

Global Connections

HIGHLIGHTING THE WORK OF PRAIRIE CO-OPERATORS AROUND THE GLOBE

2011, ISSUE 3

Internship Provides International Co-operative Experience

For this issue of *Global Connections* we interviewed Heather Hale. Heather lives in Saskatoon but is originally from Sceptre, Saskatchewan. She is the Program Officer with Saskatchewan Co-operative Association (SCA). Her position involves co-ordinating all of SCA's youth programming and initiatives, including the Saskatchewan Co-operative Youth Program.

What compelled you to get involved in the International Youth Internship Program?

HH: Ever since my university days, I was interested in the CIDA youth internship program. It seemed like a great opportunity to both gain practical hands-on experience in the development field and also an interesting challenge to work and live in a new culture and country.

For one reason or another it never seemed to work out for me to participate. However, this year when I saw the CCA youth internships, I knew that I could not pass up the chance. The CCA internships seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to use the co-operative knowledge and skills that I have developed over the last 2 years with SCA as well contribute in a meaningful way to economic and social justice in the Global South.

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About CCA's International Youth Internship Program

Over the past 13 years, CCA's International Youth Internship Program (IYIP) has helped over 130 young Canadians make the transition from post-secondary education to long-term employment through overseas placements. The enthusiasm and skills of the Youth Experience International interns have contributed to the advancement of CCA's international development objectives.

Interns have undertaken placements in fields as diverse as co-operative business development, social research, HIV/AIDS education, gender and development, community economic development and youth employment. Interns have been placed in 17 different countries including: Cambodia, Costa Rica, Chile, China, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Korea, Malawi, Mongolia, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda.

Funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) as part of the Government of Canada's Youth Employment Strategy, these internships allow young people to gain meaningful work experience while learning about a new culture and exploring the world. CCA's international partner organizations and overseas offices play a vital part in supporting the interns throughout their placements.

Nyugwe Forest National Park in southwestern Rwanda

(All photos: Heather Hale)

What was the purpose of your involvement?

HH: The internship was as a Micro Enterprise Development Officer in Rwanda. I arrived as CCA and UGAMA were wrapping up a very successful three year Food Security and Co-operative Strengthening project with four agricultural co-operatives. The idea was that I would work with four agricultural co-operatives to further develop their small business idea to supplement their farming income. While I did do some of that work, I also ended up working with UGAMA on funding applications to expand the CCA program for an additional 5 years working with 15 co-operatives.

Tell us about the co-ops with which you worked.

HH: While in Rwanda I had the chance to visit a number of different co-operatives while working with UGAMA. UGAMA, the Centre for Co-operative Services, is an NGO and is one of the key organizations undertaking co-operative development assistance in Rwanda. It works with 25 different co-operatives and provides management and technical agricultural training as well as reviews the operations of the supported co-operatives.

Through UGAMA I was able to visit a number of different agricultural co-ops including a tofu producing worker co-operative that was supplied by a soya bean producer co-operative. I also visited and briefly worked with a co-operative of artists who produced handicrafts.

What were some of the challenges facing the co-ops in Rwanda?

HH: Rwanda is the most densely populated country in all of Africa. Land ownership and access to agricultural activities is at the core of many challenges. Virtually the entire population depends on agriculture for its survival. The typical situation in Rwanda is that family farms are too small yet faced with increasing demands for productivity. This is then compounded by the local conditions of soil fertility, climate change, and lack of storage facilities as well as access to markets. UGAMA is working with co-operatives and co-operative members to build stronger co-operatives that are able to increase food security, assist in agricultural production, enhance sustainable agricultural practices, increase awareness and access to



*Top: International Youth Intern Heather Hale (centre) visits with members of the CODERIKA co-operative;
Below: UGAMA board members celebrate the new year with Intore dancing, a traditional Rwandan style of dancing.*

markets, as well as provide support and training for co-operative management.

Did you see similarities between your co-operative and the ones you visited overseas?

HH: There are certainly some similarities between SCA and UGAMA. While the types of support and services are very different, both organizations are committed to helping emerging and existing co-operatives.



Do you feel that your time made a difference and if so how?

HH: I do think that my time made a difference although I would be reluctant to overplay the role of my internship. The real difference is being made by the staff and volunteers of UGAMA, many of whom have dedicated their lives to co-operatives and are a testament to what change is possible.

Do you feel changed by this experience? If so, how?

HH: While I do not think that this experience had fundamentally changed me it did however strengthen my commitment

to the co-operative model. I come away from this experience renewed in my convictions that the co-operative model is among the best for sustainable, equitable development and community building.

Do we have anything to learn as Canadians from our partners in developing countries?

HH: I think there are certainly lessons to be learned. I personally have taken away lessons of the power of resourcefulness.

While in Rwanda I was constantly reminded what major changes could be made with very little resources.

Is there value in Canadian co-operatives/credit unions supporting this work?

HH: I see tremendous value in supporting international (and local) co-operatives that are working to address the needs of their communities. I believe that development from the grassroots up will ensure long term sustainability and help to address some of the larger issues of global inequity.