the owner of the studio. Finally, she saw her doctor who referred her to an oncologist. Tests proved she had pancreatic cancer. I knew that this diagnosis was almost a death sentence then, and anyone's chances of survival remain slim, even today.



14.5 - The author with Sally in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Sally deteriorated quickly, and I had to finish editing of our milkfish film. To this day, I associate the music I edited into that soundtrack with Sally's demise. I can't recall much of the period except being called by Judy to replace her at Sally's hospital bedside the evening she died. It was then that I realized that most deaths we see in the movies are "Hollywood deaths." I sat with Sally for a couple of hours. Despite the morphine she had been given, she periodically went into spasms of pain as the cancer cells attacked her brain. Her skeletal head and torso would rise off the bed in such a gruesome way, eyes wide open, teeth grimacing. Finally I motioned and said, "Hey Sally, it's time to give up." A few minutes later she departed, and I just sat there with tears in my eyes, before I called the nurse. Then Judy returned to comfort me. Before that dark night, I had no direct experience with human death, or what it meant "to rage against the dying of the light."

Although Sally came from Protestant Scots-Canadian background, she was never religious. So, we held a wake for her, without a body, in our house, inviting her other friends and studio colleagues. There were no prayers, just a few short speeches. As I recall, her brother followed her wish of cremation and scattered her ashes over the Bay of Quinte on the shores of Lake Ontario, where she was born—United Empire Loyalist country.

We helped Sally's brother clean out her apartment—layers of the paraphernalia she had collected through the years. We knew she was a hoarder but we had not expected the extent of this obsession. We gladly accepted a set of green crystal tall-stemmed wine glasses, which appeared never to have been used. We also selected part of her rock collection, which we planted in our garden. Some of those special rocks later traveled the globe with us, as we moved from

place to place in the years that followed. Some had special numbers, which eventually wore off, but not our memories of Aunt Sally.

A few years later, Beth became inspired by those memories and wrote a poem about Sally, creating a piece of grayish blue-green calligraphed artwork, which hangs on our wall to this day:



14.6 – Poem for Sally by Elizabeth McKee

Poem for Sally

This is a poem for Sarah (Sally) MacDonald, rock hunter and child extraordinaire whose body ceased to function when she was sixty-three years young but whose heart wouldn't stop beating until two days later.

And for all the other perpetual travelers and seekers after truth who were not able to finish their quests. This is for all the Scots who found the rocks and all the others who could not leave them unturned. This is a poem for Sally.

This is a poem for all the immigrants who tried to tame the land and failed and loved it anyway: who found a place where both wild and tame could co-exist – respectfully though not always comfortably: who wanted peace and justice and the un-American way, and for their children who are trying to keep it that way.

This is a poem about a man of Scottish ancestry who grew up in the shadow of the Precambrian shield and met Sally who searched for rocks in wild places and a woman who

came from no fixed address who took the rocks that Sally had tamed and planted them in her garden with the wildflowers which she could not tame. Although she tried.

This is a poem about tame people who were touched by the wild soul of a monumental lady who do not wish to have their children lose her legacy—her love and awe of the land and her underlying need to go into wild places and discover just one more secret—uncover one more rock.

And this is a poem for these children who search for wild rocks in tame places because they have never ventured out to where the wild rocks are: and the parents who have never taken them there.

This is a plea for wild places and wild rocks that they will always remain wild and free and discoverable

because this is a poem for Sally.

Poem and calligraphy by Elizabeth McKee © 1986

15. Harnessing the Monsoons in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, formerly called Ceylon from the Portuguese name, *Ceilão*, is shaped like a teardrop falling from the southeast coast of India. Some have described its shape as a pearl, but to me its long history of invasion and colonization, conflict and wars, favors the teardrop interpretation. I am lucky to have spent time on this beautiful island in a period of relative calm. I finally had a chance to visit in February 1980, while shooting the IDRC overview film *Choices*. I was accompanied by Paul McConnell, the Executive Assistant of IDRC's president who told him, "If you really want to learn what our organization does, travel with McKee." I agreed to take him if he helped me carry equipment and act as my soundman, when required.

We visited and filmed several Sri Lankan projects, but the one I recall the most was on Cropping Systems. Simply defined, it was a movement at the time, throughout Asia, led by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines and IDRC, to adapt new varieties of rice to the systems already established by small farmers, rather than imposing such innovations on them. Using these new varieties in completely new systems would be beyond their capacity, in terms of labor requirements and other inputs, such as irrigation and expensive fertilizers.

A driver from Sri Lanka's Department of Agricultural Research took us to their office in Kandy, a city in the highlands, which had been the seat of the last Sinhalese kingdoms before European invasions began. The Sinhalese arrived on the island as Indo-Aryan settlers from northern India's Ganges Plain, bringing their Buddhist religion with them. Kandy, at an elevation of 1,640 feet (500 meters) above sea level, had been a cooler habitat, rather than the sweltering coast, for the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, who ruled the island from 1619 to 1948. It's also near Sri Lanka's famous tea estates—another colonial legacy.

However, we were not destined to stay in this lush landscape. We soon traveled north and downhill to a hot dry region full of scrub bush, poisonous snakes, dotted with impoverished villages. Sri Lankans call most of this northern territory the "dry zone." This land was the original home of the most ancient kingdoms of Sri Lanka. Sinhalese and Tamil rulers built great cities, palaces, and temples, the ruins of which can still be seen today at Anuradhapura. [As early as 300 B.C.E., Sinhalese kings ordered the building of sophisticated irrigation schemes\(1\)](#), including underground canals, to feed this otherwise dry land with waters from the Mahaweli River and other rivers flowing from the rainy highlands.

In addition, for centuries engineers directed the construction of thousands of smaller reservoirs (which Sri Lankans call "tanks"), some in a cascading chain linked to the main canals, and other so-called "minor tanks," on higher ground, which were rain-fed. These minor tanks allow crops to be grown in areas outside of the reach of the large irrigation schemes. Vision and leadership for achieving this work goes to the great Sinhalese ruler, Parakramabahu I, who reigned over the northern Kingdom of Polonnaruwa between 1153 and 1186 C.E. Due to all these canals and tanks, Sri Lanka had become an exporter of rice to much of the rest of Asia.

These marvelous irrigation systems began to crumble with the resumption of invasions by Tamil kings and their armies from southern India, and centuries of warfare. Other historians have speculated that the *Anopheles* mosquito, and the malaria it brought, were partly responsible for the Sinhalese population's gradual move into the highlands and the southwest coast of the island—areas with plenty of rainfall. At the time of our visit, the government, with international support, was in the process of rebuilding these ancient canals and large reservoirs, but much of the higher areas of the dry zone would always lie outside of the reach of this water.

Paul and I learned a good deal of this history when we reached the research station of Maha Illuppallama, where we met Dr. Walter Fernando, Director of Agriculture Research. He was a pipe-smoking man with a weather-beaten face in his late 50s or early 60s. He came from the Burgher community, a small Eurasian ethnic group who descend from Portuguese, Dutch, British, and other European men who settled in Ceylon and had children with native women. In Fernando's case, I figured it was a Portuguese ancestor who was attracted to beautiful Sinhalese or Tamil women.

Dr. Fernando was slow-talking and pensive, so it was easy to take notes for the script. We got to know him in the evenings at the Circuit Bungalow during our short visit, as we shared his favorite food and drink, roasted wild boar washed down with *arrack*—a distilled alcoholic beverage usually made from the fermented sap of coconut flowers. *Arrack* helped him embellish his stories on Sri Lankan history and his thoughts on what he and his team were achieving in their research. He asked me to make a Sinhalese version of a more detailed film for wide dissemination through the Department of Agriculture's mobile cinemas. I only required a short sequence for the general film I was making at the time, but as we talked into the evenings, I grew inspired by the possibility of returning to cover all aspects of the project. I had been communicating with IRRI about a cropping systems film and this project seemed to fit the bill.

I returned to Sri Lanka in mid-January 1981 with Claude Dupuis, my new audiovisual unit assistant. He helped with lugging the equipment and I trained him to be my soundman and to take photos. At Colombo airport, we were met by Dr. Upesena, Cropping Systems Coordinator, who took us to Kandy, where we filmed population scenes in the city center. Then we departed for the research station at Maha Illuppallama to meet Mr. Samarakoon, the local coordinator of the work at the village of Walagumbahuwa. By this time, these names were rolling off my tongue like an old Sri Lankan hand.

For the next week, from sunup to sundown we filmed many technical scenes such as weeding, spraying, fertilizing, harvesting rice, and winnowing and threshing on the land that was fed by water from the village tank. We also filmed and photographed work on higher ground, called the *chena*, where upland crops such as chickpeas, cowpeas, soybeans, and chilies were grown. We took sequences of rice breeding experiments at the research station, and shots in another area where villagers had adopted the new cropping systems methods.

When Dr. Fernando arrived, we recreated and filmed one of their organizational meetings, which had taken place when the project started in 1976. We also arranged the filming of the annual harvest festival ceremony on the tank bund—the embankment holding back the water. This involved the collection of rice and coconuts from all the villagers, which took most of the day. At 4:00 pm, 18 portions of a rice-coconut porridge were served to honor Aiyannar, who, according to legend, was the engineer responsible for constructing their tank more than 1,500 years ago. Afterwards, another five portions were served to the “divines,” as the village's religious leader chanted a Buddhist prayer over the offerings, holding his arms out toward the tank water. Then, two hundred villagers, both adults and children, lined up to receive their portions of the communal rice meal—a beautiful scene that I knew would become my film's finale.

My companion, Claude, proved to be a winner with Sri Lankans. He was a young handsome affable fellow, who attracted a large following of children wherever we went in the village. He roped them into carting the equipment around, which they did with pleasure. Claude ate everything I ate, including Sri Lanka's famous breakfast, string hoppers (*idiyappam*), a chili-

laden noodle dish that starts your day by blowing your head off. He even began to wear a *sarong* at the end of each day—a loose wrap-around piece of cloth worn in the house and to bed. (I've worn the Malaysian version since my years in that country, and can highly recommend it.) It took Claude a little while to adapt to the idea of wearing a “skirt.” He was pretty macho, priding himself by building his muscles by weightlifting.

When we returned to Kandy, I had to satisfy Claude by going to the Queen's Hotel, where Bo Derek and Richard Harris were staying while filming *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1981). Harris had left but we managed to find Bo at dinner with some of the crew. Their film was one of the most ridiculous ever made. It involves Tarzan, played by a white muscleman, lusting after Bo's perfect body, while Richard Harris threatens to kill him. Tarzan doesn't speak one word through the whole movie—only yells while thumping his chest, as any respectable ape should do. Claude found a nearby table, where we could get the best view of Bo. To me, she seemed like an expressionless statue, but for Claude, this was possibly the highpoint of the trip.

The highpoint for me came the next week, when we rented a helicopter to get aerial shots of the upland bush, Walagumbahuwa village, the ruins of ancient kingdoms, and the completed Mahaweli irrigation scheme, as well as other irrigation works still under construction. The pilot removed the door of the craft and strapped me in with an extra belt so I could put one foot on the step and lean out at the right angle to get the best shots. I sped up the camera and opened up the aperture of the lens to make the action smoother. Claude took photos from the rear seat, as best he could, but handed his camera to me to take unobstructed shots on second passes.

To do this film properly, I needed footage during the dry season and I arranged to hire a well-known Sri Lankan cinematographer, Willie Blake, to travel to Walagumbahuwa in August to film harvesting in the *chena* (uplands) around the tank. The cultivation of crops on this drier land requires a lot of work, including allowing the land to remain fallow for a few years after growing crops, and then slashing and burning the bush before replanting. The problem for Willie was that there was a very brief period between monsoons rains that year, and he had to douse the bush with kerosene to film the burning part. This man knew the best tricks of cinematography.



15.1 - Slash and burn agriculture – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Claude and I returned to Sri Lanka on October 13, 1981, and were met again at Colombo Airport by Dr. Upesena. An essential part of our mission this time was to film the monsoons, so we were a bit concerned to learn the rains had not arrived. But Dr. Upesena assured us that monsoons would come on the 15th! The northern half of Sri Lanka is usually blessed with the northeast monsoon, the *Maha*, blowing off the Bay of Bengal from October until December, and the lighter *Yala*, the southwest monsoon, in May and June.

We needed to show the *Maha* arriving in October and filling up a village tank to demonstrate the beginning of a complete cycle: 1) as the rains begin, planting new varieties of quick maturing rice on the lands below the village tank, while it fills up; 2) harvesting the rice crop in January and holding the ceremony we had already filmed on our previous visit; 3) planting a second rice crop in March, using tank water and the lighter *Yala*, starting in May, to bring the rice to maturity; 4) during July and August, preparing the *chena* by slashing and burning the scrub brush, while allowing the padi lands below the tank to lie fallow, as cattle and water buffalo graze on the grass that grows there, and at the same time fertilizing the soil with their dung; 5) during October, when the *Maha* begins again, the cycle starts over on the padi lands, and at the same time, the *chena* and home gardens are planted with upland crops, such as chili, beans, vegetables, and castor, which will be ready for harvest in January and February.



15.2 - Model of Walagumbahuwa showing the tank, rice fields, uplands and village
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC



15.3 - Using buffalo to plough rice fields – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC



15.4 - Upland crops of chili and castor

15.5 - Drying harvested chili

Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

With Dr. Upesena, we headed to the project area to cover scenes that were not possible before. But October 15th came and went, and the rains did not arrive, as he had decreed they would, and we kidded him about that. So, we drove to Kandy to film wet rice planting, tea plantations, and a fertilizer factory, all the time bouncing around on rough roads in an Agriculture Department jeep, which had little in the way of shock absorbers. Added to that, buses came flying at our vehicle, and cattle, elephants, dogs, and water buffalo suddenly appeared in front of us, out of nowhere.

We returned to the project area on October 20th and while passing a village tank occupied by a few water buffalo, the delayed *Maha* suddenly arrived. I jumped into action while Dr. Upesena organized people to hold umbrellas over me and my camera. The drenched and contented beasts in the water gave greater texture to the scene of the tank starting to fill up again.



15.6 - Filming the coming of the *Maha* monsoon
Photo by Claude Dupuis/IDRC

This cropping system had doubled the income of many farmers in Walagumbahuwa. We demonstrated this by starring Mr. Ranaide in a number of the sequences. He had recently purchased a small tiller-tractor for cultivating his land and others, at a fee, as well as for transporting his tools and harvests in a small cart. We also filmed interviews between him and research assistants, who gathered statistics from all the villagers on the effects of the experiment.

During our visits to Sri Lanka, I clearly saw the ingenious concept behind IDRC's policy of funding local researchers to do their own thing, only bringing in external technical guidance when needed. These Sri Lankan researchers demonstrated great patience, not imposing anything on the farmers. Instead, they used demonstration plots, discussion groups, and consensus meetings, as well as in-depth interviews to try to understand the farmers' points of view. They had employed a "total systems" approach, going beyond their biases and areas of specialization. The "Walagumbahuwa Concept" was in the process of being transferred to 500 minor tank villages. The potential was great because an estimated 250,000 acres (101,171 hectares) could benefit from adopting this system throughout the island nation.



15.7 - Mr. Ranaide and son on new tractor
Photo by Claude Dupuis/IDRC

By contrast, I had a chance to visit a nearby project funded and run by the Canadian Government's aid agency, CIDA, which had been operating for three years. This involved Canadian agriculturalists, some with experience in dryland farming in Western Canada. They

came with expertise in water management, agriculture engineering, animal husbandry, and weed control. They employed a local team of agriculture specialists and assistants based at Maha Illuppalama Research Station, but the Canadian experts lived in Kandy, 100 miles (161 km) away, where their families were housed and children schooled. I was told by the local staff that they only visited the project site a couple of days a week. They had a fleet of cars and trucks, whereas their Sri Lankan staff didn't even have enough motorcycles to do their work.

The local staff I met complained about communication barriers with their highly-paid Canadian bosses. I wondered what these Canadian experts had to offer the dryland farmers of Sri Lanka. I talked to some of them and found them to be cynical, only waiting out their contract periods. Instead of looking at the total system, they were attempting to introduce changes based on their specific areas of expertise. Their methods, by all indications, had failed. One frank Sri Lankan official I met summed it up like this: "If we could only have the money and resources these CIDA fellows are eating up, we could achieve a lot more."

On the last day of filming at Walagumbahuwa, our model farmer, Mr. Ranaide, invited us to tea at his small thatched-roof house—a real honor. That evening, we recorded various local musicians for the film's soundtrack and then we drank *arrack* and beer with all the project staff who had helped us so much. The next morning, the combination of *arrack* and beer proved to be near-fatal, compounded by Dr. Upesena's insistence that we try some toddy as a hangover aide (fermented coconut flower sap—fortunately not distilled like *arrack*).



15.8 - Villagers and staff gather for a final goodbye photo at Walagumbahuwa, Dr. Upesena on the far left – Photo by Claude Dupuis/IDRC

It was October 23rd and we had to leave the research station by 9:00 am because, we were told, by 1:00 pm the two-lane highway would be exclusively the "Queen's Road." It so

happened that our visit coincided with that of Queen Elizabeth II's tour of Sri Lanka. As we made our way south, road crews were making last-minute repairs and local people were decorating their towns and villages with bamboo structures cloaked in Union Jacks, Sri Lankan flags, and banners displaying the words "Long Live the Queen" and "Long Live the President." We laughed when we passed through one town where we saw people in the process of raising a banner, half in Sinhalese and half in English, welcoming "Queen Elizabeth and Duck Edinburgh." We drove into Kandy, greeted by throngs of people waiting for the royal procession that wouldn't arrive for five hours. We waved at the crowd as we passed, imitating the Queen's usual stilted handwave, and got some puzzled reactions.

There was great reverence for the Queen because, from independence in 1948 until 1972, the British monarch remained the head of state of the Dominion of Ceylon and the Queen was represented by a ceremonial Governor-General, who by 1954 became a Ceylonese national. This was the same arrangement still maintained today by Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and a number of former British colonies that take the attitude, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." But it's not quite the attitude displayed by many French-Canadians, like Claude, who couldn't believe what he saw on the road that day. He said, "This is crazy! Why would these people have so much reverence for a former colonial ruler?" At the time, Quebec's separation from English Canada was still a hot topic.

Before going to our hotel, we paid a visit to Dr. Walter Fernando at his office. Our discussion was brief since the cropping systems project was the last thing on his mind. As guardian of Kandy's Botanical Gardens, the next day he was to meet the Queen and show her around. But we did discuss his plan to distribute the Sinhalese and Tamil versions of our film through 25 mobile cinema vans in the 25 divisions of Sri Lanka.

That evening, Kandy was decorated with lights for a *perahara*—a colorful parade of elephants and dancers with torches. We were told that security would be tight and we had no permission to film. But Claude and I waited in the hotel until 8:00 pm and then, carrying our imposing equipment, marched through the crowd to a lighted spot beside a government film crew. There we announced ourselves as "friends of Willie Blake," the famous cinematographer I had hired to cover the dry season. No further explanation was needed. Willie's name was our passport. We waited there, across from the Queen's Hotel, where we had observed Bo Derek a few months earlier, to see Her Majesty pass by and wave her white gloved hand at us. I need not describe the difference in enthusiasm expressed by Claude between the two encounters.

We had little purpose in being in this spot—there being no place for a royal blessing of cropping systems in our film. Claude recorded some useful background music, while elephant trunks sniffed my zoom lens and Claude's long boom microphone, and torches passed precariously over our heads. There wasn't much room between the elephants' feet and the rather emotional crowd, and we were told there were rumors of riots in the air. Thankfully, the crowd was somewhat subdued by the late arrival of the Queen and a light rain.

The next day, we took Dr. Upesena and his family to an early lunch to express our gratitude for his great guidance, and then headed to Colombo by road. Fortunately, there was little traffic, for the Queen and her entourage were taking the slow train downhill to Colombo. We rushed to the airport but found it was already closed for the arrival of the Queen. Three hours later, we finally took off, thinking of what all the rupees spent on the red-carpet arrangements and machine-gun security could have done for the people of Walagumbahuwa and other tank villages in the dry zone.

[*Harnessing the Monsoons: Improved Cropping Systems in Asia*\(2\)](#) eventually became the title of our film. I returned in early May 1982 for the Sri Lankan premiere, attended by my

Sri Lankan friends, including Walter Fernando, who had become the overall Director of Agriculture. On that trip, I helped with producing a Sinhalese version. Later reports reached me that the film was used for education throughout the country for some years, and the English version was also widely screened by IRRI and other partner organizations in Asia, to disseminate the concept of cropping systems. Our film was useful in educating students and project personnel around the world on the meaning of a full-systems approach to agricultural development in the tropics. It won the prize of Best Audiovisual in an annual contest run by the Information Services Institute, Ottawa. I also wrote an article titled *The Return of Aiyannar* on the Walagumbahuwa concept for Asia 2000, a start-up magazine based in Hong Kong. I enjoying trying out this new writing sideline.

Thinking back to that day in October 1981, when Claude and I left Colombo airport surrounded by machine guns, they were probably present because riots had begun that year between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils. At the time, we had no idea armed conflict was breaking out between the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese-dominated government—a civil war that would last until 2009. Fortunately, the central drylands, where we filmed, and the southern drylands, never became main war zones.

While writing this chapter, I googled “cropping systems in minor tanks, Sri Lanka.” I was happy to see that [the work continued](#)(3) with many technical papers on the best mix of crops and optimum use of water, as well as videos, [including interviews with villagers who knew about the 1,500-year history of the large and small irrigation tanks in their country](#)(4), and the need to sustain these systems, which continue to feed millions today.

For the present, at least, the machine guns have been put away, and Sri Lankans continue to move forward with innovations in the crop and water management systems in the dry lands.

16. Clean Water and Sanitation for the Developing World

In the ancient world, the citizens of China, India, Peru, Persia, and parts of the Roman Empire, developed clean water supplies and sewage disposal in some of their larger cities. [These systems did not spread widely, nor did they last, as the ruins of such innovations remind us\(1\)](#). Lessons were lost to future human settlements. In fact, one time in the 1980s on a stop in London, I went into a museum to see a replica of a well dug into an old pit latrine. The well had provided drinking and household water for a London neighborhood until about the mid-1850s. Such wells were covered to prevent dirt and garbage from falling into them, and the water was usually drawn with handpumps. Despite these precautions, cholera broke out in London in 1831, 1848-49, and 1853-54, killing thousands. At the time, most people thought cholera was spread through the air until a doctor by the name of [John Snow reasoned that, if it was spread by air, it should cause lung diseases, whereas the main symptoms were gastrointestinal—severe diarrhea and vomiting, often leading to death\(2\)](#).

Through a scientific method of observation and collection of statistics on cholera cases in one London neighborhood, Dr. Snow pinpointed that the cholera cases mainly occurred by drinking un-boiled water from a particular well on Broad Street, which was surrounded by pools of polluted water. It took a few years for him to convince others, through further research, that [when human and animal feces were dumped into cesspools on the ground around wells, the pollution could seep into well water\(3\)](#).

On February 2, 1983, I found myself in Kibera, a squatter settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, with my colleague, Fibi Munene, a Kenyan journalist our Communications Division had hired as our East and Southern Africa representative. She had a great sense of humor but didn't laugh or even smile at what she saw in her city: long lines of people waiting their turn to get water from a few taps; garbage and feces all around; some people defecating in the open because of run-down filthy latrines; black streams of water full of the bacteria, viruses, and parasites, which caused cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. Thousands of insects were feeding and breeding in trash heaps and stagnant water surfaces. In the developing world at the time, acute diarrhea caused by these diseases was killing five million children under five years of age, annually. Repeated attacks led to severe malnutrition, a condition that caused the death of millions more.



16.1 - Street in a Nairobi slum – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

In the slum, we had to keep our mouths shut and watch where we stepped. Fibi had never entered Kibera before and was horrified at what she saw—the result of thousands of rural-urban migrants pouring into the city over the past 20 years, with little or no planning, resources, or regulation for their illegal but tolerated occupation of the land. There were five other squatter settlements in the city and we visited two of them, always accompanied by a police guard arranged by Fibi for our safety. Fibi's low-keyed approach really helped us get the shots I needed. One time a rock was raised at me by an angry youth, although not thrown, fortunately. I hated the fact that I was taking shots that would appear insulting and exploitative. But I had an idea on how I would use them sensitively.

These were the first scenes I filmed for an educational film I was asked to make on water, sanitation, and hygiene, working closely with Donald Sharp, an American immigrant to Canada and public health expert in IDRC's Health Sciences Division. This film was different from my other IDRC productions in that, rather than covering scientific research or a pilot project, the purpose was to widely disseminate well-known ways of preventing the deaths of thousands of people in developing countries. The narration of our finished film started with these words:

Human life and human progress depend on water—water which is both servant and master. For the majority of women in the developing world, water is the master. Much time and energy are used in its daily pursuit. Children too must join the unending task.... Water can be made safe by boiling, but most people do not have enough firewood to boil water on a regular basis.

The United Nations had declared the 1980s to be the International Decade on Drinking Water and Sanitation because, by the end of the previous decade, nearly two-thirds of the population of the developing world had no access to safe drinking water and even a larger portion lacked the means for hygienic human feces disposal.



16.2 - Crowded community water tap, Colombo



16.3 - Kenyan girl collecting water

Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

Next, I flew to Sri Lanka. On February 6, I filmed similar scenes in a Colombo slum, this time accompanied by representatives of the Sarvodaya Movement, an NGO working for development and social justice in the poorest sectors of society. Here I was joined by my audiovisual assistant and soundman, Claude Dupuis, and Bill Clarke, an artist from Crawley Films. Bill was shocked at what he saw. I wanted him to get a taste of the reality because I had hired him to design animated film sequences of fecal-oral routes of infection. I knew that using live action of defecation would be too disgusting for most people to watch, and it could stigmatize particular national or ethnic groups as “dirty people.” Animated figures, on the other hand, could be drawn in a more neutral manner as “somewhere in the tropics.”

Sarvodaya personnel took us 170 miles (274 km) south on a winding coastal highway, with buses flying at us in the opposite direction, while bullock carts, motorcycles, and pedestrians suddenly appearing on the road in front of us. Like elsewhere in South Asia, Sri Lankan drivers get where they are going by blaring their horns, playing chicken with on-coming vehicles, and applying their brakes or swerving at the last second. Claude and I were used to this chaos from earlier visits, but Bill was rattled. When we arrived at the town of Matara, at the very southern tip of the island, we checked into a decent guest house that charged only US \$4.00 per person, and then we plunged into the Indian Ocean. That, and a gin and tonic or two cooled Bill’s nerves.

Just outside Matara, we filmed the installation of an innovative water pump fabricated in Sri Lanka by Sarvodaya. Don Sharp was spearheading another experiment with pumps made locally, using plastic components, as described later in this chapter. Before returning to Colombo, we also filmed a preschool at the Sarvodaya Centre—children from low-income families being taught the basics of household hygiene. We had to get across the message that clean water supplies and well-built latrines would do little if people didn’t understand the fecal-oral route of disease. At Matara, Bill also had a chance to try out his initial drawings on Sarvodaya field staff.

On February 10th, we flew to Bangkok, Thailand, and the next day linked up and discussed progress with Don Sharp, and Lee Kam Wing from our Singapore office. We took a boat tour through the *klongs* (canals) of that famous city, not to film golden-roof temples, but slums where thousands of people dumped household waste, feces, urine, and offal directly into the water. Then we went to PDA—the Population and Community Development Association of Thailand, where we met Mechai Viravaidya, the leader of PDA, a famous Thai personality who had popularized condoms and other means of family planning in unorthodox ways, such as blowing them up like balloons at public gatherings. Mechai’s communications head, Tanaporn Praditwong, reviewed our animation storyboard and finalized a great schedule for us.

On February 13th, we drove in a van to the northeast of the country, accompanied by two delightful PDA hostesses. For the next four days when stopping for lunch or dining in the evening at local restaurants, they ensured that we never repeated a dish. This was Thai hospitality at its best.

In rural areas near Khon Kaen, we took useful footage of people drawing household water from open polluted wells, and the construction of water tanks for a rainwater roof catchment project. The northeast of Thailand is its driest area, so storing water in the rainy season is vital. My problem was that PDA had added their own video crew and a visiting consultant to our tour, and when Don Sharp and Lee Kam Wing arrived, it seemed there were more visitors than villagers. I had to look out for extraneous bodies wandering into frame. I always prided myself in getting good shots and sequences with a minimal crew: myself, a soundman, and, when needed, a technical guide who could also act as interpreter. This crowd

was frustrating, so the next day, with one PDA staff member, Claude and I escaped the large crew to get some great sequences of poor household hygiene practices, communities building latrines, a health worker addressing a village, and school children being taught hygiene lessons.

Bill had enough background and feedback to finish his artwork, so he returned to Canada, while Claude and I flew to the Philippines. During February 20 to 27, we were hosted by Cecilia (Caby) Verzosa of PATH—Program for Appropriate Technology in Health. Caby had to obtain official permission for us to film because the BBC had recently broadcast a TV program on the poverty and corruption of the Philippines under President Marcos. She had to assure the authorities that we would not take any footage that portrayed the Philippines negatively. Apparently Caby was trusted, for no government minder was assigned to accompany us. Lee Kam Wing joined us from IDRC's Singapore office.



16.4 - Caby, Kam Wing, and some of Caby's crew with the author
Photographer unknown

We did get excellent sequences of clinics and community action programs run by women—the main facilitators of social change in the country. Accompanied by Caby, one morning we drove to Malabon, a fishing port near Manila where we could film urban squalor. We boarded a small boat and soon found ourselves on a dark river, thick with floating human and animal feces. Caby held her handkerchief over her nose. We filmed desperately poor people living along this sewer. *Great shots*, I thought. But then our boat's propeller hit something hard while we were passing under a bridge, and we had to get down beside a latrine and pig pen, carefully avoiding the mushier-looking "mud" as we climbed out.

By this time on our trip, Claude and I had learned how to keep our lips sealed, our eyes to the ground, and never to take an uncalculated step. We all climbed out of the sewer, took some deeper breaths, and caught a jeepney taxi back to our clean hotel for showers. Caby had a degree in communication, so she knew we needed general footage with impact. She had delivered. But like Fibi Munene in Nairobi, I don't think she was prepared for seeing the extent of the problems

rural-urban migrants faced when they seek new lives and some means of making a living in overcrowded cities.

On February 27th, Claude and I flew to Bangkok to take a connecting flight to Dhaka, Bangladesh, our last location for this film. We had to take a fully-packed Bangladesh Biman flight—a precarious carrier at that time—and we felt even more apprehension when boarding because some of the Bangladeshis on board were wearing crash helmets (actually purchased in Bangkok for use on motorcycles). In spite of the odds stacked against helmetless passengers, we arrived safely in Dhaka at midnight. But one bag containing vital camera parts and all of my exposed film from the Philippines was missing. I insisted on scouring the airport and the cargo section, to no avail. Next, I had to transfer my long equipment list, including the missing items, onto their official customs forms. Everyone was following the rules exactly because General Muhammed Ershad had taken over in a coup in 1982, and had declared martial law.

After a two-hour process, the customs authorities politely impounded everything but our clothes. Then an airline employee came running with a telex, gleefully announcing that our missing case would arrive the next day on a Thai Airlines flight. As on previous visits, I found Bangladeshis to be very accommodating and as welcoming as possible.

The next day, our host agency's representative connected me to a man from the Ministry of Information and I headed back to the airport with him. After 45 minutes, he obtained permission from the martial law authorities for us to enter the customs area. He had to go through 10 separate procedures. I was amused by the sight of the man from the Ministry bobbing in and out of offices chasing down various officials for signatures. They had to search through Dickensian ledger books, transferring descriptions, numbers, and dates from one antiquated form to another. This brought back memories of the absurdist existential plays I had studied in university. But in a couple of hours, we managed to get my equipment out.

With the missing items returned, I was finally able to focus on my assignment. It is believed that cholera originated in the swampy Sundarban forests of southeast Bangladesh, next to Bengal, India, when the British East India Company started to exploit the area in the early 1800s, releasing the bacterium, *Vibrio cholera*. Our host agency was the International Centre for Research in Diarrheal Diseases, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B), which originated with the founding of a Cholera Research Laboratory and Hospital, in 1960. Among its many achievements, the institution had played a key role in the development, testing, and use of oral rehydration solution (ORS), a simple treatment estimated to have saved tens of millions of lives worldwide.

I had met Dr. Mujibur Rahman, Deputy Director of ICDDR,B in 1976, when he accompanied me while filming *Rural Health Workers*. Don Sharp had lined up a meeting between Bill Clark and Dr. Rahman in London, and now he was very keen on getting our film produced. He especially loved the idea of using animation to show fecal-oral contamination.

On March 2nd, we flew south to Cox's Bazaar on the Bay of Bengal, and then proceeded down a bumpy single-lane road to Teknaf, the most southern and possibly the most isolated district of Bangladesh, then with a population of 90,000. Besides Dr. Rahman, we were accompanied by the local research coordinator, an anthropologist, a field research officer, and a health educator. At first I thought there were too many people involved, as in Thailand, but we went over the shot-list in the evening and by the morning they had divided up their duties and headed off in different directions to make filming arrangements.

For the next two days, all Claude and I had to do was follow them around to take the scenes they had set up: both good and bad hygiene in households, latrines, pumps, and hygiene education at a Koranic school. The involvement of the health educator, a female, was instrumental, for women in Teknaf lived in *purdah*—in separate rooms or behind curtains, and

dressed in enveloping black *burkas*, to stay out of the sight of men, especially strangers. The health educator gained permission for us to film women doing their daily work in a few households.



16.5 - Left to right, Dr. Rahman and staff member with villager – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

In Teknaf, we stayed in a run-down guesthouse without electricity or running water. Fortunately, it had mosquito nets because, at the time, Teknaf was one of the world's hotspots for cerebral malaria. Also on the plus side, March was the Bengali spring, with cool nights. During our second evening, I recorded an interview with Dr. Rahman, gathering background for the film script and a magazine interview on ORS. He was so articulate, insightful, and helpful that I decided, then and there, he should be credited as a technical advisor on our film, along with Don Sharp.

As we talked by candlelight, I could see a full moon and the mountains of Burma (now renamed Myanmar) silhouetted across the Naf River. Even in the 1970s and 1980s, the now-famous Rohingya Muslim people crossed the river daily, without passports, to see their cousins in Bangladesh. There really was no border.

On March 5th, we returned to Cox's Bazaar to catch a night train to Dhaka, our only option. The next day we recuperated in the morning and then went over the animation story board with the ICDDR,B team for a final time. We saved the worst for our last day in Bangladesh—filming in the Cholera Hospital: diarrhea victims hollering in agony from acute dehydration, some who had come too late and were very near death; others on the road to recovery; and complicated cases of malnourished children with diarrhea. For these victims, the agent of sickness and death was *Shigella* dysentery, not cholera. Those recovering were the lucky few who lived near enough to make it to the hospital on time for proper treatment.



16.6 - *Shigella* dysentery patient with parents – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

In the afternoon, we held a meeting with Ken Gibbs, a United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) water and sanitation engineer. Gibbs had already reviewed the shooting script and trusted Dr. Rahman’s opinion. He told us he would use the film to train 700 mid-to-lower-level water supply engineers who had inadequate education on sanitation and hygiene. He also offered to fund the Bangla language version of the film. This was a fortuitous meeting for, after I finished the film, it was used all over Bangladesh in mobile cinemas for health education, and it led me to do much more work with UNICEF on other language versions around the world.

I used the live action negative and somewhat disgusting footage (which audiences would not want to watch while eating lunch) in the opening of the film, and in some later parts for reinforcing messages. By carefully editing shots between countries, I avoided stigmatizing any one nationality or ethnic group. But, the feedback we received was that the key to our film’s success was the careful creation of seven animated film sequences on the fecal-oral route of diseases and how to prevent them. This included animals and humans defecating in a river, with their pollution represented by and glowing gray-white substance carrying bacteria, viruses, and parasites, all flowing downstream to a young girl scooping up water in a jug. She takes it home and pours it into a larger water vessel, which is then used by the family for drinking, washing, and cooking.

The same grey-white substance demonstrated the danger of using water from open contaminated wells. It also showed the main points of contamination within households, such as a mother not washing her hands thoroughly after cleaning a baby’s bottom, and then preparing food for the family.



16.7 – Frame from animation showing fecal-oral route of disease

Through the magic of animation, people who never had been taught disease theory could see how contamination happened, and how the grey-white substance could be eliminated by building low-cost safe latrines, by only drawing water from safely-covered wells with a reliable handpump, by installing drainage systems around wells and preparing a separate place where people can bathe and wash their clothes, and by eliminating household infection points. We received feedback that the main messages were understood by illiterate audiences, even without voice-over narration in their languages.

I also used live action to show Asians and Africans doing things right, the need for community involvement, and the important role women play at every level in delivering safe water, sanitation, and hygiene.

During the post-production process, I took a copy to Geneva to meet Dr. Rahman with Dr. Michael Merson, the Director of the World Health Organization's Diarrhoeal Diseases Control Programme. He and his team loved it, and that helped to put our 23-minute film on the world stage. We titled it, [*Prescription for Health*](#)(4) and in June 1985, it won the World Health Organization Special Prize for best primary health care film at the 11th International Festival of Red Cross and Health Films.

In 1985, I worked once more with Don Sharp and his team to make a film on handpumps made of plastic, as briefly mentioned above. More specifically some main internal components were made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and polyethylene. Research on this had first begun at the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario, close to my hometown. In the surrounding countryside, as a child, I had seen old rusty handpumps on farms, some with broken handles, so I was quite familiar with the technology. Even in the 1980s, most handpumps were manufactured in Europe or North America and their designs had hardly evolved. These pumps were made almost entirely of cast iron and were suitable for use on single-family farms, not for continuous use by 200 or more people a day in African or Asian villages.

Don Sharp and I visited the Faculty of Engineering at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to film Dr. Goh Sing Yau and his team in action, manufacturing their version of the Waterloo handpump. We filmed endurance testing in their lab and the changes they made to the Waterloo design. They had already produced many units for field testing in a rural area, and the next day we filmed handpump installation and maintenance by Ministry of Health personnel in a village called Kuala Pilah, a short drive from Kuala Lumpur.



16.8 and 16.9 - Assembling PVC piston valve and completed pumps, University of Malaya
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

We also filmed testing of the pump in Thailand, but more memorable to me, was a return to Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka. Arriving at Colombo airport, Don and I were easily waved through customs with all my equipment when we said, “We’re visiting Dr. Ariyaratne, Sarvodaya.” We then proceeded to Sarvodaya headquarters to meet him. As the leader of his movement, [Dr. Ariyaratne had become a famous personality, internationally known for his good works throughout the island nation and around the world. Through his Buddhist ideals of selflessness and compassion, he came to be known as Sri Lanka’s “Gandhi.”](#)⁽⁵⁾ Unlike many of his countrymen, he practiced principles of non-violence and bottom-up development. He involved millions of villagers in improving their lives through shared labor, galvanizing them to build over 5,000 pre-schools, as well as thousands of community health centers, libraries, cottage industries, and village banks. The Sarvodaya Movement also constructed thousands of wells and latrines, and promoted biodiversity, solar energy, as well as rehabilitation and peace.

The next day we traveled with a Sarvodaya media crew, including one man I trained on my sound equipment, up the winding road to Kandy and then east to a small town by the name of Padiyatalawa in the dry zone. We had checked with the Canadian High Commission and they had advised us not to take this trip since the town bordered land occupied by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, otherwise known as the Tamil Tigers, who continued their war against the government, trying to establish a separate state. But Dr. Ariyaratne told us we would be fine in a Sarvodaya vehicle. Regardless, it was a little unnerving when they sent a pilot vehicle ahead of us to determine if it was safe.

Arriving in Padiyatalawa, we immediately began to film the Women in Handpump Technology Project. It was jointly sponsored by IDRC and CIDA. I filmed young women dressed in smart blue shirts and pants, making PVC pumps in a workshop—running lathes, drilling, welding, grinding, assembling, and installing them in villages. First they consulted locals on their preferred places for pump installation, and once installed they instructed them on proper use and maintenance. Some women had set up small workshops in villages for basic pump repairs and they were allowed to make extra income by repairing farm tools and household items for villagers.



16.10 and 16.11 - Sri Lankan women manufacturing the Sarvodaya handpump
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

These young women, who had an average education of Grade 10, were allowed to join the project so long as they signed a pledge not to get married for two years. This had the dual benefit of decreasing wasteful attrition of the work force, and also delaying child

birth in the area, thereby increasing their chances of attaining higher education and having safer births when and if they married. This was one of the poorest areas I had seen in Sri Lanka, and improving the role and status of women here was a key to change.



16.12 - Sri Lankan women installing the PVC rod with piston valve
Photo by Don Sharp/IDRC

Sarvodaya had made changes to the University of Malaya design based on the quality of materials available. Both PVC and brass were used, with leather piston rings, since locally manufactured PVC pipe was too rough and would cause PVC rings to wear out rapidly. Sarvodaya also had built their own drilling rig at a fraction of the cost of a commercial rig.

People liked the taste of the water from their new wells. The Sri Lankan Government, with support from UNICEF, had come through with an expensive drilling rig and peppered the area with Indian-made pumps. Most of their metal parts had corroded and people found the water metallic tasting, so they were only using the wells for washing and bathing. Before our project, there had been little or no involvement of local people in well placement here—by then a familiar story to me.

Don had to go elsewhere, so I flew by myself to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, our final filming site. The country remained in the hands of President Mengistu Mariam and his Derg, a socialist-military junta backed by the Soviet Union. Ethiopia had recently suffered from two years of famine during which an estimated million people had died, partly due to forced resettlement. The northern Tigrayan armed rebels were on the rise. I mused with irony, *What a great time to return to this country!*

I was met at Addis Ababa airport by Professor Asegeb Mammo, the project leader at the University of Addis Ababa, and Alex Redekopp of IDRC's Health Science Division in Ottawa, who had arrived a couple of days earlier to monitor the project and ensure all

arrangements were made for filming. Right away, we boarded a Canadian-built Dash-6 plane bound for the Bale Region, in the far south of the country. By 4:00 pm on the same day, I was filming a handpump training session at 10,000 feet (3,048 meters) above sea level. Prof. Mammo had tried to line up a soundman, but failed, so I trained Alex on the spot.

The training session involved village men and women in bright flowing dresses. I think they wore their best clothes for the occasion. The pumps that had been installed earlier were heavily used by the villagers, most of whom had been relocated to this isolated settlement by the government, with its central planning mindset. It was a good thing to show the adaptation of the handpump in a completely different cultural setting.



16.13 - Ethiopian women learning the basics of handpump maintenance
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

The stationary foot valves were made of PVC, but the PVC produced in Ethiopia was of such poor quality that the piston valves, which moved up and down, had to be made of brass castings with leather rings. In addition, it was found that any above-ground exposed PVC pump components would not last, for they would soon be chewed up by hyenas. Apparently they took them to be bones.

Returning to Addis Ababa, we filmed manufacturing in the university's workshop, including casting of brass pistons in a small foundry. I got the bright idea of filming ancient-style Ethiopian Orthodox Church crosses, which were made of brass and sold in local markets. We had just about finished that sequence when we were arrested by the People's Militia, bearing AK-47s. It took some time to explain what we were up to, despite Dr. Mammo's letter of permission to film. The head soldier of the unit went off to consult his superior, while we waited. Fortunately, the local chief was an intelligent fellow and we were released. Although I am not a believer, for a few moments I tightly held my newly-purchased cross—a great end to another filming trip.

Eventually, with funding from CIDA, the University of Malaya became the center for a world-wide network for PVC handpump development and testing. Today, many varieties of PVC

pumps are made locally and their handles are bobbing up and down all over the developing world. When we finished our film we gave it the title *A Handle on Health*(6).

The 1980s International Decade on Drinking Water and Sanitation brought clean water to 1.2 billion people and sanitation systems to 770 million. But the decade was only the beginning of concerted action. I also found an even more important statistic. [Between 1980 and 2015, annual childhood diarrhea deaths declined from five million to one million, while the population of the world nearly doubled](#)(7). Yes, human life and human progress depend on water, and IDRC's research, pilot projects, and my two films had become part of a successful international movement in human health and development.

17. Finding Solutions for *Campesinos* in South America

I landed in Bogota, Colombia on April 23, 1984, with a bang. Our Eastern Airline DC-10 blew one tire on hitting the runway and another while taxiing in. It was fully loaded and it took a couple of hours for two small vans to carry 20 people at a time to the airport terminal. Another two hours passed by before my equipment cleared customs, even with the help of my IDRC Communications Division colleague, Stella Feferbaum, and her husband David—a talented musician and scholar of Polish-German descent. They also brought along Heriberto Garcia, a Colombian filmmaker who would act as my soundman and interpreter for the next month, as we made our way south through the Andes Mountains. Since he had never traveled south of Colombia, he was very much looking forward to exploring his home continent with me. Heriberto became a wonderful partner in filmmaking. He was fluent in English so could easily translate my directions: “Friend, don’t walk so unnaturally!” “Please don’t stare at the camera.” On top of that, he loved discussing things and asking questions.



17.1 - Heriberto Garcia interviewing a pig – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

I was not a complete novice to South America. In 1975, I had traveled to Colombia, Venezuela, and Guyana (see Chapter 8). Then, in March of 1981, I had taken two still cameras and a tape recorder and flown to Santiago, Chile. From there I traveled by train 600 miles (900 km) south to a landscape of rolling hills and evergreen forests, where Mapuche indigenous people were struggling to survive in the cold foothills of the southern Andes. Next, I traveled north through Chile, Peru, and Colombia. In all, I visited 15 IDRC research projects on education, health, agriculture, and fisheries. I journeyed by myself with little ability in Spanish. Fortunately, I always found English-speaking personnel at our project sites. It was a pleasure to meet so many smart and motivated people, and, for a change, it was a relief to travel without lugging around all my heavy equipment.

On that trip, I managed to take about 2,000 images and the interviews I taped with project leaders served as background for four articles, which I later authored or coauthored for IDRC

Reports, our quarterly magazine. I also received many requests from project leaders to return to make full films based on their work.

This return mission in 1984 was for the purpose of shooting a film requested Tony Tillett, Associate Director for Science and Technology Policy in our Social Sciences Division. Tony gave me some background on the projects I was to cover: “Extreme land tenure inequality has been a constant feature of Central and South America since the conquest by the Spanish, over 400 years ago, and it had a major impact on indigenous communities and increasingly commercial small holders. Although there were calls for major land reform and more equal distribution and ownership, this was only significant in three countries: Mexico in the 1930s; Bolivia in 1952; and Peru, under the military regime in the 1970s. The Cuban revolution did not redistribute land but claimed it for the state. In other countries in the 1960s and 1970s there were some land reform initiatives but not on the major scale of those noted above.” Tony told me that the projects I was to visit and film made up a network of small attempts to revalidate indigenous agricultural practices, human rights, and increase knowledge about rural markets and appropriate techniques.

Stella told me that the situation in Bogota had deteriorated over the last three years. From the time I entered Colombia until I left a week later, I was always on edge. Leftwing guerrilla groups and rightwing paramilitary organizations were involved in drug-trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping to finance their activities. The drug trafficking had begun in the 1960s by the U.S.-American mafia, but it had been taken over by competing local groups with links to U.S. criminal operations, and innocent people were getting caught in the crossfire. Stella warned me of the dangers and I felt like a target with all my equipment and *gringo* looks.

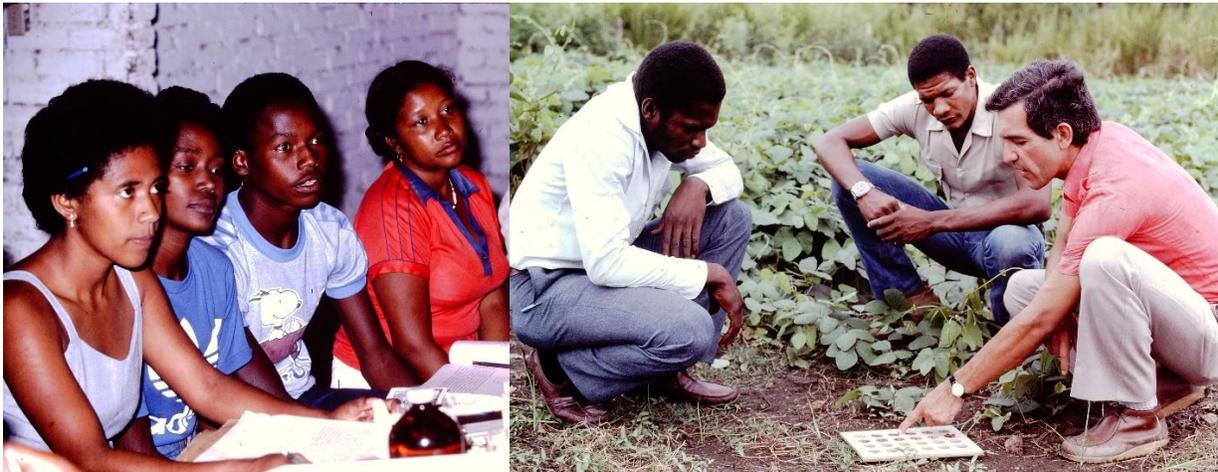
Stella, Heriberto, and I took off for Cali the next morning, a city to the southwest in the tropical Cauca Valley—a land described in the 18th century by Simon Bolivar, the Venezuelan-born liberator from Spanish colonization, as “an earthly paradise.” It lies at an altitude of 3,337 feet (1,014 meters), compared to Bogota’s altitude of 8,660 feet (2,640 meters), and it was good to breathe properly and feel warm again. I had to get used to many altitudinal fluctuations on this trip.

In Cali, we made our way into the countryside to the campus of La Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de la Ciencia (FUNDAEC), which is translated as the Foundation for the Application and Teaching of Science. (South Americans love using acronyms because their institutions often have long names.) FUNDAEC is an NGO founded in 1974 by Farzam Arbab, an Iranian physics professor of the Baha’i faith. It involves impoverished rural communities in action research in agriculture, community organization, and new income-earning activities. I found that South American’s educated class often called the rural poor people “peasants,” when discussing their problems in English, but the word sounds so medieval and pejorative to the modern native English ear. The expression “small farmers” also sounds limiting, so I will use the Spanish word, *campesinos*.

In much of South America, these people are of mixed indigenous and European blood, but in the Cauca Valley we filmed many Spanish-speaking descendants of African slaves. They had lost their small parcels of land due to expropriation or competition from large privately-owned sugar plantations and other agribusinesses, such as enormous cattle-raising ranches called *haciendas*. Some of the rural poor worked in these enterprises, but with mechanization, many were losing their jobs and migrating to cities to live in poverty, while others clung to small plots for survival. They had the desperate choice of either rural or urban hunger and ill-health.

We interviewed the Executive Director, Gustavo Correa, a highly articulate man, and for the next four days we filmed male and female students of both African and mixed Hispanic

descent in classes, and while they studied agriculture extension work, or learned new ways to earn a living. We captured experiments in appropriate technology, a model farm, as well as small businesses and micro-industries resulting from FUNDAEC's outreach to the community—metal works, grain milling, and cement products production. The students were taught using the institution's own textbooks, course curricula, and methodology. There were three levels of trainees: promoters, technicians, and “engineers of rural well-being.” FUNDAEC personnel called their institution a “rural university” but only the engineers were educated at the tertiary level. The graduates served as bridges between the world of modern science and technology and the *campesinos*' traditional technology. The object was to institutionalize the process of development within the rural communities themselves, not impose answers from outside.



17.2 and 17.3 - Classes and field instruction at FUNDAEC – Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

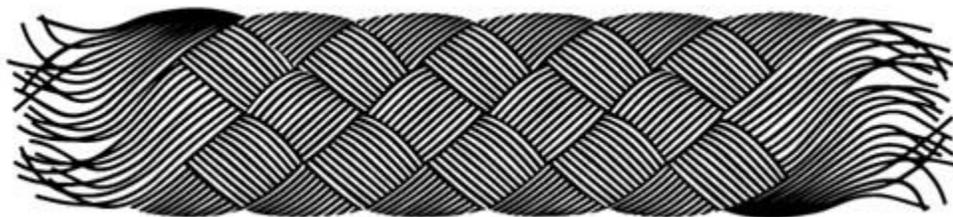


17.4 - A woman who was helped to set up her bakery with support from FUNDAEC
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Our time at FUNDAEC was rewarding and I took a lot of film footage, not knowing what I would find on other visits during the trip. The organization seemed to be idealistic and somewhat socialistic, fighting the trends of 20th century capitalism. The words they used to describe the purpose, objectives, and strategies, appeared to have an overly intellectual bias, which contrasted with their practical activities. That philosophy, I knew, came from the tradition of education started by Paulo Freire in Brazil, as stated in his famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968)(1), which I read before my first long trip through South America. But I wondered if this was all rhetoric and whether FUNDAEC would be able to continue, due to the violent armed struggle going on in Colombia.

While writing this chapter, I punched in “[FUNDAEC](#)”(2) on my computer and found the organization alive and flourishing today. Obviously, this institution must have had some success through its 46 years of operation. Otherwise, donors and Cauca Valley residents would have given up on it. I read the language on its website, which was just as flowery as ever, if not more so. That’s the Latin America way. I loved what they said about their logo—a drawing representing a woven strip of cloth:

FUNDAEC's emblem is a symbol of movement, interrelation, harmony and strength. All these lines intertwined with each other, resemble the development processes of a town. Each process alone as a thread of a loop is not very strong, but when it is joined with the others, the force that this union produces is clearly seen. These well-managed processes become a vital force capable of driving the continuous improvement of a community, small or large.



17.5 – FUNDAEC logo

From Cali, we flew back to Bogota, where Stella ended her trip, while Heriberto and I boarded a flight for Quito, the capital of Ecuador—altitude 9,350 feet (2,850 meters). In Ecuador, we visited the [Centro Andino do Acción Popular \(CAAP\)](#)(2), the “Andean Center for Popular Action” in English. I had to smile when I read online, in English, what they do today:

Each thematic space called program, implements and is made up of specific projects that involve research-training activities and organization of action as components, which aim to recognize, debate and incorporate knowledge, resources and local initiatives, towards the recognition and revitalization of processes. Building alternatives from society, from its practices, skills and initiatives, considering its diversity and heterogeneity, is recognized and incorporated as an operational concept. This defines, as a substrate, the CAAP methodology, concurrent with its central objective, and therefore its actions and intervention modalities. Each action of intervention and technological generation also implies, as intrinsic components, specific punctual investigations.

Humm...okay, but what did they do in 1984? Believe it or not, these people were more practical than that description, and we got down to work right away—fortunately with an expert guide by the name of Lenny Field, a British agriculture economist. This solved my problem of trying to understand what CAAP's work was all about. I found that Spanish conversations flow very quickly, with lots of acronyms and buzz words. Also, many words in Spanish have quite different meanings from what sounds like the same word in English, and that sometimes led my understanding astray.



17.6 - CAAP researcher interviewing a farmer – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

At the time, CAAP's main objective in Ecuador was to save ancient Andean agricultural crops and patterns from the onslaught of agribusiness. The IDRC-sponsored research had just begun, but for two days we filmed large *haciendas* and multinational companies, such as a Nestles' baby food plant, a noodle factory, and pyrethrum plantations grown for the production

of insecticide. We also interviewed farmers and experiments on their fields, eroded soil, and mountain scenes.

Heriberto and I couldn't leave Ecuador without having one of CAAP's staff members snap a picture of us at the equator.



17.7 - Standing at latitude 0.00, a line from which the country derives its name
Photo by CAAP staff member

On May 4th, we flew from Quito to Lima, the capital of Peru on the Pacific coast. Our stay in this warm metropolitan center, teeming with activities, allowed me to catch my breath in oxygenated air. I got to know and love this vibrant place on my 1981 trip. But this time our stay was brief. The next morning, we hired a taxi to take us to Huancayo. Within minutes we were heading east and climbing steeply up a winding highway into the Andes. When we reached the highest point, at exactly 15,899 feet (4,843 meters), we got out to take the obligatory photo. I tried to walk around but my whole body felt like lead, whereas Heriberto and the taxi driver were used to high altitudes. Fortunately, the ride downhill to the Mantaro Valley brought me back to life, although the City of Hauncayo is still relatively high, at 10,730 feet (3,271 meters).

In 1981, I had visited Grupo Talpuy (Talpuy Group), an association of ethnologists and artists, and told them that, one way or another, I would return to make a film on them and their work someday. Huanca is a dialect of Quechua, which is spoken throughout much of the high Andes. In Huanca, *talpuy* means "to sow." I had been impressed with Maria Angelica Salas and her German husband, Herman Tillmann, two social anthropologists. They insisted that I call them "Maruja" and "Timmi." It was the beginning of over 40 years of collaboration and friendship.



17.8 - Huanca farmers tilling soil on a steep slope
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Heriberto and I were invited to stay with them in their wooden house, constructed in native Huanca style, with a large balcony running along the front, normally for storage and domestic work. On the first night, Timmi and I stood there sipping the famous Peruvian drink, pisco sour, while I asked him about the fires I could see burning on the other side of the valley.

“Timmi, those flames seem to be in the shape of a hammer and sickle.”

“Yes, Sendero Luminoso.”

“Shining Path, the Maoist guerilla group?”

“Yes, we will film over there in the hills tomorrow.”

“Are you kidding?”

“They know our group and they are watching us. But at this point they don’t know what to do with us.”

The Shining Path was an arm of the Communist Party of Peru. Their objective was to overthrow the government through guerrilla warfare, replacing it with a dictatorship of the proletariat, and bring about a cultural revolution. Fifty percent of the fighters were women. Grupo Talpuy was not aligned with these insurrectionists, but it was respected by the Huanca people for its work. A few times after we talked to local people, Timmi told me which person he suspected belonged to the Shining Path.

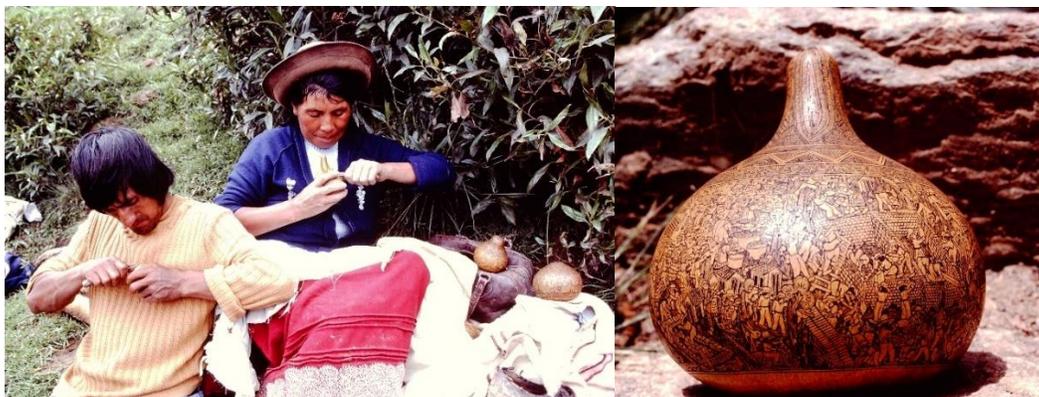
I learned some of the history of settlement in the Mantaro Valley. It goes back to 500 B.C.E. and their culture flourished until around 1,530 C.E. At first they were herders; however, about 1,000 C.E. they turned to maize cultivation. For centuries, they fought off domination by the Incas, but were finally defeated in the mid-1400s. When the Spanish explorer Pizarro and his men arrived in 1526, the Huanca joined him to defeat the Incas. In fact, Pizarro’s success was largely due to the Huanca and other native groups who despised their Inca overlords.

Before Grupo Talpuy had been created, the official Peruvian agriculture extension service had tried for 30 years to disseminate and implement models and methods of improvements that had been attempted worldwide. These had failed in Peru. What interested me most about the work of Grupo Talpuy was their communication approach through a popular magazine called *Minka*, which means “the cooperative way” in Quechua and its local dialect, Huanca. The magazine was used to reclaim and diffuse useful traditional culture and technologies that were rapidly being lost. I found it interesting that most of the 200,000 Huanca in the valley could speak and read Spanish—a great advantage for using a magazine as a main means of disseminating ideas.

Grupo Talpuy had found that their first few issues of *Minka* were too full of “technological recipes,” which had little meaning for their readers, such as plans for houses that were not within their tradition, and fragmented messages in cartoon style. They consulted the people through qualitative research and began to partner with local artists, who used traditional artistic designs to communicate stories. For instance, the Huanca had a long tradition of carving stories on gourds and paintings of house building and fiestas, which were central to their culture. These were disseminated via *Minka*.



17.9 - Painting of traditional house building – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC



17.10 and 17.11 - Huanca artists carving gourds – Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

We spent our days in the valley filming traditional technology: housing construction, spinning and weaving wool, sewing and embroidering, carving, and engraving gourds. Another example of reviving traditional technology was the *chaquitaqlla* or *chaka*, a narrow shovel with a special place to put your foot while shoving down into the soil. Many people had forgotten about this useful tool used for centuries by their ancestors. *Minka* brought it back. We also took sequences of Grupo Talpuy members interviewing *campesinos* on their complicated agricultural practices on the slopes of the Mantaro Valley. The Talpuy researchers found that *campesinos* would spend hours reading and discussing each issue in family groups, during the evenings.

Due to mounting armed conflict between the rebels, the Peruvian Army, and local police, Timmi and Maruja found it too difficult and dangerous to work in the Huancayo Valley, so they moved to Germany shortly after I filmed them. The team they left behind continued to publish *Minka* until 1996, when funding ran out. But out of *Minka* came the Coordination Commission of Andean Technology (CCTA) in Peru, and a group of activists named [Proyecto Andino de Tecnologías Campesinas \(PRATEC\)](#)(3) (Andean Program for Peasant Technology), a program aimed at the reaffirmation of Andean cultures.



17.12 - Maria Angelica Salas talking to a Huanca farmer on the utility of the chaka – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

After a week, Heriberto and I returned to Lima to fly to Cusco to do more filming, facilitated by the Inter-American Institute of Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA). This included spectacular shots of people harvesting maize on valley floors, shepherds minding flocks of llama and alpaca on the high plateaus, and scenes in between—an intricate system of agriculture managed by *campesinos* on small terraced plots: grains, vegetables, fruits, tubers—more than 60 domesticated crops, which, when grown together, support soil fertility, repel insects, and deliver the best nutritional value.



17.13 and 17.14 - Maize on the valley floor and potatoes on the slopes and pasture land on the high plateau - Photos by Neill McKee

The highlands of Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador are known as the original home of the potato. Over the centuries, the *campesinos* of these lands have bred thousands of varieties in different sizes, shapes, and colors, which grow well at different temperatures and altitudes, up and down the slopes. Some contain natural insecticide and thus repel pests. Their bitter taste has to be washed out by placing them for some time in a fast-flowing stream before being cooked and eaten. Some bitter varieties grow above 4,000 meters (13,000 feet) and are planted for the production of *Chuño*—frozen, washed and dehydrated potatoes which can be stored for many years.



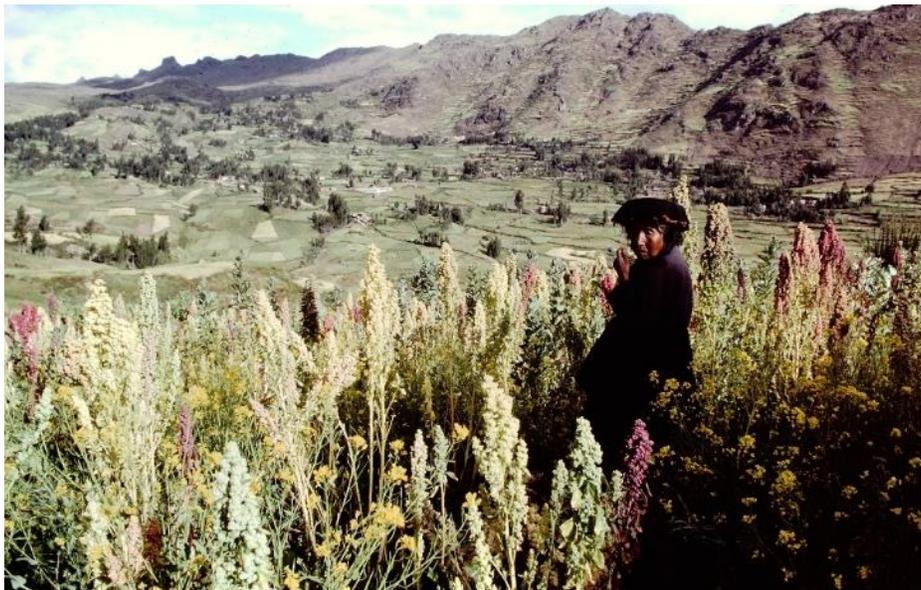
17.15 - Multiple varieties of potatoes
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC



17.16 - Potato harvest time in highland Peru
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

The Spanish brought the potato to Europe, where many farmers went for monocropping of a few larger and fast-growing varieties, leading to disasters, such as the Irish potato blight and famine, which brought my own maternal ancestors to Canada. If only the Spanish had sailed home with the wisdom of Andean *campesinos*, along with potatoes.

In addition, we filmed experiments of cropping and intercropping varieties of quinoa, a high-protein Andean grain, which, at the time, was pejoratively considered “Indian food” and was in danger of being abandoned, as the older farmers died off. (Probably no one knew, at the time, that 40 years later, it would be available in just about every upscale grocery store in North America and Europe—part of the health food movement. Unfortunately, this “quinoa craze” has driven up prices so high that now most of the harvested grain is exported from Andean countries. Many local people can no longer afford it and have to rely on nutritionally inferior foods.)



17.17 - An old woman proudly displays her quinoa plot
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Next, Heriberto and I flew southeast to Asunción, Paraguay, a city at a mere 322 feet (98 meters) above sea level. It’s a landlocked country between Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia, where the majority of people are mestizos—a mixture of Guaraní natives and the Spanish who took over the land during 1524-1537. When we arrived, most Paraguayans were celebrating a two-day May Day holiday. Despite that, the director, Domingo Rivarola of CPES, the [Centro Paraguayo de Estudios Sociológicos](#) (4) (Center for Sociological Studies, Paraguay) took us on a long trip through the southeast of the country toward the border with Argentina, where poor campesinos were attempting to make a living by hacking away at the forest to clear small plots for farming. These were people of few resources, juxtaposed against large soybean farms owned by Germans, Japanese, and Brazilian settlers. We spent the night in a cold cabin in the forest. The owners must have built it in the summer and forgot to install a fireplace or stove. It was May and approaching winter in the southern hemisphere.



17.18 - A settler clearing a small plot to farm in southern Paraguay
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

CPES's research had just begun, but we managed to film many relevant scenes on attempts to improve the lives of *campesinos*: small-scale maize and soya farms, brick production, a factory making soap out of coconut, another producing syrup from sugar cane, and a small enterprise producing pottery and other crafts. We also filmed interviews between *campesinos* and CPES researchers, and took shots of large cattle-raising *haciendas*. By this time, the South American story was familiar to me—the never-ending struggle between vested interests and people of little means.



17.19 - Brickmaking in rural Paraguay – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

CPES's role entailed doing studies and trying to influence government policy through publications and seminars. That was undoubtedly a tough sell, for, at the time of our visit, the country was run by the right-wing dictator, Alfredo Stroessner, and his Colorado Party. He

remained in power until 1989, when he was overthrown in a military coup. After civilian rule was restored in the early 1990s, except for a brief period, the Colorado Party continued to rule over the country, ensuring that the rich get richer and the poor stay poor.

Our final southward flight took us back over the Andes once more to Santiago, Chile, to meet and film the [Grupo de Investigaciones Agrarias \(GIA\)](#)(5), another band of social scientists and agriculture experts trying to find answers for the *campesinos*. That was a tall order. In 1981, I had written this paragraph in one of my articles about the country's many contrasts:

Chile is a land of superlatives: the world's narrowest country with the longest coastline and the driest desert. A local tourist brochure I read boasted the world's highest lake, the most concentrated solar intensity and the ocean's biggest oysters. At the time of my visit, the country had probably experienced the world's greatest fluctuations in social and agrarian policy: 1960—the Catholic Church began to turn over some lands to *campesinos*; 1968—the Agrarian Reform Law was passed but only enacted in a minor way; 1970—major agrarian reform begins, and by mid-1973, 5,906 large farms were expropriated—a total of 24.7 million acres (10 million hectares); then in September of the same year, Allende is overthrown by General Pinochet in an American CIA-backed coup; 1974—agrarian reform is reversed, and by mid-1977 a third of the expropriated land is returned to the original owners, another third is auctioned off, and the remaining least productive land was parceled out to *campesinos*.

GIA's director, Jaime Crispi, and his staff, gave us a very good rundown on the situation in the country before we headed 124 miles (200 km) southwest with Lizardo Pina and Joachim Benavente, who had efficiently lined up scenes for us to film: *campesinos* working on seed-bed preparation, apiculture, raising pigs, charcoal production, fish farming, a small-scale greenhouse. GIA had built a technical program centered on different low-cost technologies that *campesinos* could adopt.



17.20 and 17.21 - Managing fingerling growth on a fish farm, and honey production
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

The next day, two other GIA staff members, Miguel Diaz, a veterinarian, and Marc Nederlof, a Dutch agriculture student, accompanied us on a 10-hour train trip south. Four days of steady rain miraculously ended to allow us to film sequences of GIA staff working with

Mapuche native people in the cold wet hills east of Temuco. The harvest was over, so there was little activity to film on the land. I recall walking with our filming equipment for over an hour through mud—a thick cold mud that defines Mapuche land for much of the year. In the rainy season, the land is transformed into a quagmire, and the *campesinos* huddle in their isolated shacks for some semblance of warmth.

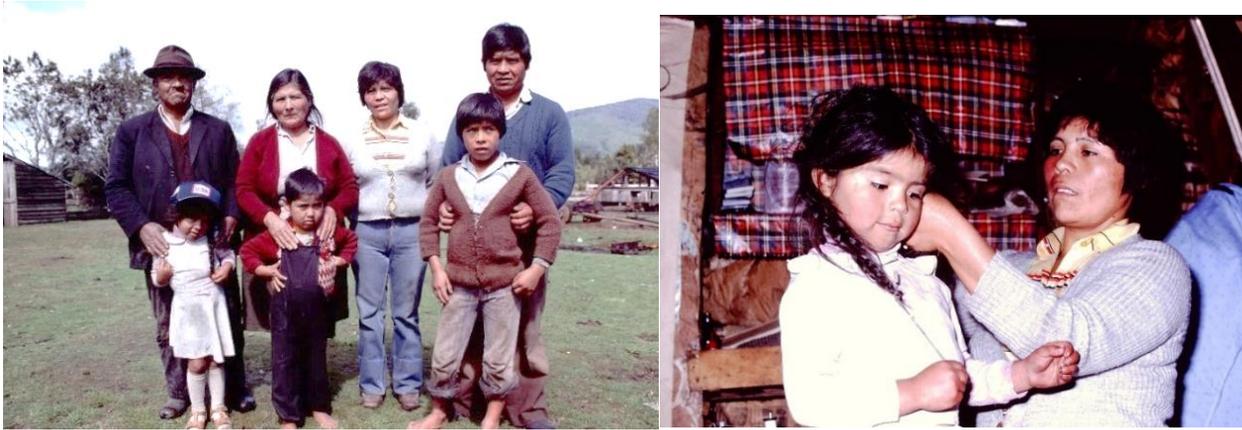


17.22 - A Mapuche home in the Andes foothills – Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

In their language, *Mapu* means “of the land,” and *Che* means “people”—an ironic meaning for they have little land. The terrain was familiar to me, for, as I mentioned in the opening of this chapter, in 1981, I had traveled even farther south by train from Santiago. Reaching Osorno, I had been taken around by another Dutch student, Jani Brower, who was doing her Master’s thesis research with a Chilean educational group funded by IDRC, focusing on communication between parents and children in Mapuche communities. I had learned a great deal and this excerpt from my article reflected that:

This is a land of little comfort, marked by a history of conflicts—border squabbles with Argentina and class struggle; fights between those in favor of and those opposing land reform during President Salvador Allende’s time in the early 1970s; then after the coup that overthrew him, the Mapuche began to fight among themselves and they became badly disorganized. Unemployment was high in the region and *chicha*, a crude local alcohol drink, was the release mechanism. But alcoholism is only a symptom of much greater social illness. The gulf between the “haves” and the “have nots” was so wide that you couldn’t see one side from the other—just like the terrain, almost permanently shrouded in mist.

During the Pinochet era, Mapuche land was privatized and much of it was sold to wealthy landlords and foreigners. Pinochet also introduced new laws, declaring there were “no indigenous people in Chile, only Chileans,” despite the fact that Mapuche make up 10 percent of the population—that’s almost a million people today. I was impressed with their resilience against great odds.



17.23 and 17.24 - Mapuche families – Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

Today, Chile is one of the most prosperous nations in South America, but like the rest of the continent, and most of the world for that matter, it is plagued by great income disparity. Mapuche still face difficulties in getting jobs and receiving equal pay. But in 1993, the government passed the Indigenous Act, which theoretically provides protection and development of indigenous groups in Chile. No land transfers can take place without their consent, and a state authority with Mapuche representation was established to oversee the enactment of the law. I read that Chile has been defined as a multiethnic society for the first time in the nation's history. [\(Source\)](#)⁽⁶⁾ But, we shouldn't be over-optimistic, for the same article goes on to say:

Chile has a high pressure to develop fast according to the neo-liberal model. Large-scale development projects, which were initiated during the Pinochet era, go on today. There are roads being built through Mapuche areas, the forest is being felled at fast speed and big power plants are being constructed in the rivers. When it comes to these large-scale projects, the Mapuche still feel infringed on their historical and cultural rights.

It is difficult to pinpoint causation in economic and social development, but somehow, while reviewing my trip reports, the articles I had written, and the film I shot with Heriberto Garcia during those 30 days in 1984, there's some evidence that this IDRC-supported research in South America had positive effects. When completing this chapter, I asked Tony Tillett what he thought. He replied:

“Each of these projects had begun separately and was based on a community/communal method to social change. Some were in their second phase, some had just begun. They were not a scientific approach to agriculture production, although this was an important element in many of them, but were based on community perceptions about how change should occur, reflecting on ‘traditional’ knowledge. The value of the network was that each organization brought a different approach to local issues. Thus, CPES in Paraguay, working in Guaraní, used modern survey and observational techniques; CAAP in Ecuador brought the power of a broad indigenous organization; FUNDAEC in Colombia focused on structured approach to learning, so that the individual community extension worker would go through a series of stages to become a “rural engineer;” and Grupo Talpuy in Peru, with its publication *Minka*, added a capacity to communicate both activities and results.”

The organizations I visited and filmed had been ready with the facts and strategies needed to make a difference for South America's *campesinos*, as political conditions improved. In

English we titled the film *Footholds*(7) to indicate that climbing mountains is difficult work, but I prefer the Spanish title, *Paso a Paso*(8)—step by step. That version received an Honorable Mention at the 2nd Festival de cine del desarrollo (films on development) , Colombia, in 1985. Not bad for a gringo!

18. Filming Multipurpose Trees Around the World

On August 1st, 1984, I traveled through West Africa with one of our science writers, Jean-Marc Fleury, to film trees and the lack of them. He acted as my interpreter, soundman, and guide, for he had come to know the region well. At the time he was based at our regional office in Dakar, Senegal, the country where, in 1976, I had survived our vehicle rolling over at dusk in a rural area.

I had been tasked with making a series of short films for IDRC's forestry experts: Gilles Lessard, Derek Webb, Cherla Sastry, and Karim Oka. Jean-Marc and I started with scenes of desertification around the Ouallam, 56 miles (90 km) north of Niamey, the capital of Niger, a former French colony in the Sahel—that dry band of land stretching across Africa south of the Sahara. Here, all forms of life were precarious because the rains had failed for years. The few trees I could see were dying. I filmed crops withering, goats eating the last vestiges of leaves, cattle carcasses lying all around. The desert was advancing southward. At the time, few people were talking about human-induced climate change on a global scale, but we were witnessing it first-hand.



18.1 – Desertification in the Sahel – Photo Neill McKee/IDRC



18.2 – Drought in Niger – Photo by Jean-Marc Fleury/IDRC

Niger had been colonized by France between 1900 and 1960. The French applied a European export model to the entire Sahel region, totally changing the landscape, institutions, and the practices of agriculture and forestry. This succeeded during wet periods, generating wealth for the colonizers and a few local elites, but such exploitation increased the vulnerability of the land and its people, especially during episodes of drought, and led to frequent famine for millions of rural farmers and pastoralists.

The main culprit, according to the information we had then, was the expanding population's insatiable demand for firewood, the only affordable source of energy for most people in Africa, at the time. Firewood comprised 90 percent of their energy requirements. Electricity was only available in cities and larger towns, and petroleum products were too expensive. But open fires have more than a cooking function. Gathering around a fire at night to tell stories and celebrate life remain a cherished ritual in Africa, just as in North America, at least when on vacation—never mind that most of the energy produced goes up in smoke.



18.3 - Camels loaded with firewood near Niamey, Niger
Photo by Jean-Marc Fleury/IDRC

Solar cookers had not been adapted to African cuisine, and energy efficient stoves were only used experimentally. IDRC had helped to develop one called the “Jiko stove.” In fact, Jean-Marc had one at home in Dakar where, on my visit, he asked his maid, a tall and lean Senegalese woman by the name of Thérèse, to cook the famous Senegalese *Thieboudienne*—a fish and rice dish—on his Jiko, instructing her to use only a fraction of the firewood she would normally use. But our instructions did not make sense to Thérèse and she burned the dish so badly we had to throw it out.

Returning south toward Niamey on the same day, we took shots of women and children hauling small loads of firewood on their heads, and men with larger loads on bicycles, on camels, in trucks, and on boats crossing rivers. We also captured sequences of wood burning practices: bakeries, breweries, brick kilns, fish smoking, barbeques at restaurants and in home compounds.

After making arrangements, Jean-Marc and I drove to Zinder, 590 miles (950 km) to the east. Flight schedules had all changed and we predicted the old Land Rover with driver we had rented would not make it. Fortunately, the Canadian Embassy lent us a car and a driver. Our vehicle had an official Government of Canada logo on its doors, and with the “ordre de mission” Jean-Marc had arranged, we made our way through about 20 police checkpoints to Zinder.

There, in the evening, we met Hamari Zada, the Director of Forestry for the region. He had a whole program lined up for us. He told us how the area to the north of Zinder had also been devastated by a long drought, and he would take us there the next day. I wondered why we had traveled all this way to film more of what we had already captured on film near Niamey. When traveling, we asked him to stop so I could take a shot of a row of dead cattle. But he refused, saying we could take them on the way back. But I knew by experience it would be too dark by the time we returned. Despite this issue, the day was not a total waste, for we did capture a great scene of a camel caravan heading north into the Sahara, which became my opening shot of the film.



18.4 - Camel heading north in Niger – Photo by Jean-Marc Fleury/IDRC

The next morning, August 7th, we headed southeast of Zinder into a very different Africa. I sped up my movie camera to take a steady moving shot of a green land of crops dotted with trees. We drove to the small town of Matamèye, where IDRC had been carrying out an important experiment in community forestry for a decade—village woodlots that had involved the villagers from the beginning. The project’s researchers had taken the time to learn about the ancient relationship between trees, crops, people, and their animals in this region. Before this intervention, the people had received opposing advice from agriculture extension workers and foresters. The former wanted them to clear land for crops, and the latter advised conserving trees. Now, the two worked together with the villagers to plant native acacia trees and fast-growing neem trees from India. These were being intercropped with cereals such as sorghum and millet, as well as providing firewood and fodder for animals.

Older *Acacia albida* trees dotted the land around Matamèye, their roots holding the soil firm. These leguminous trees also have the ability to fixate nitrogen from the air on their roots and produce nitrogen-rich pods and leaves that fertilize the soil, and also provide protein-rich feed for animals.



18.5 - Millet fertilized by a leguminous tree
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

We filmed meetings with villagers and small tree nurseries run by farmers, each producing hundreds of seedlings a year. Previously, the villagers considered planting trees to be the government's business. But after being taught the correct methods, they took responsibility for planting, and caring for the seedlings by building simple barriers to keep animals away.



18.6 - Villager watering seedlings in his mini-nursery
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

Establishing these village woodlots was not an easy process, for ethnic affiliations, grazing rights, and complicated land ownership patterns had to be taken into account. We also filmed villagers cutting trees for firewood and building materials, and pruning second growth to allow new shoots to grow more rapidly. The villagers were drawn together to reap the benefits. We took sequences of children being taught the importance of trees in their school programs and

another of villagers harvesting some of their precious trees for use in construction. The whole scene inspired me—this experiment was really working.



18.7 - Harvesting wood from a village woodlot - Photo by Jean-Marc Fleury/IDRC

When we returned to Niamey, we filmed “The Day of the Tree,” with the President of Niger and his entourage, the diplomatic core, and a large crowd who had been rallied for the purpose. A brass band played, followed by speeches and formalities, then everyone, including the President, walked to a field to plant trees to the beat of African drums. A great show, but I wondered how many of the seedlings would survive, and whether this commitment would have any impact beyond Niamey. I didn’t take film of the President’s face, for I knew that could date our film. At the time, African presidents were frequently overthrown in coups by their military.

Despite our skepticism about the “The Day of the Tree,” before we left Niger, Jean-Marc and I were told that the IDRC-supported Matamèye experiment had already become a model for similar projects elsewhere in the country. This sounded hopeful, so we decided to give our 18-minute film the title [Trees of Hope](#)(1) and *Les arbres de l’espoir* for the French version. Our film went on to win a special prize at Ekofilm ’86, the 13th International Festival of Films and Television Programs on the Environment; and also in the same year, the Red Ribbon Award for Environment and Ecology at the American Film & Video Festival.

So, what happened to all this experimental work and our toil and sweat in capturing it on film in temperatures of 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 C)? When writing about these memories, I searched on the Internet and found, to my surprise, that our efforts had not been wiped out by climate change. In 2018, The Guardian newspaper, U.K., titled an article, [The Great African Regreening: Millions of ‘magical’ new trees bring renewal](#)(2). The article emphasized that “This is not a grand UN-funded project aiming to offset climate change. Small-scale farmers have achieved it because of what the trees can do for crop yields and other aspects of farming life.”

Not satisfied with what could be “newspaper hype,” I looked further and found a series of scientific articles on what had happened since our relatively small intervention in the 1970s and 1980s. Many other agencies had entered the scene. One 2011 article titled [Rebuilding resilience in the Sahel: Regreening in the Maradi and Zinder regions of Niger](#)(3) stated the following:

The societies and ecosystems of the Nigerien Sahel appeared increasingly vulnerable to climatic and economic uncertainty in the late twentieth century. Severe episodes of drought and famine drove massive livestock losses and human migration and mortality. Soil erosion and tree loss reduced a woodland to a scrub steppe and fed a myth of the Sahara desert relentlessly advancing southward. Over the past two decades this myth has been shattered by the dramatic reforestation of more than 5 million hectares in the Maradi and Zinder Regions of Niger. No single actor, policy, or practice appears behind this successful greening of the Sahel. Multiple actors, institutions and processes operated at different levels, times, and scales to initiate and sustain this reforestation trend.... Reversals toward de-forestation or reforestation were preceded by institutional changes in governance, then livelihoods and eventually in the biophysical environment.

When I read this, I thought, *Need I search more?*

Returning to 1984, Jean-Marc and I continued our Sahelian travels by heading east to Senegal on a “milk run” Air Afrique flight. We wanted to cover more on solar energy experiments, the making of charcoal, energy efficient charcoal stoves, and the *Acacia senegal* (also known as *Senegalia senegal*) or gum arabic tree, which I had filmed, in 1976, at Mbidi forestry station—the last sequence of my first round of filming for IDRC (see Chapter 8). There, Jean-Marc and I took the first sequence for another film on multipurpose trees. The forestry plantation was now a wonder to behold. The *Acacia senegal* trees had grown tall and had generated a local industry.



18.8 and 18.9 - Gum Arabic harvested from *Acacia senegal* - Photos by Jean-Marc Fleury/IDRC

Besides its nitrogen fixing qualities, this tree's wood is used for firewood and making charcoal, as well as utensils, poles, and fence-posts. Furthermore, its bark and roots provide fiber and make strong ropes and fishing nets and its foliage provides valuable fodder for sheep, goats, and camels, as well as wild ruminants. Its flowers provide valuable nectar for bees in honey production. Today, if you google [Acacia senegal](#)(4) you will also see many of the worldwide uses of the gum that is tapped from the tree: food flavoring and emulsifiers, pharmaceuticals, and industrial products such as inks, pigments, polishes, to name a few.

I found Senegal to be a fun travel destination. In fact, I always found the people of francophone West Africa pleasant and polite, especially compared to Nigeria, a country I thought I would never have to return to. But no such luck. Jean-Marc and I arrived there on August 23rd to continue our mission. My muscles grew tight as we landed and I prepared for a fight to clear my equipment. Surprisingly, we easily glided through immigration and customs in the new Lagos airport, due to the recently installed military government's "War Against Indiscipline," as spelled out in posters we saw all around us. An army officer almost turned us back on the way out of the airport, but I pointed to one of the posters and to the sign held by the driver from the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), who had come to meet us.

We had to get accreditation cards from the Ministry of Information and that caused a delay. A further hold up was caused when we had to wait for most of a week for a "minder" from the ministry to accompany us wherever we went. He would tell us what we could and couldn't film, and we had to pay for his accommodation and food. As it turned out, Mr. Lawal had been a government cameraman for 30 years, and he gave us little direction. He was a pleasant man who protected us against any soldier who had not internalized the messages of the "War Against Indiscipline."

In southern Nigeria near Ibadan, we concentrated on alley cropping: the planting of rows of trees and/or shrubs to create alleys within which agricultural crops are grown. When planted on hillsides, this pattern also prevents soil erosion. The best filming was arranged by the International Livestock Centre for Africa (ILCA), which was doing on-farm research north of Ibadan near Oyo, using *Leucaena leucocephala* and *Gliricidia sepium*—two fast-growing leguminous trees native to Central America. They were intercropped with food crops such as cowpeas. Having already produced a whole film on that lowly legume at IITA in 1979 (see Chapter 11), I had some knowledge of such systems. As with Acacia, these trees pump nitrogen from the air into the soil through nodules on their roots, thereby eliminating or reducing the need for chemical fertilizers.

All of this work is what is called "agroforestry," a sustainable land use system in which trees and shrubs are grown adjacent to crops and pasture grass, integrating livestock, birds, bees, and fish in ponds on the same land, in such a way that the economic and ecological interaction between all components is positive. Such systems helped to reduce the slash and burn cultivation practiced in Nigeria and by more than 200 million people in the tropical world, at the time. The ancient slash and burn systems can only be sustained if the land is left fallow for a few years between crops. In addition, these fast-growing trees can provide shelterbelts against erosion from wind.

We also filmed small-scale feed lots where farmers fed the rich leaves from *Leucaena* and *Gliricidia* trees to sheep and goats, which we found in abundance in Oyo market because Mohammed's birthday was fast approaching. In Nigeria, all Muslims who have the means should sacrifice a ram for the occasion. This is a ceremonial cleansing ritual that predates Islam in

Africa. The sacrifice is said to make amends for evil acts and reverses the negative consequences of sin, or curses put on innocent people by others.



18.10 - Nigerian goats feeding on Gliricidia leaves - Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

I can't say my last trip to Nigeria went off without a hitch. I had grown weary of the delays, the endless hassles, bouncing around on rough rural roads, lifting heavy equipment and repairing, recharging, and cleaning it at night. But it was great traveling with Jean-Marc, who took things in stride, although he seemed to feel guilty, as if it was his fault when things went wrong. We drank at least two beers together every evening to erase our pain and frustration, and recharge our own batteries for another day. Because of this, and possibly the "War Against Indiscipline," plus the cool hand of Mr. Lawal, I forgot many of the negative details, until Jean-Marc reminded me when I was writing a draft of this chapter. I believe I had long-ago decided to think more positively about Nigeria, a country that has produced so many creative people such as the writers Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, who had explained so beautifully in their books what it means for a huge and diverse population to emerge out of colonialism.

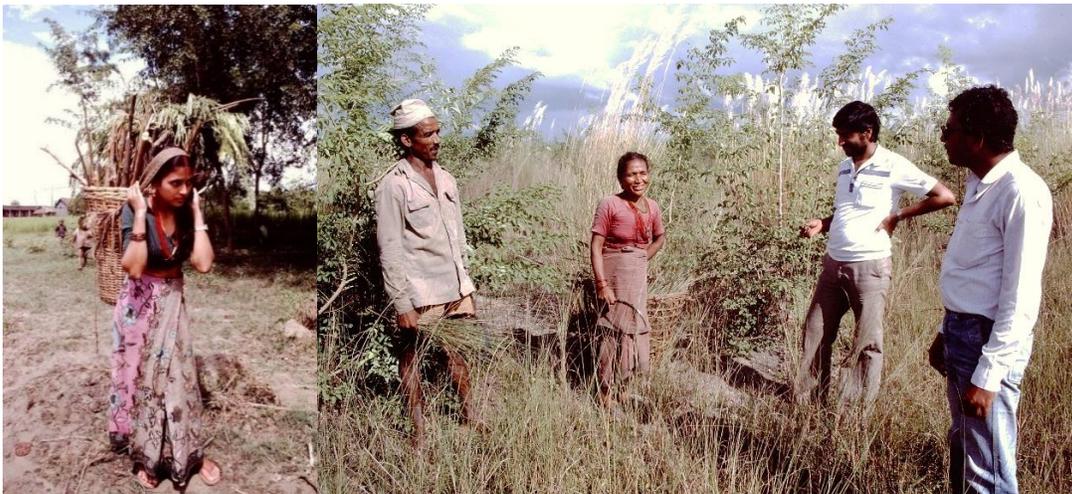
It wasn't until September 1985 that I had time to film more multipurpose tree projects, this time in Nepal with a professional soundman, Basu Dev Bista. I met him in the lobby of my hotel, the Annapurna in Kathmandu, where I learned a bomb had gone off in June, killing seven people and wounding many more. The hotel was owned by the Nepalese royal family and the perpetrators came from banned political groups. We were joined by Pradeep Dixit, our project coordinator, plus Raj Bhandari and Madhav Kari from the Forestry Institute of Nepal. They told me there was little or no terrorist activity where we were headed.

On September 25th, we drove south to the "Middle Hills" in the direction of India, where most of the forestry research was taking place. The weather looked ominous for filming—

continual monsoon rain—as we traveled over washed-out roads, by-passed landslides, and peered over guardrails down steep cliffs. I had just flown in from Canada and jetlag caught up with me, so despite this, I somehow I slept through much of the trip.

That night the monsoon ended—I was told it could have lasted another week. A blessing from Nepal’s Hindu gods? I rolled my camera to film erosion problems, deforestation, and overpopulation in the foothills and plains of Nepal—an area they call the *terai*. In Nepal, it was also fast-growing leguminous trees that made the difference, the famous *Leucaena* species, as well as *Dalbergia sissoo*, known as Indian Rosewood.

On the plains, I shot sequences of long lines of woodcutters carrying firewood on their heads, and people strengthening paddy bunds with trees. I found the *terai* of Nepal to be a fascinating place. It contains a mixture of people: various tribal groups from the hills who had migrated to take up rice cultivation, and Biharis from India who considered the Nepal-India border nonexistent. I filmed farmers who had traveled up to 186 miles (300 km) to the Forestry Institute’s nursery to put down money for seedlings to be picked up the next year. But the people here were about the poorest I had ever seen in South Asia.



18.11 - Woman harvesting *Leucaena* 18.12 - Nepal researchers with farmers
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

In one area, while walking along a paddy bund, camera slung over my shoulder, I passed a sad man carrying his dead son over his shoulder, followed by another man with a hoe. Pradeep Dixit explained they couldn’t afford the firewood needed for cremation. The boy was probably one of millions who had died of diarrheal diseases that year. It was one of the few times in my filming career that my necessary objectivity on the poverty of the situation overwhelmed me. My legs weakened and I had to hand my camera to an assistant in our team. I found some peace in the shade of one of the project’s leguminous trees and sought to recover before walking on.

On September 28th, some of my Nepalese hosts and I rode motorcycles to a vague, but ultimately rewarding destination. We forded streams and traveled over muddy roads through periodic showers. Then we headed into the mountains around Pokhara to view the famous Annapurna mountain range, visible under a full moon as we reached our destination. I rated the hotel we stayed in a “half-star” establishment.

The next day, a Sunday, it rained and I was glad to recuperate, get my thoughts in order, and clean my equipment. On Monday morning the rain had ceased and, at 6:00 am, I stationed

myself on the hotel roof, waiting for the clouds to clear, so I could take a shot of the Annapurna Range. A crowd of skeptical Nepalese hotel clients gathered to inform me that I was wasting my time, but I ordered some tea and stayed in place. An hour later, the sun burned away the clouds and I rolled my camera. It became the opening shot of the film.

My final trip for this film was to Costa Rica, in February 1986. An old colleague from my Latin American trips, Jaime Rojas, met me at the airport in San José. He had left IDRC to join the Tropical Agriculture Research and Training Center, known by its Spanish acronym, CATIE—a spectacular campus set in a picturesque valley. Derek Webb arrived from IDRC’s Bogota office to discuss the overall structure of the film and our draft script. We decided to cut out a number of possible sequences and focus on the leguminous tree—a great decision, for the Central American rainforest is the original home of many leguminous trees used in agroforestry systems, worldwide. We also reviewed the plans for the animation sketched out by my animator, Bill Clarke, to illustrate the way leguminous trees act as a nitrogen pump—pulling nitrogen from the air into nodules on their roots, and providing natural fertilizer for the soil, as well as nitrogen rich pods and leaves that also fertilize the soil and provide protein-rich food for animals.

For the next few days, we filmed agroforestry systems on the research station: Erythrina trees intercropped with maize, coffee, and beans, providing shade and fertilizer; and various methods of pasture/fodder enrichment. They called these systems “protein banks” for raising beef and milking cattle.

We also filmed the system of planting “living fences” on farms. This seemed rather miraculous to me. I took sequences of using cuttings from Erythrina trees and simply planting them in the ground to make new fence poles beside older dead wooden poles. The new poles develop deep roots and would grow for many years, outlasting traditional poles.



18.13 - Harvesting fodder from living fences in Costa Rica
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

When the new living fence poles grow to a respectable height, they are pruned, and their leaves and pods are used as rich animal fodder, while the larger stakes are planted as new fence poles or as poles for climbing plants, such as beans, to grow on. I wondered how I could make

interesting film footage on fences, but I “beefed-up” the sequence, so to speak, by introducing how CATIE had taught cowboys to feed their fences to their cattle.

When I finished our 20-minute film later that year, we titled it [Trees of Plenty\(5\)](#) an apt name, for the leguminous tree is a marvelous invention of nature which brings us so many benefits. If only we humans could learn we were put on this Earth to enrich it rather than exploiting it, making it poorer. IDRC helped to start the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF) now known as [World Agroforestry\(6\)](#) , and the techniques I documented in my film have spread throughout the tropical world. They are a major strategy against climate change and the environmental degradation we all face today.

I never entered *Trees of Plenty* in any contest because my attention was turning elsewhere. By this time in my career, I had traveled hundreds of thousands of miles over 15 years in shooting films for IDRC and CUSO, and had taken over 30,000 still photos. Besides the fact that hauling heavy filming equipment around the world had taken its toll on my back, I was feeling a mid-life career crisis coming on. I had asked IDRC if I could be given a leave of absence to join an NGO working in multimedia in Bangladesh, or to do a Master’s degree in communication somewhere. They offered me the latter, fully funded. I believe the President of IDRC, Ivan Head, recognized how I had helped to put the organization on the map at a relatively low cost through my films.

On the way back to Ottawa from Costa Rica, I stopped in Tallahassee, Florida to investigate doing a Master’s at Florida State University. I landed on a Sunday at Tallahassee airport, where I was met by two professors—John Mayo of the Department of Communication, and George Papagiannis of the College of Education. They had both served in the U.S. Peace Corps and knew all about IDRC. They told me that at Florida State they would be able to tailor a practical course of study to satisfy my needs, and that I could complete it in a year, if I worked really hard. I had applied to a couple of Canadian universities, and was told it would take two years and that they required me to complete a number of courses that seemed too theoretical and superfluous for application in international development work.

As I flew out of Tallahassee that day, I had a warm feeling about this meeting. I was impressed that these two professors had taken a Sunday afternoon to meet me at the airport to persuade me to come to their university. I certainly would apply as soon as I got home. But first I had two more forestry films to make.

19. Adventures in the Forests of China and Southeast Asia

In March 1986, I took off to China and Southeast Asia to film bamboo and rattan for IDRC's Asia-based forestry expert, Cherla Sastry. I traveled with Denis Sing, my new audiovisual assistant. He had one French Canadian and one Chinese parent, and was keen to visit Asia. I trained him on sound and taking still photos while, as usual, I focused on cinematography.

I had been to China before on a scouting trip in 1984, discussing the film I was to shoot, and arranging to make Chinese versions of my own films, as well as setting up film distribution. I knew the first order of business was the obligatory many-course, mid-day banquet held in our honor by the President of the Chinese Academy of Forestry, in Beijing. I had figured out that, for most government bureaucrats, visits by foreigners provided a way of having a good meal and lots of alcoholic drinks, all for free. At our luncheon, there were so many pauses for "Gan Bei"—bottoms-up toasts—with horrible plum wine, that we were incapacitated for the rest of the day. Before we left Beijing, according to custom, we had to reciprocate by holding another mid-day banquet for our hosts.

Wherever we went, we were accompanied by Miss Li Ching, our interpreter, and Mr. Li Peng, from the Academy's Photography Division, who must have taken 500 photos of us during our visit. Westerners were still a novelty in China, at the time, and IDRC's brand of cooperation suited the Chinese government well—providing support to Chinese scientists and exchange of ideas with international scientific networks.

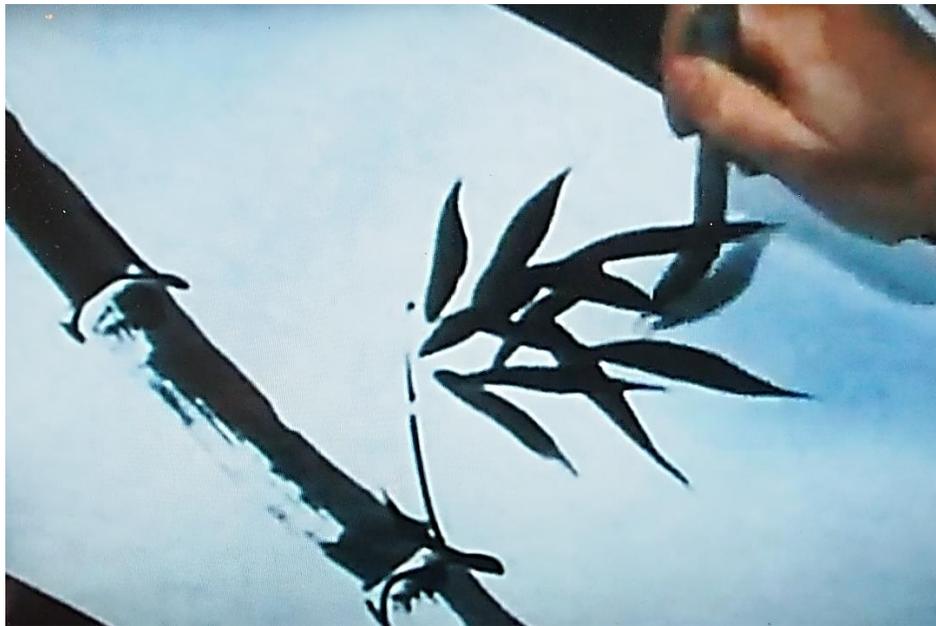
Next we flew 800 miles (1,287 km) south to Hangzhou, a city that surrounds the beautiful West Lake—an object of art and poetry in China for centuries. Hangzhou is the home of the Subtropical Forestry Research Institute and center for research on bamboo. We were met at the airport by local staff, who thankfully required no banquet. Although it was a Sunday, they wanted to begin filming right away because it was the first sunny day after many days of rain. Traveling into the mountainous countryside, I felt inspired. Here are some opening lines of our final film that reflect that feeling:

In the mountains of Asia, bamboo forests stretch as far as the eye can see. Rising from the mist, like tall sentinels, these bamboos symbolize abundance in the daily life of Asia, and harmony in its many cultures. Bamboo's long history is a blend of religion and anecdote, of magic, and practical use. Its graceful shape has inspired generations of artists and calligraphers. Its flexibility and strength, even its growing patterns, are celebrated by poet and sage, farmer and engineer. Bamboo has been called the poor man's timber because in many areas of the Third World, people live with it from birth until death.

In fact, I was so inspired that when I returned to Ottawa, I asked Beth, who had studied Chinese calligraphy and art in Malaysia, to match one of my closeups of a bamboo branch waving in a gentle breeze with her ink strokes on paper. I was also fascinated to see and film these tall stalks of Moso Bamboo, rising 75 feet (23 meters). Bamboo is a member of the grass (*Poaceae*) family, along with other flowering plants—cereals, wild grasses, and those we grow for lawns and pastures.

We learned that perhaps because of its seeming abundance, bamboo is often harvested without proper attention to conservation, with the consequence that the forests, which seemed so limitless to me, were actually in danger of disappearing. This was the reason the ongoing research was so important. During the next week, we filmed and photographed: collecting different species and growing them in gardens to ensure their survival; measuring

photosynthesis, and the strength of stalks, known as “culms,” through stress tests in labs; monitoring and controlling fungi and insect attacks; experiments on fertilizing the roots, and measuring plant growth.



19.1 - Beth McKee's hand at work, painting bamboo – image from film



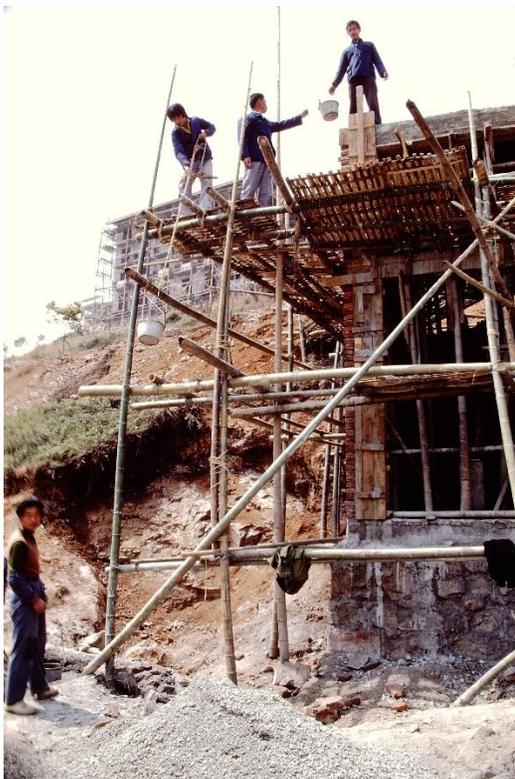
19.2 - Measuring the growth of monopodial bamboo – Photo by Denis Sing/IDRC

Through making this film, I learned that there are about 2,000 species of bamboo native to every region of the world, except Europe. Bamboo is found in temperatures from minus 40° F to plus 104° F (-40° C to +40° C) and from sea level up to 4,000 meters (13,123 feet). It comes in a variety of sizes, shapes, and colors. Besides its wide distribution, bamboo holds another amazing property—the flowering of a single species takes place simultaneously all around the

world, and most species flower only once every 60 to 120 years, and then the plants die. It takes years for it to reestablish itself.

For the final film, I hired Bill Clarke to animate the two types of bamboo distinguished by their underground root systems (rhizomes): monopodial (running bamboo) has single culms rising out of buds on rhizomes that extend up to 300 feet (91.4 meters) in length. This type flourishes in cooler climates. Sympodial bamboo has short fat rhizomes that generate buds directly on them, growing out of the ground in clumps. This type does well in the tropics. Due to their large and complex root structures, bamboo grows rapidly and reaches maturity in a matter of months. I set up my camera to capture periodic shots of a bamboo shoot growing 47 inches (120 cm) in 24 hours. I could hear it crackling as I filmed it growing.

Just as amazing to me was the number of uses of bamboo in China. As a kid growing up in Canada, I had only known bamboo fishing poles, which we bought at our local hardware store. But in China and later in Thailand, where sympodial bamboo flourishes, we filmed a multitude of products made from it: baskets, paper, toothpicks, charcoal, furniture, scaffolding, fishnet frames, tools, fencing, water pipes, musical instruments, and low-rise housing. We also filmed people harvesting bamboo shoots, a shoot canning factory, and a family dining on bamboo shoots in a delicious sauce, using bamboo chopsticks, while seated at a bamboo table—truly a way of life. Humans have found at least 1,500 uses for this stately plant.



19.3 - Bamboo scaffold in China
Photo by Denis Sing/IDRC



19.4 - Bamboo farm tools in China
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC

We titled the film [***Bamboo: The Miracle Grass***](#)(1). I believe it was one of my most artistic creations and it was fun to travel in China while it was still a relatively new thing to do. In 1986, the country was still emerging from the communist era and the people I met were keen to interact with westerners, especially those who offered a connection to the larger world. Today,

partly due to the research network IDRC helped to establish around the world, bamboo remains much in use, and is coming back into fashion with the creation of bamboo furniture, floors, and even clothing. Unfortunately, like any plant that becomes popular and money-making, humans have a tendency to practice monocropping, thus increasing the likelihood of disease and insect attacks, and decreasing biodiversity. Bamboo will remain a major renewable natural resource if it is carefully managed. Only then can it continue to inspire artists and calligraphers for at least another 5,000 years.

On April 12th, Denis and I flew South to Guangzhou in Guangdong Province (the place the British named “Canton”), where we were met by representatives of China’s Institute of Tropical Forestry. The next day, we took a China Airways flight to Haikou on Hainan Island, a tropical part of China to the east of north Vietnam. We didn’t see much of Haikou because, on arrival, we piled into a Chinese-made, four-wheel-drive vehicle, along with local researchers. We drove for seven hours on muddy roads over mountains to film rattan research.

Rattan, which most of us know as cane, is actually not a tree, but a spiny vine that grows up trees in tropical rain forests. Rattan actually belongs to the subfamily *Calamoideae*, of the palm family *Arecaceae*. It’s a parasite of sorts, but in spite of that label, most of us love the products made from it: wickerwork furniture, baskets, walking canes, cords, woven mats, and other handicrafts; tools, hammocks, toys, child carriages, sports equipment, musical instruments; and even medicines for snake bite, rheumatism, and asthma. Rattan canes are one of the world’s most valuable non-timber forest products.



19.5 - Rattan vine in tropical forest
Photo by Neill McKee/IDRC



19.6 - Child carrier made of rattan and bamboo
Photo by Denis Sing/IDRC

We did our filming in one day—a difficult assignment since the rattan vine is practically hidden in a mass of foliage in tropical rain forests. This film, I realized, was going to be a real challenge to make.

The next day we drove back over the same muddy mountain roads to Haikou, to catch a ferry to the mainland, where a car was waiting take us to a small town near Goazhou—in all, 17-hours to travel 435 miles (700 km) that day. The next morning, we had to be up bright and early to be driven to an experimental rattan nursery and plantation—also not very exciting for a cinematographer, but at least I got some shots of Chinese researchers at work.

We had a brief rest in the late afternoon so I could rest my very sore back. The jostling on rough roads had become tortuous for me. Early the next day we were driven back to Guangzhou, an 11-hour trip. We spent most of our time in south China on poor and congested roads. But at least we avoided more drunken mid-day banquets. In Guangzhou, we filmed rattan research sequences at the Institute and the operations of a factory that employed 4,000 people making rattan furniture and other products—finally, something of value for the camera.

There were no flights available the next day, so Denis and I took a pleasant four-hour ride on a hovercraft to Hong Kong, to catch a flight to Singapore for a visit to IDRC's Regional Office. There we met Cherla Sastry to discuss how this difficult-to-make film could come together. We also touched base with Chin Saik Yoon, our new Communications Division representative for Southeast Asia and East Asia. Besides, managing publications and film distribution, he had started multimedia communication projects, which interested me. Chin came from Penang, Malaysia, and we had great rapport since I had spent four years of my early career in his country.

On April 21st, Denis and I flew to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to film rattan research activities of the Forestry Research Institute: tissue culture in the lab, nursery activities, and the computerized Rattan Information Centre they had established for the network of people working on rattan. Then we headed into the nearby countryside. I finally got some decent shots of this spiny vine growing up tall trees, searching for sunlight. We also filmed sequences of rattan species identification in the jungle, intercropping rattan with rubber trees, and cane processing, as well as furniture making. Rattan cane is a marvelous material which, with the application of a little heat, can be easily bent into many shapes. Our stop in West Malaysia was worthwhile and we experienced no more long trips on bumpy roads.

During February and March of 1987, I made another trip by myself through Asia to negotiate versioning and distribution of the films I had produced, and those made by IDRC's partner institutions. By this time, our division was also supporting the communication components of research projects, such as a health education study in China, and I looked forward to more of this kind of work instead of only making films. Besides China, I visited Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and India.

One of the main purposes of my trip was to film rattan plantations of the Sabah Forestry Development Agency (SOFDA). On March 12th, I flew from Singapore to Sandakan, Sabah, and by evening of the same day, I found myself in a boat on the Kinabatangan River, heading into the deep jungles of Borneo. Despite my four years of living in Sabah, this was a new experience for me. In Borneo at the equator, the sun sets invariably around 6 pm and we didn't reach SOFDA's station at Batu Putih until 9 pm. If there were crocodiles in the water, I couldn't see them. I was accompanied by forestry officer, Norbert Augustine Bolong, a member of the Murut tribe—people who have navigated this river for thousands of years—so I had no fear.



19.7 and 19.8 - Rattan nursery and rattan plantation at Batu Putih, Sabah, Malaysia
Photos by Neill McKee/IDRC

At Batu Putih, I filmed and photographed nursery and transplanting operations, as well as the world's most advanced rattan plantation, where the vines were ready for a harvest. At last, I could take clear shots of the difficult job of yanking these ornery thorny vines from their homes on giant tropical hardwoods. Due to the hidden nature of rattan, it was difficult to get a good sequence of what a plantation actually looks like. I took some travel shots from our boat along the river, but a flood in January had killed off a good deal of the vines.

On the final day at Batu Putih, a helicopter I had arranged arrived, and I spent two hours taking aerial shots. The pilot was experienced and took us low over the forest so I could get good shots of the canopy, even if I couldn't see the rattan. Much more visible, however, was the fact that most of the tropical rain forest in this part of Borneo had been logged to make room for vast oil palm plantations for the production of palm oil. In some areas I could only see barren earth and burnt tree trunks. I wondered if rattan plantations could ever compete with the money being made from the sale of the palm oil. Rattan vines need trees to cling to, and take up to 10 years to grow to full maturity.

To me, the future of rattan seemed less hopeful than that of bamboo. But, as I was writing this chapter, I searched online and found interesting publications by the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR), which IDRC helped to establish. Experiments continue at the Forestry Research Institute of Malaysia [in the interplanting of rattans in tree plantations](#)(2). This may be a viable income generation system for smallholders. [Another INBAR publication](#)(3) pointed out how rattan was making a comeback in fashion around the world, as humans gradually become educated about climate change and sour on exploitation of forests, as well as ecologically damaging cash crops such as oil palm.

When I returned to Kota Kinabalu, I packed my filming equipment and exposed film and shipped it all back to Canada, before continuing on my travels through Asia. That was the last time I used this well-worn equipment. It was fitting that I shot both my first film in Borneo in 1969-70, and my last sequence there. I never finished the rattan film. I had given that task to a man named Clayton Bailey, a Canadian filmmaker I'd met in Nepal. He had already joined IDRC to replace me while I took my sabbatical in Tallahassee, Florida, where I'd do a Master's in Communication. More filming was required in the Philippines and Indonesia, and the production wasn't released until 1989. Clayton called it, [Rattan: The Hidden Resource](#)(4). A good title, I thought.

20. Uprooting and Retooling in Tallahassee, Florida

In August 1987, we rented out our house in Ottawa and I took my family to Tallahassee, the capital of Florida, to begin my Masters of Science degree at Florida State University (FSU). On a scorching day as I drove our old station wagon across the border at Detroit, the muffler fell off on a pot-holed freeway. Welcome to America! I managed to get off the highway for repairs in a questionable neighborhood. Beth, who no longer identified herself as an American, was okay with the adventure if it was only for a year—and she had an idea for a calligraphy project she would do there. At the time, Derek was almost 12 and Ruth was 10. They had only known Ottawa, camping vacations, and visits to their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in Canada and parts of the U.S., such as Minnesota, Iowa, and New Mexico. Of course, I promised that we could visit Disneyworld in Orlando. But I was secretly glad it was a four-hour drive from Tallahassee. My colleagues at IDRC kidded me about taking off for a year's vacation on the beaches of Florida, but Tallahassee is located in the panhandle of the state, where I would be swimming with alligators in swamps.



20.1 - A Florida cypress swamp - Photo by Neill McKee

After more breakdowns along the way, I decided to buy a new car when we arrived in Tallahassee. We could afford one because I remained on salary at IDRC and was also given some extra funds to pay tuition. I had been given sabbatical, of sorts, although the organization had no such policy. It sure was no vacation, for I only had 11 months to fulfill the requirements for a Master's. Dr. John Mayo in the Department of Communication became my principal advisor. I dove right in, taking his course on the diffusion of innovations, which included readings on such processes in developing countries. When John Mayo was a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia, he worked in educational television. This was right up my alley. The class included great debates on the effectiveness of using communication to change behavior and social norms in the U.S., Latin America, Africa, and Asia. I wrote papers on whether communication theory and models created by Western scholars were relevant when applied to developing countries.

I took courses with Master's and Ph.D. students in both the Department of Communication and the College of Education. In the latter, I also met many students from developing countries and took a Ph.D.-level course with them in the sociology of education. Our class was taught by Dr. George Papagiannis, who had been a Peace Corps teacher in Thailand and he had many entertaining stories to tell about his experiences, and his critical thoughts on America's education system. He and John challenged me to take a course taught by his colleague, Dr. Steve Klees, on evaluation methods, emphasizing cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis. I did a paper that clearly distinguished the two. For cost-benefit analysis one must turn benefits into monetary terms. I used a Papua New Guinea communication intervention in which I substituted pigs for dollars, because native New Guineans had used pigs as the unit of exchange for centuries. Professor Klees gave me an A+ for that one.



20.2 - Department of Communication, FSU – Photo by Neill McKee

I also took courses in communication research, including entering data on punch cards, processing and analyzing the output. I bluffed a bit, saying I had taken all the statistics I needed in my undergraduate days, and somehow they excused me from that prerequisite, probably due to my adult student status. That decision proved to be a challenge when I was faced with understanding regression analysis, but I persevered.

I enjoyed qualitative research, which involved methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observation. Besides reading and discussing interesting articles, I spent hours recording what was going on in a local television station newsroom. The subject was topical because the movie *Broadcast News* had been released that year. It's about a young television news producer, played by Holly Hunter, who battles with a far less seasoned rival, played by William Hurt, over telling the truth versus providing entertainment in the news. As I sat in editorial meetings and witnessed interactions between reporters, I could see the tension over this issue playing out before me.

I was an odd sight on campus among trendy young undergraduates because I carried my own chair and desk to classes. On the way to Florida, at my father's manufacturing plant, I had designed and welded together a metal collapsible chair, based on a Scandinavian concept. It involved kneeling and sitting on upholstered pads, while keeping my back straight, and I

included a pop-up desk. I had used a non-portable version of the chair at my office desk for some years for relief from daily back pain.

At the time, FSU had no regular courses in filmmaking, but I was asked to teach an undergraduate course in the basics of cinematography and editing in the second semester—for monetary compensation, of course. I found the American system quite flexible in their hiring practices. There was no course curriculum. I had to create one out of the blue, and also decide on the required textbook. About 15 students joined the class, expecting big things. But FSU had no video equipment, so we used old Super-8 cameras and basic editing equipment. That suited me. I had never switched to video because professional equipment was still too cumbersome and delicate in the 1980s. It could break down easily, especially in the climates and rough terrain of developing countries.

The class project involved shooting and editing films. The resulting films could be silent, but most students chose to roughly synchronize their images to their favorite pop music, mimicking MTV. At the time, most North American youth had moved to watching hours of fast-moving images, timed to the latest youth music. When I told them about the kinds of films I had made, their eyes glazed over. But I did succeed in teaching them the basics of filmmaking.



20.3 - At home in Tallahassee - Photo by Neill McKee

We had rented a small bungalow in a northern suburb of Tallahassee. Beth used a space beside our kitchen for her studio and our bedroom became my office during the day. She met other calligraphers in the community and taught a class for five of them. She created a series of 36 pieces on the poetry of Joan Finnigan, an Ottawa Valley poet and friend, which she intended to hold a show on when we returned home. Almost every evening, she'd ask us to critique her work during supper. My favorite from that period was a calligraphic creation from a long narrative

poem on the meaning of home. I think it captured Beth's longing for permanent place. When I read it, a few lines stood out to me, some traditional and some realistic or truthful:

*Home is the place where when you go back there you don't have to knock
Home is a place where when they know somebody is coming by night they always put a
light in the window
Home is the place where two people lay down steadiness underneath the unsteadiness
Home is a place where when you come home from school nobody is there
Home is the place you think is forever, and find it isn't
Home is love's long-standing relationship to wind*



20.4 – *Home* by Elizabeth McKee

The children were picked up by buses to be taken to their respective schools—Ruth to a nearby elementary school and Derek into the city to a middle school. They made many friends and came to love their schools, taking all classes in English for a change instead of the French immersion stream, in Ottawa. They entered school contests and joined clubs. Beth reverted by taking them to a Lutheran church that had a strong youth program with a drama group and camping trips. So, the move to Florida was a good move for them, after all.

When at home, I only emerged for meals with the family and to watch the odd movie queued up by the family. I worked on a small Tandy computer with a basic printer, kept up on all academic readings, and completed all the communication and education papers required. We did take a few breaks to see wildlife in nearby swamps, watch alligator wrestling, eat shrimp on the Gulf Coast, and wander around the usual sites: Busch Gardens, Epcot Center, as well as Disneyland, of course.

I even had time for two joyful reunions with Peter Ragan, my Peace Corps buddy during my Borneo years, who had lent me and then sold me my first 16mm movie camera—the one which I used at the start of my career. Peter and his wife, Arlene, and son Daniel, were living in Daytona Beach, where he taught English as a second language at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical

University. He and I had created the North Borneo Frodo Society (see Chapter 2) and we touted our first reunion in Tallahassee as a general meeting of the society. I placed a sign concerning the meeting on the roadside in front of our house—something that probably made the neighbors wonder about us. Our second meeting was more traditional—building sandcastles and sailing on the Atlantic coastal waters off Daytona Beach.

One of my favorite leisure time stories on our time in Florida is about taking Derek and Ruth to the creation of the world's largest pizza. It was assembled on a circular steel plate, about 40 feet (12 meters) in diameter. The organizers cooked the crust from underneath with moving gas torches, while I guess they relied on the sun to heat the cheese, tomato sauce, dust, and bird shit on top. The proceeds went to the American Red Cross, but I wonder if the five dollars per piece everyone paid actually covered the cost of the uncooked gritty ingredients. We threw our pizza away.



20.5 – The world's largest pizza - Photo by Neill McKee

To cover all the requirements for a Master's, I had to complete 12 semester courses or nine semester courses and write a thesis. I chose the latter and, in early January, I held open-ended interviews with communication experts working in international behavior change programs in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland. At the time, many of these people were practicing a method they called "social marketing." For instance, for diarrhea management in developing countries they claimed to be carrying out formative research to determine the 4-Ps of marketing: the right Product (e.g. oral rehydration solution [ORS] and/or food recipes); at the right Price (the cost of ORS packets, food ingredients, cooking fuel, and time of the mother for preparation); the Place or distribution channels for the product; and the Promotion methods (interpersonal communication with health workers, and/or radio and television ads, etc.). In other words, social marketers resorted to using the language of marketing to describe their work in behavior change programs.

My Master's thesis was an enquiry on: 1) the effectiveness of such programs in developing countries, to date, through secondary analysis of strategies and evaluation results; 2) whether the language of marketing was a barrier for the acceptance of social marketing by managers and staff in nonprofit organizations; 3) if social marketing was manipulative—a reputation gained from the American-dominated ad industry; and 4) whether these methods could be used beyond individual consumer choice programs in community-based interventions.

After my last class ended in early May, I sweated through the interview transcripts and articles I had gathered to come up with a 182-page document for defense in July. I titled it, *Social Marketing in International Development: A Critical Review*. I was quite critical about social marketing. It seemed too American for application in Canadian-sponsored development programs—possibly trying to sell the American view on free enterprise to the world. I called for a much more participatory community-based approach without using the language of marketing, which might easily raise a communication barrier among development professionals.

In early August, I had to defend my thesis before departing for Canada. Besides Drs. Mayo and Papagiannis, Dr. Edward Wotring and Dr. Gary Heald were on my committee—a formidable assemblage of brainpower. I expected some tricky questions but somehow made it through the process. They only required a few changes, which I would do in Ottawa, and submit the final version for graduation in December. One of them asked me if I would come back to do a Ph.D., but that was out of the question. I had to get back to working at IDRC and earning a living for my family. In fact, I could not afford the time to attend the December 1988 graduation ceremony or the luncheon in April 1989, when I was inducted into the Phi Kappa Phi Honors Society.

Flashing forward, I did return to Tallahassee in December 2008. Dr. Mayo had put my name up for a “*Omicron Delta Kappa* Grads Made Good Award.” I believe I won due to my scholastic record, all the films I had made for IDRC, and my multimedia productions after that, as described in the remaining chapters of this memoir. Someone even made a weird line-drawing of my face from a photo I had sent, which now sits on a wall or in a storage room somewhere in the university. It was homecoming weekend at FSU with all ceremonial hoopla—a Florida State Seminoles football game and parades through the streets. I was asked to ride in a red convertible and wave at the crowd—a strange exaggeration of my achievements. But that's the American way.

That's not the Canadian way. In September 1988, when I returned to IDRC, I presented my thesis in a lunchtime discussion, where my work was criticized by various participants—especially by those from our Social Science Division, who delivered various criticisms of the concept of Social Marketing—all of which I had outlined in my thesis. None of them had read it. To them I was only a filmmaker, now with a Master's degree in something.

I didn't return to making films. I was given the title of Associate Director for Dissemination in the Communications Division. For 15 months I carried on with my new job of supervising a few staff who worked with me to try to figure out new distribution channels and methods for our publications and films, including in video format. By then my films were in various film libraries, such as that of the prestigious National Film Board of Canada, and video distribution was gaining momentum.

I also took the lead in hosting, in Ottawa, a global workshop on development communication, attended by, among others, Dr. Everett Rogers, the scholar who wrote the important textbook I had read at FSU, *Diffusion of Innovations*(1). I participated with my colleagues and other organizations on a few projects involving the popularization of research

results, the training of science communicators, farm radio extension work, and small studies on the reach and effects of various communication media. In the first half of 1989, I visited about 50 development agencies in Africa and Asia and their headquarters in Europe, Canada, and the US, to find out about their projects and dissemination methods.

On a business trip to New York, I visited UNICEF's headquarters near the United Nation's Secretariat, to learn how they handled publications, films, and videos, but I was also there to be interviewed for the post of Chief of Programme Communication and Information in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It was a country I knew well, especially through my work on the film *Prescription for Health*, which UNICEF had widely used there and in many other developing countries.

On a day in early August 1989, Beth called to say I had received a telegram at home from UNICEF's Executive Director, James P. Grant. My application had been accepted and they wanted me to join as soon as possible. I went home early that day to see the telegram with my own eyes and discuss the implications with Beth before we told the children. They had settled back in Ottawa after our Florida sojourn. Derek was about to start Grade 9, and Ruth Grade 7 in new schools. Also, on return from Florida, Beth had told me, once more, that she would like to stay in Ottawa for the rest of her life. But she knew I wasn't happy with my new job. I had no budget to practice what I had studied in Tallahassee and her principal passion, calligraphic arts, was portable. I don't think I had to remind her of the original promise she made to me:

Move where you want to
I will go with you
Fight for what you will
And I'll stay by your side.

Another line in Beth's calligraphic creation of Joan Finnigan's poem had to be gently explained to our children:

Home is the place where your father finds his next job, home is on the move.

PART THREE
MY YEARS AS A MEDIA PRODUCER AND FACILITATOR

21. Becoming a Multimedia Creator in Bangladesh

I resigned from IDRC in December 1989, but Beth and I decided to make the transition gradual. She would remain in Ottawa with Derek and Ruth so they could finish the school year, and she could complete some on-going calligraphy projects, as well as be on hand to show and sell our house. In early January 1990, after passing through UNICEF's headquarters in New York for a brief orientation, I arrived in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where I was met by a driver in a white Landcruiser with the blue lettering and logo of UNICEF plastered all around. I recall being driven through streets clogged with trishaws to the home of UNICEF Representative Cole Dodge, an American about my age. He warmly welcomed me to Bangladesh and told me he'd pick me up the next day at 8:30 am.

After a jet lagged sleep in my hotel room, the next day, a Saturday, I found myself speeding through Dhaka with Cole and his driver, a UNICEF flag flying on the front fender of the car. Representatives of U.N. agencies have diplomatic status, but Cole was not at all pretentious about it. He introduced his driver to me as a valuable colleague. We headed to a Rotary meeting where Cole gave a speech to a large crowd on the importance of the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI). I was impressed with his delivery and clarity of message. Rotary International was already a partner in EPI, focusing on polio vaccinations, and Cole only had to thank and motivate them to keep up the good work.

On the way back to my hotel, he asked if I could give a speech on immunization to a Rotary youth meeting in a couple of weeks. I agreed, even though I had no clue what to say. Cole handed me some small spiral-bound pocket cards with talking points, figures, and graphs and said, "Just read these over and make up a speech."

"Sure, I can do that," I replied. But I had a lot of homework to do. That's how things went with this job—learning by doing. The Bangladesh workweek is Sunday to Thursday because Friday is the day of prayer in Islam. The next day, a Sunday, I was driven to work at the old sprawling UNICEF office complex in the Dhanmondi neighborhood of Dhaka. It consisted of a set of office buildings, including some converted houses. At the time, there were about 250 UNICEF staff in Dhaka and seven zonal offices—the second largest UNICEF operation in the world (India being the largest). The majority of staff members were Bangladeshi at almost every level, from drivers to senior program officers. I also was taken around to meet about 35 international staff from just about every part of the world—a mini-U.N. in itself. I found the atmosphere friendly and welcoming.

My own unit, the Program Communication and Information Section (PCIS) consisted of approximately 10 people at the time. This was the largest team I had supervised directly. All were Bangladeshis except for Charles Rycroft, a man from U.K., who was about to transfer to another country. He and the former chief, also a Brit, had focused on EPI communication work—then the priority of UNICEF throughout the developing world. Charles and Afsan Chowdhury, the most senior Bangladeshi staff member in my section, showed me the wide variety of EPI materials they had produced: posters, TV spots, videos, cards and booklets to support interpersonal communication. We went through all the strategies employed and events held with government and NGO partners, to date. My imagination overflowed with possibilities when Cole told me my job would be to strengthen this work and expand into new areas such as water and sanitation; maternal and child health, including breastfeeding and nutrition; and universal primary education, focusing on girls' enrollment and retention in school.

I soon moved from the hotel to a comfortable guest house in Gulshan, a more modern part of Dhaka with a few restaurants, which I could reach by hiring a trishaw with driver. I

ordered a second hand Toyota van, but it would take a couple of months to arrive. Most evenings, I poured over documents from the office, learning the background on all the work that lay ahead. Local television was mostly in Bangla language and boring. Sometimes I would chat with other guests, but not over a beer. Dhaka was a dry town. You could only get alcoholic drinks at a few large international hotels or from special stores selling foreign goods. Only foreigners and Bangladeshis with “medical needs” for alcohol could acquire a passbook for shopping there. Quite a few richer Bangladeshis managed to get such prescriptions from their doctors.

My family arrived in mid-July in time for school, which would start in August. I had found a brand-new house to rent in Gulshan—a two-story affair with terrazzo stone floors and a flat roof, where we could dry clothes and hold evening parties. The property had a small lawn and garden, which required caring for. I had hired a general servant by the name of Mitro, who wanted to become a cook. He didn’t know anything about cooking, but Beth, with some reluctance, said she would teach him. She had heard about professional Bangladeshi cooks and was looking forward to stepping away from the kitchen. But, at least Mitro could read and write, so she read out each recipe in English, and he wrote them down in Bangla on small index cards. He also did most of the shopping. Mitro stayed in a room by the kitchen and we agreed he could bring in his sister, Lilly, his brother-in-law, Shuntu, and their baby girl, Poppi. The family stayed in a small room beside the open garage and Shuntu became the gardener, gate keeper, carpenter, and general handyman—an invaluable and cheery fellow.



21.1 - Our extended Dhaka family - Photo by Neill McKee

This was how most mid- and upper-class households were run in Bangladesh and we didn’t buck the system. Clothes washing and dishwashing had to be done by hand. I had promised Beth she would be relieved of a lot of housework by agreeing to come to Bangladesh, so she would have lots of time to devote to her artwork.

Derek and Ruth soon found themselves in American International School, Dhaka, which had students and teachers from almost everywhere. Ruth was not happy leaving her friends in Ottawa, but I believe Derek was relieved. He had been listening to hard metal and refused to follow the gifted stream in high school, but he quickly teamed up with a Sri Lankan friend in his

class, Ananda, who saw one B+ on Derek's first report card and told him there was no excuse for that. From that time on, he only got As. The peer pressure in Canada had driven him in the opposite direction. So, pulling him out of the Canadian teen culture had been a good move. I had spent most of my high school years rebelling, and didn't want him to follow my pattern.

Ruth was less happy with her classmates, but the school had a drama club, and trips, including one to Nepal—many perks she and Derek would not have experienced in Canada. They could also catch a trishaw ride to their friends' homes. Ruth was further cheered by our agreeing she could have a dog in Bangladesh. She chose a small black-and-white terrier that an American couple had found in a slum in Manila. They were moving again and wanted to give the dog away. His name was Tuxedo, or "Tux" for short, because he had white markings on its chest that looked like he was ready to go to a formal dinner.

We had just settled down to life in Bangladesh when the President, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, was overthrown in a popular uprising. I write "popular" but in Bangladesh many politicians rented crowds for a small fee per person for demonstrations. General Ershad had seized power in a bloodless coup in 1982, and declared himself President in 1983. Khaleda Zia, widow of the former president, Ziaur Rahman, who was assassinated in 1981, took over. She put Ershad under house arrest in a place we could see from our roof. For a few days, we had to stay at home because the demonstrations could be volatile. But eventually the country settled down. In its short history since 1971, two of Bangladesh's presidents had been assassinated and there had been many changes in the country's leadership. Ershad's downfall was par for the course.

Things had just settled down when the Gulf War began in January 1991. That war was far away but many Bangladeshis revered Saddam Hussein, President of Iraq. He was seen as a strong Muslim leader and Iraq employed many Bangladeshi laborers. We were forced to stay at home for two weeks after a mob stopped a van of another U.N. agency, politely asked everyone to get out, then promptly poured petrol on it, setting it on fire. In their eyes, the U.N. and the U.S. were one and the same.

No sooner had that crisis settled down, when a tropical cyclone formed in the Bay of Bengal in late April, making landfall in Chittagong District with winds of around 155 mph (250 km/h). It was one of the most powerful cyclones ever recorded in the Bay, creating a 20 foot (6.1 meter) storm surge along the coast, which caused about 140,000 deaths and US\$1.7 billion in damage. But Bangladeshis were used to such disasters. UNICEF and other U.N. agencies, the government, hundreds of NGOs, and the private sector fired into action. The very next day, the roads south were clogged with trucks carrying fresh water, food, and fuel, as well as medical and building materials. Short-term assistance morphed into longer-term strategies, such as the building of raised cyclone shelters in coastal villages, which would also serve as schools and community centers in normal times. When the country was born out of the brutal conflict with Pakistan in 1971, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger described Bangladesh as a "basket case." But the action we witnessed after that cyclone proved he was wrong.

I did not work in emergency relief. My work was concentrated in UNICEF's ongoing programs. I had become a multimedia producer and manager, rather than a lone filmmaker. Gradually, my section became involved in almost all program areas: developing advocacy materials, logos, mass media programs, TV and radio spots, interpersonal communication guides, as well as helping to form program partnerships. I brought on-board new staff members: two British women, Pamela Reitemeier, as my deputy and head of program communication, and Clare

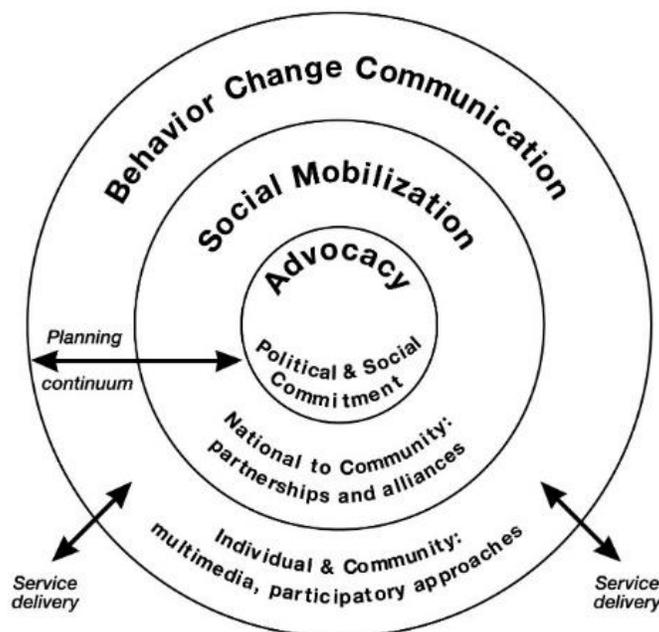
Blenkinsop, in charge of information and press relations. I was also given the green light to hire new Bangladeshi staff for each program area. They were placed in my section rather than in program sections such as health, water and sanitation, and education, etc., because I had articulated a new vision for the role of communication. We moved our section to a middle building, surrounded by other program sections, and welcomed everyone to visit or pass through it.

I studied all the pieces of the successful EPI program, which achieved near universal childhood immunization by the end of 1990, and I was determined to find out how they all worked together. I had rejected the idea of social marketing in my Master's thesis, and was intrigued by what UNICEF called "social mobilization." But to me, New York's definition was too grandiose—it comprised practically all of the activities of UNICEF and didn't give clarity on who was to do what. Gradually, I redefined the terms:

Social mobilization is the process of bringing together all feasible and practical inter-sectoral social allies to raise people's awareness of and demand for a particular programme, to assist in the delivery of resource and services, and to strengthen community participation for sustainability and self-reliance.

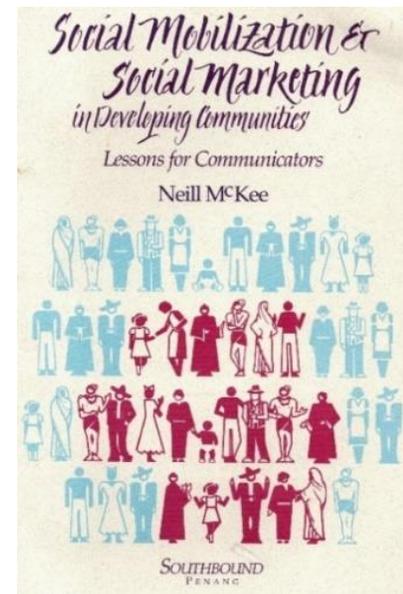
Furthermore, I analyzed all the *Advocacy* activities that helped to bring so many donors and partners on board to deliver the program, and I differentiated them from those which were targeted at the end user—the parents and older members of families, as well as the community leaders, who were key in the decision to get children vaccinated. At the time, UNICEF called this *Programme Communication*.

To articulate the relationship between these three key concepts, I created a diagrammatic representation for this strategic approach to communication, which we adapted for almost all UNICEF programs. (See the diagram below, which illustrates the general relationships between the key concepts and their functions.)



21.2 - Communication for Development Model

In my spare time, I reworked my Master's thesis, adding my experiences with UNICEF in Bangladesh, and wrote a book to be published by my former colleague, Chin Saik Yoon, who had quit IDRC, Singapore and started a publishing company in Malaysia, specializing in books on communication. He named his company Southbound Publications and we titled my book, **Social Mobilization and Social Marketing in Developing Communities: Lessons for Communicators**.⁽¹⁾ Cole encouraged me throughout this process and he asked James Grant to endorse my book. Cole saw the value of having publications under your belt. He motivated and paved the way for staff members' successes.



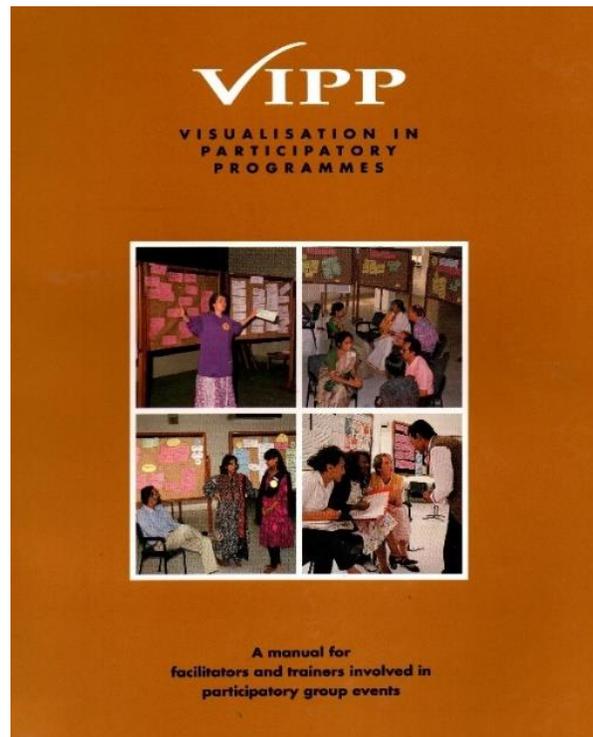
21.3 - My first book on communication

Creating targeted communication activities and materials required careful research, such as focus group discussions, to ensure that they were going to bring about sustained behaviour and social change. I knew all this from my recent Master's degree studies, and I was determined to get it right. For instance, we carried out a communication study on how people were persuaded to get their children vaccinated and found that in both rural and urban areas, health and family planning field workers were the main influencers, although mass media had a stronger effect in urban centres. Furthermore, we found that some health and family planning workers were giving out inaccurate information and required more training on EPI facts, as well as proper interpersonal communication methods.

I continued to give the occasional speech at events, representing UNICEF. During my first year in Dhaka, I attended many meetings that only consisted of speeches. They were repetitive and tedious presentations by a special guest, honorable guests, and many regular functionaries from the government or NGOs. At one Ministry of Health meeting, time was running out because everyone wanted to say everything about the same subject, usually repeating the points made by earlier speakers. The chairman was having a hard time getting people to stick to their allotted time. The last speaker was no different. But instead of cutting his speech short, he sped up his verbatim reading to the point that it was getting comical, causing the audience to laugh. The man remained oblivious to what was going on because he hunched his head down on his many pages, eyes glued on the lines he was speeding through. It was great entertainment, but I'm sure no one could recall a thing he said.

That's when I vowed to try a different form of group meeting. I contacted Hermann (Timmi) Tillmann and Maria Angelica (Maruja) Salas, my old friends from Huancayo, Peru, whom I filmed there in 1984 (see Chapter 17). They had moved to Germany and, in 1989, they invited me to attend an interesting meeting in the Black Forest on agriculture communication work. That's when I was first exposed to the method of having participants in group events write their contributions on color-coded cards, with only one idea per card, and pinning them in patterns for discussion and rearrangement on moveable boards. I invited Timmi and Maruja to Bangladesh as consultants, and we ran workshops to train facilitators of group events.

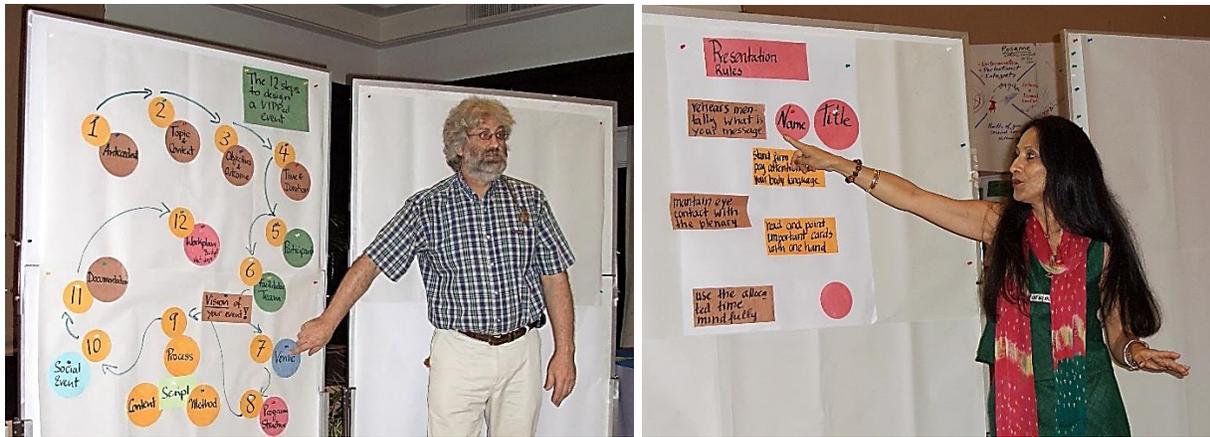
Eventually, we created a manual, calling the method [Visualisation in Participatory Programmes \(VIPP\)](#)(2).



21.4 - Our first VIPP manual

The methods of VIPP democratized group planning meetings and training events, making them fun, rather than tedious affairs, where the most vocal or senior personalities occupy the majority of the discussion time. For instance, at one workshop on improving the national strategy for breastfeeding, the head of the government's institute on maternal and child health, Dr. Talukdar, and the Chief of UNICEF's Health Section, Philip O'Brien, locked horns on some technical issue, stopping progress. I was facilitating and I asked them to go for a walk and talk about their families or something else. While they were gone, the group came up with a visual representation of the problem and possible solution. When they returned, they took a look at the VIPP cards on a pin board, and after a brief discussion, both agreed that the ideas represented there solved their conflict. This was a clear demonstration of the utility of VIPP.

We trained many UNICEF and NGO staff to be facilitators or to simply appreciate the effectiveness of VIPP events, in which circularity of discussions was much reduced and outcomes broadly shared. The use of VIPP methods contributed a great deal to our success in launching so many communication programs during those years. Eventually, Timmi, Maruja, and I trained the Training Division of UNICEF in New York in VIPP techniques, and the methodology spread to many other UNICEF offices, to other U.N. agencies, and NGOs around the world.



21.5 and 21.6 - Timmi Tillmann and Maruja Salas training facilitators

VIPP methods originate from the Latin American empowerment philosophy started by educators, such as Paulo Freire in Brazil, and post-World War II German educators and development planners, who were searching for new means of democratization, while avoiding chaos in society. It has rules and ordered methods for wider participation of groups of people in decision making, planning, and training. Such educators held that a non-handicapped person learns in the following manner: one percent through taste, two percent through touch, three percent through smell, 11 percent through hearing, and 83 percent through sight. Hence the focus on the ordered visual methods in VIPP, rather than the predominant oral methods. I especially was attracted to Dr. Hartmut Albrecht, University of Hohenheim, Germany, who restated the old Dutch saying, as follows:

Said is not heard,
 Heard is not yet understood,
 Understood is not yet approved,
 Approved is not yet applied.

In Bangladesh, I had seen an extreme version of the oral tradition in conducting meetings, planning sessions, and lecture-loaded training sessions. The visual, so important to me as a filmmaker, was usually missing. It was good to create a counterforce to that.

Our VIPP methodology had immediate impact; however, my most successful communication initiative in Bangladesh began shortly after I joined UNICEF, in 1990. I received an invitation from UNICEF-New York to attend a conference in Prague, Czechoslovakia on the use of animated film in development work. Cole told me I should go, in spite of my increasing workload. He was well aware of the animation sequences in my IDRC film, *Prescription for Health*. In fact, the use of that film by UNICEF in many countries was one of the main reasons he had chosen me for the communication position.

In early March 1990, I flew from Dhaka through New Delhi to Prague. It was only four months after the fall of the Berlin Wall. I recall the city had the air of a second Prague Spring. The first had taken place when the country rose up against the Soviet Union in 1968—a short-lived revolt. Even through communist times, Czechoslovakia had its own UNICEF Committee that raised money for UNICEF's programs around the world, as in the U.S. and Canada.

There were two reasons for holding this conference in Prague. First, the UNICEF National Committee there had some local money to spend, and it had more value in the country than elsewhere. Secondly, despite the effects of the Iron Curtain, Czechoslovakia had remained a center for artistic animated film production, and it was ready to show the rest of the world that it was open for business.

I recall walking in a park near our hotel that spring to view many-colored perennial flowers bursting out of the ground. The Cold War was over, but that wasn't the case inside the hotel. There were about 200 of us being served by the unsmiling Czechoslovakian staff, who wheeled in large carts to our tables and slammed down plates of lukewarm food in front of us—no choices, take it or leave it. Perhaps some had never served so many black and brown faces before—communication staff members from many developing countries. Or maybe they didn't really believe the communist era was over. The older waiters and waitresses had seen this movie before.

On the first day of the conference, James P. Grant, who had been the Executive Director of UNICEF since 1980, gave a rousing speech about the importance of communication and information in UNICEF's work. He was the main driver of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which had been adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 20, 1989 and would come into effect on September 2, 1990. That convention and the 1981 Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), guide all of UNICEF's work.

Grant's words on the importance of communication were music to my ears. Also present, was Bill Hanna of Hanna Barbera Productions in California, creators of *Tom and Jerry*, *Huckleberry Hound*, *Yogi Bear*, and *The Flintstones*. What did Hanna have to do with international development programs? Well, James Grant had an entrepreneurial streak—attempting to get the private sector to support our work. In the reception that followed, Mr. Grant was talking to Bill Hanna, when I was introduced to them by one of the New York staff. Mr. Grant turned to me abruptly and said, "McKee, I want you to come up with an idea to work together with Hanna Barbera."

I recall saying something like, "Sure, I can do that." I think Cole had actually tipped off Mr. Grant that I would be there and had mentioned my previous work in animated film. I remember feeling I might be stepping on the toes of some of the New York staff, but hey, I had been challenged by the big boss.

I thought a lot about what I could do and slept fitfully that night, fighting jet lag. But as I woke up the next morning, an image of a cartoon-style South Asian girl flooded my brain. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union of countries in South Asia, had declared 1990 to be "the Year of the Girl Child." It was an attempt to change traditional gender discrimination against girls, in terms of their equal rights to education, nutrition, health care; prevention of early marriage, exploitation in domestic labor, and sexual exploitation through trafficking—a huge task. Later, SAARC declared the 1990s to be the Decade of the Girl Child in the region.

As the conference in Prague continued, I began to talk about my "brainwave," but only got positive feedback from a few South Asian female staff members. When I returned to Dhaka, I advocated with my colleagues, wrote to UNICEF-New York and other South Asian UNICEF offices about the concept, and developed a funding proposal. Cole suggested I stick with making some TV spots, but I wanted to create stories. I knew that stories could get people talking about the situation of girls in their families and communities. They had the ability to change attitudes, and maybe practices. But I recognized that animated films were expensive to produce. (At the

time, thousands of images still had to be hand-drawn and colored. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that computer-based animation became good enough to use.) I also knew the characters and stories would only be cost-effective if they were suitable for use throughout much of the South Asian region. It was difficult to sell this idea to some countries because UNICEF was then, and remains today, a largely country-based organization, programmatically, and usually doesn't operate regional projects.

In any case, I was too busy with all the other communication priorities to spend much time on my cartoon girl project. Once again, Cole came up with the answer. One evening in a garden party at his house, he introduced me to a tall British woman who had recently arrived with her husband. Rachel Carnegie had experience in creating communication materials for and about children in a U.K.-based NGO, called Child to Child. Her arrival out of the blue seemed like magic to me. I hired her as a consultant and she soon became the main creative force and coordinator, co-managing with me. The magic continued when money from the Government of Norway began to flow in, and other donors also jumped on board.



21.7 - Rachel Carnegie with her daughter and staff member, Mr. Saha



21.8 - PCIS staff, front row at table L to R: Mira Mitra, Afsan Chowdhury, Nuzhat Shahzadi, with other support staff in back

Rachel found Ram Mohan, an animated film expert in Mumbai, India and we brought him onto the team. I introduced Rachel to Mira Aghi of New Delhi, a former IDRC colleague, who became the research director for Meena. Mira had completed her Ph.D. in the U.S. and brought

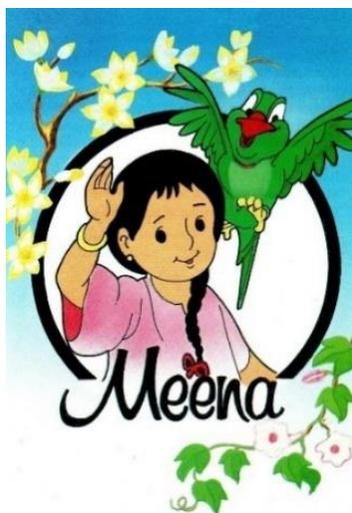
with her the experience of working with Children's Television Network (CTW)—“Sesame Street.” The other main mover and shaker was Nuzhat Shahzadi, an attractive, feisty, and experienced Bangladeshi communicator with two Master's degrees—one in English literature and one in Public Health. She had joined my section to work on other programs, but became a perfect Bangladeshi counterpart for Rachel Carnegie. We all worked together with Morten Giersing, the Regional Communication Officer, based in Nepal, as well as UNICEF staff from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. We held many participatory regional workshops, using VIPP to make most decisions and exchange experiences.

We audience-tested character designs of young girls by various regional artists, and Ram Mohan's won. At the same time, we tested many names for her and “Meena” came out on top—a common name for girls from Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist families. In addition, we tested various background designs and eliminated features that showed particular regions and religions—no mosques, temples, or churches. We also tested the drawings and names of supporting characters, including Meena's younger brother, who came to be called “Raju.” We did not want to alienate boys in the storylines, for boys also had to change their minds about the capabilities of their sisters, female friends, and classmates. In addition, we tested various animals to act as an alter-ego of Meena—a character who could add humor to the stories, while getting away with mischief that adults might frown upon if seen as the actions of a girl. Audience research revealed that a parrot we called “Mithu” was the most popular, and fit well into the reality we were trying to create, for parrots can talk, or at least mimic human speech.

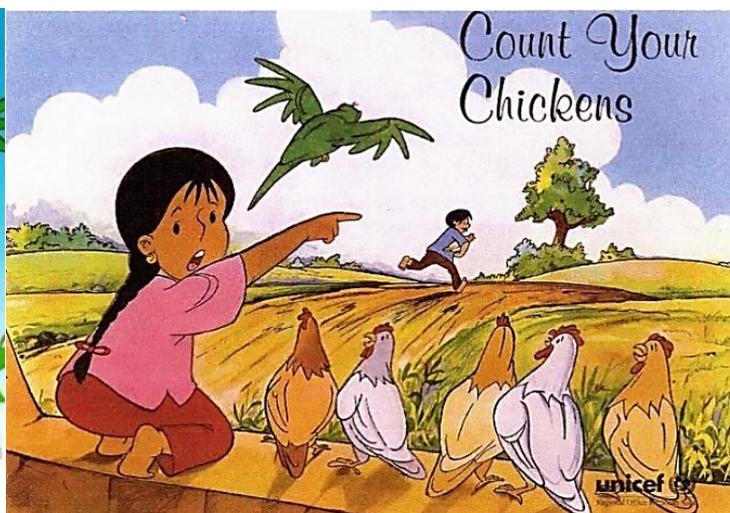
Using storyboards, the team carried out in-depth interviews on the first story about fulfilling Meena's wish to go to school. For each of the first few episodes, the formative research process involved approximately 200 focus groups and 50 in-depth interviews, throughout the region, involving girls, boys, parents, grandparents, community members, and decision makers. We scaled down the research process thereafter, but in total, over 10,000 children and an equal number of adults were consulted in the process of creating the first five Meena stories.

It was interesting that the majority of respondents saw Meena as a real girl like their sister, daughter, granddaughter, or like girls in their communities, not a cartoon figure. Many said that most films shown in cinemas, such as those produced by Bollywood, were fictional and did not address their own realities. Meena and the other characters were people from their own village. We created a girl who was a role model for other girls, not a strident advocate for their rights, but one with emotional intelligence and the essential life skills to facilitate change, such as problem solving, critical and creative thinking, good communication skills, self-awareness, and empathy. She operated within the cultural framework in which she lived, realizing that change takes time.

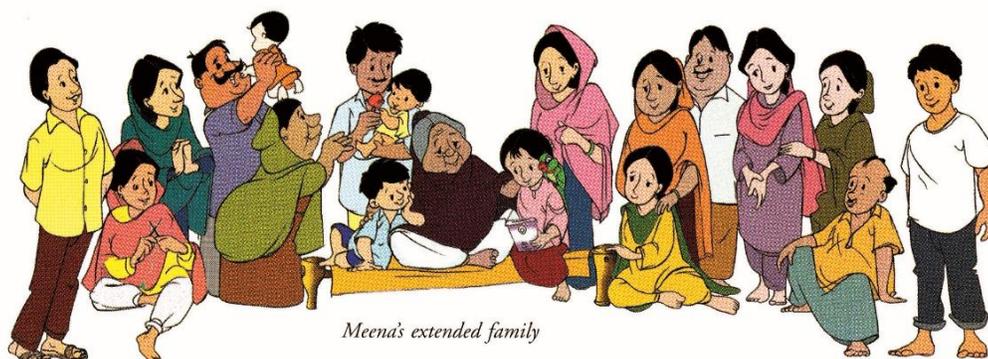
Ram Mohan first worked with Hanna Barbera's FIL Cartoons in Manila, Philippines, which offered a reduced rate to UNICEF for the first few episodes. In December 1992, we launched the first episode of Meena on girls' access to education, titled [*Count Your Chickens*](#)⁽³⁾. It was a great hit in Bangladesh and throughout the region. I was only managing the process, but certainly using what I had learned about communication programming at FSU in Tallahassee. I remember feeling that moving to UNICEF was definitely the right move for me.



21.9 - Meena logo



21.10 - Comic book cover, episode 1



21.11 – Meena's extended family

Meena stories were broadcast on television throughout the region. In all, they were dubbed into 17 Asian languages. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced two Meena radio series in Bangla and three other South Asian languages, which were also broadcast throughout the region. In some countries, girls listening and discussion groups were formed. This approach further popularized Meena among hard-to-reach, under-privileged communities.

For each story, we also created a simple comic book. In addition, we created other materials, such as stickers and metal plates to fasten on trishaws. Some video distribution companies began to copy the cartoons and put them on VHS video cassettes. There was no way of stopping such piracy and, besides, it was a sign of Meena's popularity. We found one firm that was recycling waste plastic, melting it down to make video cassettes, and selling Meena cartoons at a low cost. In this way, they provided entertainment-education to the rural poor and slum dwellers, who had little access to television.

In Bangladesh, Meena was integrated into the work of many partner organizations; for example, thousands of nonformal primary schools and village micro-loan chapters run by Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC); the programs of other NGOs, including folk theatre, puppet shows, competitions, and celebrations; the Department of Mass Communication's mobile cinemas and outreach work in almost all districts; and even the

Department of Education's primary schools in the country. Similar dissemination work was carried out in other countries in the region.

Meena became a popular tool for UNICEF's world-wide advocacy, fundraising, and education initiatives. In December 1995, Meena was identified by *Newsweek* magazine as "one of the actors to emerge on the world's stage in 1996." Meena was appointed as the official "ambassador" of the 1998 International Children's Day of Broadcasting—an event reaching more than 2,000 broadcasters, globally. By 2001, the pilot episode had been dubbed into and broadcast in 30 diverse languages.

Eventually, [31 regional episodes were produced](#)(4)—most by Ram Mohan in his Mumbai studio. Almost all were accompanied by matching comic books. The main episodes deal with many issues of gender disparity:

- challenging the dominant parental norm of son preference;
- girls' rights to quality education, both access and retention;
- girls' and women's right to quality health care;
- girls' equal right to a balanced and adequate diet;
- equal distribution of household chores between girls and boys;
- prevention of teasing and bullying of girls, and children with disabilities;
- girls' rights to recreation and sports;
- delaying marriage until at least age 18 or until completion of education;
- rejecting harmful dowry practice in marriages;
- preventing domestic child labor and sex trafficking;
- girls' and women's peace and security in conflict situations.

Some of the episodes addressed UNICEF's mainstream programs, for instance: pre-natal and newborn care; early childhood development practices; breastfeeding and additional complementary feeding; preventing childhood accidents and injuries; management of diarrhea and use of oral rehydration; as well as safe water delivery, sanitation, and hygiene; psychosocial support in natural disasters; and preventing the stigma and discrimination of people with HIV/AIDS, and giving accurate information on how it is transmitted.

I want to clarify, however, that much of this progress took place after I left South Asia. At the end of 1993, I departed Bangladesh to take up the post of Regional Programme Communication Officer in UNICEF, Nairobi. But the "dream team" I had set up carried on the great work.

When I left Bangladesh, I had no idea that many Meena episodes would continue to be created and used 25 years after the initiative was launched and that Meena would become part of the culture of South Asia. My waking dream in Prague became real.

22. Creating Our Own Kenyan Village

Beth, Ruth, and I left Dhaka for Nairobi, Kenya, right after Christmas in 1993, with our little dog Tux. We had lined up jobs for Mitro and Shuntu, plus a school for Poppi. Derek had departed six months earlier. He had done very well and was offered places at universities in Canada and the U.S. He chose Harvard, and his Sri Lankan friend Ananda went to Cambridge. We wondered about the monetary side of Derek's choice, but we could afford it because the U.N. paid for two-thirds of the overall costs (through a mandatory 30 percent deduction from international UN staff salaries, in place of our home country income tax). Such an expensive university as Harvard wouldn't have been an option for Derek if we had stayed in Canada. Just the same, we told him he had to earn his own pocket money, and he took a job of cleaning the washrooms in his residence.

On arrival in Nairobi, we found the air cool and crisp—quite a pleasant change from overcrowded and muggy Dhaka. Nairobi lies at 5,880 feet (1,792 meters) above sea level and becomes chilly at night—even more so in the slightly higher suburb of Gigiri, a large expatriate village about six miles (9.6 km) from Nairobi's city center. It is the home of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and where many other U.N. agencies are housed, including UNICEF's Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO). Walking around the fenced-in UNEP complex in the evening, with its many trees, flowers, and birds, was like experiencing heaven on Earth—not a hardship post at all.

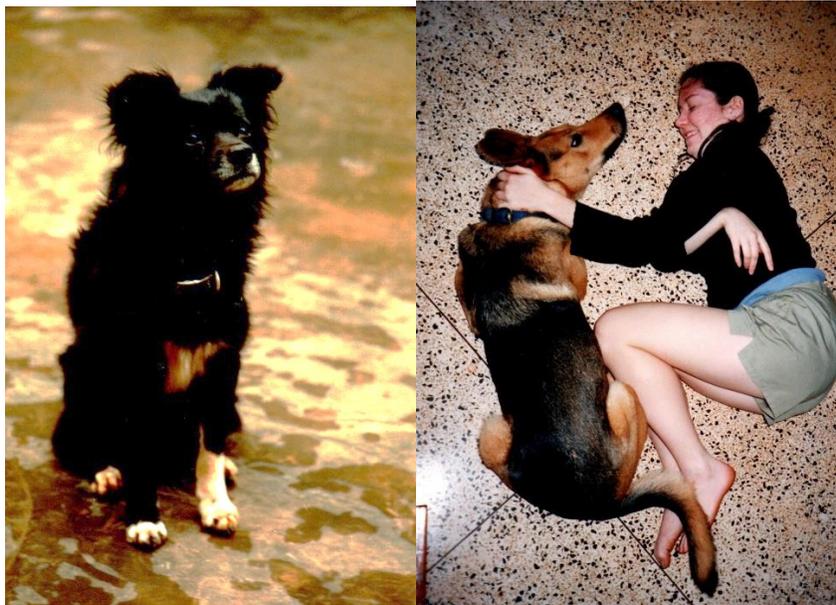
I had visited earlier to get the lay of the land and rent a brand-new house, not far from the U.N. gates, but on arrival we found it far from finished. At first we stayed with Irish friends, Philip and Anne O'Brien, whom we had got to know in Bangladesh. I'd worked well with Philip, then Chief of the Health Section. Our landlord, Mr. Okora, a Kenyan businessman of the Luo tribe, had run out of money to complete our house. So, we made a deal with him to pay the workers directly in cash, rather than pay him rent for six months. I had to begin travels for my work, so Beth ended up carrying a bundle of Kenyan shillings over to the house to pay them every Friday afternoon.



22.1 - Our unfinished house and garage - Photo by Neill McKee

After many weeks of delay, we finally moved into our still unfinished house. Beth found a gardener by the name of Aggrey, who came from the Luyha tribe, to look after our fenced-in property, and to open and close the gate during the day. I had ordered a second-hand white Toyota station wagon and painted a wide blue stripe all along its sides and back, because there were a lot of hijackings of more expensive expats' cars, especially in Gigiri. I thought no one would want to steal this inexpensive and unattractive car, which could easily be identified. Our house was far from any shopping center, Ruth's international school, and the homes of good friends she quickly made. So, we shared James—a driver from the central-Kenyan Kikuyu tribe—with the O'Briens. He drove Beth sometimes, made pick-ups and deliveries, and worked on Friday and Saturday nights so he could take Ruth to her friends' homes and meeting places.

At last, we were safe in our large new home, which had a huge lawn for Tux to run around on. We adopted a young female mongrel from a litter the O'Brien's dog had delivered. This dog grew to be three times larger than Tux. We asked Ruth what she wanted to call this new addition and she came up with "Laertes," a character in William Shakespeare's play Hamlet, but if we didn't like that, how about "Shovel," "Fork," or "Doorknob?" The latter name seemed to fit well with the state of our roughly finished house, so the dog was dubbed "Doorknob."



22.2 - Tuxedo a.k.a. "Tux" 22.3 - Ruth with Doorknob

Photos by Neill McKee

Beth wanted a real cook and a housekeeper, not someone who she would have to train, like Mitro in Bangladesh. She wanted to concentrate on her artwork, which was becoming a business. Since our station wagon, and a second car I bought to get around town, were of low value, our large garage wasn't really needed. So, Beth had the workers install glass windows on its doors so it could serve as a bright marbling studio. She had been practicing the ancient art of marbling, which dates back at least 1,000 years in East Asia and the Middle East. It had been used since the 17th century in making inside covers of books, among other decorations. Beth gradually built up her business and at one time had five young Kenyans working for her, making beautiful colored patterns on cloth; sewing ties, vests, blouses, skirts, and hats; and selling these

products at craft sales. Beth said she wanted to earn extra money to help pay for our part of the cost of Derek's education at Harvard.



22.4 to 22.7 - Beth's marvelous marbling business - Photos by Neill McKee

Finding and training such artisans was the fun part for Beth; cooks and housekeepers were another matter. She went through a number of them who couldn't cook or couldn't get along with other people. For instance, she hired Julius, a Kikuyu man who showed up at the gate with an English paperback novel under his arm—a good sign, Beth thought, but it was probably a prop. She also hired a housekeeper by the name of Agines, who claimed to be a widow and had been recommended by O'Brien's cook, Levi, a Luo preacher whose church Agines attended. Agines and Julius worked together harmoniously for a while, but when Julius went away for a weekend, he returned to find that someone—probably Agines—had put a grey powder on top of

a door to make him ill—a form of witchcraft. Agines denied doing it, of course, and the two got into a long argument. Julius also told Beth that Agines was not a widow, as she claimed. Her husband was a cook in another house nearby, so Agines had become real agony. Beth tried to negotiate peace between them, but finally gave up and let them both go.

Next, Beth hired two young ladies, graduates from a housekeeping school. Beatrice, the housekeeper, was a Swahili from the coast and Jacinta, the cook, possibly from the Kisii tribe. They were relatively well-educated, so they didn't believe in witchcraft. But after a year of relative harmony, Jacinta announced she would have to quit because she was getting married. She'd been made pregnant by a truck driver. Shortly after that, Beatrice said she was getting married too and quit.

By this time, Ruth had left for university in the U.S. and there was just the two of us to feed. But Beth was very busy with running her marbling business. So, she hired a housekeeper, another Beatrice, who already had all the children she was going to have. She also hired Esther, a highly-recommended older woman cook employed by a Canadian friend who was leaving. But much to Beth's dismay, Esther only knew limited menus, so she decided to let her go and trained Beatrice No. 2 as a cook. She also agreed to continue to do the housework.

The two solid employees were James, the driver, and Aggrey, the gardener. They stayed with us throughout, and I can imagine their conversations about the comings and goings of all the other staff. They were both from Bantu tribes, but their languages were not mutually intelligible and their customs different.



22.8 - Jacinta hard at work



22.9 - James, our driver

Photos by Neill McKee

Aggrey didn't sleep in our compound at night. He stayed with his wife and family elsewhere. But one day he showed up to say that she had given birth to twins and he needed the equivalent of U.S. \$2,000 in Kenyan shillings to get them out of the hospital. Apparently, he and his pregnant wife had waited in line at the regular government hospital and his wife, in much pain, was bleeding. It looked like she might die, along with the twins, so he rushed her to Gertrude Children's Hospital, explaining that his boss worked for the U.N. and he would pay. He had not asked us about paying the bill, but there was no time to waste.

It should be noted that in many African cultures, the birth of twins is a bad omen—a curse on the family. I'm not sure if Aggrey believed in this superstition, but maybe he thought he had to overcome this bad luck, one way or another. Due to his presence of mind and critical thinking, his wife and the babies had lived. We decided that the saving of those children was

more important than our money. But thereafter, Aggrey's wife went a little crazy in the city, looking after the twins and their other children, and she ran away, heading back to her home in western Kenya. Aggrey had to take the twins to her and put her on his father's farm with their babies.

Near the end of our stay in Kenya, Aggrey's father fell sick, so Aggrey brought him to Nairobi for medical treatment. He died soon afterward, and Aggrey couldn't afford to hire the special transport to take a body from Nairobi to their farm near Kakamega, an all-day trip to the far-west of Kenya. He politely asked for money to transport the body, but instead Beth offered our small station wagon, to be driven by James, who agreed but didn't know what he was getting himself into. He ended up carting the coffin around Nairobi all day to different ceremonies, wailing sessions, and meals. It wasn't until dusk that they departed on the long journey. Unfortunately, the coffin was a little too long for our station wagon and the back door had to be kept ajar, causing exhaust fumes to enter.

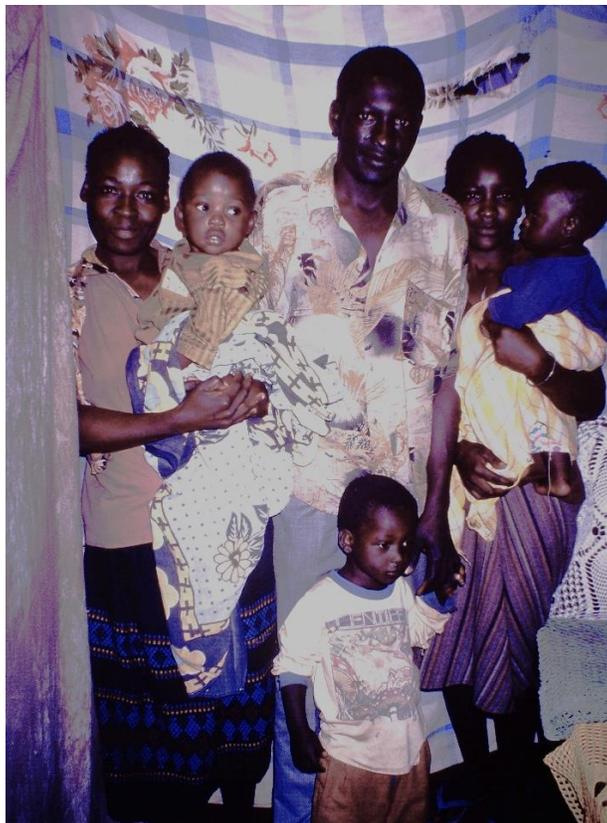
James later reported, "It was a terrible journey. I could hardly keep awake and felt sick. We arrived at sunrise and there was a lot more wailing, crying, and praying. After a while, I begged Aggrey to let me leave. He agreed. He said he had to stay for some time to make sure his mother would be okay. But before I left, Aggrey's mother brought me a live chicken, bound at the feet. She told me to release it after I left the area."

James continued, "I asked her why and she said, 'It will release the evil spirits from the car.' I laughed at her stupid superstition, but took the chicken as she asked."

Beth asked James, "Did you bring it back to Nairobi to cook?"

"No way. I released it!"

I think he understood why we laughed at his reply.



22.10 - Aggrey and his family - Photo by Neill McKee

Today, Beth admits that in those years she was suffering from migraine headaches and menopause. She also thought she was finally mourning her mother's death, which happened when she was only seven years of age. I speculated that it was possibly caused by "empty-nest syndrome," after Ruth left in the summer of 1995. Added to that, her religious beliefs had evolved. In Bangladesh, she had found an ecumenical congregation run jointly by a Methodist pastor, an Anglican priest, and a Catholic priest, which I occasionally attended. But on our first Easter Sunday in Nairobi, we attended All Saints' Anglican Cathedral, seat of the Archbishop of the Province of Kenya. We were used to Anglican services from our church in Ottawa, but the Archbishop's sermon was on the evils of HIV/AIDS, satanic devil worshipping, and *matatus* (fancily-decorated, privately-owned minibuses used as shared taxis). We couldn't figure out what he was talking about. We stayed for the first 45 minutes of his illogical ramblings, and then walked out down the center aisle, in full view of the elite African and white congregation. We never returned.

It wasn't until later, when we asked an educated Kenyan, that we understood the Archbishop was making a partially-political speech. President Moi belonged to the suspicious Masonic Movement and his face appeared on Kenya shillings notes. Our Kenyan friend suggested that possibly the Archbishop, a Kikuyu, viewed Moi, a Kalenjin, as a devil-worshipper. In 1992, an estimated 5,000 people had been killed and another 75,000 displaced in the Rift Valley during a conflict, primarily between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities, over land ownership.

At least the Kenyan village we had created was more peaceful than that.

23. Travels and Creations in Eastern and Southern Africa

How did we end up in Nairobi? Well, Cole Dodge, the UNICEF Representative in Bangladesh, had left Dhaka over a year before me. He became UNICEF's Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, and asked me if I wanted to apply for the post in Nairobi. In January 1994, I was tasked with providing program communication expertise to 22 UNICEF offices in the region from Eritrea and Ethiopia in the north, to South Africa, and around the horn of Africa to Namibia and Angola.

Our regional office in Nairobi was almost a mirror image of a typical country office in terms of staff make-up—a mixture of local national and international staff. The big difference is that the international program staff, like myself, had no program budget. We had our salaries and small travel budgets, and were considered to be advisors to the country offices, so we had to sell our services, much like consultants. There was no requirement for country offices to request our services for help with their programs.

I focussed my efforts on strengthening the communication strategies in UNICEF's country programs, such as immunization, water and sanitation, maternal and child health, and retention in education. The enrollment of children in school was better than in South Asia, but the retention of girls, especially, remained a big problem, due to family poverty, workload at home, and sexual harassment, as well as early pregnancy and marriage. In addition, the growing problem we were facing was HIV/AIDS. HIV infection rates were steadily rising in the region, and increasing numbers of sexually active adults were dying of AIDS. HIV could also be passed to babies through breastfeeding. But, at the time, there were no affordable and fully-approved anti-retroviral drugs to interrupt transmission from the nursing mother to her child, or for treating people living with AIDS, although trials had begun in Africa. Furthermore, our region had been stricken with the more virulent HIV-1 rather than HIV-2, a milder form of the virus predominant in West Africa.

I was honored to be named as the HIV/AIDS program focal point in the region, which meant I helped to organize regional trainings and planning meetings on what UNICEF's strategies should be to prevent infections and mitigate the impact on women and children. Because there were no medical answers on prevention, it was natural that staff carrying out activities in communication for social and behavior change should take the lead. I worked closely with the UNICEF Representative in Uganda, Kathleen Cravero, an American who became the convenor of our HIV/AIDS Program Network in the region. Uganda was one of the countries in our region being hit hardest by HIV/AIDS.

Our Deputy Regional Director Zerfi Bendow from Ethiopia, was focal point for the Women in Development Network, which focused on strengthening UNICEF programs in addressing gender disparity. I was lucky to work with these women. We saw eye-to-eye on the fact that the disempowerment of girls and women was a major factor inhibiting social development and accelerating the spread of HIV/AIDS in our region.

Besides gender disparity, there were tribal and ethnic divisions in most African countries—factors which impeded development. The genocide of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda in early 1994, made that obvious to the world. Cole had seen how the VIPP methodology had worked in Bangladesh, and along with a Junior Professional Officer from the Netherlands, Caroline Den Dulk, and my Kenyan Program Assistant, Eunice Wambugu, I began to train VIPP facilitators. Throughout the region, we saw the need to democratize group events in order to allow ideas and opinions of people with differences in gender, ethnicity, and age, to be shared

and built into program objectives, strategies, and activities. I didn't believe in flying into a country, consulting with only a few key stakeholders, and then writing a communication strategy on HIV/AIDS or any other program. I knew that by doing this there would be little or no ownership by the people who had to implement the plan, and therefore little chance of success. So, the VIPP methodology became my *modus operandi* in the region.

During my time in ESARO, I trained hundreds of facilitators and facilitated many program planning sessions. I also brought in my VIPP co-creators, Timmi Tillmann and Maruja Salas, to train facilitators. In addition, they helped Esther Wyss, an American facilitator working with UNICEF-Zambia, to build a home for VIPP in that country. Together with UNICEF's Training Section in New York, we also held a global VIPP consultation on the Island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, and developed a [VIPP Games and Exercises Manual\(1\)](#) for participatory group events. From the beginning of our experience with VIPP, we had found that including entertaining activities and exercises that are related to the theme of the events, increases participation, creativity of thought, as well as group cohesion, which in turn helps with consensus building.



23.1 - VIPP facilitator trainee – Photo by Timmi Tillmann

In mid-1994, I was invited to present the work I had started in South Asia on Meena to UNICEF's Regional Women in Development Network. Kathleen Cravero attended, and she invited the newly-elected Vice President of Uganda, Speciosa Naigaga Wandira Kazibwe—the first woman in Africa to hold such a title. At the end of my power point presentation and the showing of an episode of Meena, there was much applause, and the Vice President made an important public statement, “You must make an African Meena.”

So, I had my marching orders. I started right away, writing a proposal and consulting UNICEF communication officers in the region. With support from New York once more, I was able to raise money from the Government of Norway. It also was wonderful to gain so much

backing in the region, especially from women representatives and their staff. Catherine Mbengue, a Cameroonian woman who was the UNICEF Representative in Malawi, joined our group and, soon we had 10 countries involved: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, and South Africa.

Once again, I was able to assemble a great team. Besides Caroline Den Dulk, Justus Olielo, a Kenyan man, won the competition for a national officer position. We also brought in a writer by the name of Richard Mabala. He had first gone to Tanzania as a British VSO volunteer and remained there, taking on an African surname. He was fully fluent in Swahili and had become a Tanzanian citizen.

During the development of the first episode, we identified African artists, writers, researchers, and UNICEF country office focal points from the 10 countries involved as testing sites. I hired Dr. Mira Aghi from New Delhi, principal researcher for Meena, to come to Africa to train researchers, using the same qualitative research methods we used first for Meena. I also contracted Ram Mohan from Mumbai, the artist who had created Meena, to train African artists for the project.

In the early research we undertook, the name “Sara,” common in both Christian and Muslim communities, came up on top for the girl we created. Besides the name, we tested different character designs to arrive at the one for Sara, as well as for supporting characters and backgrounds.



23.2 - Final Sara Character 23.3 - Many versions of Sara were tested



23.4 - Various background scenes were tested to arrive at Sara's village

Richard Mabala wrote the first story, which was tested widely in the region. We held the first regional synthesis workshop in Machakos, Kenya, where we finalized the characters, backgrounds, and first storyline. Besides Ram Mohan and Mira Aghi, I invited Rachel Carnegie, who had returned to the U.K., and Nuzhat Shahzadi, then leading the Meena project in Bangladesh. It was a very creative and entertaining event, which further solidified our regional group.

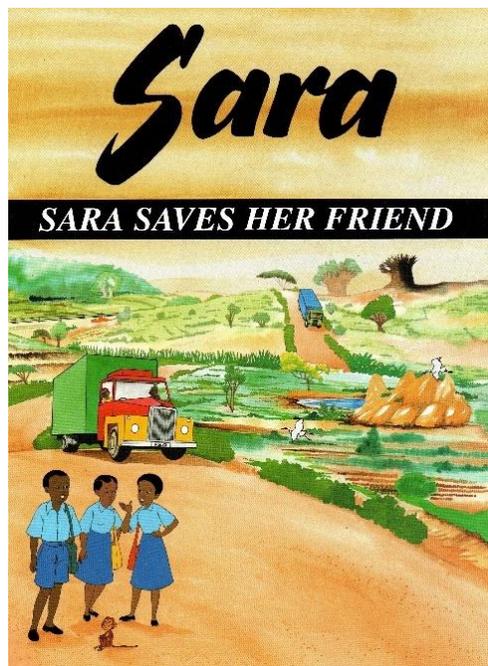
The first episode, [*The Special Gift*\(2\)](#) on Sara's retention in school, was produced in video and comic book formats, and became a great hit. It's an entertaining story on how Sara manages to convince her overbearing conservative and somewhat comical uncle to allow her to go on to secondary school to fulfill her dreams, instead of quitting school at the end of primary grades to help with chores at home. At the Machakos workshop, we used VIPP methods and also acted out parts of the story. Richard was excellent at playing the part of the Uncle he'd created.



23.5 - Richard Mabala playing Sara's uncle
Photo by Neill McKee

We wanted to address the themes on sexual abuse and HIV/AIDS. A couple of storylines were written by the team, but none of them were both entertaining and educational—too many direct messages that might “turn off” young people. Finally, before she left for university, I asked my daughter Ruth if she would take a crack at it, although I couldn’t pay her because it was against UNICEF rules against nepotism. In Dhaka, she had written and produced a play, and in Grade 12 in Nairobi, she had a teacher of playwriting all to herself. She had written another play and staged it at the city’s French Cultural Center, *Alliance Française*.

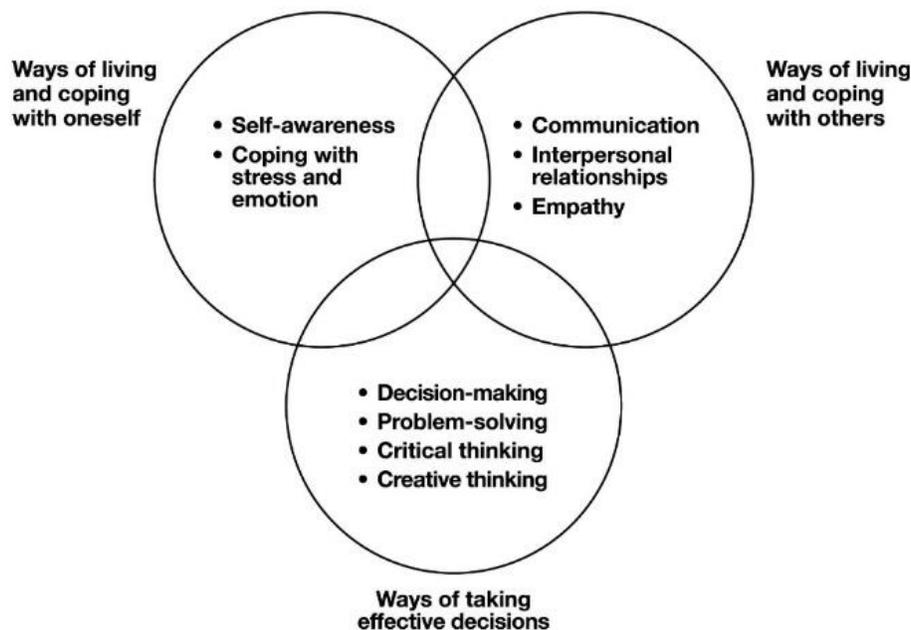
The story Ruth crafted involved our heroine, Sara, saving her friend, Amina, from sexual abuse by truck drivers—a frequent happening along busy highways in Africa. Adolescent girls walking home from school might take a joyride for excitement and adventure, and end up being raped. Long distance truck drivers, who traveled from town-to-town and had unprotected sex with sex workers, were major spreaders of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.



23.6 - Cover of the comic book version

I was happy that my adolescent daughter, not quite 18 at the time, could contribute to our initiative. Ruth demonstrated good life skills, like Sara—creative problem solving, critical thinking, self-awareness, and excellent communication skills. Beth, especially, had taught such skills early on to both Ruth and Derek. When they were growing up in Canada, Beth received a monthly “baby bonus” for each child from the federal government, and she opened bank accounts for them to buy their own clothes. They were seldom told what to do, but were taught to think about the consequences of their actions and make decisions themselves.

Our Sara team came to the conclusion that adolescent girls in Eastern and Southern Africa, and possibly most other parts of the world, usually lacked such skills due to gender inequity from birth, and therefore the Sara stories should model such skills, in culturally acceptable ways. Attempting to build psychosocial life skills in young people became an important aspect of our work.



23.7 - Model illustrating the interdependence of life skills

By early 1996, the work on Sara had become too demanding and I needed a regional coordinator who could manage the production of the second episode and create many more stories. The person had to have excellent program communication experience, facilitation skills, cultural sensitivity, a background in gender equity programming, and the ability to carefully manage the money coming from donors. UNICEF advertised internationally and Nuzhat Shahzadi won the competition, hands down. Besides the qualities mentioned above, she had demonstrated a creative flare for guiding educational and entertaining storyline creation in her work on Meena.

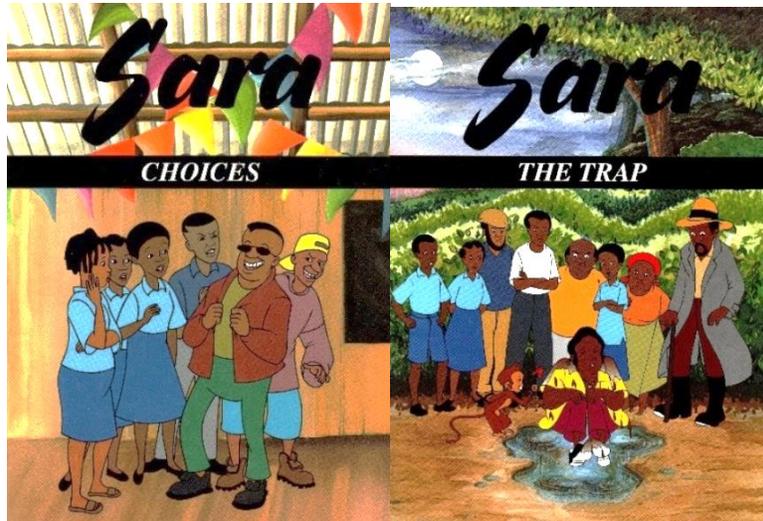
Nuzhat first had to manage the production of [Sara Saves Her Friend\(3\)](#), in Cape Town, South Africa. A company there won the competitive bid for producing the film, but it was a difficult task for them because the small firm, owned and operated by white South Africans, had bitten off more than it could chew, even with their new computer animation set-up. With Nuzhat's guidance on her many trips to Cape Town, they succeeded. But thereafter, we reverted to less troublesome production in Mumbai by Ram Mohan, who had acquired a computerized animation program.

Ram continued to build the skills of African artists in this work. We flew them to Mumbai to work with him—a great cultural interchange. One time when they were there during the Hindu festival of *Holi*, people on the street threw colored powder at them and splashed them with water. They ran back to the studio to complain, “Ram, the people don't like Africans. Look at us, they spoiled our clothes.”

Ram chuckled in his usual low-keyed manner and said, “No, they just want to include you in their celebrations of our Hindu god Krishna. The red color on you stands for love and fertility, while the green stands for new beginnings. Welcome to India!”

Richard Mabala wrote the third episode and Justus Olielo wrote the fourth, with good input from Nuzhat and the regional team, as well as Rachel and our lead researcher, Mira Aghi, following the same methods and workshop process we used for the first and second episodes. The third episode titled, *Choices*, was on avoiding adolescent sexual activity, and the fourth, *The*

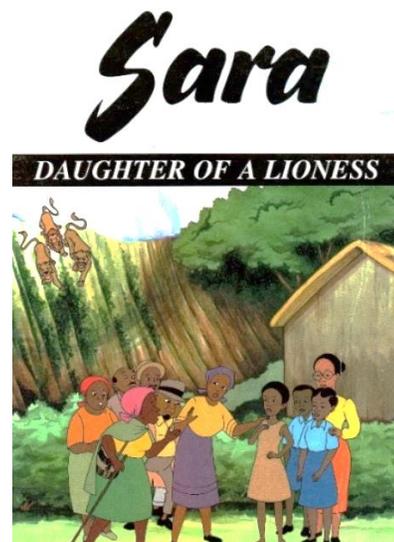
Trap, concerned strategizing to catch a “sugar daddy,” who offered to help Sara with her school fees in exchange for sex. With guidance from Ram, the African artists produced comic book versions of all the Sara stories. Nuzhat and the team designed facilitators’ guides to be included in each comic book for discussions in educational and community settings.



23.8 and 23.9 - Sara comic book covers

We wanted to tackle female circumcision—the cutting of the clitoris in childhood or adolescence to reduce sexual drive before marriage, and other forms of what many call “female genital mutilation” practiced by some ethnic groups. The gruesome tradition of sewing up the vagina until just before marriage was still being carried out in some rural communities. This often led to frequent infections and life-long pain. Older women in the community usually specialized in such traditional practices, using unhygienic instruments. These customs continued mainly in East Africa, so we focused our story research and development efforts in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

In the end, Nuzhat led the team in the creation of a dramatic story on this culturally-sensitive topic. We titled it, *Daughter of a Lioness*, and in it, Sara, the potential victim, acts as a community facilitator of change, rather than a direct advocate against such practices. There was a place for advocacy with policy makers, including both men and women at higher levels, but we knew that confronting people directly at the community level would meet with much resistance and drive the unhygienic, unhealthy, and cruel practices underground.



23.10 – Sara on FGM

It may sound like all I did was work in Africa, but that was not the case. In December of 1996, when Derek and Ruth were home for their Christmas break, we hired guides to help us climb Mount Kenya (17,000 feet or 5,182 meters elevation), a four-day hike through a majestic landscape, sleeping, cooking, and eating in rustic cold cabins. We told our children to bring two pairs of walking shoes. By the time we arrived at the launching camp for the summit, my old back had had it, and Derek's cheap leather African guard boots gave him terrible blisters. We had warned him about them, but it was his decision and his blisters. Fortunately, he had a pair of running shoes, whereas Ruth didn't—her old pair had worn out but she decided to carry on, only to be halted by altitude sickness. So, none of us made it to the summit. After Ruth returned and rested, we climbed higher over a ridge, camped overnight in tents on a plateau, and the next morning began the slow Chogoria decent on the other side of the mountain. It was like walking on a strange planet covered with plants we had never seen before.



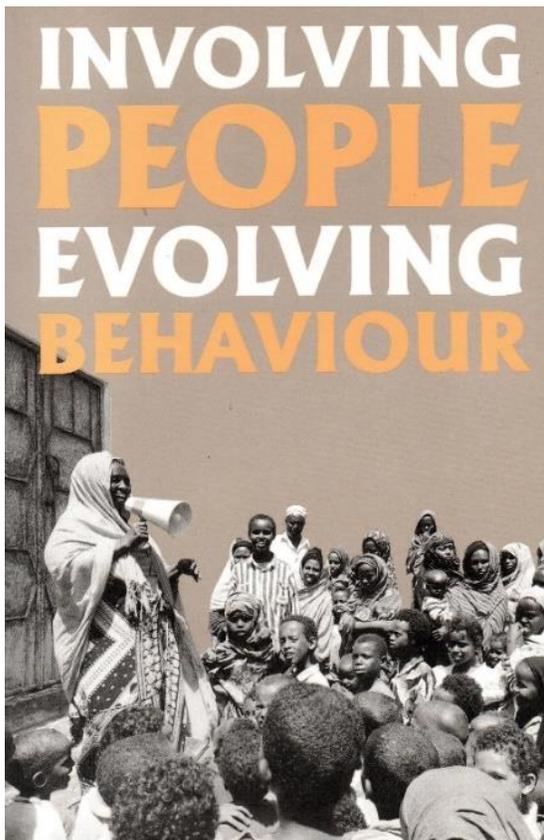
23.11 and 23.12 - Descending Mount Kenya on the eastern side
Photos by Neill and Derek McKee

We also boated and fished on Lake Victoria and Lake Naivasha, and walked among the pink flamingos on the shore of Lake Bogoria. We saved some sightseeing for our many visitors from Canada and the U.S. Lamu Island, on the Indian Ocean, was then an almost untouched Arab-African hideaway with only one car. There, we saw remnants of a thousand-year-old interface between two very different cultures, and a donkey sanctuary dedicated to their survival for at least a thousand more years.

My parents took advantage of our location to stay with us for five weeks during December 1995 and January 1996, when Derek and Ruth were also with us part of the time. We all went on a safari through the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania to see elephants, rhinos, giraffes, kudus, impalas, ostriches, and thousands of zebras and wildebeests. By then, we were not big meat eaters, but my dad was a life-long hunter and loved his meat, so before we took my parents

to the airport to fly back to Canada, we stopped at a restaurant called the Carnivore, where Dad devoured samples of antelope, wildebeest, ostrich, crocodile, and other African beasts. We wondered if he would die on the plane over the Sahara. That dinner was something I had to write home to my siblings about.

In between such visits and my official travel, I also did some professional writing while in Africa. My experience with Sara and HIV/AIDS communication led me to take the lead in creating another book. I co-edited, and co-authored this one with the program division in UNICEF, New York and some of the Meena-Sara team. We integrated the models I had come up with in my first book, published while I was in Bangladesh, but added a section on the need for psychosocial life skills and an enabling environment for sustained social and behavior change. My former IDRC colleague, Chin Saik Yoon, wrote the introductory chapter and his company, Southbound, published the book in partnership with UNICEF, New York. I consider the publication of *[Involving People, Evolving Behaviour](#)*⁽⁴⁾ another major milestone in my career as a communication professional.



23.13 – Book cover



23.14 - Social and behavior change model

By 1998, I had weathered two changes in leadership in the Regional Office. James Grant died in 1995 and the new Executive Director of UNICEF, Carol Bellamy, started making changes. There had been a major blow up in UNICEF-Kenya operations, involving mismanagement of funds, and the representative, who would never allow our regional office to oversee his operations, was fired, along with many senior staff. UNICEF financial staff and U.N.

auditors had caught up with them. Although our regional office was well-run and had nothing to do with this mess, Cole Dodge knew the writing was on the wall. The new Executive Director would want to shake things up. To avoid being transferred, he engineered a side-step to the United Nations Environment Programme.

The new regional directors who became my bosses, first Shahida Azfar, a graceful and experienced woman from Pakistan, and later Urban Jonsson, a nutrition and human rights expert from Sweden, had different management styles, but I remained the regional HIV/AIDS program focal point and Nuzhat continued to lead the Sara Communication Initiative. By 1999, I had begun to turn the whole process over to her. Shahida knew about Meena's success in South Asia, and Urban could relate to Sara and Meena because of his memories of *Pippi Longstocking*, an empowered, nine-year-old, Swedish girl cartoon figure, who had been popularized in books since the 1940s, and made into movies, spreading to many other countries.

Also, an important factor in the continuation of the Sara Communication Initiative was that Sara continued to gain much donor support. In addition to the Government of Norway, UNICEF Committees in the US, Canada, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany, as well as UNAIDS (the overall coordinator of HIV/AIDS programs in the U.N. system), supported Sara productions and dissemination in various languages in the region, and many country offices were using their own program funds in utilizing Sara materials.

This was all good, but by January 1999, I had been in the same position for five years, and it was time to move on. The U.N. system penalizes international staff, in terms of salary and benefits, if you stay in one position beyond that period. I toyed with the idea of becoming a UNICEF country representative, but decided I wanted to remain in communication. There was no senior communication position for me in New York, nor did I want to work there, so far from the field, sitting in endless meetings discussing and developing program guidance for country offices. I had been successful in Dhaka and Nairobi due to supportive supervisors, and the freedom to dream up new initiatives and raise money to create and implement them. So, I accepted a senior position in UNICEF, Uganda, a country just to the west of Kenya. Beth and I had first travelled there on our "honeymoon" filming trip in 1972 (see Chapter 6), when Idi Amin was in power, and I had visited the country many times on assignments while in Nairobi.

In mid-1999, Beth laid off Beatrice No. 2 on amicable terms and closed her marbling business, after finding jobs for all of her employees. Her marbling business lost money, but she had put her heart into training a group of Kenyans to create beautiful items—an employment creation operation, of sorts. Meanwhile, James found a driver's job with the U.N. and we gave Aggrey enough money to buy land of his own near his mother's farm, hoping he could live again with his wife and the twins we had inadvertently saved.

In August of 1999, we packed and shipped our things and a UNICEF driver took us and our two dogs, Tux and Doorknob, to Kampala, Uganda, to begin another adventure.

24. A Brief Sojourn in Uganda

Kampala is a thriving jiving city that rocks with a hodgepodge of African music and cultures. In general, I found Ugandans to be happier than Kenyans, at least on the surface. They had been through civil and tribal wars, as well as much social-economic turmoil since independence. It's a wonder they still sang and danced. Political stability had come, at least for the moment, but not without growing authoritarianism on the part of the President, Yoweri Museveni.

Since there was just the two of us, Beth and I decided to rent a small one-story bungalow in a hilly suburb called Ntinda. Beth had given up marbling to return to calligraphic arts and began to do some graphic design. She took over the garage and the master bedroom for her studio. Large master bedrooms always seemed nonsensical to us, for all you did there is make love and sleep. An important part of our house was the small room where we had an electrician by the name of Paul install an inverter that would switch to batteries, giving us minimal power on a few lights and the refrigerator when the electric grid failed, which frequently happened.

The most important feature was the wall around our place—a cement structure at the front with shards of broken glass embedded on top, but only a low steel fence on other sides, which any half-hearted thief could scale. As compensation, we were given a uniformed guard service, supplied by the government in an agreement with the U.N. Due to the decades of unrest since independence, these men were armed with semi-automatic rifles. But the one who was usually posted at our house had a habit of taking a break at a small shop across the street to drink beer, leaving his rifle inside the unlocked gate. We couldn't fire him since he was not employed by us, and we figured complaining about a man who walked around our house with such a gun wouldn't be so wise. Actually, he posed the greatest danger in our peaceful neighborhood.

I took the post of Chief of Basic Education, Child Care, and Adolescent Development (BECCAD) with the understanding that my focus would be on developing the communication components of a new country program addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I continued training people in the use of VIPP and used it in program design. Ugandans proved to be very receptive. Kathleen Cravero had left by then, and the new Representative was Michel Sidibe, a man from Mali, West Africa.

Meetings and office work aren't that interesting to recall and write about, and I found the work very bureaucratic, compared to my previous duties in UNICEF. This was partly due to a very structured computerized management system dreamed up by nerds in New York, who would have had me strapped to my desk if I hadn't handed over a lot of the steps to my program assistant. I only signed the hard copies. Another negative feature that I quickly noticed was that the management style in the office was mimicking that of UNICEF in New York—top down. I had read Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*(1) and Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*(2). UNICEF was trending in the opposite direction from the management approaches outlined in these reputable books.

My usually happy and collaborative Ugandan staff made up for that feature of the office, in part. They were from practically all the ethnic groups of Uganda and I was able to discuss the country's culture and politics with them openly, but one at a time. Another positive feature was that UNICEF-Uganda was a leader in the dissemination and use of Sara materials. Some of my staff worked with Nuzhat Shahzadi in Nairobi to complete three more Sara comic books on priority themes: protecting adolescent girls in emergencies and in domestic labour situations, and reducing stigma and discrimination against people living with or affected by HIV/AIDS. My program was supporting such people through local NGOs, but I didn't realize how important that

was until I visited the humble home of a grandmother taking care of her 25 grandchildren. All of her children and their spouses were buried in shallow graves beside her house.

Nuzhat and I continued to work on the future of Sara while I was in Uganda. We knew that because UNICEF programs are usually country-based, interest in Sara could eventually peter-out, if there was no strong regional champion. Therefore, while I was still in Nairobi, we had begun to search for a home for Sara in the private sector, at least in terms of fulfilling orders for print materials and videos from UNICEF offices, governments, and NGOs. While I was in Uganda, along with our regional procurement officer, Einar Syvertsen, we finalized a partnership between UNICEF and Maskew Miller Longman, an educational publisher in Cape Town, South Africa. They sold and distributed the videos and comic books, but also developed and published new materials for teachers and students, marketing them through educational outlets and bookstores in Africa.

In retrospect, this private sector partnership was a good move, for Nuzhat left Nairobi in 2001 to become Meena Regional Coordinator in Kathmandu, Nepal. Without her enthusiasm and skills, the regional office never was able to complete videos of the last three episodes or produce any new stories. But the deal with Masker Miller Longman continued for over a decade and Sara stories were spread far and wide in Africa. To this day, I continue to get enquiries from NGOs wanting to know the background on Sara's development and how to acquire and use the materials.

On the social side of life in the country, I found Ugandans to be shy about offering invitations to their humble homes. But our electrician, Paul, of the Buganda tribe, invited us to his wedding, an all-day affair with men in white gowns and women in traditional garb, *gomesi*—floor-length, brightly-colored dresses with puffed sleeves. In the early 1900s, the British colonials succeeded in stopping women from covering themselves with what they considered to be crude cloth, made from the inner bark of the Matuba tree (*Ficus natalensis*). Beth had a *gomesi* made for the wedding and was taught how to wear it properly. The grace and beauty of these Bugandan women helped to keep me awake in the heat of the day, while the steps of the ceremony and meal went on and on. As honored guests, there was no way we could leave until the end.



24.1 - Beth having her *gomesi* adjusted
Photo by Neill McKee

When we moved to Uganda, I had purchased a second-hand Mitsubishi Pajero and Beth painted Sara on the spare tire cover on the back. There were fewer vehicle hijackings in Uganda, so we felt safe enough to travel with friends to remote places on rough roads to have picnics, and watch sunsets beside Lake Victoria, while drinking a little wine.



24.2 – Author with his Mitsubishi Pajero - Photo by Beth McKee

We also did some wider travels in Africa. By this time, our son Derek had finished his B.A. at Harvard in Anthropology and Visual Arts, where he had also completed a senior project titled, *Darshan in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, a photographic study of Hindu Temples in the United States and Canada. After that he headed to Zambia for a year, working with Street Kids International, a Canadian NGO. He helped with the organization's mission of providing health services, employment, shelter, and human rights education to homeless boys and young men.



24.3 - Derek with colleagues in Zambia - Photo by Neill McKee

We visited him there in September to see his work and meet his colleagues, as well as to take an overnight boat trip on Lake Kariba, a large body of water created by the damming of the Zambezi River. After a glorious sunset, we spent the night in sleeping bags on the open deck.



23.4 and 23.5 - Sunset and slumber on Lake Kariba - Photos by Neill McKee

We were happy to see that our son was following in our footsteps, seeking international work and adventure, as well as visual arts. During our visit, we came to understand a little of his experience during his sojourn in Lusaka. This was the city where we married in 1972 (see Chapter 6), but by all appearances it had gone downhill since then. Like Uganda, Zambia had become one of the African countries most afflicted by HIV/AIDS. When we entered the same office building where we signed our marriage license, we spotted a dilapidated sign inside a glass case that read, “Registration of Births, Marriages, and Deaths—Room 1.” We stepped into the designated room, only to meet a smiling man in a worn gray suit, who told us he worked for the Ministry of Agriculture. This was just as mixed-up as our marriage vows 28 years earlier, when the official asked me, “Will you, Nelly McKee, take this woman to be your husband?”

Derek finished his assignment in Zambia and joined us in Uganda for Christmas season 1999, along with Ruth and my nephew, Kent, who was serving two years as a volunteer teacher in Malawi. Our small house was packed, but we enjoyed their company and they enjoyed the nightlife of Kampala. After they left, Beth and I took a New Year’s 2000 break in South Africa, flying to Cape Town and renting a camper vehicle. I left my computer and work behind and we just enjoyed the summer weather on the Cape of Good Hope, driving around to different vineyards with good food and wine, then sleeping it off inside our vehicle, before moving on to a different campsite almost every night.

We discussed our future, for Beth knew I wasn’t exactly thrilled with my new position. Should I look for a different job in Canada or the U.S. closer to our children? While we were living in Nairobi, Beth had helped Ruth get a U.S. permanent residence card, so she could work off-campus for pocket money, while studying at New York University. By then, she was serious about settling down in the U.S. to pursue a playwriting career. Beth had also started the process of getting a “green card” for Derek, but on August 7, 1998, that all ended. She had been heading into Nairobi city center with our driver James, when they had to turn around due to a traffic jam. Al-Qaeda had blown up the American Embassy, and with it, Derek’s papers. He decided “that was that”—a sign that the green card was not meant to be. From Uganda, he was on his way home to Canada via the Middle East, to find gainful and meaningful employment, and probably pursue graduate studies.

On New Year’s Eve 1999, we toasted the New Millennium before midnight and fell asleep in our camper, not caring whether computers and digital clocks would sync with the year 2000 in the morning. We figured a more positive future would soon materialize. After all, we were on the Cape of Good Hope.

Back in Uganda, in May 2000, I went on a field trip to the undulating hills of Rukungiri District, where I experienced a much different and shocking side to the New Millennium. I was curious about an incident that had happened in the Kanungu Sub-County just a few weeks before, and my contact man from the District Health Department (DHD) guided my UNICEF driver and car on a winding dirt road to the former location of a cult that recently had made headlines around the world. I can't recall what attracted me to go to this place. Perhaps I thought it would hold some answers to the nature of religions in Africa.

As we approached the headquarters of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, the setting appeared idyllic, except for the entrance lane which, because of its steep angle, seemed to forewarn us of impending danger by nearly tipping our vehicle over into the valley. Young boys were busy making mud bricks in the adjacent field and a pair of crested cranes could be seen guarding a piece of pasture far below. Inviting flowers covered the hills above us as we crossed a well-worn log bridge over a small brook. As we came closer, it became apparent that most of the flowers were Amaranthus, bowing their poisonous bloodred heads in the gentle breeze—another ominous sign?

In front of the tin-roof buildings lay a large earthen parking lot, as if the builders of the establishment had anticipated many visitors. But no one greeted us, not even a policeman or a guard. Our driver, looking a little frightened, said he would stay to guard the Land Cruiser. As my DHD guide and I descend a path into the property, we passed by a rusty old wheelbarrow. The contents had been burned but I could see the remnants of what appeared to be scripture in a Ugandan language, a cross, a chalice, and other spooky religious paraphernalia.

At first sight, the buildings looked normal—a mixture of small and large structures placed in no particular order. But a newer structure with a cement foundation rose taller than the rest. It stood to the right of the downward path and was evidently unfinished, with empty louver-holders in the windows. My guide, who had visited just after the event, said, "It was called 'The Ark,' the ship that was supposed to take all the people living here to heaven when the world ended." A brief walk around the building revealed another story. A gaping hole in the cement foundation discharged a foul smell. Below lay uncounted decaying bodies of people who did not rise up at the appointed time.

I felt evil hanging in the sunlit air, as we continued our investigation, but for some reason I persisted, trying to understand why and how it had happened. Through a wide passage between two buildings, we descended to a school assembly ground. We walked past educational lessons on the walls, including the drawing of a human skeleton, and remnants of learning materials scattered amid haphazardly placed empty benches. I closed my eyes and seemed to hear the echo of pupils' voices. But they were not happy sounds. They were wails of malnourished and ill-treated children, who had not been allowed medicine when they were ill, so my guide told me. On one school bench sat a partially broken clay statue of the holy family. On a blackboard beside remnants of past lessons, a sympathetic message had been scribbled in broken English after the disaster: "Poor children to going to heaven but gone to hell."

My guide warned me not to step on an oily substance on the floor. It appeared to be petroleum jelly, but he explained that it contained a substance that makes the flesh burn rapidly when ignited. Inside were other partially-used bottles of this jelly spilling onto the floor and window sills.

We descend further. The lower side of the assembly grounds was bordered by a beautiful flower garden, which was a welcome relief from the scene above. But on drawing nearer, I saw it was a graveyard for the cult members who died before the horror. Neat piles of rocks could be

seen amid the flowers, appearing to shelter the inhabitants of this ground from what took place on that day.

Below the graveyard stood empty dormitories where cult members, separated by age and sex, once slept on woven mats in the mosquito infested air. Beside these lay a newly cleared ground where, I was told, the church once stood, evidently a long hall which lay below the failed Ark. It was here that 778 people, mainly women and children, began their prayers that morning of March 17th, the windows and doors tightly shut as the ceremony continued. No one remained alive to say exactly what happened or how the fire began. The heat from the tin roof above probably built up gradually and began to blend with the fire below; then panic set in. I was told that a pile of charred bodies was found at the remains of the door, indicating they had attempted to escape when they didn't ascend. Screams echoed through the valley below. Curious villagers, alerted by the sounds and the smoke, arrived too late to save anyone. At last, they discovered what this strange place was all about. The inmates had been barred from any form of social contact with the surrounding population.

We walked down to the edge of the cleared space and climbed freshly formed mounds of earth. The scenery below looked like a Scottish summer landscape painting. Only the sheep were missing on the rolling hills. But this escape was fleeting. My guide informed me the mounds we stood on were hiding human remains. He pointed out a wreath recently laid by the President of Uganda.

We started back, ascending the hill and passing the broken wheelbarrow once more. As we reached the top, my guide pointed to a small house on the other side of the valley, where an old man once lived. Unlike other local inhabitants, he had joined the cult. That morning he was also invited to partake in the special prayer so that no one would remain to speak to the world about the practices of this twisted form of religious opium that had gripped the minds and taken the souls of so many innocent people. Looking down from the car park toward the lane, I could easily picture the story my guide told me. I visualized cult leader, Joseph Kibweteere, stealing away in his car in the early morning, after giving orders to his heavily addicted officers. But others believe he had perished with his flock. No one knew for sure, but the Congo border is near this place and he could have easily escaped detection in that country, where a civil war was raging.

As we drove over the bridge, negotiating the precarious angle again, and merging onto the main road, I looked back once more at the deserted buildings. I was numbed by what I had seen and the fact that what had happened here seemed to be almost forgotten, certainly unattended—anyone could wander through. I tried to return my thoughts to my work—the inspection of friendly health services for the young people of Rukungiri, and the communication strategies we were putting in place to protect them from HIV/AIDS. But as we drove off, I sat in silence. I had entered and quickly exited the heart of darkness.

In the months that followed, the evil I witnessed on my field trip to Rukungiri District frequently haunted me, and those images remain vivid in my memory, even today. Perhaps my going there was some kind of message I sent to myself. I soon decided that seven years in Africa was enough, for now. Working in UNICEF for 11 years had mostly been a creative and fulfilling experience, but it was time to search for the next step in my career. I resigned, and Beth and I packed our things. In early December 2000, we found a good home for our dogs, Tux and Doorknob, to live out the rest of their lives together, and we left Uganda.

25. Finding Myself in America

In late December 2000, Beth and I drove around Chesapeake Bay, Maryland, looking for a house to buy. I wanted river-front property and that was difficult to find in a good condition at an affordable price. Then we drove down a narrow winding road in the sprawling town of Pasadena, situated on the Magothy River. There it was, a newly completed two-story house, located on a hill overlooking the water. It came with a new floating dock—a perfect place for me to recreate the boating and fishing adventures of my boyhood in Ontario. The Magothy is about 10 miles (16 km) long and empties into the Bay, a 200-mile (320 km) body of brackish water that joins with the Atlantic Ocean. I'd found my dream home.



25.1 – Early morning view from our new house on the Magothy River - Photo by Neill McKee

As we drove out, I noticed a man with a black face on the road. By the U.S.'s Federal Fair Housing Act, real estate agents can't volunteer information regarding the racial, religious, or ethnic composition of any neighborhood, but we eventually found out most of our neighbors would be African American. Of course, that didn't matter to us. We'd just left a Ugandan suburb where we seldom saw white faces, so we made an offer and closed the deal. But were we imposing on an historic black neighborhood, driving up prices through a process of gentrification?

As it turned out, there were a few white families living there, one located just down the hill from us. On our next visit, Mike Christianson popped his head out of an upstairs window, when we were driving by, to tell us a bit of the history of the place and that we'd be welcomed. Mike was a lawyer working for US Congressman Elijah Cummings, then leader of the Black Caucus of the House of Representatives in Washington. Mike told us that during the years of segregation, the area had been donated by a Quaker woman to educated black families from Baltimore for summer residences. Most of the present residents were children and grandchildren of the original owners. Mike had rented his house before buying, in order to prove to them that

he would be a good neighbor, and he helped the neighborhood association on legal matters. Mike's wife Jean was a social worker at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) in Baltimore, and they were both peace-loving Quakers, so we felt we were in good company and had found a great spot for the next chapter of our lives.

I, too, was working for JHU by then. A good friend, Edson Whitney, who had been in Dhaka, Bangladesh while we were there, encouraged me to apply to the Center for Communication Programs (CCP) at JHU's School of Public Health, where he had become the head of Asian programs. I had accepted the offer of working as a Senior Program Officer in Edson's section, but when I arrived, the Executive Director, Phyllis Piotrow, said I would be their Senior Advisor for HIV/AIDS Communication. How could I turn that down? I soon learned this was the American way of doing things—flexibility was the word, and salaries were negotiable. There were no rigid grades and steps, as in the U.N. system. Everyone was a free agent and could bargain, based on his or her credentials, experience, and salary history.

JHU is a large private institution founded by the philanthropist Johns Hopkins (1795-1873). His parents named him after his great-grandmother, Margaret Johns, leading to confusion, mispronunciation, and misspelling of the university named after him. His parents were Quakers who owned a tobacco plantation, but they were persuaded by an abolitionist to set their slaves free when Johns was 17, forcing him to quit school and work in the fields. He soon left home to get a better education, and he became a successful self-made businessman. He remained a life-long bachelor, and in his will he left millions “to create a university that was dedicated to advanced learning and scientific research, and to establish a hospital that would administer the finest patient care, train superior physicians and seek new knowledge for the advancement of medicine.” ([Source \(1\)](#)).

Hopkins succeeded in this goal, but when I first visited JHU's grand hospital complex where the School of Public Health is located, I was shocked to find it to be surrounded by an African American slum—boarded-up and dilapidated rowhouses, graffiti on the walls, with drug pushers and addicts walking the streets. Absent were the cafes and restaurants of a normal university community. I had given up working for an organization dedicated to helping to fulfill the social and economic rights of children and women, to come to a country famous for its work in political and civil rights, but where most social and economic rights, such as health care, are not recognized. To this day, the U.S. has not ratified the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as well as most other U.N. conventions. Some Americans say this is their rightful “exceptionalism,” as the longest-lasting continuous democracy in the world. In spite of helping to create the U.N., and hosting it in New York, most international conventions clash with the U.S. Constitution and legal frameworks. In fact, I found that many of my new colleagues didn't have much respect for the U.N., and with some, it was hard to discuss the value of my previous work in UNICEF.

Fortunately for me, JHU is one of the largest employers in Maryland, and has many branches in numerous locations. CCP is located next to Baltimore's modern inner harbor with its cafes, restaurants, an aquarium, shopping centers, upscale apartment buildings, plus a baseball and a football stadium. Beginning in 1958, the inner harbor was transformed from rotting docks and rat-infested warehouses into an attractive entertainment and tourist destination. I enjoyed walking around the harbor to Federal Hill, a defensive stronghold during the War of 1812, where replica cannons stand on guard, as if they remain ready to fire on the British. The neighborhood below the hill burned in the race riots of 1968, but has since become gentrified. The harbor is also home to the Visionary Art Museum, which proudly displays the work of American mental

patients, drug addicts, alcoholics, misfits, and kooky non-conformists. I had come to work in a city with a great sense of humor.

I also loved the sense of humor of most of my new American colleagues—program officers, researchers, technical geeks and support staff—largely white Americans, but with a sprinkling of African, Asian, and Latino Americans. Until I joined CCP, my main experiences with Americans had been with those I had met in UNICEF, my year at FSU in Tallahassee, and, of course, my wife and her family. In Baltimore, I found debate and rapid-fire discussion to be the *modus operandi* more than in the U.N. or Canada. I'd read that many departments of communication in the U.S. had evolved from schools of rhetoric—the art of persuasive speaking or writing. It also seemed to me that CCP was more involved in mass media social marketing campaigns for individual behavior change, rather than the more participatory forms of communication programs I had helped to formulate in UNICEF, which attempted to tackle social change. But CCP did do a good deal of work in strengthening the interpersonal communication of health personnel, peer education, and had a library full of some of the best examples of communication materials.

I came to learn that there was a reason for the more campaign-style approach to communication programs at CCP, for most of its work was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)(2) on five-year global contracts; thus quick and visible strategies and actions were expected by the donor. CCP's main experience had been in promoting family planning in developing countries. It had recently won its fifth such USAID contract called, "Health Communication Partnership (HCP)," which had broader objectives, and the organization needed strengthening in HIV/AIDS communication—which is exactly why I was hired.

HCP included other partner organizations: the Academy for Educational Development, Save the Children, and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, based in the U.K. I worked with John Howson, a British man who had recently arrived from London to be part of the HCP team. Together, we tried to figure out the ebb and flow of the American office culture we were experiencing, driven by our no-nonsense Executive Director, Phyllis, and her deputies—a lively environment of fast talk and quick decisions. The third tier, Edson Whitney, Asia director; Susan Krenn, Africa director; and Walter Saba, director for Latin America, were more soft-spoken and attuned to listening in their approaches to management.

Edson and his wife Barbara, a professional facilitator, had been trained in VIPP facilitation methods in Bangladesh. We decided it would be best to bring in Timmi Tillmann and Maruja Salas to train a group of CCP personnel in VIPP. Barbara and I co-facilitated to help make the workshop more practical and focused on CCP applications. We soon had some people using VIPP to make collegial decisions on programs in Baltimore and overseas, rather than one person doing drafts and then sitting around a table in discussions dominated by whoever was most senior or most eloquent in speech.

But even the most talkative in our office fell silent on the morning of September 11, 2001, when Al-Qaeda hijackers drove jets into the twin towers in New York and into the Pentagon in Virginia. CCP staff gathered in the conference room to watch TV. I recall that I didn't join them immediately, and then only took a brief look before returning to my office. I called Beth and then our daughter Ruth, in New York, to be sure she and her boyfriend, Brian, were safe. But I remained in a type of denial when Phyllis told everyone they could go home to be with their families. I stayed in the office until all was eerily silent.

Finally, I walked across the harbor, where the police were setting up barricades, and took the Light Rail, packed with stunned people, back to Glen Burney, where Beth picked me up. We

talked a little about the country we had chosen to live in, and what might happen in the future. This was the second time Al-Qaeda had struck near where we lived. Would it be safe for me to travel with an American organization? Did we make the right decision in moving here?

When we reached home, for a short time I looked at the still-evolving horror on television, and then went down to our dock to sit and watch a great blue heron fishing in the cove across the river, and two osprey diving for fish in deeper water. They were swift and accurate, just like the hijackers who had outsmarted America's overbuilt and uncoordinated intelligence services.

By the time Al-Qaeda struck the U.S., I had already begun making business trips to Africa and Asia. In fact, I was surprised to find myself going back to Africa, a continent I had had enough of for a while. My work involved helping to formulate HIV/AIDS communication strategies, working with government officers, members of local NGOs, and local CCP staff. I organized workshops in which I used VIPP methods, whenever possible, and worked with younger CCP Baltimore staff to train them on the consultative processes I used to ensure wide ownership in objectives, strategies, and planned actions. What had changed?

Thankfully, most of my time during 2001-2003 was concentrated in Asia. I returned to India many times, working in Mumbai, and this made up for negative impression I gained on my first visit to the city in 1971, when it was still called "Bombay." It was there that I was sent around in circles by the bureaucracy, while trying to send a package of exposed film footage back to Canada (see Chapter 1). By this time, India had become a booming market economy with modern hotels, restaurants, and internet cafes. I enlisted the services of Shana Yansen, a smart young CCP staff member, and we engaged with other USAID contractors, state government, and NGO partners, to develop a comprehensive plan for the prevention, control, and mitigation of the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the State of Maharashtra. Edson Whitney joined us for the VIPP workshop where all the partners came up with the objective, strategies, and activities.

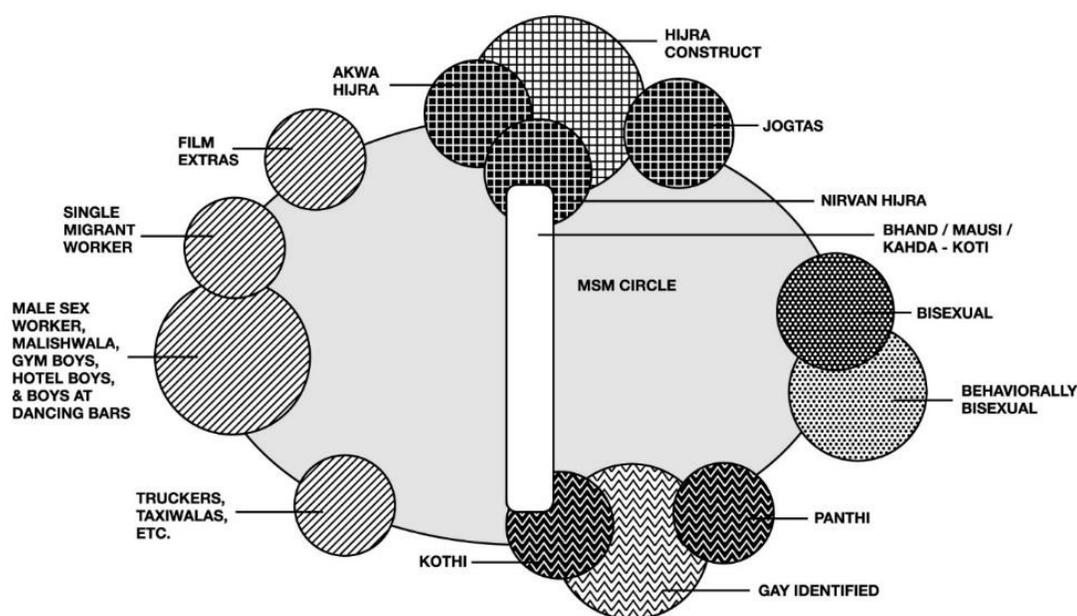


25.2 - Participants of our Maharashtra workshop on a strategic plan to combat HIV/AIDS

Photographer unknown

India is a land of variety and the virus' transmission routes were also many and varied: commercial sex workers with their regular male customers—businessmen, white collar workers, tradesmen, rickshaw pullers, and truck drivers. Young girls were being trafficked to Mumbai from various parts of India and Nepal to be sold into the sex industry. Injecting Drug Users (IDUs) were contracting HIV through use of dirty needles. Long-distance truck drivers were having sex with their male helpers, as young as 12, when they couldn't afford female sex workers. Then they'd return to their homes to have sex with their wives, some of whom were infecting their infants with the virus through breastfeeding. At the time, antiretroviral drugs to interrupt transmission were still not widely available or affordable.

We faced complicated overlaps between IDUs and Men who have Sex with Men (MSM). This was before the era of LGBTQIA: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, or asexual, but the diagrammatic representation I was given by one of our partner organizations, the Humsafar Trust, demonstrated a complexity of human sexual relations I had never seen before. There were *hijra*, or eunuchs, who, at one time, had played social or ceremonial functions in the courts of maharajas and rich households. But during the 20th century, they evolved to become mobile musicians for social events, such as marriages. We were told that “straight” men continued to seek out their sexual services because they were more skilled than most women, but feminine in manner and dress. Neither the *hijra* nor the men, in this example, considered themselves to be MSM. Some men identified themselves to be bisexual, including transsexuals, but others claimed they were only “behaviorally bisexual” and never used the bisexual label. A large number of otherwise “straight” males were available for sex, such as film industry extras, and young men and boys working in hotels, gyms, bars, and massage parlors. Those people who identified themselves as gay were a small minority of MSM, and gay identity was divided between *kothi* and *panthi*—those who were “receptive” and those who were “active” in penetrative anal sex.



25.3 - MSM Identities in India

Much stigma and discrimination remained in Indian society against MSM and we generated plans for dealing with this and for controlling the spread of HIV: research on the target audiences and the messages needed, advocacy with decision makers on the real facts about Indian men's behavior, strengthening interpersonal communication and counseling by health professionals, messages on the use of condoms or non-penetrative sex, peer education, and setting up hotlines for distressed people to call. All of this had to be linked to clinical services and drop-in centers.

During this period, I also returned to more filmmaking. Another organization, Pathfinder in Boston, working on a USAID global project called Focus on Youth Adults, asked CCP if we could help produce a video for educating young adolescents on sexuality in Bangladesh. When Edson asked me to take the lead, of course I jumped at the chance. I had left Bangladesh at the end of 1993, when the Meena Communication Initiative was still gaining momentum. On return almost a decade later, I was elated to see Meena and her parrot Mithu, painted on walls, school gates and buildings, and on metal plates on the backs of rickshaws. UNICEF had recently conducted research on Meena's reach and effects, and Meena stories and messages had become widely-known and understood—now a part of Bangladeshi culture.

I knew that educating adolescents about reproductive health in Bangladesh would be a difficult, compared to the issues in fostering the health and development rights of younger children, like Meena. Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country with some conservative elements, but Islamists had not gained much ground in the country. In my experience, Bangladeshis are more practical. They accept Saudi Arabian money to build new mosques, and send off their men to work in the Middle East to bring back dollars, but they manage to keep radical Islamists marginalized in politics. So, we had a chance to make an effective video that might complement what had already been achieved.

Pathfinder was completing four researched and well-designed booklets with the overall title, *Know Yourself* and the following subtitles: 1) Puberty, 2) New Feelings, New Passions, 3) Preventing Risks to Our Future, and 4) Preparing for Marriage. The first two booklets dealt with the fact that traditionally in Bangladeshi society, learning about body and emotional changes in puberty is difficult. Girls are usually segregated from boys, starting around their first menstruation. Being cut off from the opposite sex is not healthy for future behavior between men and women.

The third booklet focused on the dangers of teenage pregnancy and unprotected sex, which might lead to sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, as well as how HIV could be transmitted by dirty medical needles. The fourth booklet dealt with the law on the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh—18 for girls and 21 for boys—but how this law was often broken by parents for monetary gain, through the custom of dowry payments to girls' parents by boys' parents—the opposite of the Hindu custom in India. Information was included on the fact that dowry in Bangladesh is a social tradition, not a religious rule, and that it is a harmful practice for it lowers the value and status of girls and women. The booklet also included information on female and male reproductive systems, conception, and contraception. Through the long-term efforts of USAID and its contractors, as well as other donors, most family planning methods were widely available in Bangladesh, by then. The booklet also dealt with sexual impotency, infertility, miscarriages, pregnancy, nutrition and care during pregnancy, as well as postnatal care of the mothers and children.

When I looked through the booklet drafts, I realized they were well-designed, but overly detailed. I figured that this was much more information than even the average North American

adolescent would ever be exposed to or would read. For the next two years, I worked with and mentored CCP staff and members of the Bangladesh Center for Communication Programs (BCCP), which Edson Whitney had set up during his time in Dhaka. Key to the success of the work was Sanjeeda Islam, Deputy Director of BCCP, a like-minded Bangladeshi woman. We knew it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make only one video to include all the topics in the booklets, so we focused on the first. We came up with the idea of doing a video that involved real adolescents talking to each other about the issues, facilitated by a Bangladeshi who could motivate them to speak out, debate, and act out scenes between themselves and with adults who could play parents, teachers, and health service providers. We also wanted to include short clips of actual interviews with such adults regarding their thoughts on adolescents.

The best person Sanjeeda and I knew to do the job of facilitating the workshops was Nuzhat Shahzadi, who had left the Sara Communication Initiative in Nairobi by then, and was running UNICEF's Meena Communication Initiative from Kathmandu, Nepal. Morten Giersing, who had been the supportive UNICEF Regional Communication Officer when I started Meena, was now the UNICEF Representative in Bangladesh. He was very interested in our adolescent health initiative. With his request to UNICEF's Regional Director, Nuzhat was allowed to help us out at no cost to the project, except her airplane tickets. She traveled to Bangladesh to run a four-day videotaped workshop with young adolescents.

We also wanted to intersperse sequences from the workshop with entertaining cartoon clips to reinforce points and make audiences remember them. For this I brought on board Ram Mohan, the genius animated film producer from Mumbai, who had created "my daughters" Meena and Sara, and continued to produce Meena episodes at the time. BCCP hired AV Comm, a video production company I had engaged during my time as communication chief for UNICEF, Dhaka (see Chapter 21). AV Comm recorded the workshop and produced the video. Sanjeeda also hired a music production firm to write and compose a theme song, and to find a perfect adolescent girl and a boy to sing it. Soon we had an attractive pair whose musical delivery fit the style popular among youth in Bangladesh at the time.

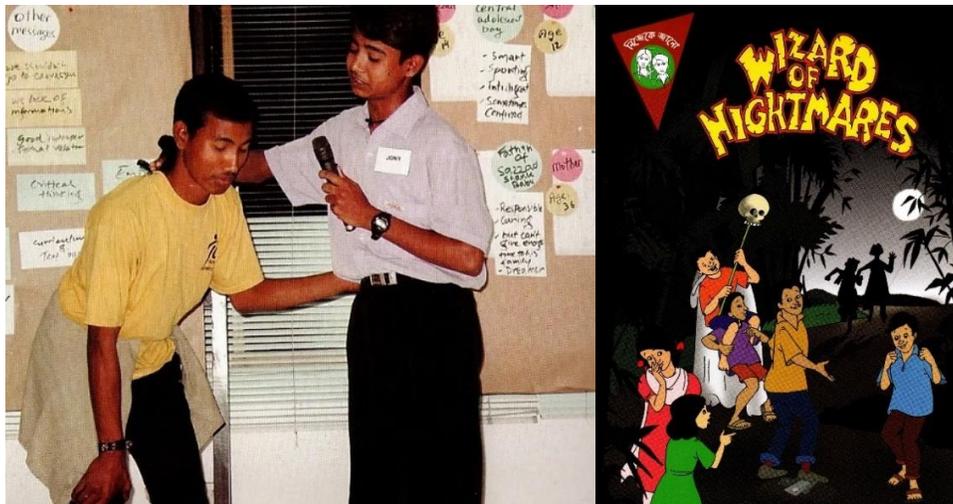


25.4 - ARH video singers – image from video

Connecting with all these people was like a coming together of the creative forces I had experienced before in Bangladesh—my “dream team.” Bangladesh is like a cake that has a foundation of ancient tribal cultures, some of which had converted to Buddhism; a center of Hindu dance, song, music, dress, and design; and a thick icing of Islam. That mixture exploded onto the screen after we produced, tested with audiences, and finalized our first ARH *Know Yourself* video, [It's My Puberty](#)(3). Pathfinder and USAID loved it. By then, Pathfinder’s global project was ending, so CCP’s global contract, HCP, kicked in to allow us to produce three more videos following the themes of the booklets.

In addition, we developed a storyline and storyboard to address boys’ anxiety concerning wet dreams. This was tested with adolescents and adults in various parts of Bangladesh. We found that those who could read were easily able to follow the comic book format, if we kept it straightforward. The results were presented, along with the overall Adolescent Communication Toolkit, during a four-day VIPP workshop outside of Dhaka. At the event, the adolescents we had invited mixed with adults from all our partners in the Adolescent Reproductive Health Working Group of Bangladesh: relevant government departments, researchers, writers, artists, and program officers from NGOs, UNICEF, and UNAIDS. It consisted of more than 30 enthusiastic and committed members who invested many hours to make sure the much needed ARH communication package was developed based on strong research findings. They gave their input on the first story and came up with draft storylines for new ones. In the end, we produced four comic books, which also included facilitators guides: 1) *Wizard of Nightmares* on wet dreams, 2) *The Circus Girl* on breast development and menstruation, 3) *Flower Boat* on emotional changes and sexual attraction, and 4) *Adventures of the Science Gang*, on dealing with peer pressure.

With Nuzhat’s help, we also developed facilitators’ guides on each theme for use with adolescents in educational workshops, along with the videos, booklets, and comic books. All these parts were packaged as the [Adolescent Communication Toolkit](#)(4). We decided to produce everything in English, in addition to Bangla, so that international partners and donors could appreciate the materials.

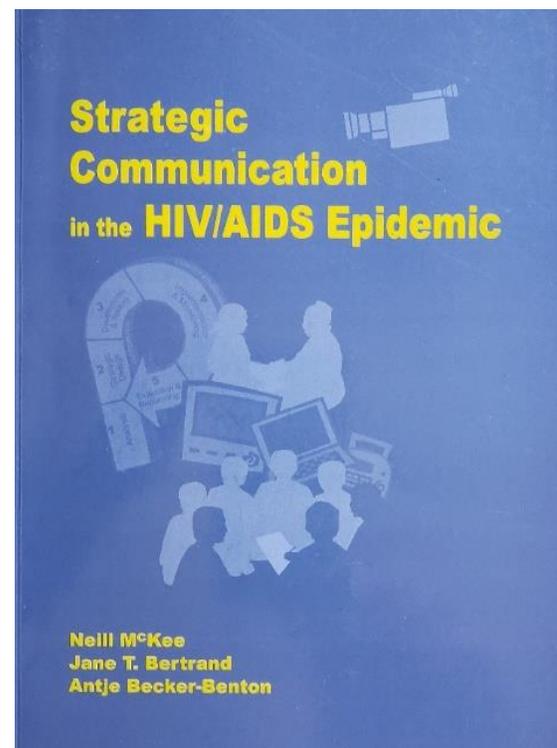


25.5 - Adolescent Bangladeshi boys give story input 25.6 – Comic book cover
Photographer unknown



25.7 – ARH Toolkit

By 2003, I was riding high working for CCP. I was back to my most creative days as a filmmaker and multimedia producer. In addition, I was reporting to Jane Bertrand, a Ph.D. in sociology and expert in international health and sustainable development. Phyllis Piotrow had retired from JHU during my first year, and Jane became our new Executive Director. We saw eye-to-eye on many things, had the same sense of humor, and along with another staff member, Antje Becker-Benton, we wrote a book on the role of communication in dealing with HIV/AIDS. [*Strategic Communication in the HIV/AIDS Epidemic*](#) (2004)⁽⁵⁾ was published by Sage Publications, a major academic publisher. It became an important resource for communicators, program designers, and educators, containing strategies and case studies for addressing almost all people at risk, as well as those who had already contracted the virus.



25.8 - My third book on communication

The book was a calculated move on our part, for the year before President Bush had launched the United States President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the U.S. Government's initiative to address the global HIV/AIDS epidemic, which still continues, providing US\$90 billion, by 2022, in cumulative funding for HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention, and research. In my humble opinion, that's the best thing George W. Bush ever did. In the same year, I joined Beth and our Quaker neighbor, Jean, to march in Washington against one of the worst things he did, the invasion of Iraq. He had already committed the U.S. to what turned out to be the unwinnable, 20-year war in Afghanistan. Thinking back to those years, I was certainly learning the ups and downs of American foreign policy.

I learned even more about those ups and downs when I returned from India and Bangladesh in early March 2004. Gary Saffitz, one of CCP's deputy directors, asked me to come

to his office. He had a pleasant but direct approach to business. With a slight smile on his face, he asked me point blank, “How would you like to go to Russia?”

I replied, “Interesting, but I’ve never done any work there or in former Soviet countries. What’s the assignment?”

“COP—Chief of Party.”

Knowing that this was a USAID-contractor term for a resident director of a project, I said, “What, me? I don’t speak Russian.”

“That’s not a problem. We’ve got great bilingual Russian staff there.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, USAID asked us to replace our COP. The original five-year project, Healthy Russia 2020, which we won in 2003, was all about social mobilization for health in general, but USAID has been ordered by the State Department to focus on HIV/AIDS—the President’s priority. We need a COP who knows all about HIV/AIDS, and that’s you.”

And so, the conversation went on. One of CCP’s largest country projects needed help, so would I step up to the plate? Gary asked me to consider it and discuss the move with Beth. I was flattered that my work, so far, had been well-regarded by my American colleagues, but I wondered if Beth would be happy with such a move after so recently settling down in the U.S. Our daughter Ruth and her fiancé Brian, had moved to San Diego, where she had begun an MFA in playwriting, and our son Derek had begun a second bachelor’s degree in law at McGill University, in Montreal. He didn’t think much of our home on the river—not a great place to visit because it was far from cafés and city life.

That evening, I surprised Beth with this offer from Gary. We talked it through and I was surprised that she wasn’t so negative about such a move. Perhaps it was that fact that I wouldn’t be traveling so much, just making trips within Russia, rather than leaving her by herself for weeks at a time in this isolated riverside house. Neither of us had seen Russia nor much of Europe, so that was another plus. Beth had been creating a major piece of illustrated calligraphy, titled *Assault of Angels*, on a poem of the same title by Michael Roberts (1902-1948), a British teacher and broadcaster. It ends with these great lines:

And a time comes when a man is afraid to grow,
A time comes when the house is comfortable and narrow.
A time when the spirit of life contracts.
Angels are at your door: admit them, now.

We should forgive Roberts for his use of typical male-dominated gender language of his era. The challenge in the poem can now be understood to apply to women too, or to people with any gender identity, for that matter. It’s not that Beth needed any challenge. She was creating a nine-page, 70-pound (32 kg), accordion-fold book, 22 inches wide, 37 inches high, and 10 inches deep (56w x 94h x 25d cm). It opens to 33 feet (10 meters) in length when all pages are displayed.



25.9 - A page from Beth's large book

The problem was the *Assault of Angels* had assaulted her. She thought that she had developed an allergy to the bark cloth she brought from Uganda, which she used on the cover and frame of each page. It resulted in a large red rash on the left side of her face, running down her neck to her upper torso. She found a special treatment called Bicom Bioresonance therapy, in Washington, D.C., which a medical doctor was doing “under the table” because it was only legal for treatment of animals in the US, whereas it was widely used in Europe, including Russia, to treat humans. (More on this in the next chapter.)

We decided to take on this next challenge. I was worried that my *Know Yourself* creation in Bangladesh would be left in the lurch. UNICEF had agreed to co-fund and help to popularize it. The UNICEF Representative, my friend Morten Giersing, wasn't happy when I told him I would be going to Russia. But we found a solution. Nuzhat Shahzadi would soon be ending her term as Meena coordinator in Kathmandu, and didn't have another UNICEF post lined up. Morten said he would only go ahead with the deal if CCP would hire Nuzhat to take my place. Nuzhat agreed, but only if she could be hired on an American salary and benefits, and be based in Baltimore.

So, in April 2004, I was off to Moscow. Beth would stay behind to rent out our house, pack, and follow me there in June.

26. Russia: Life and Work in Our Last Overseas Posting

I would wake early, have my first cup of coffee and some toast. From the vantage point in my furnished apartment on the 5th floor of Naberezhnaya 3 Tarasa Shevchenko, Moscow, I could see the first sign of early May sunlight breaking through the gloom of winter. The apartment seemed hollow without Beth and her artistic paraphernalia, not due until the end of the month. At one time, I guessed the same space housed two Russian families, or more. With privatization of such properties starting in the 1990s, restructuring began—tearing down a center wall. The combined larger apartment made a great base for us: a master bedroom, a study for me and a space for Beth’s studio, both of which could be converted to guest bedrooms. It even had a modern open space kitchen, dining and sitting room. I wondered what happened to the families who once lived here. Did they profit or lose with the restructuring of the Russian economy, *Perestroika*—a vague 1980s term for a policy that was originally only intended to bring about modest changes so communism would work more effectively for Soviet citizens.



26.1 - Our gloomy apartment building in winter - Photo by Neill McKee

Many things had not yet changed by 2004. Most days I had to open the apartment windows to let out some of the excess heat pushed up from a large underground hot water radiation system, baking all the apartment buildings in our complex from heat generated by a huge oil-fired factory about a mile away. I was told it wouldn’t be shut off until late May, and then would be turned on again in late September—centralized planning still in effect.

I would exit my apartment, avoid the small elevator which often didn’t work, and skip down the stairs instead. It was a short walk from the ugly brown metal exit door to the Ulitsa Borodinskiy Bridge across the Moscow River. As I crossed it, I would always see the imposing skyscraper housing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one of Stalin’s Seven Sisters—a beauty or a

beast? That's in the eye of the beholder, I suppose. To me its spires looked sinister and reminded me of the oppression suffered by Soviet citizens throughout that dictator's reign.

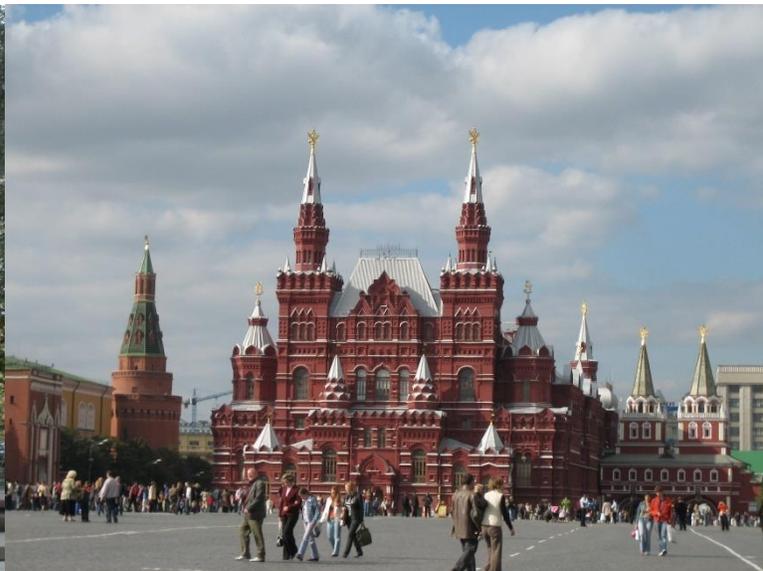
Another choice I had was to walk to Kievskaya train station, where I could take the Moscow Metro most of the way to the office. I loved the artistry and ornateness of Moscow's metro stations, each one different. This compensated for the gloomy faces I would encounter on the old-fashioned, utilitarian metro cars—everyone staring straight ahead, without making eye contact. Such indifference—or courtesy?—was sometimes broken by a few well-behaved feral dogs that would go down the steep escalators and enter open metro car doors, then exit at exactly the station of their intended destination—possibly for an expected treat from a street vendor. It must be that each station also had a particular smell we humans couldn't detect. The sight of these canine friends would make many passengers smile. The other great thing about the metro and Russian train system is that it was nearly always on time, like a fine-tuned clock.

However, most mornings, I would leave early enough to take a 45-minute fast walk down Arbat Street, a narrow pedestrian-only way to the office. The street had been constructed in the 15th century, but in 1812 Napoleon's army set fire to most of the buildings on it, before ordering a westward retreat, only to be defeated by the Russian winter. It was restored to become the home of artists, academics, minor nobles, and then high-ranking officials during the Soviet era. Now I found it lined with coffee shops, restaurants, clothing stores, tourist shops, and gambling parlors.

I usually stopped for a cappuccino at the café in the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, only a block from my office. With warmer weather, I could walk from the office to the café and sit outside to have lunch, read the English language *Moscow Times*, and listen to various students practice their string and wind instruments, causing a pleasant cacophony of classical music to filter out of the Conservatory's open windows, through the leaves and around the statue of the great composer. From the café and my office, it was only a short walk to Red Square and the Kremlin. It did not escape me that my new job was located near the center of Russian history and power.



26.2 - Tchaikovsky Conservatory



26.3 Kremlin, Red Square

Photos by Neill McKee

CCP had signed an office lease for a wing of rooms inside a large ugly green building on Gazetny Lane. It belonged to the Institute for the Economy in Transition, a non-profit founded and owned by Yegor Timurovich Gaidar, the economist who had engineered “Shock Therapy” to Russians in the 1990s. For a brief time in 1992, he had also been Prime Minister. But by 2004, he was despised by a good percentage of Russians, as were Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, former Presidents. The hyper-inflation of Gaidar’s policies had hit them hard in their pocket books and morale. Just before I arrived, Vladimir Putin had won a second term as President, after rigging the election and taking control of most television stations through his oligarchs. At the time, I was reading *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia* (2002) by David E. Hoffman(1), and slowly coming to understand what made this country tick. The Russian oil and gas industry was booming.

By May, I was deep into reformulating our Healthy Russia 2020 project with my 16 Russian staff members. Over half of them could speak English fairly well. I knew I’d never get my tongue around the complicated cases and genders of Russian nouns and adjectives, or its verb conjugations, in order to work in the language. I was told there are 25 different ways to say “to go” in Russian, depending if it’s by foot, by vehicle one way-one time, multi-directional, multi-temporal, or whether there is other parallel action in the same sentence. I speculated that perhaps it is necessary because the country is so big. In the olden days during winter, you had to be specific about directions when you were going places, or you could get lost and would freeze to death before being found.

At most, I learned enough Russian to be able to greet people, ask for directions and order meals. The project had just over three years to go, so my time to learn the language was limited. My staff were well-educated in a variety of fields such as mathematics, science, medicine, social science, accounting, office management, IT, and they were proud of it. Some of them could speak allegorically, infusing references to Russian literature in sentences. One was a medical doctor by the name of Irina, who had come from the institute guiding the country on maternal and infant care. My counterpart, Yelena, was a young Russian woman with a doctorate in sociology. The only problem was, none of them had worked in HIV/AIDS and they were doubtful about the change in direction of the project, as demanded by the U.S. Government. Yelena had also been appointed as the Executive Director of the Healthy Russia Foundation (HRF), a Russian-registered NGO, which CCP had set up as a parallel organization with the aim of raising additional funds from Russian, European, and American sources to expand the health communication work we did, and ensure its continuance after the project ended.

For the first few months, I had to get used to working in this new environment. I enjoyed interacting with my lively Russian staff and meeting Russian health counterparts in their offices and at meetings. My most demanding task was dealing with the U.S. Embassy. I had to visit it frequently, which always required being searched and scanned by Russian guards overseen by a U.S. Marine holding a semi-automatic rifle. The U.S. Embassy is located in a compound approximately one mile square (1.6 by 1.6 km) with high walls. Many Americans lived within the walls in typical row houses, not unlike those you could find in any suburban neighborhood in the U.S. They had their own shopping facilities and social clubs, so they didn’t have to meet many Russians other than those they worked with, unless they went outside to shop or go sightseeing. To me, this seemed to be an unfortunate set up, left over from the Cold War, and was surely bad for American-Russian relations.

The Russian woman from USAID who had been put in charge of our project, then called our CTO, or Cognizant Technical Officer, made many *ad hoc* demands, in addition to our required monthly report on program progress and expenditures. She continued to call my staff

directly and was often impolite or sarcastic with them. Early during my time in Russia, she accompanied me and some of my staff to Ivanovo Region, not far from Moscow, to help us set up our new program there. This required many meetings and visits to health facilities. Then at 4:00 pm there was the necessary get-together with the Governor of the region to consume a huge spread of salads, pickles, breads, cheeses, cold cuts, fruits, and sweets, while participating in the delivery of speeches—each time raising small glasses of vodka in toasts to our cooperation. After the Ivanovo visit, my staff told me our CTO had been badmouthing me in Russian from the backseat of our car—how could I understand anything? When I heard this, I thought, *How dumb was she to think her derisions would not be reported to me?*

The next day, I called her American boss at USAID to deliver an ultimatum, “Get her off our case or I will resign and leave Russia.”

That worked. For the rest of my stay we reported to Sylva Etian, an Armenian American with emotional intelligence and a great sense of humor. She supported us and our mission. American embassy staff were given up to a year to learn Russian before coming to the country, and Sylva was practically fluent. She insisted on living outside of the embassy compound so she could improve her Russian and make Russian friends. I respected her for that.



26.4 - Sylva Etian, on the left, hamming it up with a friend - Photo by Neill McKee

Meanwhile, Beth had shipped some of our favorite furniture, her vital studio equipment and supplies, and I was finding it a struggle getting these through customs. Anna, my office manager, took me through the process. There were many steps to follow and I had to be present at the notary’s office several times to sign papers. In Canada and the U.S., a notary public is a respected citizen who certifies signatures, but the Russian notary I met was a powerful lawyer and overlord of many lesser lawyers and legal assistants. He sat in a higher chair above them and was very demanding and autocratic, instilling a tone of fear throughout the office. His signature was the final one on any document, and it ensured that he had followed Russia’s codified law, which is ever-changing with each act of the Duma—the Russian parliament.

Office regulations also demanded strict steps to be followed. If I signed a travel authority for a staff member, I had to also sign an ordinance which certified I signed the travel authority. I asked too many questions and joked about procedures, and my staff learned to laugh with me about such antiquated systems. Two months after I arrived, I discovered I had been working illegally without a proper work permit. No one had informed me of that necessity. I had to hire a

law firm to deal with the large number of legal and bureaucratic steps involved in rectifying this. It even involved flying to London and re-entering Russia. At times, I felt like a blind man running through a maze! Sometimes I wondered, *Had I put myself in jeopardy by taking this job, caught between the American and Russian systems?*

It was lonely in my apartment at night. In the evenings, I would usually listen to a very “switched-on” Moscow jazz station, cook something basic, and drink a little Moldovan wine, then take a hot bath in the jacuzzi the landlord had installed when he bought the place. I wasn’t suffering, but was so glad to see Beth when she finally arrived at the end of May. We can’t recall, but probably we celebrated by having dinner at the modern hotel, shopping, and dining plaza, just down the bank of the Moscow River. It also contained an English language cinema where you could buy wine to drink, while eating popcorn during the movie—very civilized. We could also easily walk across the bridge to a Scandinavian grocery store and shopping complex with just about everything, and more restaurant choices—not a hardship posting at all. Beth could see that her life here was going to be very different, compared to our lonely place in Maryland. She quickly got into visiting Russian markets and trying to converse in Russian. She had started to study the language in Maryland, using the Pimsleur method on CDs borrowed from her library, and had ordered the program for our use in Russia.

The other immediate benefit for Beth in coming to Russia was the continuation of treatment for the rash caused by work on her calligraphic book, *Assault of Angels*. She had found a German doctor online, who worked in a clinic owned by Dr. Irina, a Russian doctor. (I wondered, *Are they all called Irina?*). This Dr. Irina practiced what Beth was looking for, [Bicom Bioresonance therapy](#). The method was founded in Germany in the 1970s, and now is used throughout Europe and other countries around the world, including Canada. It regulates the patterns of electrical energy in our bodies with what we eat or touch. Electrical energy, in turn, regulates the chemical interactions in our bodies, and I figured, American pharmaceutical companies want to keep a monopoly on that, so the technology remains illegal for treatment of humans in the U.S., as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter.



26.5 - Dr. Irina

26.6 - Bicom Bioresonance therapy machine

Photos by Neill McKee

Dr. Irina had great expertise in the method, and through some translation and Beth's growing Russian skills, she eventually managed to get rid of all of her rash and her food allergies. She ended up bringing Dr. Irina all her art supplies, and the good doctor found that the glue she was using was a greater problem than the bark cloth. The treatment worked.



26.6 and 26.7 - Beth before and after Bicom treatment, at the Bolshoi Theatre
Photos by Neill McKee

I continued to love my early-morning walks down Arbat Street to the office, now listening to Pimsleur Russian language lessons on my CD player. When I reached the café at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, I would stop to have my usual cappuccino and transcribe the sentences I had just learned in Cyrillic alphabet. I had hired a middle-age teacher, Anastasia, who I would meet at the café two or three times a week to correct my transcriptions and teach me conversational Russia. Mostly, we talked about what was happening in the country and in the world. Until the mid-1990s, she had a job, which she thought was for life, in a government language institute. It had been abolished due to *Perestroika* and she was bitter about that. Now she had to market herself as a freelancer and placate different clients, like me, to earn a living.

In November 2004, when the democratic Orange Revolution broke out in Ukraine, she scoffed at it, saying, "My father is a Russian speaker from eastern Ukraine. Ukraine is part of Russia."

I said, "But most Ukrainians have a different language and culture. Some speak Russian too."

Anastasia insisted, "Ukraine simply means 'corner' or 'borderland' in Russian. They are not a separate people."

I laughed, "Tell that to my Ukrainian-Canadian friends back home." My friends' mother had escaped from their home country due to Stalin's starvation of millions of Ukrainians, so I didn't take Anastasia's words too seriously.

I didn't want to get into talking about Stalin. By 2004, many Russians were denying his crimes and bemoaning the death of the Soviet Union. I had finished reading *Russia and the*

Russians: A History (2001)(2), by Geoffrey Hosking. I was well aware of the historical union of the Slavs and the Rus Vikings along the Dnieper River, in present day Ukraine, and that beginning over a thousand years ago, part of the population shifted northeast to Suzdal and then settled along the Moscow River. I knew that people, their cultures, and their languages evolve. In fact, it wasn't until writing this book when I read *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* by Serhii Plokhy(3) that I realized how wrong my Russian teacher was. One way of looking at it, is that Russia was really an off-shoot of Ukraine.

A good deal of our work on HIV/AIDS was carried out by program partners, both US and Russian: an in-school and peer education curriculum for youth; advocacy networks; involving Russian policy makers in economic modeling on the projected long-term cost of HIV/AIDS to Russian society and the cost-effectiveness of various interventions; and training of medical professionals on how to counsel patients, as well as those most at risk of contracting HIV. I found the latter work interesting because the typical Russian method of dealing with these people was to lecture them—a blame the victim approach. Counseling was not part of the menu of skills for most medical doctors. We developed a set of videos showing the wrong way and then the right way of interacting with patients, plus manuals on counseling.

We also produced a video drama titled *Nastya's Diary*(4). It portrayed a high school boy who fears he may have contracted HIV and his struggle to get tested. The story includes his relationship with his supportive girlfriend, Nastya, and the stigma and discrimination felt by affected people. I was only the executive producer, approving budgets and making small changes to the shooting script, but when I finally saw the end result, I was surprised with the quality of the acting and the whole production.



26.8 - Nastya with her boyfriend, Nikita – image from video

My staff and I did put together a good program in the five regions USAID wanted us to work in. Besides Ivanovo region, we had to travel to St. Petersburg (Leningrad Region), Saratov, Orenburg, and Irkutsk on Lake Baikal in Siberia, bordering Mongolia. Russia is spread out over 11 time zones, and Irkutsk, five time zones from Moscow, is as far as I went. I enjoyed traveling with my staff and having more time to talk in the evenings at dinner, so I could learn more about their hopes and fears for the future.

I began to bond with them early in my stay in Russia when Yelena, Dr. Irina and I, together with our IT man, Dmitry, who went by the nickname “Dima,” attended an important conference hosted by Russia’s Federal AIDS Center. It was held in Suzdal, an historic Russian city about three hours by road northwest of Moscow. The city dates back to around 1000 C.E. and functioned as the capital at a time when Moscow was still a cluster of cowsheds. We were occupied by the proceedings, and I saw little of Suzdal, except for an evening walk with Dima, who had just visited the place on his vacation. He was able to relate some of the history in his limited English. As we walked, the smell of autumn in the air brought back my boyhood memories, for the climate was much like Canada.

Moscow and St. Petersburg had been transformed into modern cities, but the Suzdal conference center was an old Soviet-style tourist hotel, where the ladies at the reception desk greeted us with a good deal of disdain—customers disturbing their otherwise peaceful existence. I had seen this attitude in Prague in 1990, (see Chapter 21) but it was rather shocking to see it in a Russian tourist town 15 years after the Berlin Wall had fallen. I had lunch in the hotel cafeteria with a Russian colleague, where the ladies were more customer-oriented, giving out huge quantities of food: soup and *blini* (dumplings with meat or cottage cheese). But when I went to pay, the cashier added the cost of all the items on a very worn abacus, before transferring the information to the cash register, where the sum was registered legally.

At that conference, a lot of the data came together on the growing threat of HIV/AIDS to Russians, if they didn’t do more about it. It wasn’t just drug addicts and sex workers who were at risk, and my staff became more interested. There were many overlapping risks to subsectors of society, such as spouses and children of addicts and sex workers, men who have sex with men, adolescents and young adults, members of uniformed services, internal and external immigrants, and factory workers.

Besides our growing mutual understanding of HIV/AIDS in Russia, I bonded with my staff in another way on this trip. We had taken a long-distance taxi service from Moscow to Suzdal. I’d decided we didn’t need to waste money on a full-time office car and driver. The center of Moscow was usually jammed with cars on the roads and cars parked in every direction and space possible, including sidewalks, where “car minders” connected to the traffic police, collected “facilitation fees” without receipts.

We had arranged for the same taxi company to pick us up in Suzdal on Friday afternoon, at the end of the conference. While waiting, we received a call from Alex the driver, telling us that his car had some problems but he was on the way. My staff proposed we take a Suzdal taxi to Moscow at the cost of 4,000 rubles (US\$ 133.00). The only problem was, the Suzdal taxi driver couldn’t provide a proper receipt and Russian accounting systems are strict. So, I proposed we take a taxi to nearby Vladimir, to connect with Alex. Reaching Vladimir, we waited for him. He kept informing us by cell phone that he was very close, then that he was lost. We were in the process of hiring another taxi when Alex finally showed up in his old Opel. So, we transferred our luggage to his car.

A few minutes into heavy traffic, Alex's ancient Opel stalled. It appeared to me a fuel pump problem and I told my staff that we would not make it to Moscow with this car—best to get a different taxi from Vladimir. Yelena asked Alex if he was sure we could make it and his answer in Russian was *absolutno* (absolutely)—a word that had become common parlance in Russia too, and which I absolutely mistrust to this day, for I believe there are few things that fit such a category in human experience. But my decision-making power had already been put into question for choosing to go with Alex, so we continued.

Alex pumped the gas pedal furiously, a technique which went against all my mechanical training as a youth, but surprisingly got the engine going again. Then, 30 minutes later, the car stalled once more. Alex cursed and jumped out, blocking heavy traffic. In an instant, a car from behind drove around us and backed up in front of the Opel. The driver of that car threw out a rope, which Alex fastened on his front bumper, before jumping behind the steering wheel. Moving forward, the Opel started immediately, but the tow car kept pulling us, and Alex had to brake and nudge it to the right shoulder, cursing more loudly now, while keeping his foot on the gas to prevent further stalling. Somehow he managed to rein in our energetic helpers. Suddenly, I saw a man jump out of the pull car to detach the rope, while Alex kept cursing. He pulled our car away without even a glance or a nod of thanks. When did he pay them? I hadn't noticed.

I asked for a quick clarification from my colleagues in the back seat, "So there are lots of guys out there in the traffic with tow ropes, looking to earn a few rubles?"

I received the typical Russian answer, *konieshna*—of course.

Reaching the open road, I began to gain more confidence in Alex's ability to negotiate the brake and the gas pedal at the same time. I could feel all of Alex's subtle moves to keep the engine alive at stoplights, just as I had done with my old jalopies in my teens. We advanced on Moscow for the next 80 minutes. Alex was so confident that he asked for permission to smoke, which I denied him.

However, on the outskirts of Moscow we had to drop off Irina to meet a friend, who would take her home more directly, rather than into the center of the clogged city. We reached the designated crossroads (arranged by constant mobile phone chatter, which I am proud to say I more or less understood), passing the occasional head-on collision and great confusion. I offered to keep my foot on the gas while he helped Irina transfer her luggage to her friend's car, but Alex said with absolute confidence that that would not be necessary.

Dima and I visited the bushes behind a nearby bus stop, as was the custom along roads in Russia. Then we explored a somewhat battered cement sculpture in a dark spot a few meters ahead—two large animals that looked like something between moose and reindeer with no antlers, bowing down to the highway, non-majestically.

We returned to the relative warmth of the Opel and speculated about the animals' scientific and common names. Dima proposed different solutions to the puzzle, in Russian, until Yelena, who had not gone to look at the statue and admitted ignorance of all zoology, pronounced with absolute certainty that the statue was of a mother "Rus-Moose" (a *Los* in Russian), and its calf. I assured Yelena I would be able to sleep better that night with such knowledge locked in my brain. I actually thought that maybe the statue had been placed there in memory of some large animals, or lover of large animals, who had died in a traffic accident on the spot, but there were none of the usual flowers indicating a place of death. At least we had a few moments of comic relief while Alex was delivering Irina, and having a quick smoke.

While we were laughing, I noticed the engine had stopped. I turned off the ignition to save on the battery. Alex returned and asked a question which literally means in Russian, "It, by itself."

Dima confirmed, “Yes, it, by itself,” meaning we had not been dumb enough to turn off the engine.

Then Alex lunged into two long tries at starting the car, pumping even more furiously now, almost as if that action in itself would propel us forward to Moscow. Finally, he stopped, cursed, and slammed his glasses on the dash board. I looked to see if they were broken, but apparently they were strong enough to withstand many past tirades like this. There were some quick exchanges between Alex and Dima, and I soon found myself outside, pushing the car up a slight incline. I felt this attempt to start the heavy Opel would be useless, but decided I had better show some team spirit. Two attempts and we failed. Alex steered the car off the busy highway, leaving the back end sticking out as a challenge to oncoming traffic. This seemed to be the custom when you have a breakdown on Russian roads.

So, what now? Another tow? I naturally thought. Standing on the road, I stuck my hand out, waving at drivers to help us. No success. Dima joined me and stuck his hand out using a different motion. In a minute, a fancy looking car pulled to a stop on the right lane behind us, blocking the oncoming trucks and cars. A few quick negotiations and I found myself helping to switch our belongings to a “gypsy cab” or unofficial taxi service offered by car owners who just want to make a few rubles—only 400 rubles (US\$ 13.00) to get to the center of Moscow, we were told. Yelena and Dima started to negotiate our departure with Alex, who actually wanted us to sign the receipt for his service. I told them, “No, do not do that.” As we departed, I looked back to see Alex throwing a cherished cigarette to the ground with the loudest of all curses. I think I saw the “Rus-Moses” turn to look his way as we took off toward Moscow.

And did we take off! Russian drivers are noted for their love of speed and weaving through tight spaces. The traffic on this highway, a main artery to and from Moscow, had vastly outgrown the road itself. In most places there were no barriers or islands between on-coming traffic—just a double white line to separate cars speeding towards each other in the opposite direction. I turned to ask my colleagues, “So there are many drivers out here looking to make a few rubles, as illegal taxis?”

They answered in harmony, *Konieshna*.

It seemed to be an honor in Russia to sit in the front passenger seat, which my staff granted me. I had buckled up immediately, keeping my eyes on the road. Occasionally, I looked down at Victor’s dashboard to see his speed and then quickly shifted my eyes to four plastic icons—the Russian Orthodox version of Christ the Savior.

But Victor was victorious. We dropped off Yelena at a place beside the highway so she could find another gypsy cab home, more directly, but it was decided, wisely, that Dima should stay with me. In only a few fast-moving minutes, we pulled into the road beside my apartment building. I had arrived home from Suzdal six hours after setting off on our journey. At least I lived to tell this tale and to continue my adventures in this fast-moving land.

Also, because of this experience, I felt justified in not buying a car, and my pronouncements to many were correct—the chances of injury or death on Russian highways are much greater than from a terrorist strike on the Moscow Metro—absolutely.

27. Our Final Period in Russia and Changes Thereafter

Beth also worked on HIV/AIDS during her time in Moscow. She decided to do an artistic project based on a press release that contained a speech delivered by Stephen Lewis, a Canadian politician, public speaker, broadcaster, diplomat, and former Deputy Director of UNICEF. His speech on the impact of HIV/AIDS on women and girls was delivered at the University of Pennsylvania's Summit on Global Health Issues in Women's Health, in Philadelphia, on April 26, 2005. Lewis's speech had an engaging title, "The World is off its Rocker When it Comes to Women," and Beth engaged her full calligraphic and artistic skills in creating this work, weaving highlights of the speech together with the words of the poem, *Bread and Roses*, by James Cunningham, popularized in the protest song by Judy Collins, in 1976. It begins:

As we go marching, marching,
In the beauty of the day
A million darkened kitchens
A thousand mill lofts gray

Are touched with all the radiance
That a sudden sun discloses
For the people hear us singing
Bread and roses, bread and roses

Beth also added the words of a fugue by Sarah Robins—the first two stanzas below:

Women are on their way
to the new country. The men watch
from high office windows
while the women go.
They do not get very far
in a day. You can still see them
from high office windows.

Women are on their way
to the new country. They are taking
it all with them: rugs,
pianos, children. Or they are leaving
it all behind them: cats,
plants, children.
They do not get very far in a day.

Complicated artwork, I thought, but then the impact of HIV/AIDS is complex, and in 2005, the world's attention was needed on women and girls, like never before, because they were bearing the brunt of the epidemic. Beth titled her work, *For Immediate Release*. It became a multipage accordion-fold book, decorated with colorful cut-outs she made of women and children from every part of the world, marching, marching. It eventually evolved into a project for her when we returned home. She made poster kits for women's groups in the U.S. and Canada to get together and complete by making their own marching women and girls

from magazine clippings, and through this activity, selling the posters to raise funds for the Stephen Lewis Foundation.



27.1 and 27-2 – Pages of *For Immediate Release* by Elizabeth McKee

In Moscow, Beth joined international women’s groups and learned Russian better than I did by interacting with people on the street, and with *babushkas* (old women or grandmothers) and other sellers in markets. She also became an unofficial tour guide for the many friends and relatives who visited us in Russia. She would usher them around Moscow and take them north to St. Petersburg, especially during its almost 24-hour “White Nights” of summer. She tried to make each tour different so she would learn more about Russia’s art. I found meandering through art galleries and museums, just like shopping, painful for my back, and, at any rate, seldom had the time to join these tours.

I did take a train to St. Petersburg on business and for pleasure a few times with Beth and visitors. I enjoyed watching the countryside from train windows—vast forests and fields crossed by rivers and dotted with impoverished villages, unpainted houses, sheds, and barns. Like many visitors, I wondered, *How did this country beat the Americans into space?* Then, I’d observe carefully as our train entered the bleak high-rise landscape of the city, now full of crime, violence, and disappointed youth. The transition from Communism still held little promise for many of them.

On one trip with Beth, my visiting sister, Karen, and brother-in-law, Ed, I gained a little experience in dealing with the underworld of St. Petersburg. We were in a hurry, so we stopped at a McDonald’s to eat—a surprisingly popular food outlet for Russians by then. The women

went to the ladies' washroom and I left Ed in charge of my bag without asking him to guard it, and headed to the men's. While I was gone, a man distracted Ed by speaking to him in Russian and holding a Russian newspaper in front of his face, while another man must have stolen my bag for when I returned, it was missing. It had contained the keys to our apartment, my new digital camera, and my precious Russian notebook, with all my transcriptions in Cyrillic.

With my limited Russian, I alerted the manager, who called the police. A policeman arrived on the spot fairly quickly and I tried to describe my problem. I didn't care about the camera, but was worried about the keys because our address was on the bag. Most of all, I bemoaned the fact my precious notebook, which contained hundreds of hours of work, was gone. *Probably the thieves threw it into a garbage bin*, I thought.

In the presence of the manager and the policeman, I called our landlord in Moscow, who spoke good English, to warn him about the keys and describe my predicament. He asked me to give my cell phone to the policeman and, after some discussion, I was told to wait in the restaurant until 2 pm. I sent off my companions to continue with the planned sightseeing, and I waited. Surprisingly, the policeman did come back on time to lead me to a small police station, where I met his boss and a man they said was an undercover policeman. They had recovered my bag, without the camera, but much to my delight, the keys and notebook were inside. I thanked the two fellows profusely, and gave them 500 rubles (US\$ 16.60) each, for their great service, knowing full-well I was speaking to one of the thieves and his co-conspirators. I had learned not to leave a bag anywhere with anyone, and that it was easy for the police in Russia to find thieves because they were often part of the same network.

As the months passed, I became quite engaged with Russia and loved to work and celebrate with my staff. Besides the daily interaction with them, occasionally I had to attend meetings with the



27.3 – Celebrating our success with my Russian staff – Photographer unknown



27.4 - Celebrating with Yelena - Photographer unknown

Board of Governors of the HRF, our foundation—really just an NGO, which is an alien term in Russia. During the Soviet era, people considered health services to be the responsibility of the government and they remained passive, not taking responsibility for their own health. Services became underfunded and fell apart, starting in the 1970s, and declined rapidly after the Soviet Union ended. The HRF was supposed to develop partnerships between government, the private sector, and civil society, to help rebuild and improve the health of Russians—a challenging task.

In 1990, [the life expectancy of Russians was only 69 years, but by 2005, it had dropped to 65 years\(1\)](#), and [male life expectancy was only about 58 years\(2\)](#). Excessive alcohol consumption and smoking were probably the main direct causes, but acute psychosocial stress and declining well-being were underlying these behaviors during transition to the market economy. The HRF board particularly wanted us to continue to focus on youth, which I agreed with—probably the only sector of the population where there was hope for change. I felt privileged to be interacting with these well-educated, thoughtful people, even if it was mainly through translation. Working with a cosmonaut and an Olympic champion was something to write home about.

Healthy Russia Foundation's Board of Governors

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Andrei Vavra, Senior Aide to President Putin

Tatiana Troubinova, Head of Public Interface Department, Administration of the President of the Russian Federation

USAID pushed us to hire a senior Russian figure to become the overall head of the foundation. I can't recall how we found him, but a man by the name of Gerasimov was hired. He had an excellent resumé: experience in public health issues, strong negotiating skills, good contacts with government officials and political leaders, as well as international donors. On his resumé he also stated that he was a "State Adviser, Class 3." I wondered what that meant, *Was he a Federal Security Bureau (FSB) agent?* By the end of the Soviet Union, there were hundreds of thousands of KGB secret police embedded in every department and organization, each sending huge amounts of data back to headquarters, where little of it was analyzed. Did this information gathering continue under Putin? Probably, but what would they make of our rather innocent objectives and activities?

Gerasimov spent about six months traveling around the city and to Russian regions, holding private talks with government officials and Russian businessmen, trying to drum up funding for the foundation. He couldn't speak English, so I could only talk to him with one of my staff acting as interpreter. In the end, he never raised a *kopek*. I asked him to present what he had found to the Board, and, with help from my staff, he created a long meandering PowerPoint presentation that ended on a pair of empty work boots with the laces bound together—indicating "my hands are tied." We had timed his presentation to be followed by Yelena's on the dwindling foundation's budget (separate from the project's money), ending with the fact that we needed to make some cuts. There was a brief discussion in Russian, and then I chimed in on cue with the need for *perestroika* (restructuring) and everyone started saying, "*Da, da, perestroika!*" The Board chair turned to look at Gerasimov and he nodded his head, smiling and agreeing he had to resign. And that was the end of his short career with us. I felt that I had really become a Russian bureaucrat, playing the game just right.

Following Gerasimov's failure, and during my last year in Russia, I put more effort into raising money for the HRF. Yelena and I made calls on many business leaders, and had some success. But the greatest collaboration we won was a partnership with the American health and pharmaceutical company, Johnson & Johnson (J&J), for expanding training of Russian health care providers on HIV/AIDS counseling skills, using the package we had already created. We set up a team of trainers from Russia's Federal AIDS Centre, the World Health Organization, and Moscow State University. I have to admit that my connection with an American friend based in J&J's European headquarters in Belgium, made all the difference. The old saying proved true again: "It's not what you know, but who you know."

Our other visible achievement of my last year in Russia was our production of a dramatic film of a fictional pop star and his beautiful female vocal lead returning to the small depressed Russian city, where he had grown up. The script called for him to interact with disgruntled and rebellious youth, who smoked and drank. Peer pressure was also leading them to get involved in drugs and unprotected sex. The stars were trying to break down stereotypes about rock stars and

promote healthy living. Once again, I could only act as the executive producer, discussing and approving the script and the budget. But when my staff brought the first cut back to me, I was overwhelmed with the quality of the production. The acting was superb and was infused with thematic musical numbers by the pop star, his attractive female co-star, and their band. Besides the film, the producers cut a CD of all the musical numbers in the film, to be played on radio stations. This matched well with the in-school and peer education programs we were expanding across Russia. We made a version with English subtitles, titling it *Life Themes* (3), so it could be appreciated by potential donors, who might help to fund and expand the work of the HRF. In fact, before I left Russia, our work stretched as far as Vladivostok and the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Far East, the latter being 10 time zones from Moscow.



27.5 to 27.8 – Images from *Life Themes* video

Our film “hit the mark”—an entertainment education approach, which would help to counter the growing destructive youth culture in the country. But at the same time, Vladimir Putin’s party, United Russia, had rallied a youth wing, the Young Guard, which was gaining ground across Russia—a counterforce to western youth culture, advocating for conservative social values and allegiance to the Kremlin. The Orthodox Church, a very conservative body, had also gained much political influence. We had been asked by USAID to work with them on HIV/AIDS, but that proved to be almost impossible, for its main approach was to blame the victim. As I wound up my time in Russia, I could see these strong counterforces butting up against each other, with the youth of Russia smashed in the middle.

In April 2007, at the end of my third year in Moscow, I felt that I had helped to give new direction to the project and the HRF, and my presence was eating up a huge portion of our budget. I, with the help of more junior Baltimore staff, could oversee developments from afar, and with occasional visits. USAID agreed. I communicated this to Gary Saffitz and Jane

Bertrand, CCP's Executive Director, and got a surprising reply through a phone call. Jane wanted to propose my name to USAID, Washington, as the project director for our bid for the next five-year global health and development communication project. I was flattered by this offer and agreed. I knew I'd be working closely with Jane, Gary, and others, who could give me good guidance on dealing with Washington. I recalled how unsure I had been in entering this American work world in 2001, and here they were asking me to lead their largest project, which funded many positions in Baltimore and around the world—a huge responsibility.

We shipped most of our things home and Beth left in May to visit family. I rented a small apartment and, in June, headed to Baltimore to defend our bid for the next big project. After our presentation, I felt pretty good. Then I returned to Moscow to wind up my work there.

In July, I said goodbye to all my colleagues and friends in Russia and I flew back to be with Beth in Maryland, where she had reclaimed our house on the Magothy River. Then, we took a long-needed August vacation in Canada. When I returned to work in September, I learned that CCP had lost the bid. Jane assured me that they had received high marks for proposed leadership of the project, which made me feel better, but that there was disagreement with our proposed conceptual framework and other issues. I had had little input on those elements from Moscow. Jane figured that, after 25 years, USAID just wanted a new contractor. The new project went to the Academy for Educational Development (AED), in Washington D.C.

I only returned to Russia once, to facilitate a staff retreat, using VIPP. During the time I was based in Russia, I co-authored [a new VIPP manual](#)(4) with Timmi Tillmann, Maruja Salas, and Nuzhat Shahzadi—a coproduction of UNICEF, Bangladesh and Southbound Publications, which helps to keep VIPP alive today. Tillmann and Salas have remained continual disseminators of VIPP methods for over 30 years, reinforced by many we trained.

I had trained my Russian staff and some partners in this participatory methodology, so we “VIPPed” the staff retreat, coming up with their strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities, in a visual way. I saw it as a team-building exercise, but I have to admit VIPP methods were the antithesis of the usual Russian way. At the end of the retreat, they organized a paintball war in a forested area. We divided into two teams and shot the hell out of each other for a couple of hours, a symbolically violent end to my team-building attempts. The experience left a sour taste in my mouth.



27.9 and 27.10 - A VIPP workshop in Russia, where participatory methods were almost unknown
Photos by Neill McKee

On that trip, I also traveled with Yelena and a couple of staff members to Orenburg, a city to the southeast of Moscow near the border with Kazakhstan, where opium-based drugs were flowing in from Afghanistan—the [American war against the Taliban had only increased the growing of poppies](#)(5). We attended a meeting with the Orenburg AIDS Center on our cooperation. The spread of HIV through dirty needles used by addicts was still growing, and infecting both heterosexual and gay partners. This was happening in just about every Russian city. There was also a growing link between the traffickers, the police, and some government officials. The head of the Orenburg AIDS Center was a friendly talkative man, and that made me relax. I had been told that some doctors who were treating addicts in St. Petersburg had been murdered, probably by drug trafficking with the backing of the police, and I made reference to it in the meeting. It was a *faux pas* for there was a silent FSB secret policeman in the meeting.

It wasn't until we were flying back to Moscow the next day that Yelena told me she had been pulled in and grilled by local FSB officers about who I was and what I was doing in Russia. I apologized to her and felt so dumb. For the rest of the visit, I looked behind me and searched for microphones in my hotel room. By this time, Vladimir Putin's second term as President was coming to an end, but he had devised a strategy to change places with Dmitry Medvedev, his Prime Minister. Medvedev means "bear" in Russian, but he is a short nonthreatening man who Putin knew would do his bidding and allow him to step back in as President in 2012.

I didn't know the full situation I had stepped into in Russia until I was writing this chapter. Much of the real story was classified, until only recently. I learned about it by reading *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (2022) by M. E. Sarotte(6). James Baker, the Secretary of State under George H.W. Bush, had promised Mikhail Gorbachev that the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) would not move "one inch" further east, if the Soviet Union would remove its army from East Germany—a promise for which he was chastised as soon as he returned to Washington. The book is a detailed history of subterfuge—a game of ping-pong between the U.S. and Russia over the borders of NATO—throughout the Bush and Clinton administrations. It factors in Clinton's tell-tale semen stain on Monica Lewinsky's blue dress, and Yeltsin's alcoholism, heart condition and corruption, all leading to Vladimir Putin's rise to power, when he promised not to put Yeltsin in jail.

I also read, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (2012), by Masha Gessen(7), an engaging account of Putin's early life as a child and thug in St. Petersburg, his boring years as a KGB officer in Dresden, East Germany, where he watched with astonishment as the Berlin Wall crumbled and Soviet Union fell apart. The book details his rise to power through criminality, his destruction of Chechnya, Moscow apartment bombings, political murders, and rigged elections. It was chilling to be reading this book, in 2021, while writing about my time in Moscow and watching, on TV, the butchering of innocent Ukrainians by Putin's army. My Russian teacher's words came back to me: "My father is a Russian speaker from eastern Ukraine. Ukraine is part of Russia."—"Ukraine simply means 'corner' or 'borderland' in Russian. They are not a separate people."

I wondered what lay in store for my former team in Moscow and their children. Would their lives ever get back on track?

In 2007, I also found myself back on the road again, giving advice and developing communication strategies for HIV/AIDS in India and Indonesia. I loved working in the latter country, since its root language is the same as Malaysia's, where I had started my international

career. I helped the office undertake participatory processes with government and NGO partners to develop plans, traveling all the way to Jayapura, Papua on the island of New Guinea.

That same year, I returned to Bangladesh where I found the Adolescent Health Communication toolkit, which I had put so much work into during 2001-2003, had not been widely popularized. After a year with CCP in Baltimore, Nuzhat Shahzadi had rejoined UNICEF to work in emergency programs, first in Sri Lanka and then Afghanistan. Also, Sanjeeda Islam, the Deputy Director of BCCP, had left the organization. Neither of these empowered women saw eye-to-eye with the leader of BCCP. Our well-researched materials and strategies were hardly being used. It appeared the toolkit had been treated as a product of a five-year project, and when the funding ended, the push for utilization ended. Besides, Morten Giersing, the Representative of UNICEF, a proponent of the toolkit, had also left the country.

By the fall of 2008, I wondered what I should do next. I wasn't happy traveling around like a consultant. Also, I was expensive for CCP's budget because the organization no longer held the large global project from USAID, and the overhead it provided. I was asked if I wanted to go to Jordan as director of CCP's USAID-funded project there. But it involved mostly family planning, which I had little knowledge of, nor interest in. I mentioned the offer to Beth, who said, "Are you kidding? I'm not going anywhere." I had dragged her around the world enough for one lifetime.

Then by surprise, Mark Rasmuson, the head of communication in international health at AED in Washington, contacted me. We had kept in touch over the years. As mentioned above, AED had won the five-year contract with USAID, a project they called Communication for Change—C-Change for short—a clever acronym with a pun on a phrase in William Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*. "Sea change" had come to stand for "a profound or notable transformation." That sounded interesting to me and AED needed more communication expertise. As must be evident by now, I had never been a believer in sticking to an organization if it didn't fulfill me. I always wanted to go to where I felt I could have the greatest input and create innovations.

And so, in October 2008, I was off to Washington, D.C., an easy train ride from our home on the Magothy River, or so I thought at the time.

28. Last Post in Washington, D.C. and One More Move

For a few months every weekday, I drove our new Toyota Prius for about 20 minutes to the MARC commuter train stop near the Baltimore Washington International Airport, where I usually waited 10 to 20 minutes for the train, which was often delayed. Usually it was overcrowded, so no place to sit as it rattled over old tracks through woods and small towns towards Washington. It stopped at many stations to pick up more passengers, and sometimes was held up by track repairs, oncoming Amtrak trains, or other confusion I couldn't figure out. I found it hard to read on board, because of the animated conversations among passengers. I began to play music on earphones, so I could concentrate.

After entering Washington, I'd disembark at Union Station to wait for the often-delayed Metro to Dupont Circle. From Dupont, I walked up Connecticut Avenue to reach AED's office, just south of the famous Washington Hilton, where President Reagan was nearly assassinated on March 30, 1981. The whole commute to work took me up to two hours, and I had to face the same gauntlet of delays and connections going home in the evening. I often thought about the trains in Moscow, which ran like clockwork—mass transport, not mass confusion.

By 2009, AED was almost 50 years old, with 700 employees in Washington and 2,000 more around the world. It managed about US\$500 million per year and worked on domestic programs in the U.S., but the majority of its contracts were issued by USAID for work in developing countries—health, nutrition, education, improving democratic governance, building civil society, and relief in emergencies.

I had been hired as a senior advisor for communication in the international health division. I believe AED knew me most for the books I had written, and my work in UNICEF on Meena and Sara. I made some presentations on that, and began to discuss objectives and strategies with various people on their on-going projects. But I found everyone to be busy and fairly self-assured. It seemed to me that few besides Mark Rasmuson, who had persuaded me to join the organization, wanted to discuss new ideas.

Since I landed in the U.S., I had been in touch with Don Simpson, the man I collaborated with in 1978, by making two films on an IDRC's primary education project in Southeast Asia (see Chapter 10). His company and network, Innovation Expedition, had fostered the development of a process he called "Challenge Dialogue," a method of solving complicated issues in government, industry, and international development that involve many diverse stakeholders. Rather than first holding large in-person meetings, conferences, or workshops, the method entails holding discussions with a few key informants and developing a challenge paper on the main issues, with a set of questions to be answered by a wider group through email. The answers are then consolidated and sent back to the whole group with additional questions. Ideally, this takes place two or three times before a "white paper" is produced, which then forms the basis of discussion at a large in-person workshop with as many stakeholders as possible.

Don and his team of facilitators had found that by carrying out this process, they could obtain up to 80 percent agreement on the issues among stakeholders before the in-person workshops were held. I saw the Challenge Dialogue methodology as a natural complement to our VIPP methodology for in-person meetings. I had tried to introduce Don and his method to CCP in 2003, but it fell flat. Not giving up, I felt that surely it would be an innovation a large organization like AED could employ.

Don and his colleague, Keith Jones, flew from Canada to Washington to plan a Challenge Dialogue on HIV/AIDS with international program stakeholders in the U.S.—a very tall order, I knew, because most of these organizations were competitors for contracts with USAID and other

donors, and probably would not want to collaborate at all. These agencies, including AED, Johns Hopkins University, other non-profits and for-profit organizations, were being chided by the press and some people in government as “beltway bandits” because of their overhead charged on projects, high salaries, and their engagement in cut-throat competition. *It was time for collaboration*, I thought. I had joined AED to do something different, to innovate, not just carry out “cookie-cutter” activities. After all, President Obama had just been sworn in, so Washington should be ready for big new ideas.

We were in the middle of developing this initiative, which old hands in AED were only lukewarm about, when Mark and our department director, Peggy Parlato, asked me to take over as director of our large communication project, C-Change. USAID was unhappy with the progress made in its first year—and with its leader, a researcher who had previously been accepted by them as project director. I gave it some thought. I had been with AED for about eight months, so, enough time had gone by since CCP had lost the bid for the contract. USAID knew I was now with AED and probably wanted me in the project. So, in the end I said yes—what choice did I have?

I soon found myself in charge of a large budget and a team which grew to about 35 people in Washington and over 100 more around the world. This took all the management skills I had ever learned. The deputy director I inherited wanted to work remotely, from Seattle. I brought my former CCP colleague, Antje Becker-Benton, into C-Change. Antje, born in West Germany, is a kindred soul with the same work ethic and sense of humor as me, and she was promoted to be my deputy.

My new job was demanding. Almost every hour I had to hold meetings with staff to solve problems, make decisions, or attend divisional meetings. The telephone calls and emails from USAID began at about 7:30 am and seldom ended before 4:00 pm, when I’d have time to catch up on some paperwork and answer emails before returning home. I bought a second Prius and I started driving into Washington instead of wasting so much time on the train. But if I left at 5:00 pm, it could take 90 minutes or more to get home on the heavily clogged streets and highways—no different than the Metro and train. So, I’d leave the office around 6:00 pm, reach home about 7:00 pm, and then drive back as early as 6:30 am to avoid the traffic—truly a rat race.

In September 2009, following the sub-prime mortgage crisis, real estate was cheap, so I bought a bachelor apartment about a block from the office to avoid the daily commute. I drove home on Friday evenings, while staying awake by playing loud music, such as the Russian rock songs from the video I had helped create in Moscow, *Life Themes*—bringing back images of the totally different world I had left, not so long ago.

On a cold weekend in December 2009, three feet of snow fell on our part of Maryland. It took me hours to dig out our two Priuses, and I ended up with severe backpain. Ever the experimenter, I tried acupuncture treatment for it, but the acupuncturist added electricity to the needles, vastly increasing my pain. During most of January and February, I had to work from home in an easy chair, computer on my lap, cell phone by my side, Beth acted as my nurse, while I watched many more feet of snow fall on our hill by the riverside. I sought a proper diagnosis and treatment and finally found answers when I went full circle back to Johns Hopkins University’s specialty clinics. My long career as a filmmaker in developing countries had finally caught up with me. I thought, *It serves me right to take on this high-pressure job in my mid-60s, when I should have been thinking of phasing out and getting more exercise.*



28.1 – Snowed in on the Magothy River, Maryland – Photos by Neill McKee

When I returned to work in Washington, the weather had begun to warm. I did exercises in the mornings and took walks in evenings, slowly building up the strength of my back. As I walked down Connecticut Avenue to Dupont Circle, I found it ironic to read “Taxation Without Representation” on D.C. license plates. This was the very complaint that set off the American Revolution, and here I was, over 230 years later, among people who were disenfranchised.

The city had been designed for George Washington by the French-American engineer, Pierre L'Enfant. They envisaged it as a majestic “diamond on the Potomac River.” The Author J. D. Dickey, in *Empire of Mud: The Secret History of Washington, D.C.*(1) writes about the first 70 years of the capital’s history: a swampy land with pigs and cattle running free, animal carcasses and foul odors, muddy and stinking streets with garbage piled up everywhere, no lights so utter darkness at night, no waterworks, open sewers, filthy canals, cockfights, fistfights, mud fights, swindlers, forgers, thieves, corrupt police, murderers, pimps and prostitutes, gamblers and pyramid scheme promoters, a debtors’ prison and overcrowded jails, religious strife, slave traders and many slaves. Dickey described it, as “a dysfunctional village with a confusing web of radial baroque avenues overlapping a rectangular grid.”

The problem was that from Washington’s founding, federal politicians stayed in separate boarding houses, seldom mixing with local people, those from other parties, or with civil servants, and they took no responsibility for the squalor surrounding them. They seldom voted for bills and budgets to improve the city. Services eventually improved, especially after the Civil War. Different forms of local government were experimented with, but it was not until 1974 that the federal government approved popular elections of the mayor and city council for four-year terms. The citizens of D.C. remain disenfranchised at the federal level, to this day.

In 2010, not much had changed for the descendants of slaves. About 50 percent of D.C.'s 602,000 citizens were black, with about half still living below the poverty line and on Medicaid—limited government-funded health care for the poorest sectors of society. President Obama had just managed to get his Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act signed into law in March, but many Washingtonians could not even afford that program. The Republican Tea Party wing was flexing its muscles, trying to block everything the President and the Democrats tried, while the Great Recession and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continued.

Despite these dark clouds, I loved living in Washington during the week. I could easily walk to Dupont Circle, which was included in Pierre L'Enfant's original plan. The area had a long and varied history. In the 1970s, it started to take on a bohemian feel, then became popular with the gay and lesbian community. By the time I bought the apartment there, it had gentrified and was full of coffee shops, restaurants, bars, and upscale stores. Beth planned to drive in and stay for some weekends, but only did that once while I worked in Washington. She was too busy with her artistic community, and some of her new artistic book creations were selling for thousands of dollars.

Besides, at least in warmer weather, I preferred to be at our riverside home on weekends, relaxing my back, exercising, and recharging my batteries for the challenges to come in the following week. I had no clue that an even greater challenge was appearing on the horizon.

In the fall of 2010, a disaster descended on AED. The President of the organization had attempted to resolve financial mismanagement problems in two of the many contracts the organization held with USAID, and he did so without first alerting USAID's Inspector General's Office on the issues. After many months of internal action, he sent a check to USAID for a million dollars, outlining the problems he discovered. He thought that would solve the problem, but after months of negotiations, he had to resign, and the Vice Presidents, one by one, eventually followed him out the door. In December, AED was temporarily suspended from receiving payments from USAID and all other federal government departments for "evidence of corporate misconduct, mismanagement, and lack of internal controls." I knew that was not the case with my project, but it didn't matter. We were stuck in the same boat.

On March 3, 2011, after 50 years of operation, AED announced that it would sell its assets and be dissolved. Many outside commentators thought it was an over-reaction by USAID, due to the political climate—the Congressional Republicans criticizing every step the Obama administration was making. Why bring down a whole organization that had a good record, except for one project in Pakistan and another in Afghanistan? (Source 2).

Most AED staff were shocked and demoralized. C-Change had enough money in the bank to operate for a few months. On the plus side, I stopped getting all those early morning calls from USAID. But about six months went by before Family Health International (FHI), another NGO registered in Durham, North Carolina, took over the assets of AED. They called the new organization "FHI360" because, in addition to international health, FHI was now taking on all of AED's international work in improving democratic governance, building civil society, and relief in emergencies, as well as its domestic contracts in education and health.

AED's main assets were its contracts with the USAID and other federal government agencies, and, of course, its staff, equipment, and furniture. Although FHI and AED were both non-profits, for the next few months I witnessed what I thought of as a corporate takeover in the private sector. There were many general meetings with staff, trying to assure us that all would be okay—our work would carry on. But rumors floated and people clustered in hallways, talking in

hushed tones, or behind closed doors. Some former AED executives had their pass keys confiscated and were marched out the door by security staff with little notice, just like you see in the movies and television dramas.

I continued to try to boost the morale of my staff and fight for them, as the two organizational cultures came together, trying to merge job descriptions and salary levels. We lost about six months of progress, but the funds finally started to flow from USAID again, and I resolved to achieve our goals, somehow.

At the same time, like most USAID projects, C-Change was designed to include a wide range of other organizations as operational partners in the US and overseas. The “more the merrier” it seemed to me. That’s what won contracts, but the reality of trying to satisfy those partners with adequate activities and funds to meet expectations, was problematic. A good deal of my time was spent in listening to their complaints and explaining our constraints. It seemed to me that once a contract was signed, USAID didn’t really care about our partners. They just wanted results.

And results we gave them. We implemented programs in about 25 countries in Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) for HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other health issues. By the end of the project, we managed to program US\$ 67 million and were also given associate awards worth U.S.\$125 million from USAID to continue work in particular countries. Our [final report details many achievements](#)(3). C-Change developed a range of evidence-based learning tools to aid organizations in mastering the process of implementing SBCC programs. The [C-Modules](#)(4) were at the core, while the [SBCC Capacity Assessment Tool](#)(5) helped end users assess their SBCC knowledge. Taking training to a higher level, C-Change also partnered with academic institutions to develop the first graduate-level SBCC program in Africa at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, and worked with universities in Albania, Guatemala, and Nigeria to improve SBCC education. Other communication tools were also created. Antje Becker-Benton took the lead in shaping the SBCC framework and key tools, while I managed steering the whole ship through rough waters. But the C-Change legacy contain much of my own thinking and writing, as articulated in the three communication books and the many articles I had authored and co-authored over the years. I never considered myself to be an academic, but figured I didn’t do too badly for a guy without a Ph.D.

By mid-2012, our son Derek had completed a doctorate in law at the University of Toronto, and had begun teaching law at the University of Sherbrooke in Quebec. He never lost his ability in French. In fact, for a year he had clerked for the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada. When we reflect on his chosen career, we laugh at the way, as a child, he used to set the rules and regulations for all the kids playing with him in our backyard in Ottawa.

Our daughter Ruth, always preferred to facilitate her childhood friends to play more creatively. By 2012, Ruth had completed an MFA and was making progress with a playwriting career in Los Angeles. In 2004, just after Beth had followed me to Russia, we briefly returned to New York for her marriage to Brian—a great gathering of the clan from both families. Brian K. Vaughan became a well-known graphic novelist, movie script writer, and executive producer. Recently, Ruth and Brian had also produced two beautiful grandchildren—a boy and a girl. We had begun to take breaks to see them, whenever possible, and Beth would go to Los Angeles to babysit when Ruth and Brian wanted a break from parenting.

Also, by 2012, C-Change’s term was coming to an end and USAID issued a call for proposals for a new five-year global health and development communication project. Mark

Rasmuson took the lead in putting together FHI360's proposal, and he and our new director of global health, asked me if they could include my name as project director. I told them I would think about it over the weekend, and let them know.

It was on a sunny afternoon when I made my decision. Our house was situated in shallow water near the source of the Magothy River, so I could only have my low-draft pontoon boat. It was great for parties and for going out on Chesapeake Bay to fish or just explore—a great mental break from Washington. That Saturday, the wind and waves were just right, giving my vessel and me some extra thrust, as we skipped over the waves. I liked to do this with *Santana Abraxas* playing in my earphones, just like I did while rolling across the plains of India in December 1970, as described on the first page of this book.

It was then I decided that 45-years in my line of work was enough. Despite all the problems that remain, I had played a small part in the post-World War II world-wide success of a vast decrease in extreme poverty levels, the doubling of global literacy through education, and an almost doubling of life expectancy due to these factors, plus access to improved health care, immunization, clean water, and sanitation.

We stayed in our Magothy River home in Maryland for a couple more years, while I began to dabble in creative writing. I took a night course at St. John's College in nearby Annapolis. I also made frequent trips to Canada to visit my aging mother, siblings, relatives, old friends, and our son. It was then I began to formulate stories for my memoirs on my childhood and youth, and my first job in Borneo, as well as do research for another book on my ancestors in Canada and the U.S. My father had passed away in 2007 just after we returned from Russia, and after my mother died in early 2015, Beth and I decided to move to New Mexico, the land of enchantment—plenty of sun, mountains, deserts, forests, river valleys and milder temperatures with little snow, as well as a multi-ethnic population.

We joined international social organizations, I signed up with a writers' group, and Beth became a member in calligraphy and artistic book creation societies. Beth's two brother live in Las Cruces, New Mexico, so I brought her closer to family after dragging her around the world for many years. Her father and stepmother had settled in the same city after they left Papua New Guinea, but both had passed away.

In August 2015, soon after we arrived in Albuquerque, I registered in a master's-level seminar workshop in creative writing at the University of New Mexico taught by Professor Diane Thiel. That's when my creative writing juices really started to flow. I exchanged critiques with other students and some writers I met, and spent hours drafting and revising the stories that I had in my head for so long, but never had time to write. My first memoir, *Finding Myself in Borneo: Sojourns in Sabah* (2019) won three awards. That was followed by *Guns and Gods in My Genes: A 15,000-mile North American search through four centuries of history, to the Mayflower* (2020), which won two. It was published a few months after the Covid pandemic hit. With nothing more to do than to research, write, edit, promote, and connect on-line, I turned to the creation of *Kid on the Go! Memoir of My Childhood and Youth* (2021), in which I describe myself as a bit of an explorer and rebel from my early days, seeking greener pastures away from the familiar, and new challenges—leading me to Borneo. With the pandemic lingering, next I turned my efforts to this memoir on my career after I left Borneo and began to explore the world in full. I also decided to set up a website on all the films and media projects I could locate—a digital library: www.neillmckeevideos.com. In that way, readers could go to that source to learn more, if they so desire.

My CUSO films were used across Canada in the 1970s and 1980s to recruit volunteers—either through CUSO-Ottawa’s efforts or by CUSO committees on university campuses and learning centers—and helped with overall fundraising efforts. My later productions—films, videos, and multimedia materials were used in developing countries through TV networks, video sales, lending libraries, educational institutions, project meetings and trainings, and outreach efforts such as rural cinema and video shows, or through the educational activities of schools, other government departments, and NGOs. Some of my IDRC films were distributed through Canada’s National Film Board and Canadian embassy libraries around the world, and in the 1990s and early 2000s, they were sold in video format by a Canadian distribution company. Some were shown on educational television channels.

As I wrote this memoir, I wanted to determine if my efforts in international communication had made any difference in people’s lives. Some citizens of donor countries think international development efforts are a waste of time, and their tax money. I decided to incorporate my own conclusions on this in the chapters themselves, rather than write a huge summary at the end, which might put readers to sleep. In my experience, the communication component of any international development endeavor is an essential component, which can determine success or failure. Researching and writing Part One, on my years as a CUSO filmmaker, brought me in touch with so many former volunteers, like myself—teachers, medical doctors and nurses, engineers, technicians, agriculturalists, foresters, etc. I had helped to recruit some of them and found that many committed themselves to careers in international development or to their own communities and fields of endeavor in Canada.

In Part Two, on my years as a filmmaker with IDRC, Canada, I included the results of research projects that paid off—many more than I expected. Others had less success, but that’s the nature of research—sometimes it provides a way forward, sometimes it doesn’t, but even negative results are positive in a way. They provide direction for future investigations. My job expanded my own knowledge in many fields—health, education, forestry, agriculture, food and nutrition, water and sanitation, and rural development. I still think of those years with IDRC as my “dream job.” I had to digest a great deal of knowledge to produce these films, guided by great colleagues from around the world, some who mentored me. Probably the most salient thing I learned in all this work was the importance of community participation in achieving positive and lasting results.

Part Three, on my years as a multimedia producer and manager with UNICEF in Bangladesh, Eastern and Southern Africa, and with Johns Hopkins University, based in the US and Russia, and finally AED cum FHI360 in Washington, are more complicated to evaluate. In this work, the interventions, themselves, were communication strategies in social and behavior change. We carried out formative research, mid-term, and final evaluations, showing many positive results. But many factors have to be taken into account, such as the length of time donors are willing to commit funds, and whether people who take over after you are willing to put energy into initiatives started by the previous person in charge. Often, they want to leave their own mark—that’s human nature.

However, on the personal side, during those years I learned a great deal about management and leadership. A good leader needs to inspire but not dictate, listen more than talk, assemble a like-minded team and facilitate that team to achieve agreed-upon objectives, rather than taking the lead in everything. In that regard, my experience in co-creating and using the VIPP methodology in so many countries was paramount in understanding the qualities of good leadership.

When people ask me, “Which film or media project you created made the most difference in people’s lives?” I don’t have to think too hard to come up with the answer. Today, I occasional get feedback on the Sara Communication Initiative, which I started in Africa (see Chapter 23), and weekly feedback on the Meena Communication Initiative (see Chapter 21), which I started in South Asia. These come in emails and through many of comments placed on YouTube from young women and men who were influenced by these stories during their childhood and adolescence in the 1990s and early 2000s. Some are just brief and nostalgic comments about how they missed their childhood or how these were their favorite TV programs, but many mention the important themes covered, and how the cartoon stories helped them as they grew up.

In November 2021, while writing this book, I was surprised when one young Afghan woman from a minority community, who calls herself “Darya Parsia” online, reached out to tell me how she saw the Meena films and read Meena comic books as a refugee in Pakistan during her childhood. Meena helped to teach her that she should have all the rights that boys have and she had to fight and strive for them. She returned to Afghanistan with her family in 2010, where she received a good education up to the secondary level, but her university attendance was interrupted when the Taliban took over again in August 2021, and the family fled to Pakistan once more. Today, I am helping her with her on-line university education and am encouraging her budding artistic talents, while she seeks a new home country. She continues to help needy children in Afghanistan through an on-line art therapy program she has designed herself.

I am also particularly heartened by the young men who write to me to say that these entertaining cartoons and comic books taught them to appreciate girls’ rights. As I was finishing this chapter, one young man from Uganda, Derick Skai Njalwe, wrote to me to say, “The Sara materials created a huge positive impact in my general view of a female child in the society. This also affected the way I started to treat them. I learned to appreciate their roles in the society and also protect their rights and recognize their achievements. I have also grown to fully comprehend the struggles of a girl child and the need to work hand-in-hand to assist in accomplishment of our dreams regardless of the gender differences.”

So, in my golden years, I am in touch with some of the people I influenced by my efforts and people who influenced me, as well as networks of people I worked with around the planet. I have reinvented myself as a creative nonfiction writer, thankfully still remembering most of what I experienced and learned in “My University of the World.” What more could a person ask for in one lifetime?

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Repeated Acronyms

AED—Academy for Educational Development
AFNS—Agriculture, Food, and Nutrition Division
BCCP—Bangladesh Center for Communication Programs
CAAP—Centro Andino do Acción Popular (Andean Center for Popular Action), Ecuador
CATIE—Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (Tropical Agriculture Research and Training Center), Costa Rica
CCP—Center for Communication Programs
C-Change—Communication for Change
CIDA—Canadian International Development Agency
COP—Chief of Party
CPES—Centro Paraguayo de Estudios Sociológicos (Center for Sociological Studies, Paraguay)
CTO—Cognizant Technical Office
CUSO—Canadian University Services Overseas
DHD—District Health Department
EPI—Expanded Program on Immunization
ESARO—Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office
FHI—Family Health International
FSB—Federal Security Bureau
FSO—Field Staff Officer
FSU—Florida State University
FUNDAEC—La Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de la Ciencia (Foundation for the Application and Teaching of Science)
GIA—Grupo de Investigaciones Agrarias (Agriculture Research Group)
HRF—Healthy Russia Foundation
ICDDR,B—International Centre for Research in Diarrheal Diseases, Bangladesh
IDRC—International Development Research Centre
IITA—Institute of Tropical Agriculture
IMPACT—Instructional Management by Parents, Community, and Teachers
INBAR—International Network for Bamboo and Rattan
IRRI—International Rice Research Institute
JHU—Johns Hopkins University
J&J—Johnson & Johnson
MSM—Men who have sex with men
NGO—Non-Governmental Organization
ORS—Oral Rehydration Salts
PDA—Population and Community Development Association
PNG—Papua New Guinea
PVC—Polyvinyl Chloride
RIIC—Rural Industries Innovation Centre
SAARC—South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SBBC—Social and Behavior Change Communication

My University of the World

Neill McKee

SEAFDEC—Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center

SOFDA—Sabah Forestry Development Agency

TM—Transcendental Meditation

UNEP—United Nations Environmental Programme

UNICEF—United Nations Children’s Fund

USAID—United States Agency for International Development

VIPP—Visualisation in Participatory Programmes

About the Author

Neill McKee is a creative nonfiction writer based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. *My University of the World: Memoir of an International Film and Media Producer*, is a stand-alone sequel to his first travel memoir, *Finding Myself in Borneo: Sojourns in Sabah*, which has won three awards. McKee holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Calgary and a master's degree in Communication from Florida State University. He worked internationally for 45 years, becoming an expert in the field of communication for social change. He directed and produced a number of award-winning documentary films/videos, popular multimedia initiatives, and has written numerous articles and three books in the field of development communication. During his international career, McKee was employed by Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO); Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC); UNICEF in Asia and Africa; Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland; the Academy for Educational Development and FHI 360, Washington, D.C. He worked and lived in Malaysia, Bangladesh, Kenya, Uganda, and Russia for a total of 18 years and traveled to over 80 countries on short-term assignments. In 2015, he settled in New Mexico, using his varied experiences, memories, and imagination in creative writing.

Summary of this Memoir (for back of book cover)

My University of the World: Memoir of an International Film and Media Producer

In this memoir, Neill McKee takes readers on an entertaining journey through the developing world from 1970 to 2012. In the first seven chapters he describes how he becomes a “one-man film crew” while documenting the lives of Canadian CUSO volunteer teachers, medical doctors and workers, engineers, technicians, agriculturalists, foresters, and biologists in Asian and African countries. He learns the craft of filmmaking “on the hoof” and in a Canadian studio. Along the way, he meets Elizabeth, and describes their distant love affair and hilarious marriage in Zambia.

In the second part, the couple establishes a home in Ottawa, in 1975, and starts a family, while Neill roams the world making more films for Canada’s International Development Research Centre. He produces many award-winning films about the organization’s work in Asia, Africa, and South America on searching for solutions to problems in agriculture and nutrition, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, health delivery systems, water and sanitation, as well as education and poverty alleviation. In the third part, McKee describes his 11 years with UNICEF in Bangladesh and in Eastern and Southern Africa, where he initiated long-lasting, multi-media communication programs for child health and HIV/AIDS, with a focus on empowering South Asian and African girls. Next, he describes his move to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, U.S.A., to carry out similar work, as well as his challenges while living and working in Russia during 2004-2007. That experience, plus a final chapter on his last post in Washington, D.C. as director of a global development communication project, concludes his vast variety of experiences—great material for his next career as a creative writer.

Throughout this memoir, McKee flashes forward to search for and reflect on the long-term impact of the projects he films and creates. He also describes the influential people he meets, his challenges and doubts, as well as the ever-evolving artistic creations of Elizabeth, who provides a solid but moveable home for him and their two children. McKee’s memoir is full of humorous and poignant stories, compelling descriptions, dialog, photos and illustrations, and his thoughts on world development, as he recounts his many journeys and sojourns in what he calls “My University of the World.”

