



# A Human Future

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## *Youth and International Development*

L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.



Jessica Vorstermans is a recent MA graduate from the University in Utrecht, The Netherlands, where she studied Conflict Studies and Human Rights and completed an internship at the European Center for Conflict Prevention in The Hague. She has volunteered, worked and studied in various Latin American countries – Ecuador, Paraguay, Guatemala and Cuba – and considers these experiences as definitive in shaping her in a moral, intellectual and spiritual way. Jessica is currently working as a freelance consultant and plans to continue her studies at the PhD level in September 2009.

*Jessica Vorstermans is a smart, dynamic young woman who has a passion to change the world for the better. We felt that readers would enjoy a glimpse into her journey and some of her very timely thoughts. Readers might be interested also to know that Jessica is a child of L'Arche. With parents who were both L'Arche assistants, she grew up in a family that often shared their meal table with people with intellectual disabilities and young assistants from around the world.*

A Human Future, is a free e-publication. We invite you to read back issues or to subscribe at [www.larche.ca](http://www.larche.ca). Beth Porter, ed.

### **Beth Porter – What led you to international development?**

**Jessica Vorstermans** – After high school I was unsure about what direction I wanted my life to take. Actually, I didn't have any real direction at all! Then, in my second year at the University of Western Ontario I participated in an academic and experiential learning program called Intercordia Canada. For three months I lived in a small village in the highlands of Ecuador with an economically disadvantaged family. I was immersed in a completely different life and culture.

One day I was traveling on a bus through the highland mountains, returning from a weekend of sightseeing with my Canadian colleagues. Sitting next to us was a small boy, only 9 or 10 years old, wearing tattered jeans and a dirty tee shirt. In our limited Spanish we asked him where he was going, and he answered that he was traveling from his small highland

**"It was a human experience of how extremely unequal our world is..."**

## Sarah Peek & Anna Zatsepina



*Since 1998, the Canadian government has sponsored over 5000 young Canadians working abroad in the field of international development, through the CIDA International Youth Internship Program (IYIP).*

*At an annual cost of approximately \$6 million, we believe that the IYIP program is one of the most cost effective ways for the Canadian government to invest in its young graduates. The program embodies a crucial opportunity for critical education, cross-cultural learning and both personal and professional development.*

*This program, up for review in March of 2009, is now facing the threat of termination. In response we, as Carleton University graduate students, have established a grassroots campaign, rallying Canadians from across the country to call for the program's continuation. To date our online petition ([ipetitions.com/petition/keepIYIP/](http://ipetitions.com/petition/keepIYIP/)) has over 900 signatures and includes words of support from IYIP interns, past and present, and from partner organizations abroad.*

Anna (left) and Sarah are MA candidates at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. Their studies focus primarily on issues of human security. Both women are also involved in community activism projects in Ottawa.



village to the capital city, Quito, to shine shoes for the week. He would travel ten hours by bus to Quito to spend the week shining the shoes of businessmen and sleeping on the streets, returning to his family on the weekend with the money he made. I was struck by the huge difference in our human existence: I was traveling back from a weekend of relaxation and laughter; he was traveling to a week of hardship, violence, and incertitude. How could two people be traveling on the same bus in such different circumstances? This personal meeting changed me – it was a human experience of how extremely unequal our world is, a concrete and individual example of this inequality. I knew then that I could not live my life in ignorance; my eyes and my heart had been opened far too wide.

**BP: Where did you go from this experience?**

I returned to Canada with a new and intimate sense of the great suffering and challenges facing our world. At times this knowledge was overwhelming and feelings of my smallness in our world engulfed me. But my desire to see change in our world has moved me to seek a place in the field of international development and conflict prevention. After completing my degree, I applied for an International Youth Internship Program (IYIP) in Guatemala, working with a local micro-credit organization. I learned so much! And I was constantly amazed at the human spirit; so alive in the adverse environment of insecurity and scarce resources that characterizes Guatemala today.

**BP: Do you have a sense yet of where you will settle in this field?**

For now I have decided to pursue a career in academia. I will add my voice to the discussion on the current world climate of insecurity, the continued war-on-terror discourse that dominates the field of international development and conflict prevention, and the conditions of human suffering that we in Canada are allowing to continue. I believe that we have to make major changes in our lives here in the North in order to allow for positive changes to happen in the South. I want to be an agent of that change and inspire others to choose this path too.



## Howard Choi



*As part of CIDA's IYIP, I was a youth educator at the Guatemalan Presidential Human Rights Commission, working with over 300 Guatemalan youth from across the country. These youth, from all social and ethnic backgrounds, enthusiastically participated in leadership workshops, volunteer work, and political activism.*

*This civic participation is impressive given the pessimism pervading Guatemalan society. Rampant government corruption allows 98% of homicide cases (over 6,000 in 2006) to go unsolved. Most Guatemalans live in constant fear in this climate of impunity, so it was amazing to witness the awakening of this new generation of young leaders willing to step forward and call for change.*

*Despite the sense of resignation I felt in Guatemalan civil society, meeting hundreds of youth dedicated to working towards the daunting task of change affected me deeply. Indeed, this experience changed the direction of my studies. I am now studying international public health in hopes that I can work towards correcting inequities and bringing change.*

Howard Choi is a Masters student in International Health at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health (Baltimore, USA). He is currently in Peru for his Masters practicum on determining risk factors for tuberculosis in Peruvian slums. Contact Howard: [hwchoi@jhsph.edu](mailto:hwchoi@jhsph.edu)

**BP: What are the problems facing the field of international development today?**

One concern is the rise of the politicization of development programs and aid. The last time a country gave aid without significant interference in governance systems was when the US helped rebuild Europe after WWII. Since then, we have seen development aid become a tool for donor countries to exercise global governance. A U.K. academic, Mark Duffield, explains that Northern governments see underdevelopment as a cause of conflict and instability, so they use aid to govern unstable areas in our world. I believe that this unhealthy development culture and discourse has been fostered through our reluctance to understand each other. We have the capacity for this; we just have to take the time for it. Without this understanding, development and aid cannot be properly implemented because it is rooted in injurious values and intentions.

**BP: What will inspire youth to be interested in this field?**

I think deeply human experiences such as the kind I had in Ecuador, where I lived with a family and shared their life for the summer. Or in Guatemala, where I worked side-by-side with indigenous Mayan women. These are places where one can form personal relationships across difference, and see the reality of human suffering and hardship. In situations very different from our own in Canada, young people gain an understanding of themselves, their place in the world, and our impact on Southern countries. Living such experiences with others can be catalyzing for many youth. They find themselves deeply challenged to make a difference in our world.

**BP: Are these practical experiences enough?**

I do believe that these experiences need to be married to theoretical and academic learning. Such knowledge helps youth to really engage, not just live the experience passively. Understanding how our lifestyle in the North directly affects those living in the South and the dialectical relationship between our shared futures can help youth become agents of change.

**BP: What should we be doing as individuals today?**

Whether we live in the North or the South, we are being pulled together in an intimate way now, through global problems which are affecting us all, such as the food crisis, dwindling resources like oil and potable water, and our fragile environment. We have an absolute need to work together on these as members of the global community. We can no longer afford to choose not to understand each other. We need to work together at building a more equal, respectful and just world – listening to each other and understanding each other. We often feel powerless, but each of us can help foster this climate of understanding. Befriending people from other countries, even choosing fair trade products, help sensitize our minds and hearts to the rest of the world. We can lobby our government to keep Canada's commitment to reducing extreme poverty through the UN Millennium Goals. We can make our voices heard to our MPs with regard to the possible cancellation of the IYIP program. We need to raise our voices in unison and do this now!

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*The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 134 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 28 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.*

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## FOR YOUR INTEREST

### Developing an Understanding

“Jeffrey Sachs, leading international economist and advisor to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, worries that we lack the interest to understand each other, ‘I worry, because if we don’t have shared understanding at basic points, then the kinds of solutions that are available will not be achieved ... I am worried about our capacity to kill each other faster than we can understand each other.’”

(Javed, Noor (2008). “Guru worries we won’t win war on poverty,” *The Toronto Star*, Tuesday, September 9, 2008, p. A12)

How can interest in international development be stimulated among ordinary people here in Canada? Some suggestions: (*click on the websites*)

- Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) Mandate [www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/)
- CIDA International Youth Internship Program (IYIP) [www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/)
- Information on the Guatemalan micro-credit NGO Mujeres en Acción, [www.worldaccord.org/](http://www.worldaccord.org/)
- The Promise of Microfinance for Poverty Relief in the Developing World, [www.csa.com/discoveryguides/microfinance/review.php](http://www.csa.com/discoveryguides/microfinance/review.php)
- The UN Millennium Development Goals website, [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)
- The European Center for Conflict Prevention, [www.conflict-prevention.net/](http://www.conflict-prevention.net/)
- Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. New York, N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2005. Interview with Sachs: [www.cceaia.org/resources/transcripts/5132.html](http://www.cceaia.org/resources/transcripts/5132.html)
- Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York, N.Y.: Metropolitan Books, 2008. See a short film on the book: [www.naomiklein.org/shock-doctrine/short-film](http://www.naomiklein.org/shock-doctrine/short-film)
- Gerry Helleiner, “Towards Balance in Aid Relationships.” PDF. (Gerry is a long-time friend and board member of L'Arche. In recognition of his international development work he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada. BP)

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