

ACADEMY OF ROOT DEVELOPMENT

by Graham Ferguson

The Academy of Root Development is a not-for-profit charitable organisation that has been working with Scheduled Caste people in Guraru block, Gaya district in Bihar, India since 2002.

The organisation's overall philosophy is oriented towards sustainable development through organizing women and youth groups in the target area, and judicious use of government and international resources for the larger benefit of the people.

Self Help Groups:

The programme brings under-privileged rural women together around the common activity of "saving and credit", facilitated through the establishment of formal Self Help Groups (SHG's).

SHG meetings are crucial to the empowerment of the women. This process creates confidence and mutual support for women striving for social change. In this forum women members try to critically analyze their situation and to develop collective strategies to overcome their difficulties. This process help to raise the awareness level and creates confidence among group members.

Micro-credit:

"Saving and credit" is a vital platform for the sharing of common problems. Members are encouraged to save a little from their household finances each week, with which they commence savings accounts. At first the group is able to



make inter-loans between members but as the collective balance rises they are able to borrow from financial institutions.

Saving and credit has been consistently found to be a good tool for community organization and consolidation, and it gives members of these poor families immediate relief from the exploitation of moneylenders. Professor Muhammad Yunus, who pioneered micro-credit in Bangladesh in the 1980's through his Grameen Bank, was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Today micro-finance benefits more than 100 million people worldwide.

Lack of employment and financial opportunity drives rural people from their villages, with their inherent support mechanisms, to migrate towards metro-cities and provincial towns in search of employment. ARD is working to strengthen communities whereby villagers can remain within their community and live equitable, fulfilling lives, free from poverty and food scarcity.

Income Generating Activities:

The identification of livelihood opportunities for the women is discussed in the group meetings. At present the majority of women are involved in daily labour at brick kilns, stone crushers and in agriculture. There is scope for village-level manufacturing, tailoring, as well as poultry farming, dairy farming and kitchen gardening within the farming sector, to raise the income levels of the women.

ARD will establish vocational training and supplementary education programmes to support the women in the development of individual and community-owned employment opportunities.

Strong communities benefit individual members which in turn further strengthens the community.

Donations and Gifts:

All monies gifted to the Academy of Root Development go directly to the project. A seemingly small financial donation can achieve lasting results in the lives of rural people living in India. As the new year dawns on us all, let us reflect on the equitable sharing of resources in the world and consider what we might personally do to improve the lives of those less fortunate than ourselves.

To offer support or learn more, please contact The Academy of Root Development. In Australia: <stageone@nrg.com.au> or in India: <sandeep_gaya@yahoo.com> or by visiting our website at <www.ard-guraru.org>

Venezuelan voters victory

by Warwick Fry

Oaxaca

While the western Anglo media has been somewhat subdued about the election results in Venezuela, there has been a total news blackout on what amounts to a state of civil war in the Mexican state of Oaxaca.

Oaxaca is probably best remembered by some of the more senior hippies of the Independent Republic of Nimbin as the place where guru Timothy Leary spent a year as a psychology research fellow, and 'discovered' the 'magic mushrooms' and the psilocybin that launched him on his career as an explorer of psychedelic spaces.

Forty years later; ... Oaxaca is a political site for indigenous movements (the cultural base of Leary's investigations), student, worker, and women's movements to 'explore' the political space left to them after a corrupt governor won control of the state in a disputed Mexican election - the dispute being based on the electronic voting system!

What began as a teachers' strike in the middle of 2006 escalated into a fully blown uprising, as students, and then indigenous, worker, and women's organisations reacted to the governor's response.

His response was to send in more police, paramilitary squads, and eventually (when barricades were erected to keep the police out) death squads, kidnapers, and arson teams to burn down the offices of opposition newspapers and political organisations.

The only time this received attention on the mainstream news was when and indymedia (Independent Media network) journalist, Brad Will, was shot and killed in an incident at the barricades he was videoing. Six other journalists (Mexican) have been killed and injured.

It is a situation that closely resembles the twelve-year 'civil war' in El Salvador during the 1980s when student demonstrators were massacred (roughly) every 6 months, and death-squads terrorised activists and intellectuals.

On the 22nd December this year demonstrations were held



around the world in protest against the human rights violations against the people of Oaxaca. Thirty-seven countries participated, including a group of Australians in Melbourne. This was unreported in the Australian press. (The civil war that is now occurring in Oaxaca will probably not be reported in the mainstream media until the US is implicated.)

Venezuela

In late November two and a half million supporters turned out on the streets of Caracas, Venezuela, in one of the biggest rallies in modern history. An Australian brigade was present and sent back breathless reports of the euphoria of Chavez supporters. Locally it was described as "the red tide" as Chavez supporters identified themselves with red shirts. (The sound files of interviews with the Aussie brigade can be found on <http://del.icio.us/nimbinradio/latinradical>)

Observers outside Venezuela, with more access to some of the right-wing publications and propaganda, were concerned that the US, and the people it supported inside Venezuela may have seen December 3 as their last chance to disrupt Chavez' drive to introduce far reaching social programs. A group of disgruntled former Generals had held their own rally several weeks before the election, and hinted at the possibility of a coup, and the US Embassy warned US citizens to stay home on election day with enough food, water and medical supplies for at least three days.

It all turned out for the best. As the December edition of The Good Times was going to press, millions of Venezuelans were going to the urns.

President Hugo Chavez Frias' vote actually improved on the 60 percent popularity rating of even the most conservative

polls. Voting in Venezuela is not obligatory as it is here, and Chavez wanted to make his win so absolutely convincing that he could claim a popular mandate to bring in profound institutional changes that will make it near difficult to roll back the social programs he has brought in over the last ten years. (Hugo Chavez is using Venezuela's oil revenue to bring in social programs in health, education, literacy, housing and sustainable energy and agricultural practices, and worker control of factories.)

The elections went without a hitch, (despite unprecedented queues from 4 am in the morning) and international observers praised the electoral process for its transparency.

Unlike disputed US and Mexican election results of electronic voting, the Venezuelan electoral office ensured that there were receipts for each electronic vote (one for the voter, and another for scrutineers), so that there was a parallel 'paper trail' if the electronic results should be disputed. The opposition conceded defeat, much more meekly than was expected.

Chavez himself delighted Australian brigadistas observing the electoral process, and the local Venezuelan community, by personally driving up in his bright red Volkswagen to cast his vote in a working class neighbourhood.

Since the election results, there has apparently been an increase in the business boom in Venezuela, with an incremental increase in trade with Australia. Venezuela has shown a consistent 10 percent growth rate in its economy since Chavez came to power almost eight years ago.

Since the election result there have been many voices from within the US to 'tone down' the anti-Chavez rhetoric.

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