



## Introduction:

Upon my return from Peru I took some time to decipher my notes, study many photographs of people and places related to the projects we support with our CEP Humanity Fund contribution.

One photo in particular, of three Peruvian children, in the high jungle area near Tarapoto, on the other side of the Andes mountains, near the source of the Amazon River, captured a moment in time I shall not soon forget. Their expressions do not speak of poverty or worry about their future, perhaps because their parents have carved out a living in a strategically located cook house. As I set the photo of these children aside, I recalled the words of an organic farmer. When our delegation visited a workshop in progress, led by staff of ISAT in the village of Surco, a rural

community in the foothills of the Andes, this farmer and leader spoke with quiet pride and determination of the reason he and his fellow workers worked so hard. He said they needed to improve, diversify and market their products so that their children and following generations might realise a sustainable future in their own communities. His statement also reminded me of the neighbourhoods, perched high on steep hills on the outskirts of Lima, to which people from outside communities flee in search of a better life. If young families cannot find work in rural villages, they have little choice but to relocate to large centres, where they end up living in overcrowded, polluted slums, without access to fresh water, adequate health care or proper schooling.

For most working people in Peru, there aren't choices. Women, mothers, grandmothers, old and young face more complicated obstacles. Gender inequality, considered a social problem in Peru, is not acknowledged by many men in workplaces or in households of working families. During a seminar on Globalization and the effect on South American women, one speaker stated "The bigger the workplace, the more inequality between men and women."

Another speaker at a Women's Forum in Lima said: "Poverty has a woman's face." We learned that women's work in Peru is not recognized as "valuable" and therefore is "invisible." Even when women, work side by side with men, processing the minerals the men dig out of the ground, women's work is not seen as a "job." It is seen as "helping out", the same as rearing children and household duties. This lack of recognition or respect for women's work further inhibits self-esteem, already prevalent in the social fabric of working class people.

During our meeting with the Mining Federation in Lima we met a woman who recently lost her husband to a mining accident. It is a difficult challenge for a grieving widow to ensure she reads the fine print, understands and receives benefits for which she is eligible. If it wasn't for the Widows Fund, initiated by ISAT and dedicated individuals like Janet Barzola of the Peruvian Mining Federation, proper compensation for the life of this widow's husband might not be realised. Other widows, who cannot get support, cannot survive. Many will be forced out on the street, or work in other precarious situations.

Our delegation witnessed many women working on the streets of Lima. Some are employed as traffic officers, on raised platforms at dangerous intersections with traffic lights, oblivious to excessive noise and pollution from vehicles. Ironically, motorists do not seem to acknowledge their presence.

Female street cleaners work in early morning hours, alone on darkened streets, wearing scarves wrapped over their mouth and nose as protection. Their tools, brooms and small containers are not adequate for the quantity of trash littered on the street.

In congested, chaotic traffic jams, when motorists are stopped at traffic lights, many individuals walk from the sidewalks onto the roadway. Many of them are women, young and old, able or disabled. They hurriedly weave in and out between the vehicles trying to sell their wares: Everything from toothpaste to candy, from mops to Harry Potter books translated to Spanish. These women's faces are not covered with scarves to prevent them from breathing in the noxious petrol fumes. Their faces look drawn with fatigue, and their eyes speak of hope, and worry.

There are other risks. Women working with toxic by-products, on fields, in factories and soup kitchens suffer more serious illnesses and injuries. There isn't control nor enforcement of proper safety equipment or education on Health and Safety issue concerns.

As a first generation immigrant I understand the value of a job and the freedom it gives me. As a woman and professional, with effort and support of organisations, I know of my basic rights and choices. I've had to learn to demand these rights that are enforced by law. Laws and rights have given me choices.

Building self-esteem, empowering community groups and individuals are how our fund helps people to help themselves. The majority of indigenous Peruvians, women and youths, and other vulnerable people do not have healthy choices. This includes the mental and physically challenged who cannot afford health care. There is no "social safety net" or universal access to resources. Such services, where they exist, are primarily centralised in Lima and often misappropriated.

Basic human rights, such as the right to own property and the right to earn an adequate wage, are taken from the most vulnerable workers and families. The effects of colonisation, exploitation of people and natural resources, political unrest, terrorism and dictatorship have left the country in serious debt. It's estimated that two billion dollars of interest are paid annually on an external debt of 30 billion. Peruvian government could not borrow any money from the world banks unless it opened its doors to multinational companies. Peru's neoliberal government implemented structural reforms. This has meant radical change to economic, legal and institutional systems in order to entice foreign investment in the expansion of mining and other sectors of the economy, especially in services previously operated by the government. Quality standards and inspections were reduced or withdrawn and the liberalisation of foreign investment by multinational companies resulted in the elimination of workers' rights, benefits, and financial reserves.

With foreign privatisation many workers lost their jobs due to new technologies and foreign trade affecting the established industries. Workers' jobs became more "flexible", and the elimination of security and health and safety protections enabled companies to force out unionised workers.

Half of the unionised workforce was literally thrown out on the street, or forced into the "underground economy" where they have become "informal" sector workers, without benefits. Many, because of the lack of re-training programs and the lack of available jobs in general, ended up working in the overly competitive and saturated service sector industry.

Canadian foreign investment in Peru consists of about 65 Canadian owned companies, mainly in the mining sector, which bought out state-owned companies. These companies now employ primarily third party or short term workers, while the remaining "stable" formal workers are intimidated and afraid of losing their jobs. Some of them distrust their unions, because of the union's powerlessness to prevent the mass lay-off.

Currently, it's estimated that seventy-five percent of jobs are done by temporary, contract workers hired by employment agencies, or self-employed workers. The change in labour laws has provided cheap labour while the lack of environmental laws has proven to be a gold mine (pardon the pun) for multinational companies without a conscience.

Organisations such as ISAT, an occupational health and safety agency which is our partner in Peru, plays an important role in the study and education of occupational health issues.

ISAT raises the profile of working and living conditions of union and non-union workers, those who are formally employed and those in the informal sector (workers who used to have jobs who were kicked out on the street). Their studies and data acquired through contact with the community are processed and aid in the formulation of true statistics on the increasing rates of workplace illness, injury and death in Peru, including serious illnesses in communities contaminated by unregulated companies. These reports are available for presentation to workers, unions, government and companies.

The effect of the previous fifteen years of terrorism and the last decade of the Fujimori - Montesinos dictatorship plus effects of irreversible environmental damage contribute to disastrous conditions of health and safety of Peruvians, many of whom are indigenous. The geographic isolation of communities far from Lima, combined with the centralisation of government funding to Lima created many challenges for the non governmental organisations working to improve living and working conditions in the country and assist in building a culture of democracy and social justice.

The CEP Humanity Fund is a godsend for the workers in the villages and mountains in the high jungle of the department of San Martin, as well as for farming communities in the highlands and mining towns of the La Oroya region high in the Andes. The Fund's counterpart organisations provide training in leadership, and educate workers about occupational health and safety and environmental conservation issues. Most importantly, projects our Fund has sponsored teach about ownership and management of credit. As a result, our contribution provides choice and real opportunity for a self-sustaining future. We should feel satisfied our contribution of one cent per hour can reach so far and deep.