

Global Connections

HIGHLIGHTING THE WORK OF PRAIRIE CO-OPERATORS AROUND THE GLOBE

2011, ISSUE 2

A Journey of Discovery

For this issue of *Global Connections* we interviewed two prairie co-operators who just completed a CCA Study Mission in Sri Lanka.

Paul Kelly has worked for First Calgary Financial since 1995, and has been its CEO since 2009. He was born in Hamilton, raised in Toronto, and has lived in Alberta since 1990. He has four daughters (two sets of twins).

Wayne Thrasher is employed by Enterprise Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan's economic development agency, to manage its co-operative policy and programming, including its Co-operative Issues Council. Wayne has worked for the Government of Saskatchewan for more than thirty years in various capacities relating to the promotion of co-operation and co-operative development. He is passionate in his belief that co-operation and co-operatives contribute to the growth of individuals, their members and the community as a whole. In addition to his work, Wayne is a member of several co-operatives and credit unions. He has worked closely with co-operative organizations at the local, provincial, national and international level.



Local Society (Credit Union) Staff (Photo by Paul Kelly)

About CCA's Study Mission Program

In February, ten Canadian Co-operators embarked on a Sri Lankan journey of discovery.

The 10, from co-operatives and credit unions across Canada, were participants in a study mission organized by the Canadian Co-operative Association and the Co-operative Development Foundation of Canada. Their experience allowed them to see how Sri Lanka's credit union system, the SANASA Movement, has strengthened communities and transformed lives, and they learned how CCA and CDF have been partners in that work for more than two decades.

In good times and in bad – through the terror of tsunami and the uncertainty of civil strife – Sri Lankans know and trust the name SANASA. SANASA's familiar blue signs can be seen throughout the island nation. 5,000 credit unions and growing, the SANASA family of co-operatives is a lifeline of hope for generations of men, women and children.

Canadians have been working with SANASA for over 25 years to stimulate economic prosperity, provide goods and services and meet the special needs of vulnerable women and children.

Before they left Sri Lanka, the team of 10 Canadian co-operators re-affirmed their commitment to CDF by setting a fund raising goal of \$150,000 by Christmas. With a match of 3:1 by CIDA, this will raise a total of \$600,000 for this worthwhile work.

While in Sri Lanka, the participants shared their thoughts and experiences through an on-line blog. You can read about their journey at <http://journeyoutofpoverty2011.blogspot.com/>

Three prairie co-operators participated: Paul Kelly of Calgary, Trish Rasmussen of Edmonton and Wayne Thrasher of Regina.

What compelled you to get involved in CCA's coaching program?

PK: I was asked by Barry Delaney, Chair of First Calgary Financial, to go on the trip. I was interested in learning about grassroots credit unions compared to the Canadian system, and I had never been to Asia, so I decided to apply.

WT: I have long been interested in international development and the important role co-operatives can play in using the co-operative self-help model to address economic and social issues around the world. I have previously undertaken co-operative training programs in Ukraine and looked upon this as opportunity to learn more about CCA's work in Sri Lanka.

What was the purpose of your involvement?

PK: Our purpose was to tour various societies (credit unions), meet with leaders of SANASA, learn about the Sri Lankan credit union system and bring the story back to Canada.

WT: I wanted to learn more about CCA's development work, and the role of organizations like SANASA, in part to broaden my personal understanding but also to develop my skills in the area of international development as I am interested in working in this area after I retire later this year.

Tell us about the credit unions you visited.

PK: We visited many individual credit unions. Most are in small villages where the credit union is the only way the village can access credit or banking services. The people we met were very proud of their success and growth and the impact they make in their members' lives.

WT: I was impressed by the level of technical sophistication that was available in most of the branches we visited. All had computers and well trained, enthusiastic staff.

Most impressive however were the staff, and directors. At the regional office in Kigalle, we were greeted by a welcome ceremony of musicians and dancers and by about 200 members who had come to attend the event. The level of participation was most impressive. At this event, their member of parliament and important cabinet ministers attended and joined us for lunch, demonstrating the recognition that the government places on SANASA.

Although the level of capital by Canadian standards was low, the impact of supporting savings and providing loans for local economic development was very important. We were able to visit several clients including farmers, fish processors and other small businesses. The level of self-sufficiency was impressive and people were clearly improving their individual and community prosperity as a result.

What are some of the challenges facing the credit unions in Sri Lanka?

WT: Some of the challenges are reflected in co-operatives and credit unions around the world, including Canada. Attracting and involving youth and women was an important priority and challenge, as was increasing capital and ensuring government regulations were enabling and not unduly restrictive. One of the interesting challenges is providing the range of services necessary to benefit the broad needs of members, including education and training and child care, which are so important to many young families.

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

PK: Similarities exist, such as personal service, local decision making, and differentiation from large banks. However, they are much more explicit about the co-operative principles driving their business activities.



Above: The CDF Study Tour group learning about Sri Lanka.

Below: An elephant on the road blocks the tour bus

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

WT: I think my participation and that of my colleagues was a great learning experience, and while we probably made no immediate difference, our visits were considered of great symbolic importance representing a valued partnership between co-operatives and nations.

What important message would you like to impress upon Canadian co-operators?

PK: That credit unions, at a small grass roots level, can make a dramatic change in people's lives. That it is a way out of poverty and that the multiplier effect of individual loans can positively impact many people. A \$1000 loan can make a dramatic difference.



Do you feel changed by this experience?

WT: Yes. I felt rejuvenated in my support for the principles and practices of co-operation and how they can impact on all our lives and communities. I think it inspired me to

work harder to support them and look at the opportunities of the International Year of Co-operatives to promote them.

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

WT: I was reminded how pooling the even limited resources of a community can result in great success and how we should not take for granted our co-operative organizations, but remember that their success is all our responsibilities, whether it be maximizing our business with them or participating in their governance.

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

WT: Absolutely! Co-operatives are part of an international movement and we must all share both the challenges and opportunities of building our co-operatives and economies based not on greed and self-interest but on self-reliance and equality of opportunity.

Did you know . . .

You can donate to CDF on line at www.cdfcanada.coop