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International Volunteers, International Partnerships

Adam Tiller and Peter Devereux (Australia)

[Presentation Report]

Many people want to support and work in overseas developing countries. Peter and Adam coordinate these volunteers with the developing countries in need.

This meeting began with all people introducing themselves by name, country, interest and involvement in permaculture.

Peter spoke first by stating that his broad aims are dealing with philosophical issues with working overseas as well as dealing with the practical issues. Founded in 1961, the Overseas Service Bureau (OSB) now conducts its activities in close to 50 countries throughout Africa, Asia, the Pacific and Latin America. OSB provides opportunities for Australians to *live alongside* people in developing communities and work *in partnership* with them in order to:

- foster cross cultural relationships and international understanding;
- assist in the development of their own and other communities;
- and contribute to a peaceful and just world.

As a community-based non-profit organisation, the OSB's principal concern is human development. It gives emphasis to the importance of partnership, teamwork and consultation believing that the skills and contributions of all individuals should be valued equally.

OSB is best known for the Australian Volunteers Abroad (AVA) program which facilitates the placement of approximately 270 volunteers each year. OSB responds to requests received from organisations in developing countries by facilitating the placement of interested and suitably qualified Australians. Increasingly today requests are for people with direct permaculture or permaculture-related skills, for example community forestry, sustainable agriculture, rural community development.

Some examples of OSB placements:

- Wayne in El Salvador working in the early 90s with the Salvadorian Centre for Appropriate Technology, whose fundamental objective is to promote and develop projects that contribute to a process of sustainable development;
- The Vietnamese Community Forestry Project was funded by AusAid and managed by OSB. Three OSB personnel worked on the project, two horticulturalists and a forester. The Australians provided technical support and training to villagers in skills such as composting, irrigation techniques, crop selection and fertilisation in areas where, due to land-clearing and soil degradation, food supplies were being threatened. Three years later, apricots, pineapples and cashews are among the new crops that have been added to traditional crops. Improved stove designs are using less firewood;
- In India Linda was an AVA horticulturalist in Orissa, northern India with a local NGO, Gran Vikas, on a social forestry project where women propagated and cultivated seedlings. Gran Vikas is a large organisation that runs a number of community development programs throughout northern India.

From OSB's long experience several key elements have been identified with the success of volunteer placements, including the length of their stay, their immersion in the local communities alongside local people under similar conditions, and the local organisation being the employer. These factors all lessen the importance of differences and allow greater opportunity for the diversity to be understood and celebrated.

OSB also does a great deal of important work building partnerships that do not involve volunteers. The Projects Partners program for example helped translate and submit a Managua reforestation project proposal developed by FACS Nicaragua to the former NGO Environment Initiative funding window of AusAid. The project proposal was successful and it is hoped the first release of funds will soon provide the impetus for this community-based tree-planting effort.

OSB aims to make its volunteer program a cyclic one that promotes long term engagement with development issues, not just whilst people are away, but also before they go and when they return.

OSB like permaculture attempts to work within the social, economic, environmental and cultural contexts for beneficial and sustainable development. That is why OSB hopes for continuing and strengthening cooperation with local, national and international permaculture organisations and people.

Adam Tiller spoke on the Permaculture Global Assistance Network (PGAN). PGAN is an Australian association which networks with permaculture groups around Australia to promote permaculture in international development. PGAN directly supports a small number of projects in poor communities around the world and assists many other projects, working with international aid organisations. It links overseas NGOs with AusAid which has a large budget per year. PGAN looks for funding on behalf of overseas projects.

Adam stressed the need for preparation before going overseas such as reading about other's experiences, working in Australia and making links with overseas. There is a need to humble oneself before going, to realize that much work has already been done on the project before the volunteers arrival, not to go in saying "here is permaculture, this is the answer" but to realise the enormous difficulties faced by the people.

Peter advises volunteers not to do it alone, to work within an organisation such as the local NGO which will give a bit of structure without the institutionalisation. A long stay is also suggested for maximum effect.

The meeting was opened to questions and comments.

Di Kilsby from International Women's Development Agency, stressed the need for volunteers to obtain a comprehensive background of the country, culture, work done so far and problems of the people before going overseas. She pointed out that, due to cross-cultural problems, the people may defer to volunteers by agreeing to a suggestion even though it may not be what they really want. Di also pointed out that much can be done to help overseas developing countries from home.

Finally Adam and Peter made two lists available for delegates to fill out;

- those wanting to go overseas as a volunteer, and
- known overseas projects needing assistance.