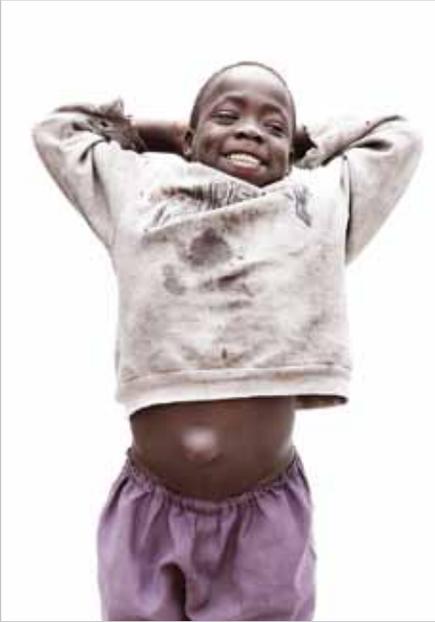




OXFAMExcha
WINTER 2009





Balume



Banza Masamba, 47, hairdresser



Kalimbiro Shamavu, 75, cobbler



Antoinette, 70

“ I think we have become anesthetized to traditional photographs of conflict victims,” says photographer Rankin. By photographing people without the context of the camps, against a stark background, Rankin’s hope was “to get beyond the statistics and show the human side of the conflict.” ”



Fidel



Tumani (Hope), 38, tailor

The photographs on these pages and the cover were taken in refugee camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2008 by celebrated photographer Rankin. The images were exhibited from October through December on London's South Bank outside Britain's National Theatre as part of an attempt by Oxfam to raise awareness of the situation in Congo. Over the past decade, the Congo has become the world's deadliest conflict since World War II. In the east of the country, more than five million civilians have been killed. More than one million people have had to flee from their homes. Many thousands more have died trying.

With studio lighting and white backgrounds used in his celebrity portraiture, Rankin traveled to the Congo's Mugunga camp where some 17,000 people are forced to live on the outskirts of Goma, near the border with Rwanda.

Describing these portraits, Rankin explains, "I think we have become anesthetized to traditional photographs of conflict victims." By photographing people without the context of the camps, against a stark background, Rankin's hope was "to get beyond the statistics and show the human side of the conflict."

Cover image: Karo Redi, 14, with baby, Happiness

These are extraordinary times.

We are in the midst of a global food crisis and an international financial crisis. Historic losses are rocking the US and global economies. The federal government has authorized monumental bailout packages. And yet, this month, the US will inaugurate its first African-American president—a moment that many of us thought we would not live to see. Had the election gone the other way, we would have inaugurated the nation's first woman vice president.

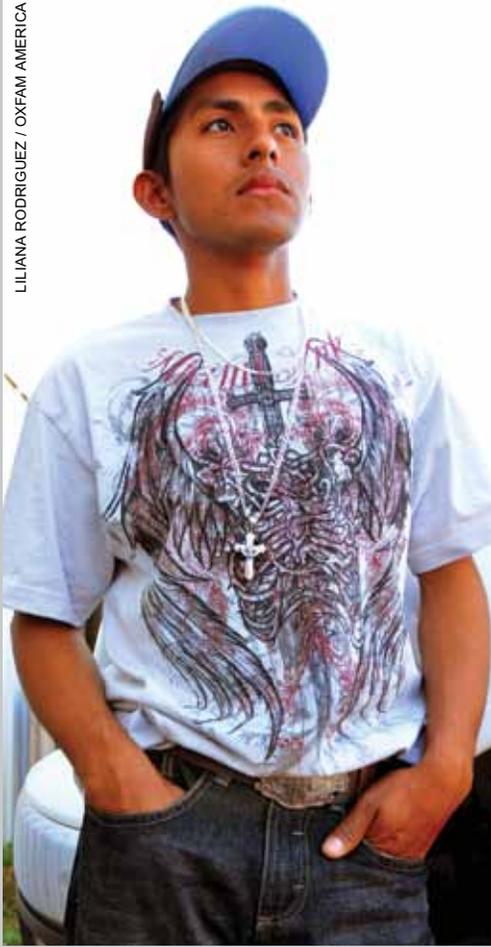
We must learn to suspend disbelief because sometimes the unimaginable is possible. At Oxfam, we face dwindling resources just as people's needs increase. Despite the challenges before us, we believe that solutions are within our collective grasp. To mark this, we open the current OXFAMExchange with these photos. The photographer deliberately chose to create portraits with little context

to elevate the human aspect of the crisis in Congo. These images are a visual expression of Oxfam's conviction that our greatest resource—our reason for hope—is people. It is the same sort of perverse hope that inspires someone living in a refugee camp amidst great violence to name their newborn Happiness.

So, in these extraordinary times, do not forget these extraordinary people.

They deserve an extraordinary commitment.

Raymond C. Offenheiser
President, Oxfam America



Drought has depleted the pasture around Okarey-Af, Ethiopia, leaving people there with no income and dependent on food aid.

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OXFAMExchange Winter 2009

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 Coco McCabe, Andrea Perera,
 Charles Scott, Elizabeth Stevens
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ABOVE (clockwise from left): Miguel Gonzalez Zaragoza gave up his university studies one year before earning his degree so that he could help support his family by taking a job in the fields of North Carolina. | "Once you know about your rights, you are not going back to the same position," says O. Sumanaseli de Silwa, who participated in research on how NGOs ending their tsunami programs can exit responsibly and ensure the gains they worked for are sustainable. | Fruit of the Sacha Inchi plant, rich in omega-3 and omega-6 oils, and a possibly lucrative product for indigenous Ashaninka farmers in Peru.

We welcome your feedback. Please direct letters to editor@oxfamamerica.org or Editor, OXFAMExchange, 226 Causeway Street, 5th Floor, Boston MA 02114-2206.

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Looking to Sacha Inchi for their future

Reporting from Peru, Oxfam's **Chris Hufstader** explores how indigenous farmers are growing an ancient plant that promises to bring new opportunities—and money—to the central Amazonian jungle.

San Ramón de Pangoa is a handful of houses at the end of a nearly impassable dirt road that frequent rains render a muddy stream. The homes here are framed by gardens of carefully tended plantains and citrus. The forest embraces the small community in green. It is spring; the air is thick with the smell of orange blossoms.

There are about 200 indigenous Ashaninka people living in this area, but most of them, like 29-year-old Dante Cheresente, are not making much money and therefore can't pay for things like doctor visits when family members fall ill or education for their children. They live off of the fruits and vegetables they grow in their small plots, but these are mostly for their own consumption. "We grow yucca, plantains, lemons, oranges, and tangerines," Cheresente says. "But we just eat most of it and feed it to our animals, because prices are so low it is not worth selling."

To tap into the opportunities of the market economy and make some money, Cheresente and his father,

to carry out an experiment: growing the ancient Sacha Inchi plant, which yields a nut that is rich in nutritious omega-3 and omega-6 oils.

"There is demand in Peru for Sacha Inchi oil for cooking, but also as a health supplement internationally," says Raul Ho, Oxfam America's program officer in South America. "It is well known now, and the supply is lower than demand, both in Peru and abroad. To meet this demand, we will help indigenous farmers find the right Sacha Inchi variety for their lands and help them grow, process, and sell it in the fair trade market."

Building on strengths

SEPAR is working with farmers like Cheresente all over the central Amazon to plant experimental plots of Sacha Inchi. In San Ramon de Pangoa, they are growing two different varieties, one from the northern Amazon and one from the southern region, to determine which will perform best in the soil and altitude found in their village. "This is being done with indigenous farmers every

Cultivating a valuable cash crop like Sacha Inchi can help the indigenous Ashaninka people in villages ... to connect with local and international markets on their own terms.

who is the village chief, and others in their community are collaborating with a local rural organization known as SEPAR, Oxfam America's partner in this central jungle region of Peru,

step of the way," says Ho. "We will help them enter this market with the right seeds and production technology, and the farmers will know the best practices for growing Sacha Inchi." The goal is to produce a high-grade, organic Sacha Inchi, for which the farmers will get the best possible price.

Once the Sacha Inchi seed germinates, it is ready for planting. Sacha Inchi is rich in omega-3 and omega-6 oils, and it represents a sustainable alternative source for these oils as global fish populations wane. Oxfam America is working with SEPAR in Peru to determine the best varieties of Sacha Inchi for growing in the central jungle region so that indigenous farmers there can take advantage of the increasing world demand.





PERCY RAMIREZ / OXFAM AMERICA

In San Ramon de Pangoa, the rows of Sacha Inchi plants are interspersed with corn, soy beans, potatoes, and other food crops to determine which growing patterns work best. Frank Mendoza, a tropical agriculture expert advising SEPAR, says the Sacha Inchi crop could be quite lucrative. “If we can help these farmers grow Sacha Inchi as just one of their crops, it will increase the income of the farmers considerably,” he says. Cheresente and his father, for example, say if they can make decent money from Sacha Inchi, they could devote five of their eight hectares—about 12 of their nearly 20 acres—to growing the plant. Ho and Mendoza estimate that with luck, in their first year they could get as much as 500 kilos of Sacha Inchi per hectare and sell the unprocessed nuts at about seven Peruvian soles (about \$2) per kilo. This could mean a gross return of as much as \$5,000 per harvest. With the right

variety and improved production techniques, farmers like the Cheresentes could eventually produce nearly 1,000 kilos per hectare, which would bring in over \$10,000 for unprocessed Sacha Inchi nuts on their five hectares, a huge income boost in a very poor region of Peru.

On their own terms

Cultivating a valuable cash crop like Sacha Inchi can help the indigenous Ashaninka people in villages like San Ramon de Pangoa to connect with local and international markets on their own terms: to earn money and preserve their culture and way of life. Preserving community and the Ashaninka’s legacy occupy Cheresente’s mind quite a bit these days: he and his wife, Laura, have a two-month-old son, Jason Fritz Cheresente. While his father talks with visitors, Jason Fritz lays in a hammock, quietly sleeping. Attached to the hammock is a string, which

his grandmother pulls gently to rock the baby as she talks with friends. She and her generation have witnessed the wholesale occupation of this central jungle region by settlers from the highlands escaping the guerilla war of the 1980s and seeking land and opportunity. The government encouraged this exodus, believing the land was unoccupied, as it ignored the indigenous inhabitants. The result is that the Ashaninka have been squeezed into smaller and smaller areas and can no longer hunt and fish. They are now settled and trying to become part of the larger economy while preserving their culture. Despite these pressures, Cheresente is optimistic that growing Sacha Inchi will help them. “We expect to increase our income, so we can support the elderly people in the community, as they were the ones who worked to get this land. We also want to improve the level of nutrition and education for children here.”

Growing Sacha Inchi is just part of this economic integration for the Ashaninka. Others in the village are getting help in producing and marketing handicrafts such as woven bags and traditional garments, as well as souvenirs for tourists. Cheresente’s wife even got a grant from SEPAR to open a store, where she sells food, soap, and other consumer goods. Small enterprises like this will help people earn cash they can use to pay for health care and other services. And more small enterprises will help start to move cash through the rural economy.

Growing Sacha Inchi and other money-making ventures in these indigenous communities will help people prosper and maintain their communities. Cheresente and his neighbors have worked hard to get the research plots growing despite a serious drought that set in just after planting last year. They watered the Sacha Inchi plants from a small stream near the village and tended the plots three entire days per week.

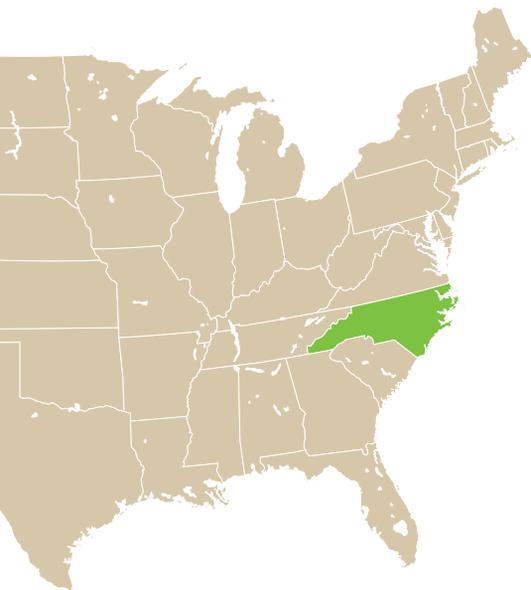
Antonio Cheresente, Dante’s father, says they are looking to Sacha Inchi for their future. “We know this research will help us improve our farms,” he says.

▲ Dante Cheresente shows visitors one of the areas where his village is experimenting with growing Sacha Inchi. Growing and marketing organic, Fair Trade Sacha Inchi nuts could be a potentially lucrative and sustainable form of agriculture for his village.



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¡Miembro!

For *miembros*—members—of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, their historic contract is now up for renewal. Will the protections these immigrant workers struggled hard to win survive? Oxfam's **Coco McCabe** reports.

They are dressed in their traveling best—busloads of workers, some in crisp jeans and tall cowboy hats, others in new shoes and slogan-splashed T-shirts. After months spent topping, suckering, and harvesting shoulder-high tobacco and other produce like sweet potatoes in the sweltering fields of North Carolina, these family men from Mexico are going home, and their anticipation is electrifying.

But this year, their exodus from the parking lot of the North Carolina Growers Association is significant for more than personal reasons: It marks the final season of a historic labor contract—the first in the nation to provide a host of protections for immigrant workers. It gives them better pay and a voice in the living and working conditions that have long subjected laborers like them to indignities and hazards most working Americans would never tolerate.

Four years after its original signing, that contract is now up for renegotiation—a job, on the workers' side, that will require a mix of diplomacy, pressure, and a keen understanding of the politics of an industry that both depends on their sweat but is loathe to value it. And that job falls to Baldemar Velásquez, the founder and president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, or FLOC, a longtime Oxfam America partner and the force behind the birth of this contract.

"The contract sets a precedent," says Velásquez, the son of Mexican farmworkers who himself labored in the fields of Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana all the way through college. "This ground-breaking agreement has allowed dialogue and problem-solving to replace accusations and recriminations—

and we appreciate the efforts of the growers' association to set practices that go beyond regulatory standards. It offers an example to everyone else around of how things ought to be done. We want people to have a different experience with Mexicans than their preconceived notions."

Who are the Mexicans who come to tend and harvest the fields that feed us—cheaply and well—while so much of the world is slipping into hunger because of wildly fluctuating food prices? Many of them are guest workers, here temporarily with the permission of the US government to do the jobs that local farmers can find no one else willing to take on. Without them, harvests that stock our supermarkets and help fill the coffers of our corporations would go to waste in the fields, bringing ruin to growers and adding to the global food crisis.

Fathers and sons

Though it is mid-October, the sun is hot as it beats down on the buses waiting in the parking lot of the North Carolina Growers Association headquarters in Vass. Men wait patiently in line to buy a last meal from a truck serving tacos before boarding the buses for the ride back to Mexico—a three-day two-night haul. Their bags bulge, stretched to bursting with goods for their families: new clothes, coveted toys. One man cradles a stuffed horse—too stiff and big to cram into his duffel—as he would the child for whom it is intended.

For Gustavo Arriago Chavez, this is the best part—being homeward bound, bearing gifts. For 16 years he has made the trip from his home in Aguascalientes to the fields near

here in central North Carolina. Because of the contract FLOC worked out with the growers' association, he's not only able to keep the recruitment fees that could have cost him \$400, but he can earn the prevailing wage set by the US Department of Labor. This year, that was \$8.85 an hour—more than double the pay when he first started. With the money he has earned over time here, Arriago has built a small house for his wife and three children in Mexico, an achievement that would have taken him many more years if he hadn't headed north each spring.

Still, the annual trek is not without trade-offs—big ones. This year, Arriago opted for a shorter work season—coming in June instead of April or earlier—because he wanted to have more time with his family. At 36, he has spent nearly half his life laboring on farms in the US. But fear about how long he'll be able to keep it up nags at the back of his mind: field work, especially for tobacco pickers, can take its toll. Nicotine coats the leaves of the tobacco plants and easily soaks through clothing and gloves, sometimes causing a temporary flu-like sickness known as "the green monster." Pesticides on the plants may compound its effect. And it's those pesticides that worry Arriago.

"Nobody knows when they might affect you and you might suffer from an illness," says Arriago, who has neither a pension nor social security to fall back on. His worry is for his family. Who will take care of them if something should happen to him?

Listening carefully to Arriago was a young man with a boyish face and a slight frame. A silver cross hangs from his neck. His name



SINDICATO DE TRABAJADORES CAMPESINOS
FLOC MIEMBRO DEL SINDICATO
FARM LABOR ORGANIZING COMMITTEE, AFL-CIO
HASTA LA VICTORIA!
EPIGMENIO SOSA RIVERA
LA JOYA
IXTACAMAXTITLAN, PUE
FECHA DE NAC: 3/24/1975
ID: 518372
MIEMBRO DESDE: 10/17/2005

A card-carrying member of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), Epigmenio Sosa Rivera, joined the union four years ago. Its membership benefits and the knowledge that solidarity would help his fellow farm workers are what drew him to FLOC.

is Miguel Gonzalez Zaragoza. At 22, he has just completed his second season in the North Carolina fields—a job he took after having to give up his university studies with just one year to go before earning a degree in accounting. Gonzalez's father died, and his mother and siblings need his help.

"For now, I need to concentrate on supporting my family," he says. With his earnings last year, the first thing he did was buy his mother a washing machine.

"There are not a lot of job opportunities in Mexico," adds Gonzalez. And even though the seasonal work in the US takes him away from home for months on end, he's able to earn more than he would in his chosen profession in Mexico. So for the moment, the deal is worth it.

"Now that I come up here, I'm able to go back to Mexico and have some of the luxuries I wasn't able to have," he says. The contract, which is due to expire on Dec. 31, 2008, has played a key role in making the whole arrangement work.

Stability, security

This year, about 6,500 guest workers—those who have what is known as an H2-A visa—have benefited from the contract signed between FLOC, the North Carolina Growers Association, and its members. And about 600 association growers hired those workers, paying them more than \$2 an hour above the federal minimum wage.

But perhaps even more important than the financial boost are the labor rights the contract has helped workers secure, including an effective grievance process that allows them to speak out about work-related problems without fear of being blacklisted and not hired back. Field hands who join the FLOC union—as about 60 percent of the guest workers now have—receive extra benefits, too, such as monetary assistance if they have been injured and are waiting for worker's compensation to kick in and financial help if they have to rush home for serious medical emergencies among family members.

Have conditions for immigrant farmworkers improved since the contract was first signed?

"Definitely," says Eric Jonas, a FLOC field organizer. "A lot of the big improvements come from workers knowing there is a grievance procedure and making workers feel more confident."

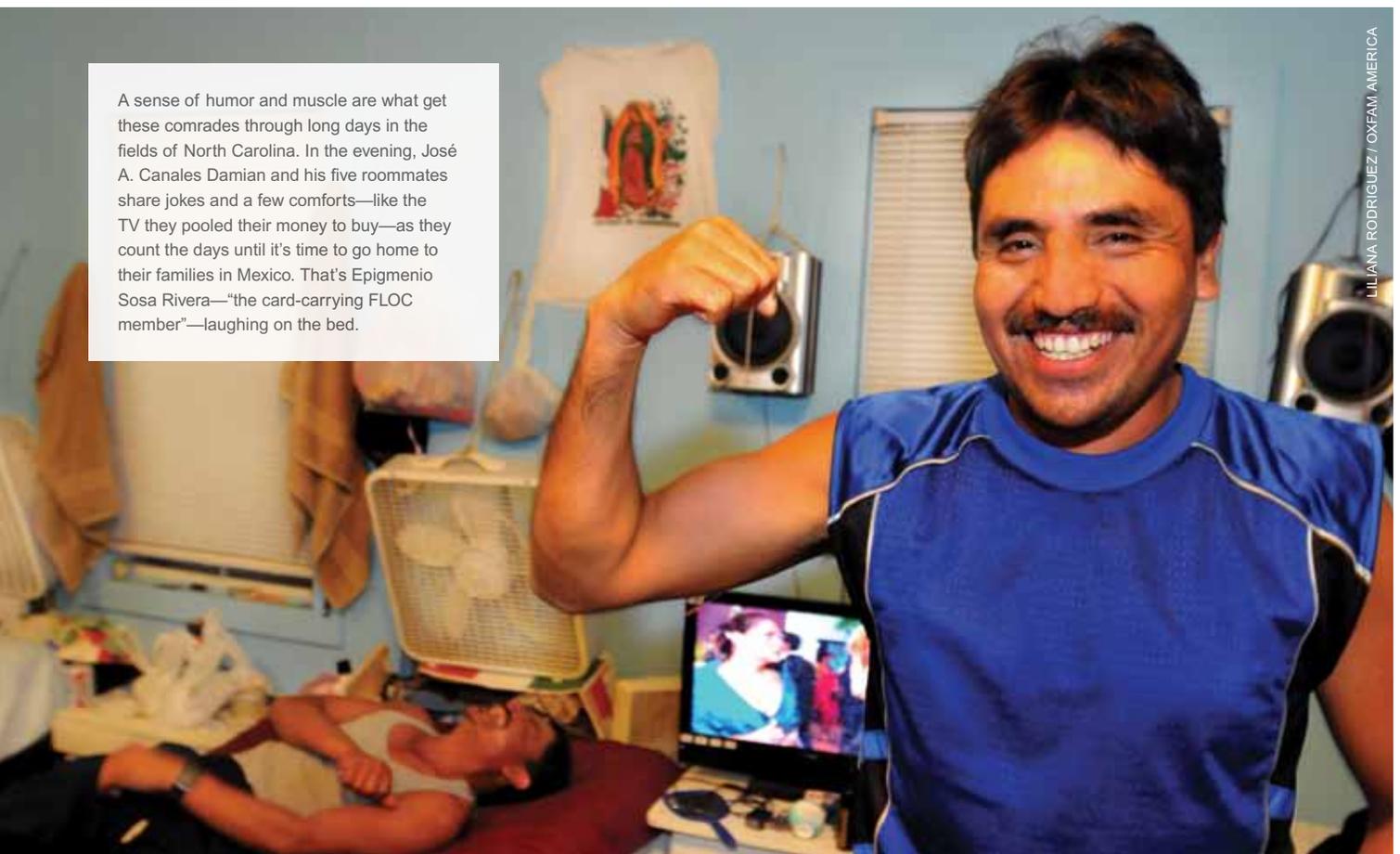
In the meantime, solid relationships between field hands and the farmers who employ them seem to be blossoming—an outcome that bodes well for both groups.

"If we have a problem, we can talk to him," says Victor Vargas Mendoza of the farmer who has asked to have him come back each year, giving Vargas a feeling of stability. "He's fair."

And though women are rare among the guest workers contracted through the growers' association, one mother-daughter team has found a welcoming environment in the three years they have come north. Laura Avalos and her mother, Maxina Maldonado, work for a grower who has provided the women, and one other of their family members, with a house for which he pays the rent and the use of a car. And they are grateful for the arrangement—even if it means they are away from home for nine months of the year.

“Our job is to teach workers to speak up and not be silent. It's the job of an organizer to share that vision of a greater world with a place for everyone.”

A sense of humor and muscle are what get these comrades through long days in the fields of North Carolina. In the evening, José A. Canales Damian and his five roommates share jokes and a few comforts—like the TV they pooled their money to buy—as they count the days until it's time to go home to their families in Mexico. That's Epigmenio Sosa Rivera—"the card-carrying FLOC member"—laughing on the bed.



LILIANA RODRIGUEZ / FOXFAM AMERICA

"There's no work in Mexico," says Maldonado. "This is a necessity."

For H2-A farmworkers in North Carolina, the contract has helped to soften that reality, guaranteeing them protection from the injustices—dangerous working conditions, abusive bosses—so many others are forced to accept. Velásquez, FLOC's founder, knows well about those trials: he grew up bound by them.

"From the time I was six years old, I was raised harvesting crops," says Velásquez, who was one of nine children in a migrant family that followed the crops, sometimes even leaving home before the school year had finished. "You see a lot of good farmers, and some bad ones. A young man grows up feeling angry about those things."

But for him, the worst was the foul language heaped on his mother by crude employers. The denigration she endured hurt him deeply as a boy and has informed his activism ever since. His position today? Stand tall and don't be afraid. It's a message he shares wherever he goes, and with Oxfam's help, FLOC is spreading the word as it continues to organize workers across North Carolina and to improve relations with the growers' association.

Organizing—far and wide

Dusk had turned to night by the time Frank Velásquez and a handful of other FLOC organizers pull into a labor camp about a 45-minute drive from their Dudley headquarters. Acres of soybeans stretch along the highway between fields of cotton sprinkled like confetti atop their stiff talks. This is farm country: everything is far apart, and checking in with workers often means burning a lot of gas.

In the yard among a cluster of cabins, a crowd of men gather in the dark and listen as Velásquez talks about the union and what it can do for them. Many have already signed on; others pay close attention to his words.

Inside one of the cabins—crowded with beds and painted swimming pool blue—the men need no convincing. One of them is

Rigoberto Vargas Gayosso, a 25-year-old university graduate who is wrapping up his first season as a tobacco and sweet-potato picker. He plans to become a union member on his return next year.

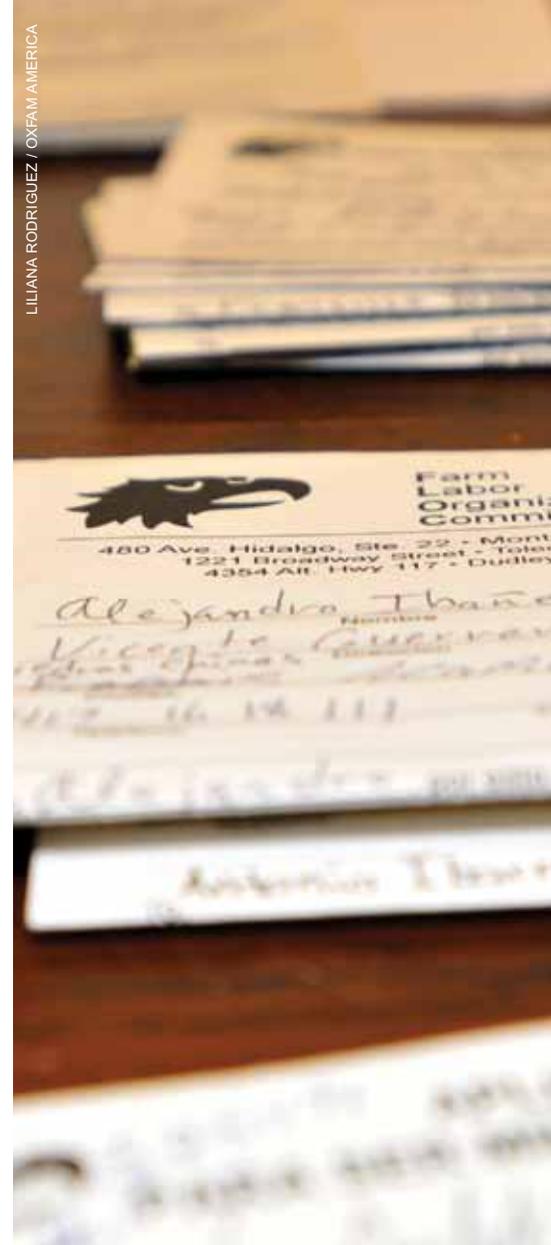
"It's always good to have something to count on—if someone is coming here alone, by himself," he says.

"It's helped everybody," adds Epigmenio Sosa Rivera, a 33-year-old father of three children. "Things are better for everybody who comes up here." Last year, for instance, he had to return suddenly to Mexico, before the harvesting was complete, after his wife developed complications following a Cesarean section. When he wanted to come back this spring, the growers' association made it difficult for him, he says, because he hadn't finished last year's contract. But the union stepped up to Sosa's defense—and helped him get his job back.

But down a different road, at a small camp set off by itself in a field far from the farmer's house, the workers seem hesitant as Velásquez tells them about FLOC. A few bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling light their common room: a concrete floor, metal walls, a row of stoves, and another of fridges make up most of their creature comforts. They listen silently, the exhaustion of the day heavy on their shoulders. When Velásquez finishes his pitch and asks if anyone would like to join the union, the men slowly shake their heads. No.

Outside, the night is clear and a full moon washes the camp in silver light. Velásquez and the other organizers regroup for a moment, relishing the peace of the evening as they discuss the silence of the workers inside. Was it fear that kept them quiet? Perhaps. But as the organizers climb into their car and pull away, they can see through the camp window that their visit was not for nothing: inside, the workers are busy leafing through the red-covered labor contracts Velásquez wisely left behind.

"Our job is to teach workers to speak up and not be silent," FLOC's founder said earlier that day. "It's the job of an organizer to share that vision of a greater world with a place for everyone."



FLOC opened an office in Dudley, NC, so it could reach out to immigrant workers toiling in fields across the state. Besides the paperwork that gets carried out there, the office has a large meeting hall where union members can gather.



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Itumeleng Modimola

Welgeval, South Africa

Itumeleng Modimola, manager of Pholo Modi Wa Sechaba, is a caregiver, community worker, HIV/AIDS counselor, fund raiser, mentor, and role model who has nurtured a commitment to care for others into a sanctuary of support for families infected and affected by HIV/AIDS in South Africa's North West Province.

Writer: Charles Scott, South Africa



The tree is a powerful symbol of stability and resilience across much of Africa.

Trees provide shelter from the blazing sun, traditional medicines, building materials, firewood, and food. So, it was fitting that a group of 30 women chose to gather beneath a tree in Welgeval village in 2002 and decided they had to take action. “When we became aware of the deadly effect of HIV and AIDS in our community, we realized we had to do something,” says Itumeleng Modimola. “It was not easy when we started; people were not used to the idea of caregivers and because of the stigma around HIV and AIDS, people would pretend they were not at home when we came to visit.”

But the women persevered, and in 2006 their efforts were rewarded when the local traditional council offered them land and a building as a base for their organization. Today Modimola is the manager of Pholo Modi Wa Sechaba, a thriving community-based HIV/AIDS project in Welgeval in South Africa's North West Province. The organization—whose name means “health is the root of the nation” in the local language, Setswana—is dedicated to overcoming the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS in the local community.

South Africa has the world's largest number of HIV infections—an estimated 5.5 million of the country's 48 million people live with HIV. Women are hardest hit. In 2005, one in three women in South Africa aged 30–34 were living with HIV.

Every day the Pholo Modi Wa Sechaba site is alive with activity as children from AIDS-affected families crowd into the small day care room and spill out onto the dusty playground. In the afternoon, they are joined by their elder siblings and other schoolchildren for a healthy meal and supervised afterschool activities where they learn life skills—such as how to prevent HIV/AIDS. The once-barren garden is now green with tidy rows of vegetables. The foundation and walls of a new community center are taking shape nearby, the material and labor provided by members of the organization.

Pholo Modi Wa Sechaba runs a support group for people living with HIV/AIDS and has 20 caregivers who provide home-based care services to almost 300 families in four villages. It is a member of the AIDS Consortium, a South African national umbrella organization

that helps community groups struggling to provide services for people living with HIV/AIDS. A grant from Oxfam America is helping the AIDS Consortium extend its reach to the North West Province, where Pholo Modi Wa Sechaba and some 100 other community organizations will get additional training to raise and manage money, design and carry out better community programs, and train their staff.

With the AIDS Consortium's help and growing awareness about HIV/AIDS in the community, Modimola says her organization is making progress.

“The situation has changed for the better; people are more aware of HIV and take informed decisions to protect themselves and their families. But we still have a long way to go. Government and other partners need to increase access to anti-retroviral [ARV] treatment and health services in our area,” says Modimola. “While we are doing the best we can with limited resources,” she admits, “training and retaining caregivers ... is an ongoing challenge.”

Modimola has built strong partnerships with the local clinic, tribal authorities, and government departments. Pholo Modi Wa Sechaba receives an annual grant from the provincial government to provide food to 60 families and a monthly stipend for the caregivers. Once this grant is depleted, however, Modimola predicts many caregivers will be forced to quit; they cannot afford to work without pay.

Local caregivers provide a vital service to the community and fill the gaps in the national health care system. Often they are the first to identify members of the community who may have become infected with the HIV virus and the last line of care for those with AIDS. While ARV treatment and hospital care is the responsibility of the state, there are not enough doctors, nurses, and hospitals to cope with the spread of the disease.

Like the tree beneath which Pholo Modi Wa Sechaba was founded, Modimola and local caregivers serve as symbols in their community. Their steady commitment in the face of challenges has given strength to many.



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For stories and more information on Oxfam's work on HIV and AIDS in South Africa, go to www.oxfamamerica.org/hivaids.



Beyond saving lives: Listening to the voices of survivors

Reporting from South Asia, Oxfam America's [Elizabeth Stevens](#) explains how Oxfam learned that the best responses to the devastating 2004 tsunami were those guided by communities.

Four years ago, on Dec. 26, 2004, the second largest earthquake on record triggered a tsunami that battered the shores of 12 countries. The disaster left 230,000 people dead or missing and displaced hundreds of thousands from their homes. In some areas of Sri Lanka—like the village of Dutchbar—90 percent of the population died. The losses were profound. As one Oxfam staff person reported, “I met people who had infants literally wrenched from their hands.”

Within hours of the quake, Oxfam had launched its largest humanitarian response in history—an aid effort that would reach more than two million people in seven

countries and would involve everything from meeting urgent public health needs to helping women stand up for their rights.

Four years later, tsunami survivors have come a long way.

The generosity of millions around the world has enabled organizations like Oxfam to make good on our effort not only to help people recover, but to build back better. After four years, many communities now enjoy better water supplies, sanitation, housing, schools, nutrition, and incomes than before the tsunami. The gains have not only been material: women—the focus of much



Local researchers like M. Kalyanasundaram (left) and H.S. Ganesh, who studied micro-insurance, brought dedication and cultural sensitivity to the tsunami research program.



Top: "Without a full and active partnership, there's a big risk that the program will turn out not to be suitable or sustainable," says Mallika R. Samaranyake, founder of the Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development, an Oxfam research partner. "There's a difference between consulting with communities about a program, which most aid providers already do, and really engaging them as full partners."

Bottom: The "polling booth" shown here is a research tool invented by Oxfam partner Swasti that ensured confidentiality in a study on the sensitive topic of HIV. The research produced important findings on how aid providers can help communities protect themselves from the spread of HIV after disasters. "In this process, there is no inhibition," says one participant.

attention by aid agencies—have emerged in force as leaders in their communities. If there were doubts about the potential for humanitarian efforts to bring about positive social change, the tsunami response should put them to rest.

What few of Oxfam's donors may realize is that one of the most valuable contributions they made to the tsunami response was to support a critical facet of humanitarian work that has historically been underfunded: research—systematically gathering information and insights from the people affected by a disaster in order to improve disaster response.

Research as a tool for thinking locally

When a sudden-onset emergency strikes, aid providers can parachute into practically any region of the world and mount a response that will save lives. But when it comes to creating longer term programs, a general knowledge of emergency response protocols is not enough. Local history, culture, politics, physical environ-

ment—even personalities—play major roles in what will work and what won't, and these vary country to country, region to region, and village to village.

Taking time to understand the local context can make the difference between a humanitarian response that is clumsy or deft, short-term or sustainable, divisive or inclusive, and—from a community perspective—dignified or disempowering. Research based on in-depth discussions with community members can help aid providers understand the needs and priorities of communities, as well as their strengths and challenges. It can also produce results.

Research in action

"When people hear the word research, they think of academic studies and can't figure out why Oxfam would undertake it in the middle of an emergency," says Oxfam's Russell Miles. Miles is the director of the Oxfam International tsunami research program, which, over the past four years, has completed more than 20 studies in India and Sri Lanka, each aimed at improving the tsunami response or reducing the risk of future disasters.

"Our researchers didn't set out to simply publish papers," says Miles. "They based their work on a methodology called *participatory action research*, which meant that a big part of their job was to have a direct, positive impact on the participating communities."

A study and video on conditions at temporary shelters in India, for instance, quickly led to the release of \$1.4 million in government funds for shelter repairs. The result of research in Sri Lanka on reducing disaster risks was a plan to protect community members in the event of a cyclone. A study of changing rainfall patterns in rural India resulted in increased yields for local farmers. And research into the coir (coconut fiber) industry in Sri Lanka guided an Oxfam program that helped coir spinners, who are mostly women, double their incomes.

This is the *action* in participatory action research.

The *participatory* element has to do with community engagement. Researchers ensure that all the participants—even those with limited literacy, low stature in their community, or little experience speaking in public—have a chance to be heard.

Taking time to understand the local context can make the difference between a humanitarian response that is clumsy or deft.



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Local researchers, fresh perspectives

Local and national academic institutes and nongovernmental organization partners—rather than Oxfam staff or consultants—carried out the studies. The local researchers brought with them cultural sensitivity and a long-term commitment to the issues they were studying. They also contributed fresh ideas and perspectives.

For example, after the tsunami, a variety of mental health workers traveled around the region offering survivors everything from New Age therapies to psychiatric drug treatments. The programs were not always well received. One research participant called them “silly, ridiculous, and inappropriate.” Chamindra Weerackody, a researcher who grew up in rural Sri Lanka, tried to get to the heart of the problem: Sri Lankan villages are community-oriented, whereas Western-style therapies are focused almost exclusively on the individual. He therefore created a study that gave villagers a chance to explain what they felt would restore the mental health of their communities as a whole. Their answers ranged from the obvious—secure livelihoods and dignified housing—to intangibles like living in harmony with neighbors, and they varied greatly from one village to the next.

“This study helped me to understand that well-being ... changes from time to time and place to place,” says Weerackody. “The value of this study is in showing how broad people’s perception of well-being is.”

Like many of the studies, the research on mental health has implications that go far beyond its immediate findings. In the rush to help communities recover from disasters, aid providers might make the mistake of assuming that food plus water plus housing plus incomes equals recovery and well-being. But as Nanditha Hettitantri, Oxfam’s research program manager in Sri Lanka, points out, “if harmony with neighbors is a community’s top priority, then the fairness with which aid is delivered may be more important than any of the ‘things’ that a humanitarian agency can provide. We need to pay attention.”

Communities need a larger role

As the findings from the various studies rolled in, so, too, did a message from the communities: in the event of a future disaster, community members want a chance to play a larger and more decisive role in the programs designed to help them.

Many tsunami programs, Oxfam learned, would have been more effective and sustainable if aid workers had taken time to get fuller community participation in all phases of the work, from design to final evaluation.

The next step is to help everyone from aid providers to supporters to the media understand that once the most acute, life-and-death phase of an emergency is over, the most valuable and sustainable programs will be the ones that take time to incorporate the priorities of communities—which calls for more research in future emergencies.

“Participatory action research isn’t flashy,” says Hari Krishna, Oxfam’s research program manager in India. “It never makes headlines. But it gives communities a chance to tell us what they want and think and care about most, which is the starting point for any program that truly meets community needs.”

▲ Research on how to improve the incomes of coir (coconut fiber) spinners, who are mostly women, formed the basis of a successful Oxfam program that introduced mechanized equipment, new products and markets, and a federation of coir workers. Before the tsunami, the coir women of southern Sri Lanka were among the poorest of the poor. “We earn double now,” says a spinner from the village of Lunukalapuwa.



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For more on Oxfam’s research about the humanitarian response to the 2004 tsunami, please visit www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies.



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