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2006 REUNION "THE BEST YET"



That was the opinion of more than 90 members and their guests at the fifth annual event, held this year for the last time at IDRC's Queen Street headquarters — next year the Centre will be in its new home, and we'll join them there. The regional theme this year was Africa: African decor, African food and drink, African music. And there was much more. For a full report and more photos, see page 2.

Generous donation to Alumni Research Awards

In the mail received by Alumni Secretary Chris Smart last Fall was a brief letter from Alumni member Rachel Desrosiers in response to the new Alumni Research Awards Program. "I was so impressed by the 'Program de Bourse' initiated by the IDRC Alumni Association that I decided to pitch in." she wrote. "Here is some money for your next round competition." Enclosed with the letter was a very generous cheque for \$1,000. Many, many thanks Rachelle!

The first Alumni Research Awards were presented to 24 young researchers from developing countries last September. The award program is designed to assist doctoral research students from developing countries who are enrolled at Canadian universities, and has been welcomed by IDRC President Maureen O'Neil. Although your Board had not originally envisaged the Awards program as a fund raiser, any donations are of course welcome, and will be applied in their entirety to future awards. However, please note that IDRC Alumni is not a registered charity, so we cannot issue tax receipts.

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From the Board...

On Friday 27 October IDRC Alumni held its fourth Annual Reunion and AGM, its fifth meeting of members when you include the founding meeting. To meet our focus on the IDRC African Regional Offices for East and West, the Conference Floor of the Centre was resplendent, decked out in the African decor created by Angie Anton, Dawn Lucas, the IDRC Conference Manager, and Kim Daly leading her team of volunteers.

The meeting was an unqualified success, and the 95 Alumni Members in attendance, with the 24 and 25 year IDRC staff members, had a unique afternoon and evening. To pay tribute to David Hopper, Maureen O'Neil, IDRC President, worked with our Board to create a suitable and memorable calendar of events. At 12 noon, David and Ruth met with a senior group of Ottawa business and development leaders for lunch hosted by Maureen O'Neil. At 2:15 the Hoppers met with members of the IDRC current staff. At 3:00 they joined interested IDRC Alumni members for the annual seminar with senior IDRC Program staff, on current international development trends, and at 5:00 the Annual Reunion commenced.

With the toasts to David and the reminiscences shared with the Members of the Alumni, we felt a genuine sense of comradeship in the room. For many of us, the day was a fine reminder of the experiences and genuine pleasures of working with David and Ruth. I did take the opportunity to remind the assembly that, while David was progressing in the World Bank, Ruth was leading the Social Sciences Division of USAID. When she had completed her tasks there, she enrolled in Law at Georgetown University and is now a member of the Pennsylvania Bar.

I am pleased to advise that Michèle Wilson has now rejoined us as our translator. Once again, our sincere thanks go to Danielle Vinette, Lyse Lavictoire, Bob Huggan and Jean-Marc Fleury for their highly professional translation work during Michèle's absence.

The creation of an IDRC Alumni Research Award for recipients of the IDRC Doctoral Research Award has attracted some attention, which has led to some contributions to the Alumni for future activities. Two of the Doctoral candidates, from Quebec City and Montreal Universities, travelled to Ottawa for the Reunion.

This year's seminar with IDRC senior program personnel went extremely well and the Alumni Members attending feel they have a better understanding of IDRC's current program activities. See page 4 for Chris Smart's report on the seminar.

Our best regards to you all. For those of you unable to attend this year, we hope to see you next year. We continue to welcome your suggestions for the Newsletter and for our ongoing activities. Members of the Board feel that the IDRC Alumni has reached a watershed, and we thank all of you for your efforts to achieve this result.

James Pfeifer
Chairman

Alumni Annual Reunion October 27, 2006

Africa was the theme of this year's reunion. Renewing old friendships — and making new ones — was the order of the day.

Special guests included two of the students who were recipients of the first Alumni Research Awards.



Photos by Catherine Shearer

What Do You Mean By Technology?



A personal view after sitting in on the IDRC Alumni Seminar, October 2006 — by Chris Smart

The Alumni Seminar that preceded the Annual General Meeting and Members Reunion was both looking ahead — and a trip down memory lane: a ‘back-to-the-future moment’, *déjà vu* all over again. The guiding idea of the Seminar is to inform the Alumni about what IDRC is currently doing and planning. It invites the Alumni to scratch the itch that got most of us into IDRC in the first place: we have ‘a thing’ about the frontiers of research for development. Personally, I found hearing that the future is a lot like the past both encouraging and worrying, and then inevitable.

Laughlin Monroe, Director for Policy and Planning, introduced us to Dr Richard Isnor who heads a new program area in IDRC called Innovation, Science and Policy (ISP). Alumni wanting chapter and verse on this work can visit www.idrc.ca/en/ev-90465-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html and follow ongoing work on the *ISP Newsletter*.

The back-to-the-future moment was caught by Dr Ruth Zagorin-Hopper (the first Director of the Social Sciences Division) when she asked Richard what he meant by ‘technology’? One had a flashback to those moments when the fate of a project rested on an answer to a Board member’s probing question. Richard passed the test when he assured Ruth that, in the spirit of IDRC fundamentals, there was no pat answer to the question; that the Centre’s appreciation of technology was not confined to gadgets and their associated engineering but to the pursuit of science and technology situated in a social system. Only with this understanding of technology could the Centre take on the development challenge — to seek solutions to problems that delay or advance human development.

I was encouraged by Richard’s stance on technology because it validated the work the Science and Technology Policy team did in the early days of the Centre — the *déjà vu* moment. But I wondered what progress had been made if the holistic view of technology as a social phenomenon still needed its champions to find status at the Centre. Most encouraging — and a very remarkable change from the early days — was to hear how ISP is seeking ways to collaborate more fully with Canada’s research councils and science-based government departments. In an increasingly interconnected world, where the poverty and disadvantage of the developing countries are tangible threats to the security of Canadians, something more than the restrained Canadian Coop Programs of my time at the Centre is needed. With this in mind the ISP has created financial incentives to strengthen research partnerships between developing country scientists and Canadian researchers. See especially the new program with the Network Centre of Excellence at www.nce.gc.ca/comp/IPI/IPI_e.htm

Mark Twain is reported to have said that ‘History does not repeat itself; but it often rhymes’. So, *déjà vu* moments are to be expected — take for example this observation: “The mechanism of production and distribution has been transformed by a combination of technical and scientific advances. There is no safe and stable basis for society. We must, for very life, understand and control its economic and political form.” That was written by the physicist J. D. Bernal in 1949! IDRC can expect to be engaged with that fundamental question — What do you mean by technology — until *déjà vu* gives way to *déjà entendu*.

Where Are They Now?

Remembering Mr Huang

by Kerry Broadbent

In August and September last year I visited China and Tibet in the company of my eldest son, Marc, who is the Chairman of a joint (Canada-China) enterprise. While there I contacted Huang Jianyuan, a recipient of a Centre Internship in 1984-85. We first met in 1982 when IDRC ran a ground-breaking course on the Management of Information Centres under the aegis of the Institute for Scientific and Technical Information of China (ISTIC). He was one of the ISTIC staff looking after all the local logistics. At the end of the course, we looked at several possibilities for follow-up and Liu Zhaodong, Deputy Director of International at Relations at ISTIC was keen to get IDRC more involved in training of trainers and 'exchanges'.

When I returned, both John Woolston and Ivan Head were warm to the idea and thought that we might offer an Internship. However, the Chinese People's Republic at that time did not exactly work cooperatively with foreign governments, especially when it came to releasing any of its citizens for independent sojourns in capitalist countries. So the matter languished in limbo until Ray Audet led an all Divisions team into China in 1983. Ray was able to confirm the Centre's willingness to offer Mr Huang the Internship and set the wheels in motion.

At the Centre, he threw himself into program we set out. From the beginning his ebullience and naturally friendly nature made a mark with all he came into contact with. He still retains a remarkable memory of the staff of the Centre ... Rob Robertson - 'wry sense of humour'... Richard Lee - 'hard working Chinese'... John Hardie - 'friendly, good jokes guy'... Vern Joransen - 'held the purse strings'... John Woolston - 'door always open, not like in China. Martha Stone and Maria Ng were both 'awesome ladies'. He had special praise for the Library and its collection as well as its 'lovely ladies'.

He enjoyed Ottawa's rich heritage, but also such shopping icons as Big Bud's, Giant Tiger and, of course, Canadian Tire, where he managed to save sufficient Canadian Tire money to purchase a rubber dinghy for his son back in Beijing! It was a defining period of his life that not only succeeded in upgrading his skills but his whole outlook at a time when China was beginning to awaken from its period of self-imposed isolation.

Now I learned that recently Chinese institutions, like counterparts in Canada, had downsized and fractured into state and private partnerships. Mr. Huang had as a consequence moved to a private institution, the Centre for the Advancement of Science and Technology (CAST). That evening I was a dinner guest of the CAST Director and his Heads of Departments who praised IDRC for its role in Chinese development. There had, he said, been a significant multiplier effect from Mr. Huang's Internship where he had been able to train others to apply effective management skills in the area of science and technology at a crucial time of socio-economic change.

Looking out on all the high rises, the glittering neon and plasma displays as we slowly battled our way back to my hotel through the dense traffic snarled up the entire expressway, I recalled those grey, monochrome days of wide streets filled only with mass bicyclists, correspondingly



dressed in grey-blue drab. No building higher than four or five storeys and no shops other than 'Number One' department store! I couldn't help feeling a certain irrational nostalgia. There goes Mr Huang, I thought, successful, satisfied and on a career high, but still just a little out of step with the modern China, still the eccentric we all knew. I was lucky to get in contact with him at all. As my son's office staff who tracked him down for me said: "What kind of Chinese is he if he doesn't have a cell phone?"

Paul Stinson is on the move again. He writes:

"I left HUPO in Montreal (see *IDRC Alumni Newsletter* No.9) after ten months, for a variety of reasons. I had completed the job that I set out to do, and since my family had not moved with me, I decided to return to the Best Coast. I have re-established CAPRA International – and I have been working closely with **Don Simpson** ... he's still going strong! See www.innovationexpedition.com." For more about CAPRA visit their website at www.capra-international.com.

All in the Family — **Nicola Pfeifer** was born at Wakefield Community Hospital at 7 a.m. on 21 October, 1970, the week of the first meeting of the IDRC Board of Governors. Nicola's arrival is noted here because she was the first baby born to a staff member of IDRC. Nicola was the first child of Jennifer and James Pfeifer, then Secretary of IDRC. Jennifer's recollection of the event is that "We were both very nervous — we were in Quebec, 25 kilometres from our home in Ottawa, we had no family within several thousand miles and the television had nothing but the Laporte kidnapping to welcome the baby." In Jen's memory, Nicola's birth would always be mixed in with the October Crisis, soldiers with machine guns.....and this Board meeting thing looming.

In due course, Nicola attended the University of Ottawa where she received her B.A. When her parents went to China on a posting, she was appointed President and Managing Director of her family's legal support company. She also enrolled in the College of Law at the University of Ottawa and completed requirements for her Bachelor of Civil Law and her Bachelor of Common Law. In September of 2004 she was contracted as a law clerk to Mr. Justice Konrad von Finckenstein of the Federal Court of Canada, where she completed her articles and was called to the Law Society of Upper Canada. In 2005 she was hired as legal counsel in the Department of Justice and assigned to a major criminal trial with the Competition Bureau of Canada.

IDRC has kindly made space for the Alumni website. First (and flawed) efforts to set our website up have shown that I need help from someone who likes computers and websites and who is willing to learn the IDRC software to get the Alumni site up and running and to maintain it. All of the text for the site is written and translated by others. The "Webmaster" would only be responsible for putting the contents on line. If there is an IDRC Alumnus out there who would like to help, please contact me at csmart@ca.inter.net for more information. *Chris Smart*

**WANTED:
WEB-SAVVY HELPER
FOR ALUMNI WEBSITE**

From the Centre

New Free Software Supports the Microfinance Phenomenon



Prof. Muhammad Yunus

Microfinance has gone macro. The system of very small, short-term business loans for the very poor that won this year's Nobel Peace Prize for Professor Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, is now a worldwide phenomenon. Microbanks and credit cooperatives have sprung up all over the developing world, providing loans to millions of clients. And taking care of all that business has become a big challenge for microbankers.

Microfinance works so well because the money is constantly recycled. As each loan is repaid—usually within six months to a year—the money is recycled as another loan. Money in, money out. Thousands of clients. Hundreds of thousands of small transactions. Keeping track demands computers. They're affordable, but the specialized software tools for this kind of work, known as management information systems (MIS), are not. They are expensive, and the essential training and support are either unavailable in the developing world or too costly.

That's where the Grameen Foundation and its Technology Center come in. They have developed free open-source software designed to revolutionize the way that microfinance practitioners access and use technology. Called Mifos, the new system was launched at the Global Microcredit Summit in Halifax, Canada on November 13 2006, where Professor Yunus was among the participants. At the same time, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) announced that it will partner with the Grameen Foundation to provide support for the establishment of an African community of Mifos users and developers.

Professor Yunus welcomed Mifos as a tool for microfinance institutions. He spoke about the power of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in helping to raise people out of poverty in the developing world. He offered the example of women in remote villages who quickly learned how to use cell phones once they realized that these could help them to build small businesses and earn a livelihood.

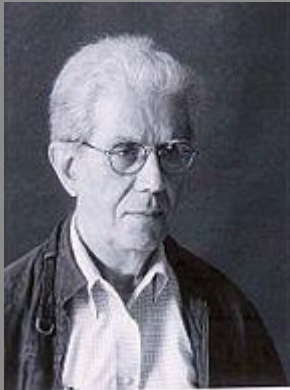
IDRC has collaborated with Yunus and the Grameen Bank on a number of projects linking the use of ICTs and poverty reduction. George Conard, who leads the Mifos initiative for the Grameen Foundation, announced IDRC's support for expanding the community of users in sub-Saharan Africa at the official unveiling of Mifos at the Summit.

The Centre's decision to support Mifos arose out of a workshop held jointly with the Dutch NGO HIVOS in Nairobi, Kenya in September. Here the representatives of more than 80 microfinance institutions explored their information and communication technology needs. A key issue was the inflexibility and high cost of existing commercial MIS software. Typically, microfinance institutions have scarce resources to invest in the purchase, maintenance, and upgrading of MIS systems.

Perhaps the most significant feature of Mifos is that it is open source software. This lowers costs and promotes adaptation: anyone with the right skills can modify the system to meet particular local needs and language requirements. This in turn enables microfinance institutions to better control their information management systems and to use available local technical support.

In Memoriam

Dr Emile Samaha passed away in Rome on September 23 2006 at the age of 73. John Woolston, former Director of the Information Sciences Division, sends the following tribute from Mexico.



Emile Samaha

Dr Emile Samaha had been director of the Lebanese national *Centre de Documentation et d'Information Scientifique* in Beirut. In 1977, when the civil war was raging, he headed for Paris and contacted Raymond Aubrac, who was then IDRC's representative in France. Raymond, in his earlier capacity as director of FAO's Library and Documentation Systems Division, already knew and respected Emile, and he recommended him to David Hopper and myself.

The timing was fortuitous: IDRC was cooperating with the UN in preparing for a major Conference on Science and Technology for Development, UNCSTD, to take place in Vienna in August 1979. The subject "information for development" was looming larger than expected, and the UN was looking to IDRC to provide expertise in this area. We recruited Emile and promptly posted him to New York. Emile also became one of the team that organized an IDRC-sponsored seminar on International Cooperative Information Systems in Vienna a month before UNCSTD itself.

Emile's scientific specialty related to agriculture, and IDRC was working very closely with FAO to support developing-country participation in its cooperative information system, AGRIS. Once the UNCSTD exercise was over, Emile was transferred to Rome. His fluency in three languages (Arabic, English and French) was a great asset in his dealings with the national participants. Then, a few years after his posting to Rome, Emile accepted the position of director of FAO's Library and Documentation Division, the very position that Raymond Aubrac had occupied a decade earlier.

Raymond, Emile and I shared the conviction that developing-country scientists would remain marginalized so long as they lacked access to the information services enjoyed by their peers in more advanced countries. Emile dedicated his formidable energy to the task and, by 1996, he had brought AGRIS to its peak performance and had made its products widely available on user-friendly CD-ROMs in most countries of the world. However, it was then that he reached FAO's age of retirement. He and his wife Isabelle began to share their time between Rome and his beloved Lebanon

As I write this, Isabelle is engaged in the sad task of organizing Emile's interment in the Lebanese village where he was born. I recall those wonderful years when we worked together - and everything was possible!
