

Ruth Compton Brouwer

CANADA'S  
GLOBAL  
VILLAGERS

CUSO in Development, 1961-86



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## Preface

It has now been many decades since international development assistance has been regarded as an unequivocally “good thing.” To the extent that critics of development have referred to the presence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the development process, even the sternest of them has usually found initiatives to commend. As for the NGOs themselves, though, far from being complacent, many were already engaging in self-reflection in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the publication of book-length critiques of the roles and relevance of NGOs by practitioners and former practitioners is largely a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Whether calling for the transformation of NGOs or their effective dissolution and whether writing from an international or a national perspective, these authors share an emphasis on how much has changed since the hopeful days of amateurs in the first Development Decade. Among those reflecting from a Canadian perspective, none, so far as I know, has harkened back to the existence of “a pre-Harper paradise lost,” as a recent polemic suggests.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, they are far from romanticizing the good old days. Yet some of them, writing with strong institutional memories, *do* recall what was in many respects a better time for northern NGOs, a time, especially before the mid-1980s, when the governments that helped fund them remained comparatively supportive and non-prescriptive even in the face of politically inconvenient NGO activism; a time before the corporatization of NGOs, on the one hand, and the rise of volunteer tourism, on the other; a time when many NGOs were a good match with existing needs in the Global South and so successful at what they did that they contributed to their own obsolescence.<sup>2</sup> Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO), the NGO I write about in this book, was part of that better time.

*Canada's Global Villagers* is intended as a contribution to historical scholarship rather than a commemorative work. As such, it engages in the kind of critical analysis of sources expected in the history profession. My sources, however, go beyond documents: they include more than one hundred living men and women, former CUSO volunteers and staff. In the course of conducting my research, I have developed a deep admiration for them, formed personal friendships, and felt more than a touch of envy for youthful pasts more adventurous than my own. These CUSO alumni are listed in an appendix and acknowledged along with many others whom I thank at the end of the book.

## Abbreviations

AGM	annual general meeting
ANC	African National Congress
AUCC	Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
CCC	Canadian Council of Churches
CCIC	Canadian Council for International Cooperation
CESO	Canadian Executive Service Overseas
C-FAR	Citizens for Foreign Aid Reform
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
COV	Canadian Overseas Volunteers
CUSO	Canadian University Service Overseas
CVCS	Canadian Voluntary Commonwealth Service
CYC	Company of Young Canadians
EAO	External Aid Office
ECSA	East, Central and Southern Africa
FSO	field staff officer
GAD	gender and development
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IRM	inter-regional meeting
MSF	Médicins Sans Frontières
NFCUS	National Federation of Canadian University Students
NGO	nongovernmental organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
RV	returned volunteer
SCI	Service Civil International
SCM	Student Christian Movement
SUCO	Service Universitaire Canadien Outre-mer
SUPA	Student Union for Peace Action
TESL	teaching English as a second language
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USC	Unitarian Service Committee
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WAD	women and development
WID	women in development
WUS	World University Service
WUSC	World University Service of Canada

## Introduction

Global Villagers. It was a catchy label for CUSO volunteers, especially in the age of McLuhan. *Maclean's* magazine used it in an appreciative article about the volunteers in 1969, at the height of the Nigerian civil war.<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, though, a different label had routinely been used: Canada's Peace Corps. Back in 1961, it had seemed the readiest phrase for CUSO and the media to use to capture the nation's attention and convey a sense of the new organization's youthful makeup and overseas focus. But the label was misleading in several respects, not least because CUSO was a nongovernmental organization (NGO) rather than a creation of the state. And with the growth of a new and more radical Canadian nationalism in the last half of the 1960s, many members of the CUSO community came to detest the phrase, so much so that in 1967, at CUSO's sixth annual meeting, a resolution was passed calling for an end to the use of the words *Canada's Peace Corps* in all campus advertising.<sup>2</sup> "To Serve and Learn," "Development Is Our Business," and other slogans would likewise come and go as CUSO itself developed and sought to redefine itself. This book takes CUSO beyond labels and slogans. Drawing on the personal reflections of CUSO alumni as well as on archival and private collections, it introduces readers to an organization that engaged thousands of young Canadians in the practice and politics of development in and beyond the two so-called Development Decades.

Portrayed as poster kids for idealism in the early years and as irresponsible radicals by some on the right at the end of the 1970s, the volunteers were like the decades themselves, a mix of contending tendencies.

Founded in 1961 as Canadian University Service Overseas, CUSO was the first Canadian NGO to undertake development work from a secular stance and in a context of rapid decolonization. By 1965, it was said to be “the fifth largest peace corps programme in the world”; twenty years later it claimed some nine thousand returned volunteers.<sup>3</sup> When I first thought of writing a book about CUSO, I was motivated by two related factors, one personal, the other professional. A high school classmate – studious, actively involved in church work, and likely, it seemed, to follow her Uncle Roy into missionary service in the United Church of Canada – unexpectedly joined CUSO in 1966 and went off to teach in Kenya. Over the years I lost touch with my friend, who died in 1999, but vague memories of her CUSO involvement recurred and had increased resonance as I researched a book about three Canadian professional women and their mission-based work in the interwar era. I was struck by the ways in which the institutional and social service work of mainstream Protestant missions in that period anticipated the kinds of development work that new NGOs undertook in the 1960s. By the end of the sixties, the overseas activities of such churches had themselves effectively become “NGOized.”<sup>4</sup> Why, then, did my friend and thousands of other young Canadians, often church-raised like her, instead choose a secular vehicle for acting on the idealism, the adventurism, and the varied other motives that took them into development work? Was it a minor transition or a sea change? And what did they actually do as secular volunteers? Inevitably, as my research on CUSO proceeded, other questions came to the fore, and this book took on a life of its own. Before saying more about its content, I use the next few paragraphs to remind readers of salient terms and events related to the broad international and national context within which CUSO came into existence.

As practices and entities, both *development* and *NGO* have long histories. But the terms acquired much of their present meaning and became common coinage in the post-Second World War era through agencies of the United Nations.<sup>5</sup> The proposal to assist “underdeveloped areas” as “a cooperative enterprise ... through the United Nations and its specialized agencies whenever practicable,” famously made by President Truman as Point Four in his inaugural address in 1949, effectively “*inaugurated the ‘development age,’*” writes historian



Gilbert Rist.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the Cold War, addressing underdevelopment through economic assistance and the application of modernization theory acquired increasing urgency and indeed came to be seen as crucial to the interests of the United States and other Western nations.<sup>7</sup> The term *Third World*, introduced in 1952 by French anticolonialist Albert Sauvy to refer to underdeveloped regions that were part of neither the Communist nor Western blocs but rather places where their rivalries would be played out, quickly entered the development lexicon. Present-day Western writers employ the term sparingly and with unease, but as Vijay Prashad points out, it was quickly appropriated by Frantz Fanon and by non-aligned leaders like Nehru, who saw its utility for uniting former colonies around a common project to resist the legacy and continuation of imperialism.<sup>8</sup>

The first United Nations Development Decade, proclaimed in 1961, set the stage for ambitious new commitments and expectations for multilateral and bilateral assistance to the developing world.<sup>9</sup> It was also in this decade that, metaphorically speaking, a thousand NGOs bloomed. In introducing their study of NGOs in contemporary Britain, James McKay and Matthew Hilton caution against what they call “the 1960s fetish” and observe that in the international development sector, such agencies as Oxfam and Christian Aid were already in existence.<sup>10</sup> Had they extended their study beyond Britain, McKay and Hilton could have added other, earlier internationally minded NGOs, such as World University Service (WUS), whose roots go back to 1920s Geneva and the European Student Relief wing of the World Student Christian Federation; and Service Civil International (SCI), whose pacifist founder, Pierre Ceresole, went in 1934 to earthquake-ravaged Bihar, India, with a few Swiss and English companions and his trademark strategy of work camps, thereby perhaps making SCI the first secular agency to send volunteers from the West to the South.<sup>11</sup> The 1950s saw the emergence of more organizations with a focus on the non-West, sometimes, as with World Vision, out of strong roots in evangelism. For Canadians able to recall this decade, the most memorable organization was the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). Founded by Lotta Hitschmanova in 1945 to assist postwar Europeans in need, USC began providing aid to Korea after the civil war there.<sup>12</sup> In 1957, World University Service of Canada (WUSC) was incorporated as a Canadian NGO. WUSC became the vehicle through which numerous soon-to-be-prominent Canadians, including Pierre Elliott Trudeau, participated in international seminars in countries such as India and

Ghana.<sup>13</sup> Many more Canadians, the author among them, would get a more accessible taste of WUSC's attempts to broaden their international horizons as its annual Treasure Van brought developing-world crafts to university campuses in the 1960s. A year after WUSC was established, Operation Crossroads Africa began encouraging young Canadians to develop empathy and international understanding through a few months of hands-on work on diverse projects alongside their contemporaries in new African countries. Taken up by the United Church of Canada at the suggestion of an African-American minister who had established the organization in the United States, Crossroads would later sever its church connection and expand its focus beyond Africa, but as Crossroads International, it lives on as a vehicle for sending volunteers abroad on short-term assignments.<sup>14</sup> Finally, across the world in Australia, and particularly noteworthy as a 1950s initiative that had an important influence on CUSO, was the Volunteer Graduate Scheme, launched, it was said, out of an urge to atone for white Australia's past racist relationships with its non-white neighbours.<sup>15</sup>

These examples notwithstanding, the 1960s was a decisive decade for the expansion, transplanting, and creation of development-focused NGOs. The Mennonite Central Committee, the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, and Oxfam Canada became important Canadian NGOs, and, of particular relevance for this study, organizations to send young volunteers from industrialized to developing countries multiplied internationally.<sup>16</sup> UN Secretary-General U Thant's much quoted observation, "I look forward to the time when the average youngster – and parent or employer – will consider that one or two years of volunteer work for the cause of development either in a faraway country or in a depressed area of his own community, is a normal part of one's education," reflected and resonated with the times.<sup>17</sup> As the author of *New Trends in Service by Youth* noted, the growth of such programs all over the world during the 1960s was "nothing short of spectacular."<sup>18</sup> In England, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), founded in 1958 by Alec Dickson, became an independent NGO in March 1961 following the "palace revolution" that sidelined Dickson. In the same month, by executive order, President Kennedy established the Peace Corps, vastly bigger, more ambitious, and influential than any of its nongovernmental "Peace Corps cousins."<sup>19</sup> Though early CUSO volunteers and supporters rightly pointed out that CUSO's organizational antecedents predated the Peace Corps, it was not until June 1961 that the Canadian cousin officially came into existence.

Canadians think of their nation as having a tradition of generosity in terms of development assistance. The emergence of NGOs in the 1960s and the optimistic mood of the period may have contributed to this perception.<sup>20</sup> Until recently, historians have not devoted much attention to separating myth from reality in regard to Canada's role in development assistance, or even to charting its course, largely leaving the task to political scientists, journalists, aid practitioners, and consultants.<sup>21</sup> The beginning of Canada's official contribution to development assistance is usually dated to 1950 and the launch of the Colombo Plan. In 1966, political scientist Keith Spicer, one of CUSO's founders, published an early critical analysis of Canada's contribution to the Colombo Plan, highlighting what he argued were flawed assumptions in federal aid policy overall. Three years later, journalist Clyde Sanger published *Half a Loaf: Canada's Semi-Role in Developing Countries* following his tour of a dozen countries where Canada had involvement and largely confirmed Spicer's analysis. Canada's official aid was frequently neither bold nor generous, nor was it well conceived, Sanger argued, commenting more approvingly on what he had seen of assistance provided by churches and NGOs.<sup>22</sup> Canadian official development assistance policies received attention in 1976 in some of the essays in *Canada and the Third World*, and they were subjected to close-grained critical analysis in several works written or edited by Cranford Pratt, for whom a key analytical theme was the triumph of pragmatism over "humane internationalism" in such policies.<sup>23</sup> But it was not until 1998 with *Aid and Ebb Tide* that another political scientist, David Morrison, provided a full-fledged study of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the major vehicle for orchestrating Canada's official aid. And it was only in 2010 that historians Bruce Muirhead and Ronald Harpelle introduced readers to CIDA's innovative and little-known offspring, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).<sup>24</sup>

CUSO's work overseas and its influence within Canada have received passing attention in some of these studies. CUSO, though, did not wait for the attention of outsiders: its returned volunteers (RVs) and staff began early on to document their own history. In 1968, CUSO's first full-time executive director, Bill McWhinney, framed a varied collection of volunteer narratives with a lengthy introduction to CUSO's origins. In 1985, Ian Smillie, also an RV and former executive director, published a much different insider history before going on to a long career as an author and consultant on international development issues.<sup>25</sup> Beginning in the mid-1960s, several RVs wrote graduate theses on aspects of CUSO.<sup>26</sup> Other former volunteers who went on to careers linked to

international development have provided broader analyses of the NGO phenomenon in Canada, largely with a view to improving NGOs' self-understanding and performance.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, especially as early CUSO volunteers have reached the stage of retirement, several have published collections of their youthful letters home.<sup>28</sup>

What has not yet appeared despite the passing of more than half a century since Canadians began to participate in the age of development is an academic history of CUSO or of any other development-focused NGO. This lacuna is not peculiarly Canadian: as Akira Iriye has observed, when historians study international relations, they typically do so from a state-centred perspective.<sup>29</sup> I hope that my book will be the beginning of a succession of alternative and complementary perspectives. Studies of the origins and evolution of secular NGOs such as CUSO and Oxfam Canada and of faith-based organizations such as KAIROS and its antecedents can enhance our understanding of the evolution of Canada's global consciousness beyond the missionary era and complement analyses of the role played by Canada in international development through bilateral and multilateral agencies. In choosing to make CUSO the specific focus of my study I was motivated by several factors in addition to those mentioned earlier. CUSO was the first NGO to receive government assistance for development work and during this period received larger amounts than any other NGO. Indeed, it was pressure from the CUSO community and its supporters that resulted in a significant shift in external aid policy: the establishment within CIDA in 1968 of a specific division to assist NGOs on an ongoing basis. In taking this step, CIDA became something of a role model internationally among official aid agencies. Moreover, like the missionaries before them, CUSO's thousands of volunteers became the human face of Canada in many parts of the developing world, a presence for some years in more than forty countries. Beginning with the civil war in Nigeria in the late 1960s, CUSO volunteers and staff also became, along with activist churches, Oxfam Canada, and other groups, a major lobbying constituency in trying to influence Canadian foreign and aid policies. By the end of the 1970s, CUSO's forays into development education and its controversial support for anticolonial and anti-apartheid activism in southern Africa had made it a target of right-wing criticism and as such a source of vulnerability and potential embarrassment for CIDA and for the federal government more generally. As these and other aspects of the organization's reach and activism are recovered, it is less likely that CUSO will remain absent in histories of Canada's role in the Global South.

This book deals only with CUSO's first quarter century. CUSO still exists as a volunteer-sponsoring organization, by now claiming some fifteen thousand alumni. But since its 2008 merger with VSO, its British counterpart, it has operated under two different names: first CUSO-VSO and now Cuso International. Especially with these name changes, it is unquestionably less familiar to Canadians than NGOs such as Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), whose involvement with emergency aid and relief work periodically brings them into the limelight. In choosing to focus on the years 1961-86, and especially on the two Development Decades, I am dealing with the period when CUSO was in its heyday, its volunteers still overwhelmingly *young* Canadians, often straight out of university. Demographic and other changes accelerating in the early- to mid-1980s as the organization placed fewer volunteers, typically older, professionally trained, and experienced, resulted in what insiders called "a new CUSO." As its records become available, it will merit its own history.

Chapter 1 of *Canada's Global Villagers* analyzes CUSO's competing founding narratives and provides a profile of the 1960s volunteers. Most members of the first cohort went to India, where placements ended after just a decade. To the extent that India lingers in CUSO's institutional memory, its work there is associated with its pioneering phase, with naive expectations and hair-shirt idealism. The early India volunteers subscribed to a philosophy of service that gave pride of place to the promotion of international goodwill and understanding through simple grassroots living. But as I argue in Chapter 2, without abandoning that philosophy, the volunteers quickly moved beyond an inevitable early naïveté and actively sought niches for useful work. Their maturity and commitment helped overcome early reservations about CUSO in official Ottawa, while the eclectic nature and challenges of their postings provided important early lessons in development and drew them into such new areas as family planning and the green revolution. Meanwhile, as government funding became available to CUSO from the mid-1960s, the organization lost its early bootstraps character. What had been a tiny secretariat at its Ottawa headquarters became an emerging bureaucracy invested in the "business" of development. This period also saw the emergence internationally of scathing critiques of development<sup>30</sup> and the return of politicized volunteers. These changes set the stage for the intense debates and substantial upheaval within CUSO in the 1970s that are the subject of Chapter 3. Nigeria, which became, early on, the biggest placement country for CUSO, was also in several respects its most daunting field, as Chapter 4 shows. The everyday challenges of living and working in Africa's

most populous country quickly emerged, followed by a civil war that sharply divided the CUSO community on the ground and in Canada. In the 1970s, programming in Nigeria came under further criticism within the organization, especially from politicized volunteers and staff who declared that the ongoing concern with providing teachers to that country was not *real* development. In Chapter 5, the focus of the book again turns homeward to consider the question of the long-term impact of the volunteer experience on Canadian society and on the volunteers themselves. Numerous CUSO alumni remained involved in development through official agencies and NGOs or did analogous work on domestic issues such as those confronting First Nations peoples. Many more RVs, shaped irrevocably by their overseas experience, undertook to tutor their fellow Canadians about the needs – and the cultural richness – of the developing world, whether in their workplaces or in the communities to which they returned. It became something of a refrain to say that CUSO's greatest contribution to development was made within Canada. As for the early slogan “To Serve and Learn,” CUSO volunteers interviewed for this book were nearly unanimous in turning it around to declare that they had learned far more than they had served. In the Conclusion to *Canada's Global Villagers*, I return briefly to this point and to the metaphor of “gnat against elephant” used by an early RV to put the immensity of the overseas challenge and the volunteers' realism about their own contribution into perspective.

There are several aspects of CUSO's first quarter century that receive scant coverage in this book, among them its fractious relationship with SUCO, its francophone sibling. There is also limited coverage of CUSO's overseas work outside India and Nigeria, although interviews with volunteers who served in other placement regions have yielded valuable insights and fruitful comparisons. Moreover, CUSO's connections with eastern and southern Africa receive a good deal of attention, particularly in Chapter 3, as the site of inspiration and engagement for many volunteers and staff who became political activists in the 1970s. Throughout the book, I make abundant use of personal anecdotes as a way of considering how individual lives intersect with large-scale movements, particularly, in this case, with the secular and reformist impulses animating contemporary Canada and with the international movements for development and decolonization that drew the volunteers abroad. Their recollections tell us much about how they remember themselves as individuals responding to these larger forces. Collectively, they convey a vivid sense of young Canadians

discovering worlds very different from their home communities and in the process engaging in voyages of self-discovery and personal growth.

During the decades considered here, CUSO as an organization was itself in development. Through close attention to how it responded to specific issues, it may be possible to contribute insights into some of the “big questions” that have also challenged other NGOs: What are the trade-offs when an NGO accepts substantial state funding? How does its interpretation of its mission change in response to on-the-ground issues and new development paradigms (development as a “business,” for instance, and “women in development”)? Should NGOs begin or continue to work in countries notable for corrupt regimes and deplorable human rights practices? Should they intervene in the internal politics of a country if they believe intervention is the best way to advance aid and development, or simply concentrate on sending qualified workers?<sup>31</sup> Should they try to stay on in a country that starts to withdraw its welcome mat if they believe that they can still function to meet community needs? How do they avoid self-destructing in the face of ideological challenges such as those that arose when internationally influential figures like Ivan Illich began decrying the export of Western-style institutions, especially formal education, the very kind of work in which volunteers were most heavily involved? One question that CUSO seems to have spent relatively little time considering was that of concentration versus dispersion. Why did it spread itself across so many countries, especially since the dispersion approach has so frequently been criticized in regard to official aid? Finally, given the fact that NGOs like CUSO *did* carry on despite increasingly sharp critiques of development work and their own intense soul-searching and internal debates, how did they redefine themselves in order to justify an ongoing role?

A significant number of volunteers, and particularly volunteers-turned-staff, *did* engage with the big questions. But during their two-year assignments, volunteers mainly had to deal with the everyday realities of their placements. For a few, there would be a significant boredom factor, and as they themselves acknowledged, they could not always triumph over adverse circumstances to make a success of their assignment. Furthermore, there were undeniably some who went into CUSO ill-equipped motivationally, academically, or psychologically to cope with the realities of their placements. Still, when one early supporter referred to the first cohort of volunteers as “fine young Canadians” in introducing them to community groups whose financial support he courted, he was

identifying an unmistakable strand of commitment and idealism, however quaint his phrase may sound now and however much it amused and embarrassed the young men and women he was describing, who were very much conscious of complexity in their own motives. The strand of idealism arguably remained among their successors even when they restyled it *pragmatic* idealism and perhaps especially when they became advocates of more politicized approaches to development.

Collectively, the volunteers who participated in these Development Decades returned home enriched by their overseas experience and anxious to make Canada a less parochial and more generous country. Collectively, too, they embody the interconnectedness of our country's overseas and domestic narratives. The first of these narratives is paramount for this book, but I hope that my account also contributes to a broader understanding of salient themes in this period of Canadian history. Organizationally, CUSO was shaped by, and in some cases influenced, new university and state initiatives and new ideas about civil society. At an individual level, the young volunteers personified the complexities and ironies of an increasingly secular Canada and new, more capacious ways of thinking about race and sexuality and gender roles. CUSO gave them an open road and a chance to grow. Transnationalists,<sup>32</sup> idealists, and engaged citizens, they pushed Canada to live up to its own best self-image. It has been a pleasure to follow them on their journeys.



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