

Cuso International's magazine on global volunteering

CATALYST

SUMMER 2020



THE WOMEN
OF BENIN



trail BLAZER

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Photo: Nelly Rakotozafy | Innovation Project Manager, Cameroon



Skills to share.
Futures to build. 🍁

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editor@cusointernational.org

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Canada

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Catalyst is also available in French.

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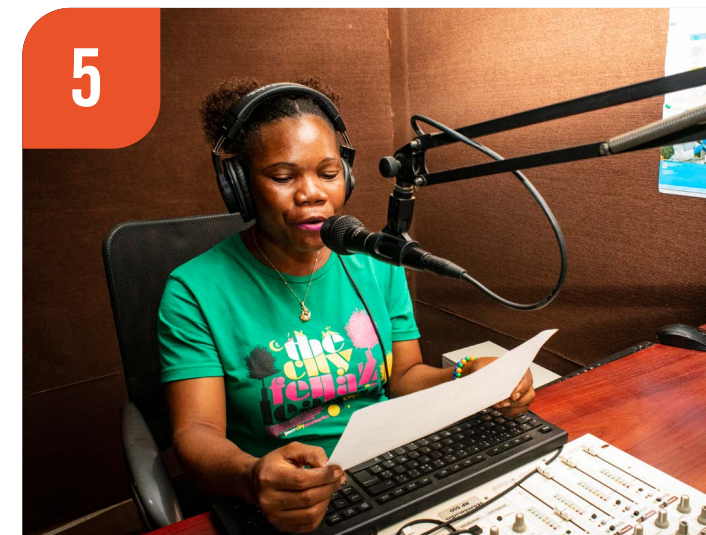
On the cover: A young mother and her daughter are part of Cuso's new project in Benin. (Page 13)

Photo: Brian Atkinson

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Above: Keo Pomeoudom is a farmer at a cooperative in Laos. Photo: Brian Atkinson



FROM THE CEO

These past few months have been challenging times with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) impacting communities around the world. It’s early April as I write this message at my kitchen table, and I must admit I’m nervous about striking the right balance here.

We are a long way from knowing how this health crisis will play out or what long term effects it will have, especially for the most vulnerable communities where we work. Our country offices and Canadian staff have adjusted program plans and in the early days of the pandemic, Cuso organized the return of our volunteers. Since this began, I have seen countless acts of generosity, compassion and kindness take place, as well as demonstrations of remarkable adaptability and flexibility throughout this unprecedented situation.

These same traits are woven throughout the stories you’ll see in these pages and I hope you are as inspired as I am when reading them.

We are continuing to update the look and feel of *Catalyst* and have shifted to publishing in the Summer and Winter to coincide with new programs. Our work in gender equality, women’s rights and opportunities for youth is more important than ever and we are looking forward to doing our part in the journey ahead.

Stay safe and healthy,

Glenn Mifflin

Glenn Mifflin
CEO, Cuso International



REFILL NOT LANDFILL

Photos by Brian Atkinson

Small businesses in Southern Laos reducing plastic consumption with water stations.



In Southern Laos, many micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses are reducing plastic consumption by selling reusable, branded water bottles and offering free water refill stations in their stores. The Refill Not Landfill initiative has not only been good for the environment, it’s been good for business.

“Many businesses have reported increased foot traffic as a result of the refill stations and our marketing support—over 169 Southern Laos branded aluminum reusable water bottles have been sold by the businesses,” says Cuso International volunteer Vivekan Jeyagaran, who has provided support with product development, designing inclusive itineraries, project planning and implementation, marketing, workshop facilitation and technical assistance for Cuso partner Swisscontact and local businesses.

In the first five months of the initiative, participating businesses reduced plastic water bottle consumption by approximately 200,000 bottles.

“We have seen Lao people, foreigners and backpackers buy the bottles to refill,” says Siriporn, manager of local café Delta Coffee in Pakse. “It’s better for our environment to reduce plastic. I’m quite happy with the results from the people who refill the water into the bottle.”

Left: Siriporn, manager at Delta Coffee in Pakse, Laos.

In Laos, as in many countries around the world, people are trying to reduce their use of single-use plastics. In 2018, it was estimated that more than 100-million disposable water bottles were consumed by travellers in the Southeast Asian country.

“A lot of tourists are looking for reusable bottles, but more importantly, refill stations—whether it’s for the environmental cause or because it also saves money,” says Vivekan. “Refill Not Landfill is reducing plastic and helping these small- and medium-enterprises adapt to the way consumers are changing.”

And it’s influencing change in other areas. As a participating retailer in Refill Not Landfill, Siriporn became aware of how many plastic bags she was accumulating when shopping at the market. “The vendor uses plastic for small things. I decided not to take all those plastics. I put them together in one big bag.”

The Refill Not Landfill project is led by Cuso and Swisscontact, and involves the Southern Laos Department of Tourism, local business associations and business owners.

“Both the private and especially the public sectors have been taking notice of the importance of single-use plastic reduction and the implications it has on the tourism economy in Laos,” says Vivekan. “Other provincial departments have expressed interest in expanding the Refill Not Landfill initiative into their provinces, while the Ministry has shown great interest in the potential of this initiative.”

Vivekan volunteered as a Tourism Entrepreneurship Advisor for 12 months in Laos. Born in Sri Lanka, the 25-year-old lives in Markham, Ontario and graduated from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Business Administration. ■

Top: Khampanya works the counter at Coffee and Tea, a partner in the Refill Not Landfill project.

Bottom: Cuso International volunteer Vivekan Jeyagaran.



Above: Marie Thérèse Manzoour broadcasts in Bagyeli. **Photo:** Brian Atkinson

ON THE AIR WITH MARIE THÉRÈSE

When Marie Thérèse Manzoour hit the Cameroonian airwaves in 2016, it wasn’t just a first for her, it was a milestone for the whole country.

She’s the first radio host to offer programming in Bagyeli, the traditional language of Bagyeli people, an Indigenous group living mostly in southern Cameroon.

“There used to only be French or Bantu on the radio. People would listen but couldn’t necessarily understand what was being said,” says Marie Thérèse, a Bagyeli woman who speaks five languages. “Now they hear my broadcasts and understand what they’re hearing.”

Marie Thérèse covers topics like education, human rights, culture, malaria prevention and women’s health on her show, providing important information to a population that was previously unrepresented.

“I want children to go to school. I want people to know agriculture is important. I want them to know health is important. I want all the children and women to get the health services they need,” she says. “This radio is their radio.”

The Bagyeli are among the most marginalized people in the world. Traditionally, their communities are located deep in Cameroon’s forests and many subsist by farming, fishing and hunting. But with increasing deforestation and land pressure, they are in danger of losing their land and their way of life.

Cuso International works with partners like Radio Communautaire Nkuli Makeli to increase opportunities for the Bagyeli. A career in broadcasting hadn’t been on Marie Thérèse’s radar until she heard about a training opportunity with the station and Cuso International.

She worked with Cuso volunteer Emile Anet to build her communications skills and learn how to run her own broadcast. Together, they practiced interview techniques, how to cover breaking news, using the various pieces of radio equipment as well as how to troubleshoot any problems.

Marie Thérèse says there’s been an increase in school attendance, people are more mindful of their health and taking preventative action, and cultural traditions are being shared in a way that wasn’t possible before.

“Radio is my calling. It gives me joy,” says Marie Thérèse. “People come to see me, ask me about my programs and even want to do what I do. I think I’m changing lives for the better.” ■



Above: Cuso International SCOPE volunteers in Colombia.

PERSPECTIVES: THE YOUTH OF LAS GARDENIAS

By Allison Vickery, SCOPE Volunteer Research Advisor

Working with marginalized youth in Barranquilla, Colombia wasn't originally part of Allison Vickery's placement, but it became one of the highlights. Here is part of Allison's story, as told from her perspective.



“With the support of government psychologists, I expressed the need for a holistic intervention in order to better prepare these youth to enter the workforce.”

Las Gardenias is one of the largest subsidized housing projects in Colombia. Home to more than 20,000 inhabitants, the area has been known for high rates of violence. In June 2018, the need for urgent intervention became clear when a teenaged boy died.

Following the boy's death, the municipal government of Barranquilla formed a committee to promote peaceful coexistence in Las Gardenias. As a volunteer for the Secretary of Economic Development, I had the opportunity to be part of the committee and work with these vulnerable youth.

My arrival coincided with the completion of the project's first phase. Twenty-two young people from the housing area participated in the initial exploration. They explained that boredom and a lack of academic and employment opportunities often led to their participation in delinquent acts.

The committee connected these youth with employment opportunities and many began new jobs. Unfortunately, the majority of them—67 per cent—left work in the first month. Only one person remained employed after the second month.

With the support of government psychologists, I expressed the need for a holistic intervention in order to better prepare these youth to enter the workforce. Together, we created a psychosocial plan

that included home visits, meetings with families, job training and a series of personal development workshops.

We found that most of the young people we were working with had not finished their high school education. So, we adjusted the plan and started hosting workshops on life skills such as peaceful coexistence, conflict resolution, leadership and teamwork.

The final phase of our plan focused on job training. With the help of the Secretary of Economic Development, I led sessions on personal presentation and professional dress, how to write resumes and answer questions during job interviews, and the importance of work ethic and personal responsibility. The youth also received several professional development opportunities thanks to the National

Learning Service (a technical school), the Secretary of Education and an entrepreneurial foundation.

For me, the most impactful part of this project was the sweeping change I saw in these youth. We were able to bring a job fair to Las Gardenias at the end of the project and I looked on proudly as they arrived with their collared shirts and resumes in hand.

Fifty-eight youth attended the job fair, while more than 160 people received support through this program.

These young people were always capable of all the things they accomplished during the program. They just needed their minds opened to the possibilities. I feel very fortunate to have been part of the beginning of this new chapter for the youth of Barranquilla. ■



Right: Cuso International volunteer Allison Vickery.

LABOUR *of* LOVE

Health workers key in reducing maternal and child mortality in rural regions.

Story and photo by Ruby Pratka,
MSL Volunteer Communications Advisor



Above: Ahiya Abdelkadir, with her son Saladin.

Fatuma Mustofa isn't afraid of hard work. As a health extension worker in rural Ethiopia, she is the front line of care in the isolated village of Kubrihamsha. Trained in sanitation and basic nursing, she travels house to house, often walking for hours each day to talk to her neighbours about the importance of hygiene and health care.

"I'm from this village and in the past, there were a lot of mothers and young children dying," says Fatuma. "I wanted to support them and reduce maternal mortality."

In 2004, the Ethiopian government launched a program to train and equip 40,000 women as rural health extension workers. For four years, Cuso International's Midwives Save Lives (MSL) program has been providing additional training in maternal and newborn care to these workers—260 in total—in Assosa and Bale regions.

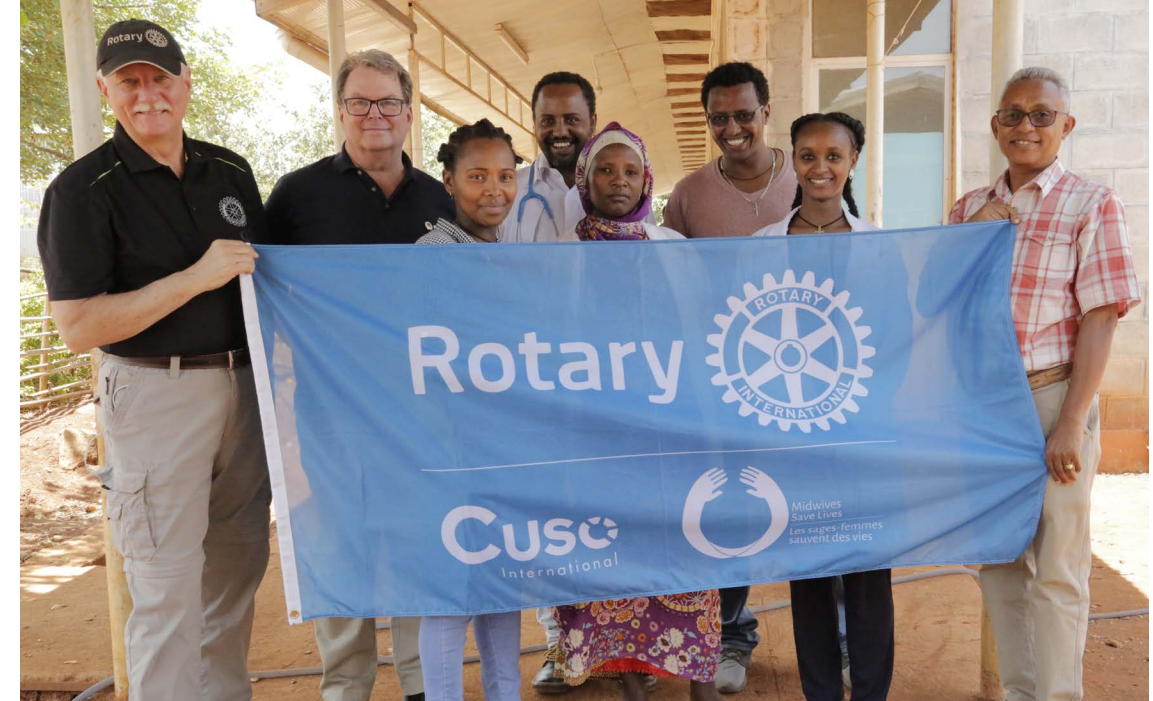
Fatuma received MSL training and monitors maternal and child health within her village. "When I started, many women were giving birth at home," she says. They often weren't aware of available services or that home births could increase their risk of dying from treatable issues.

Ahiya Abdelkadir is one of those women. She gave birth to her first child at home; there was no health centre in her village at the time. When she became pregnant again, she was advised to use the newly opened health post. She attended prenatal appointments at the clinic, got to know the staff and what to expect when the big day came.

"After the awareness-raising by the community health workers, most if not all women are giving birth at the health facility," explains Ahiya, who now encourages other women to use the health centre. "We mothers let people know the health facility is safe."

For Fatuma, this means her hard work is paying off. In Ethiopia, 60 per cent of women in target areas now receive adequate prenatal care, compared to only 27 per cent prior to MSL's implementation. "We are now able to monitor maternal and child health at the community level and reduce maternal mortality related to delivery," she says.

Midwives Save Lives was a four-year initiative in Benin, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia and Tanzania that ended in March 2020. The project was led by Cuso International, in partnership with the Canadian Association of Midwives and local midwifery associations, with funding from the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada and our generous Cuso donors. ■



Above: Rotary District 7070 supports MSL program in Ethiopia.

Rotary and Cuso: SAVING LIVES IN ETHIOPIA

Rotary District 7070 is leading a fundraising effort to support Cuso International's Midwives Save Lives (MSL) program in Ethiopia. The project is improving the lives of as many as 500,000 Ethiopians by giving expectant mothers access to better maternal and newborn care.

"Our local Rotarians believe in providing this very necessary level of care for a severely under-served segment of the Ethiopian population," said Ian Lancaster, Rotary Chair of District 7070's Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Committee. Lancaster said more than half of District 7070's clubs have contributed to the fundraising effort.

Every day, about 830 women worldwide die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Cuso International launched the MSL program in 2016 in partnership with the Canadian Association of Midwives to deliver training in basic emergency obstetric and newborn care to midwives in developing countries.

In Ethiopia, the MSL program trained 260 community health workers to recognize high risk pregnancy. This is significant, as more than 70 per cent of women in Ethiopia deliver their babies without a skilled birth attendant. The mortality rate in Ethiopia is 412 maternal deaths per

100,000 live births and 29 neonatal deaths per 1,000 live births. Compare that to Canada's seven maternal deaths per 100,000 live births and 4.3 neonatal deaths per 1,000 live births.

Rotary's District 7070, located in an expanded greater Toronto area, has raised \$45,000 CDN to support MSL.

"This partnership with Cuso toward such a worthwhile goal, coupled with the 13 to 1 funding match, made the ask for support from Rotary clubs in our district an easy sell," said Lancaster. "Rotary is always looking for effective partnerships with other NGOs for the purpose of doing good in the world."

The funds are being used to purchase birthing kits for student midwives in the under-served Assosa and Bale regions of Ethiopia. Birthing kits include delivery trays, ambu bags (manual resuscitators), stethoscopes, blood pressure cuffs and more. These essential items are in very short supply in under-served regions but are crucial for maternal health care.

Over the course of the project, MSL has reached more than 1.5 million women of reproductive age across the four countries. ■

Q+A

BRIAN ATKINSON

Photographer Brian Atkinson has documented countless Cuso International programs in eight countries over more than 10 years. You can read our full interview online and see more of his photography at cusointernational.org/blog.

How did you connect with Cuso?

A woman who I had travelled and worked with in Guatemala was working with Cuso. She sent me application forms for Cuso's first communication brigade. I ended up in Honduras with an ex-BBC documentary producer for six weeks. And, as they say, the rest is history.

Describe your role and where you've been.

My job is to bring back images to highlight stories on the various projects Cuso is involved in. I have documented programs in Benin, Cambodia, Cameroon (twice), Ethiopia, Honduras (twice), Laos, Myanmar and Nicaragua.

What has been your biggest challenge?

Because all my postings are short, two to six weeks, I don't think the challenges are anything like those who commit to a year or two. Mostly it's trying to get over jet lag as quickly as possible, hit the ground running and make the most of each day. The days are long and intense and jump from place to place so quickly it's hard to stay in the moment. But I like variety and

I like travelling and I love the projects we cover, so a bit of disorientation is worth it. It really is the people we work with that help me make it past any challenges.

What's your most memorable experience?

In Cameroon last year we were trying to get from the coast to a remote Baka community. It was the rainy season and we had a late start. It didn't take long before the forest road turned to mud, and then to deep mud, and then it was blocked by a large truck.

A crew showed up from somewhere out of the jungle with shovels and muscles. If it wasn't for the mud and the heat, it could have been a winter scene in Canada when you try and dig your way out of a snow-filled ditch. Same idea, just 50 degrees difference. We finally got the truck out and then slid our way through the forest for a couple more hours before having to hike across a shaky bridge and then load ourselves into a very battered, very old, 4x4. But we made it.

Can you share a funny story?

In Nicaragua we arrived at a remote village where a women's co-op was working with bees. Everyone wanted me to put on the special gear but I said it wasn't necessary. In Canada, as long as you aren't directly in front of the hives when the bees emerge, all is fine.

Eventually they got me in the suit with one glove on. The women opened a hive and smoked the bees. Out they came and, yep, right for me without a thought for how Canadian bees would behave. I got stung a few times on my hand before I got the other glove on.

When I had enough, we started back to the village. Well, everyone else did. They didn't want me bringing any irate bees back home. I and another woman had to walk in the other direction until every last bee had decided I was no longer worth the trouble. Ah, what a day. ■



Top: Cameroon, 2018.

Above: Honduras, 2011.

Left: Laos, 2019.



SPOTLIGHT

Peter Ackhurst

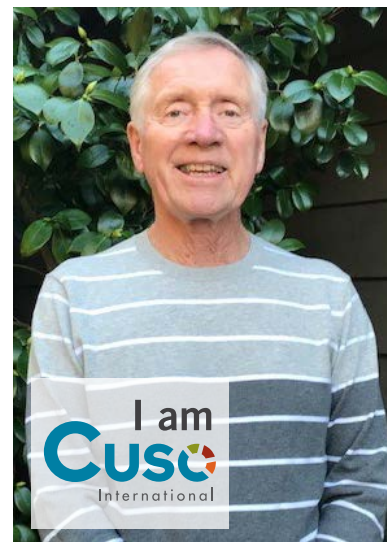
📍 Tanzania 1969-71

Two years after completing the forestry management program at the University of British Columbia, Peter Ackhurst and his wife joined Cuso to work in Tanzania. For two years, Peter was responsible for the Forest Inventory Section of the Ministry of Forests, while his wife worked as a nutritionist in the Ministry of Agriculture.

This overseas experience was the gateway to a career in forestry and land use management that took Peter all over the world—including Chile, Southeast Asia, China, Estonia, Bolivia and Armenia.

Peter held top managerial positions with British Columbia's Ministry of Forests. He served as President of the Association of BC Professional Foresters and National President of the Canadian Institute of Forestry. He also chaired the Tree Improvement Council and Forest Productivity Council and was the forest manager of the Cheakamus Community Forest at Whistler.

Now retired, his interest in international development hasn't waned. He is working on Rotary Club projects with Uganda as well as with Forests Without Borders. Peter lives in West Vancouver with his wife.



Geralyn Klassen

📍 Canada 2010-12; Staff 2014-15; 2016-20; Cameroon 2019

Geralyn Klassen recently returned from a six-month placement in Yaoundé, Cameroon, after taking a leave of absence from her former role at Cuso International. She volunteered as a Program Support Officer, managing volunteers and supporting them in achieving greater success in their roles. Geralyn was also Cuso's top fundraiser of 2019, raising \$7,505 for the organization.

"The chance to learn from local colleagues, friends and Cuso volunteers was a phenomenal experience. I cannot

overstate how much I learned about international cooperation and development, the strength and capability of Cameroonians, and of course, Cameroonian culture, history and society."

Geralyn began with Cuso as a volunteer community selector in 2010 and continued in various volunteer and consulting roles before she was hired full-time in 2014. She was Cuso's Assessment Advisor from 2016 to 2020.

Geralyn has an Honours Bachelor of Business Administration, Master's in Philanthropy and Non-profit Leadership, and Graduate Certificate in Volunteer Management. ■



WE WILL STOP IT

Meet the women of northern Benin working to end female genital mutilation.

Photos by Brian Atkinson

Agnès* remembers all too well the pain of her own experience. Sitting in the shade of a tree in her rural village, she is joined by three other women from the community. They speak openly and frankly about female genital mutilation (FGM) and what happens before, during and after the procedure.

"We remember our own pains. We know what pain the children are going through," says Agnès. "We cry because we feel their pain."

**Name has been changed to protect identity.*



Above: A woman shares her ideas for ending female genital mutilation in northern Benin.

Previous Page: Cuso's Women Engaged for Human Dignity in Northern Benin project is working with village leaders to end gender-based violence through education efforts. Editor's note: We are withholding names and locations of the women in this story. Permission was received for all photos.

“When they come back home, they say, ‘Please don’t do this to our younger sisters.’ The ones who are lucky to go to school stop the practice.”

Every year more than three-million girls are at risk of genital mutilation. An extreme violation of a person’s human rights, the World Health Organization reports that more than 200-million girls and women around the world have undergone the practice.

There has been movement in Benin to advance women’s rights and eradicate FGM. The country adopted a law banning the practice in 2003 and the national rate now sits at 13 per cent. But in rural areas, cutting is still a strongly rooted social custom. In some communities, an

estimated 70 per cent of women and girls have been subjected to this violation.

Agnès, president of the Women’s Association in her village, says things are changing. “Before, it was obligation. All the community daughters should be cut. But now, it is not.”

Cuso International, with funding from Global Affairs Canada, launched the Women Engaged for Human Dignity in Northern Benin project. This three-year program will support tens of thousands of young girls and survivors of sexual violence.

Focusing on community education, supporting young girls and survivors, and engaging men and boys in discussions on healthy and positive relationships, the project will ensure local actors have the resources and connections to deliver programs and become champions of sustainable change in their communities.

For Agnès, education is the key to stopping the practice once and for all. She’s already seeing the impact in her village as more girls attend and remain in school.

“When they go to school, they are taught that it’s not good,” says Agnès. “When they come back home, they say, ‘Please don’t do this to our younger sisters.’ The ones who are lucky to go to school stop the practice.”

FGM increases the likelihood of short- and long-term health risks. Uncontrollable bleeding, infection and excessive tearing during labour and delivery are just some of the dangers. And because it’s illegal, cutting often takes place in secret.

If there are complications, many families choose not to seek professional medical care for fear of reprisal. Rébéca, head midwife at a regional hospital, says girls and women who are cut are often tended to at home.

“They don’t like to come to the hospital because they know that they will have a problem with the law. We won’t know if she died because of mutilation,” says Rébéca. “We take any occasion to talk with women when we do counselling about family planning. We talk about FGM, the consequences. The solution is not by force but to inform them and let them know the bad part of mutilation.”



Cuso is partnering with the Government of Benin, the United Nations Population Fund and local organizations on the project. Together, they are working with Agnès, Rébéca and other agents of change in target communities to build trust and lay the groundwork for success.

“The communities are strongly involved in the project,” says Ernestine Denami, Cuso’s Country Representative in Benin and program manager of the project. “The leaders will be empowered to combat FGM in their communities. They will develop action plans and will be accompanied by facilitators to improve the social environment in favour of FGM abandonment.”

In Agnès’ village, the sun has shifted and the shadows have grown longer. It’s been a long day of difficult conversations, but even so, the women are smiling. They want to see this practice come to an end. They want to be part of the solution.

“If we can help people to understand, they can stop,” says Agnès. “We are ready. We will stop it.”



Top: Agnès, left, and other village leaders play a key role in the success of the project.

Bottom: Opposition to female genital mutilation has grown as more girls attend and remain in school.



FORCE FOR CHANGE

WOMEN'S VOICE AND LEADERSHIP PROJECT LAUNCHES IN PERU.

Women in Peru are ushering in a new age of gender equality—one built on the empowerment of women and girls and the enhanced protection of their human rights. For Karen Escudero, this work is everything.

“Our lives depend on this work as women and as Indigenous women,” says the 46-year-old. “I’m Indigenous and as an Indigenous woman, I like to support the growth of my other sisters to get the full exercise of their human rights.”

Karen is Quechua, an Indigenous group from the Apurímac region. She is a founding member of Organización Nacional de Mujeres Andinas y Amazonicas (ONAMIAP) and was recently named project coordinator for Cuso International’s newest initiative, the Women’s Voice and Leadership (WVL) project in Peru.

She was at the official launch of WVL earlier this year with Cuso’s four partners: Estudio para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer (DEMUS); Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristán; Movimiento Manuela Ramos (MMR); and ONAMIAP. This is the first time all four organizations will be working collectively on the same project.

Funded by Global Affairs Canada, WVL builds on the existing relationships the four organizations have cultivated over many years. Each partner has specific strengths that will be tapped into and built upon:

- ONAMIAP is the only national organization focused on the rights of Indigenous women.
- DEMUS defends women’s human rights at the local, national and international levels.
- Flora Tristán works to advance gender equality and advocates for gender sensitive public policies.
- MMR is focused on ending violence against women, promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights, and advancing women’s economic empowerment.

As a Quechua woman, Karen says it’s necessary to include Indigenous voices when advocating for women’s rights. “Indigenous women suffer or experience three times the discrimination of others; for being women, for being poor and for being Indigenous. These intersections that Indigenous women experience makes their lives very difficult.”

Left: Karen Escudero, founding member of ONAMIAP.
Photo: Robert Lawlor

Indigenous youth have had to leave their homes and communities if they want a high school education, and experience higher rates of violence, hunger and discrimination. As a result, Indigenous youth are less likely than non-Indigenous youth to graduate from secondary school.

“They suffer, they are hungry, they don’t have enough food. They can suffer sexual violence and they live in very poor conditions to go to secondary school,” says Karen. “There are very few who finish high school, and fewer go onto post-secondary.”

Which is why she’s excited for the work that’s begun through WVL. “We are making sure there is an intercultural and intersectional approach towards public policy.”

Cuso and its partners are working on a number of initiatives that will strengthen women’s organizations. An assessment tool will help identify strengths, needs, gaps and priorities, and allow for strategic and timely decisions. Workshops in financial management, funding strategies and volunteer programs will create long-term sustainability. And research into the causes of gender-based violence will help identify prevention mechanisms and inform necessary supports for survivors.

As the project moves forward, the four partners will deliver training, psychosocial support and advocacy activities to smaller local women’s rights organizations across the country. This will create a stronger and more unified voice as Peruvian women’s organizations advocate for women and girls’ rights, advance gender equality and coordinate gender-based policy change.

“At the end of this Women’s Voice and Leadership project, I expect to see the organizations strengthened and focused on a common agenda—to defend the rights of women,” says Karen. “My goal is to be part of that force. To lead the process of change in the country.”



A PARTNERSHIP WORTH CELEBRATING

Cuso International launched the Women’s Voice and Leadership (WVL) project with a celebratory event in Lima, Peru on January 30, 2020. In collaboration with four Peruvian women’s organizations—DEMUS, Flora Tristán, Manuela Ramos and ONAMIAP—the project will be implemented in 14 regions of the country to strengthen the capacities of women’s rights organizations and advance gender equality.

Cuso’s Board of Directors Vice-chair and Treasurer, Patricia Pérez-Coutts, is from Lima and now lives in Mississauga, Ontario. She spoke to the importance of projects like WVL in creating lasting and sustainable change during the launch.

“This magnificent project has features that make it unique and promising, namely the teamwork of four organizations that have decades defending women’s rights in Peru,” she said.

“When you help lift women, girls and youth, and when they are given the same opportunities to participate in society, their families, neighbours and communities benefit too. And that’s the impact of this organization—it doesn’t stop when the volunteer goes home or when a project comes to an end. It grows.

“Those who benefit from our programs continue to share the knowledge, the skills and the lessons they learned with others. They become the teachers, the mentors, in their families and communities. The cycle of learning, of sharing, of building continues. I’m grateful to the women who will be championing this important work over the next four years in Peru.”

Above: From left, Cuso board members Patricia Pérez-Coutts, Vice-chair and Treasurer, and Susana Galdos, with former Minister of Justice and Human Rights Ana Teresa Revilla Vergara, at the WVL launch. **Photo:** Robert Lawlor

THIS IS OUR IDENTITY

Photos by Brian Atkinson

An Indigenous women-run restaurant in Myanmar is preserving Mon culture, empowering women and supporting survivors of gender-based violence.





“It’s a wonderful culinary experience.”

Khamoom Chan stands at the back of the kitchen over the stovetop. It’s 30-degrees Celsius outside and even hotter in the small space. With her hair pulled back from her face, she stirs the ingredients for a curry. The air smells of spices. Traffic drones by on the street outside the restaurant.

Khamoom is head chef at Pao Mon restaurant in Myanmar. She moves from task to task, keeping the area tidy as she explains the dishes she’s preparing for tonight’s dinner. Everything is made using locally farmed and wild-grown ingredients, and the recipes come from generations past.

“In Mon cooking style we do not use much oil. We do not add any artificial powder. It’s all natural. It all comes from natural spices and ingredients. It’s very healthy,” she says.

Pao Mon is more than just a restaurant and the dishes Khamoom is preparing are more than just meals for hungry guests. With every plate of food served, she’s earning her own income, helping other women and preserving her Indigenous culture.

The Mon Women’s Organization (MWO) opened this unique restaurant in Mawlamyine five years ago. Pao Mon employs Indigenous women and focuses on skills training and mentoring. Profits from the restaurant are used to support survivors of gender-based violence and programs that empower women and girls.

In Mon State, sexual assault is a huge problem that often goes unreported. The cost to access legal and other services is unaffordable for most and limited in terms of scope and availability—a reality organizations like MWO are working to change.

Mi Aye Krak Mon, vice-chair of the Mon Women’s Organization, says that income generated from Pao Mon and other MWO organizations last year helped 40 women access the services, health care and legal advice they needed.

“It is very important for this restaurant to keep existing because this is the place where all the money to help these women comes from,” she says. “I would like to see Mawlamyine as a place where there is no gender-based violence, where women can be at peace and where they can prosper and be happy.”



Above: Traditional Mon dishes are served at Pao Mon restaurant using fresh and local ingredients.



Previous page: Khamoom Chan, left, and Mi May Thet Khine prepare fresh vegetables.

Top: Mi May Thet Khine is learning to cook traditional Mon dishes.

Bottom: Khamoom Chan prepares a meal at the stove in back of Pao Mon restaurant.

Since 2017, Cuso International has partnered with Pao Mon, sending volunteers to provide ongoing mentoring and support for business development, marketing and financial management. With the assistance of volunteers Angela Baker and Mikaila Ross, both veterans in the restaurant industry in Toronto, Pao Mon has increased its visibility in the local marketplace and online.

“When I arrived, we identified the areas that they wanted the most feedback on. We arrived at the marketing of the restaurant because clearly, they don’t need any help with the cooking,” says Angela.

Together, Angela and Khamoom began updating materials and promoting Pao Mon’s catering services and traditional Mon cooking classes—a popular attraction for tourists. They also began creating a cookbook of the restaurant’s best-selling dishes.

“They realized that they could be attracting even broader audiences by enhancing their marketing package. We’ve been working to broaden the audience and drive more traffic to the restaurant. In turn, that will increase revenues and feed back into the MWO programs,” says Angela.

“The food is outstanding. Just go on TripAdvisor and look at the reviews. The freshness of the food, the quality of the food,

the care, the love, the pride—it’s all there. They do a phenomenal job. It’s a wonderful culinary experience.”

Angela also worked with Mi May Thet Khine, a 20-year-old member of the restaurant staff. Cook, server and gift shop manager, Mi May Thet built her confidence with the English language by practicing with Angela.

“We focused a lot on product knowledge, ingredients and feeling more at ease interacting with guests. These are huge challenges in Myanmar as they grow the hospitality industry,” says Angela. “I’m proud of the progress Mi May Thet made. The change was noticeable.”

As the sun goes down for the day, Mi May Thet helps Khamoom bring the warm, fragrant dishes from the kitchen to a table at the front of the restaurant. The street traffic is lighter now and there is a cooling breeze. She arranges the dishes and explains the ingredients in each before the guests dig in.

Mi May Thet says she finds it rewarding to work in a restaurant that empowers women and promotes the Mon way of life.

“I’m proud to be part of it and I’m gaining a lot of experience,” she says. “The younger generation needs to know more about the culture and tradition because this is our identity. It’s very important we preserve it and let the world know.” ■

ALUMNOTES

SHARE + CONNECT

Editor's Note

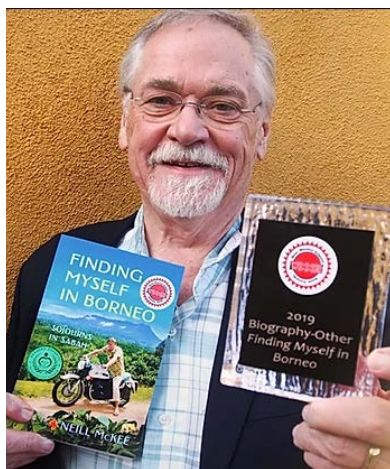
Please note that your Winter issue of *Catalyst* will be published online only, and we want to make sure you receive your digital copy. Message us at alumni@cusointernational.org or call 1-888-434-2876 x 295 to update your contact information or with any questions. We are excited to move to a new format and hope you will be too.

Neill McKee (pictured below)

📍 Malaysia 1968-70

Readers' Favorite Book Reviews and Award Contest recognized *Finding Myself in Borneo* with an honourable mention in the Non-Fiction-Travel category. My memoir also won for Biography-Other in the 13th Annual New Mexico/Arizona Book Awards. For those who like to listen, an audio-book version is now available. Visit neillmckeeauthor.com/audiobook for retail outlets.

I am pleased to donate my earnings from all in-store sales and orders, plus



all online sales in Canada, to Cuso, the organization that got me started in my 45-year international career and put me in a place that generated so many entertaining stories!

Editor's note: Thank you, Neill, for giving back to Cuso!

Bob Jamieson (pictured above)

📍 Ghana 1970-72

After seeing the article on Stan Bunston in the last issue, I thought I should send you my story.

I worked as a Cuso volunteer in the Ghana Department of Game and Wildlife. I was part of a program with volunteers working on conservation projects across Africa in that era. Back home, I worked as an outdoor writer, ecologist, rancher and conservationist. I now live on a ranch in southeast British Columbia near a village called Ta Ta Creek. All Cuso folks are welcome, if you can find it. Connect through email: bjamieson@cintek.com.

Alan Dill

📍 Malawi 1972-74; Ghana 1977-79

In response to Tim Babcock's note in the Fall 2019 *Catalyst*, I wanted to share my experience in re-establishing contact with my former colleague and housemate Charles Gunsaru, a Malawian science teacher. Charles and I shared a house at Chikwawa Secondary School in southern Malawi during my first stint with Cuso. We worked closely together in the mathematics and science department.

We remained in touch for a year or so, using what we now call "snail mail," which was the only viable option at the time. Eventually the letters stopped coming and I lost touch for about 30 years. Then, in the mid-2000s I got an email from Cuso, saying that someone was trying to get hold of me. It was Charles. He was able to get in touch with Cuso, who in turn got in touch with me.

Charles and I have remained in touch ever since. While there is much to

criticize about the internet, one very good thing is that it allows people to find each other after decades apart. At the time he first contacted me, Charles held the top civil service position in the Malawi Ministry of Education, second only to the Minister. He has since retired. I am grateful to remain in touch with Charles, who has kept me up to date with what is happening in Malawi.

Sharon Channer (pictured right)

📍 Tanzania 1969-71

It has been 50 years since an idealistic and committed group of Canadians boarded an airplane and flew off to Tanzania with Cuso. We were full of excitement, anticipation and maybe a touch of apprehension. Most of us had freshly minted degrees, diplomas or certificates and were eager to apply what we had learned.

Fifty years later, there is probably one thing on which we can all agree—our experiences in Tanzania were memorable and profound. This was made abundantly clear at a Cuso Tanzania 1969 reunion party held in Toronto in September 2019. A resounding success, returned volunteers arrived from Victoria, Montreal, Melfort, New York, Vancouver, and from various locations in Ontario.

Comments from guests:

"It was quite an experience to relive memories of 50 years ago and learn how much is still very fresh in our minds. Congratulations to all for such interesting lives and careers since 1969. It appears that none of us has ever recovered from wanderlust."



"Revisiting the past is not so bad when the people have remained so active, intense about issues and positive in outlook."

Marcel Zollinger

📍 Botswana 1974-77

Marcel Zollinger keeps a foot on two continents. As a young man he arrived in Canada from Zurich, Switzerland during our centennial year 1967 and completed his Bachelor of Science in Agriculture at McGill University. With that new degree, Marcel accepted a Cuso assignment in rural Botswana, where he taught school for four years. In July 2019, Marcel and his wife Connie attended the CUSOBOT Reunion in Ottawa.

ATTENTION ALUMNI

Are you planning an event? Interested in becoming an Alumni Ambassador for your region? Just want to connect? Please reach out to Linda Hartwell, Manager, Communications.

Email: linda.hartwell@cusointernational.org Phone (toll free): +1.888.434.2876 x 295

ALUMNOTES

Marian White

📍 Nigeria 1977-78; Board member 2005-08; Guyana 2016-17

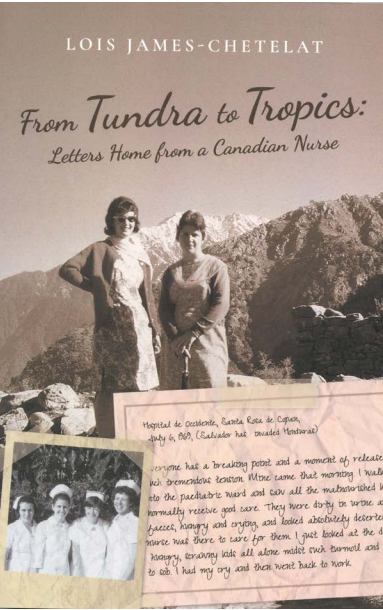
I recently celebrated my 65th birthday. Facebook hooked me into attaching a fundraiser to it. I got sucked in and named Cuso International as my organization of choice. I named \$650 as my target. First, I put \$65 then I added the zero!

Editor's note: Thank you, Marian, for raising \$670 for Cuso!

Lois Chetelat (pictured below)

📍 India 1963-65

Lois draws on the letters she wrote home regularly during her time away and discusses the historical events, economic conditions and social values that affected her life and those of other women in her book, *From Tundra to Tropics: Letters Home from a Canadian Nurse*.



Lois graduated as a nurse in 1961 and spent two years in the Canadian Arctic before being one of the first Cuso volunteers placed in India in 1963 to provide care for refugee Tibetan children. She went on to volunteer assignments in Honduras and Indonesia, met her husband, had two sons and graduated with a PhD in Anthropology from Carleton University.

Anne Saunders (photo above)

📍 Malawi 1974-76

In January 2019 I was hired to research Canadians' involvement in the Biafran War. A young Nigerian broadcaster, wife and mother, Angela Onuora, living in Waterloo, Ontario, made connections between the Biafran

War, her family's history, and the role of Canadians. Compelled by the story of Canairelief, Ms. Onuora is making the documentary *Operation Lights Out: The Story of Canairelief*.

The research led me to learn about the Cuso program in Nigeria from 1962 through 1969. The best known Cuso Nigeria volunteer during the Biafran War was perhaps Diane North, who was featured in *Maclean's* magazine in February 1969. Diane was a Cuso nurse in Nigeria from 1964 to 1966. I found it so interesting reading about the development of the Nigeria program in the 1960s and its continuance through the period of the Biafran War. Thanks to Cuso International for its permission to research Cuso files at the Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa.

Christopher Braeuel (pictured right)

📍 Tanzania 2013-14

I was recently awarded the Governor General's Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers (SMV). Among the nation's key honors, the SMV is awarded to select Canadians who have made significant, sustained and unpaid contributions to their community in Canada or abroad. It's the highest volunteer honour in Canada. The medal was presented by Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson and Kanata North Councillor Jenna Sudds on behalf of the Governor General. 🇨🇦



SHOUT OUT: ALUMNI AMBASSADORS



Above: Saskatoon Alumni Ambassadors Fred Rieben and Rebecca Bulmer host an alumni social at their home in November 2019.

Below: Vancouver Alumni Ambassadors Gil Mervyn and Katelyn Schoen host a Lower Mainland alumni social in November 2019.



LIVES LIVED

REMEMBERING OUR VOLUNTEERS



Eleanor Hart *(pictured above)* (nee Dick)

📍 Nigeria 1970-74

Eleanor Maxine Hart passed away on December 30, 2019, aged 74. Beloved wife of Graham Hart for over 50 years. Loved mother and grandmother. Eleanor graduated with degrees in Home Economics (University of Guelph) and Education (University of Toronto). Her teaching career included schools in West Africa (with Cuso) and Ontario.

James McLeod

📍 Papua New Guinea 1982-84

After many years of courageously battling illnesses, the world lost the kindest man, James Edmund McLeod, on October 28, 2016, at age 82. Beloved husband of Irene for 23 years and the late Joyce. Loved father and grandfather. He will be missed by family and friends.

Lynda Lafoley

📍 Ghana 1967-69

Lynda died peacefully on December 1, 2019, at age 78. Born in South Porcupine, Ontario, she was a proud graduate of St. Michael's Hospital School of Nursing. She worked as a Cuso volunteer and for CARE/MEDICO and retired from a long career in nursing from VON/Carefor in Ottawa.

Pamela Ralston *(pictured below)*

📍 Indonesia 2011-13

Pam Ralston passed away May 3, 2019, at age 70. Loved and treasured by her husband of 23 years, Don Newsham, and family. An avid orienteer, hiker, skier and biker, she was passionate about family get-togethers, making memories and volunteering (two-year Indonesia venture). Pam had a special presence, was a treasure and gift, and will always remain in the hearts and minds of family and friends.



Gordon Thompson *(pictured above)*

📍 Malaysia 1970-72

Gordon passed away on March 28, 2018, after a short battle with cancer. Gordon is survived by his wife Lilian, his children and grandchildren. After graduating from SAIT and a short period of employment with Agriculture Canada in Saskatoon, Gordon went to Malaysia as a Cuso volunteer for two years. It was there where he met and married Lilian.

On his return to Canada he joined Environment Canada where he had a lengthy and interesting career for 30 years. After his retirement, Gordon and Lilian shared time living between Powell River and Malaysia.

Terence O'Connor

📍 Nicaragua 1989

Terry (Arthur Terence) O'Connor passed away June 19, 2019. Born in Pickering, Ontario, Terry was married for over 61 years to Colleen (Kenny) who predeceased him by just one month.

Stephen D. Blackwell

📍 Nigeria 1970-72

My brother was a volunteer with Cuso in Nigeria. He unfortunately passed away on May 7, 2019. In preparing for a belated memorial service, we were looking for photographs of him but couldn't find anything from his time in Africa. I know it's probably a long shot, but I'd be interested in photographs and any reports or descriptions of my brother's work that might be available. He worked as a science teacher at a school in what was then the state of Biafra in Nigeria from 1970-72.

Thanks very much in advance for any help you might be able to provide. In loving memory of Stephen D. Blackwell, all the best from his brother Tom. Connect through email: tblackwell@postmedia.com.



Anne-Marie Gaston (nee Groves)

📍 India 1964-66

Anne-Marie Gaston died April 5, 2018. Dancer, choreographer, writer, photographer, lecturer, teacher, traveller. Beloved wife and sister. She attended Queen's University and earned two post-graduate degrees (M.Litt., D.Phil) at Oxford University, UK.

She joined Cuso and was sent to teach in India, where she also studied Indian classical dances. She was the first native-born Canadian to perform classical East Indian dance professionally and performed throughout Canada, US, Europe and India, including for Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Indira Gandhi. 🍀

Patsy Russell *(pictured above)*

📍 Guyana 2015-16; 2016-17; 2017-18

It is with deep sorrow that we announce the death of Patsy Russell (Scarborough, Ontario), who passed away on September 19, 2019, at the age of 65, leaving to mourn family and friends.



A LIFE WELL LIVED:

REMEMBERING DR. HEATHER ONYETT

📍 Burundi 1967-69

Dr. Heather Onyett died on January 6, 2020. Born and raised in northern Ontario, her early experiences with remote communities had a profound influence throughout her life. After graduating from the University of Toronto, she spent two life-changing years as a volunteer with Cuso teaching in rural Burundi. This experience opened her heart to the importance of medical care in remote and impoverished communities.

Upon returning to Canada, she graduated from Memorial University of Newfoundland

as their first pediatrician. She spent over five years as Chief of Pediatrics with the International Grenfell Association, the sole pediatrician for the remote communities of northern Newfoundland and Labrador.

She studied tropical medicine, completed her Master of Public Health degree at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and was inducted into Delta Omega Alpha. She was also a Pediatric Infectious Diseases specialist of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

Dr. Onyett joined the Faculty of Medicine at Queen's University in 1987 and became Professor Emeritus in 2012. She received numerous awards, including the inaugural Queen's Excellence in Teaching Award and the Boston University Summer Excellence in Teaching Award for Maternal and Child Health in Lower Income Countries. In 2016 she received the Life Membership Award from the Canadian Paediatric Society for "tremendous dedication to advancing the health of children in Canada."



FLASHBACK

Who do you recognize? Help us dust off this memory by sharing your stories or identifying those in the photo. Please email us at editor@cusointernational.org. Submissions will be shared via the next edition of *Catalyst* and online at cusointernational.org/blog.

Did you recognize anyone in this photo?

We asked our readers to send in their best guesses, here's one.

“The Flashback photo in your Autumn 2019 issue brought back memories as I and my cohort appear in it. This photo was taken in Ghana, probably around late 1975. I am fourth from the left, in the then-fashionable checked trousers, part of the contingent of volunteers who went in August of 1974.”

Don St. Jean | Ghana 1974-76

Read more at cusointernational.org/blog.



LEAVING A LEGACY

Kenneth Affolder acquired his first teaching experience with Cuso International when he volunteered in Sierra Leone from 1966-68. He enjoyed it so much, he turned it into a life-long career, teaching throughout Canada and Africa.

“The teaching program was excellent. It gave me the time and opportunity to get my professional feet on the ground. It set me on a path in life which has been more than satisfying. It was brilliant really.”

An alumnus and passionate supporter of Cuso, Ken sees the benefits of his continued support and encourages others to

consider the lasting difference they can inspire by leaving a gift in their Will.

“I believe the small projects really do make a difference. They make a difference to communities; they make a difference to individuals. They enhance our ability to feel connected to other parts of the world that don't have the immediate benefits we do.”

Above: Young girls in Benin will have brighter futures, thanks to the support of Cuso's donors. **Photo:** Brian Atkinson

To learn more about how you too can continue to play an integral role in Cuso International's mission by leaving a gift in your Will, please contact Meghan Maack, Manager, Major Gifts and Legacy Giving.

Phone (toll free): +1.888.434.2876 x 205 Email: meghan.maack@cusointernational.org





HONDURAS



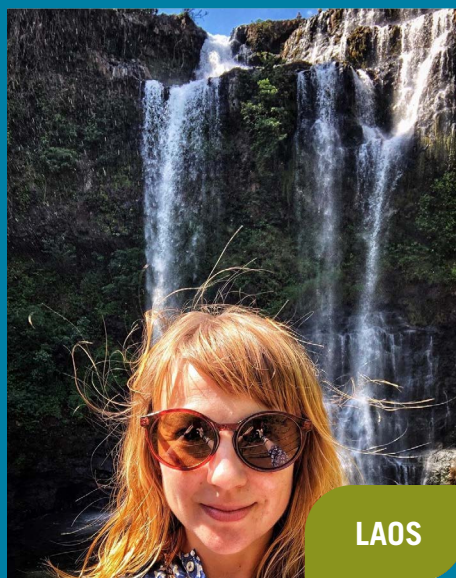
TANZANIA

GETTING SOCIAL

#cusointernational



COLOMBIA



LAOS

Cuso
International