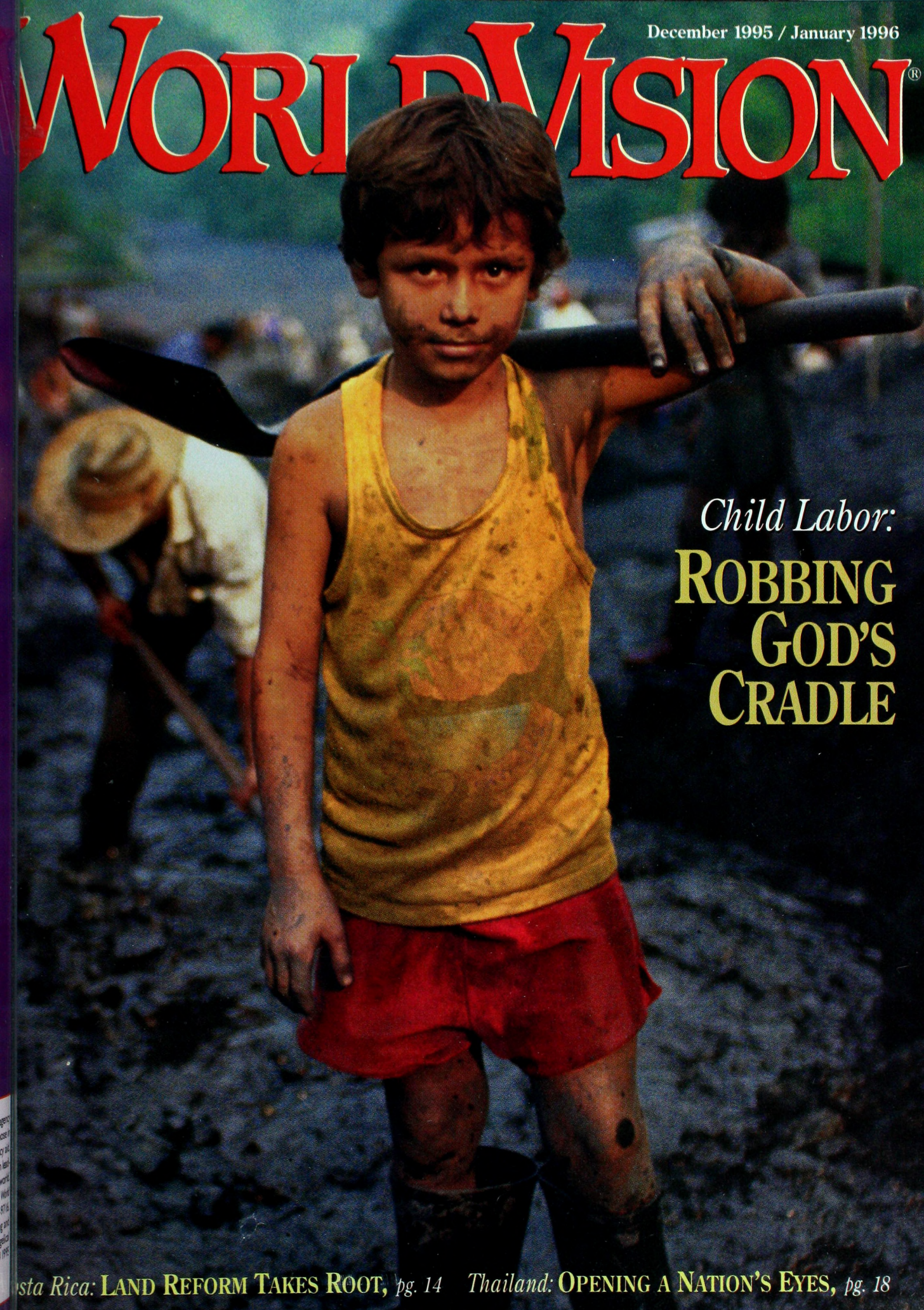


December 1995 / January 1996

WORLD DIVISION[®]



Child Labor:
**ROBBING
GOD'S
CRADLE**

Costa Rica: LAND REFORM TAKES ROOT, pg. 14 *Thailand: OPENING A NATION'S EYES, pg. 18*

Child Labor: **ROBBING**



GOD'S CRADLE

BY JANE SUTTON

A child apprentice learns handloom weaving from an older boy in a cloth factory in Dacca, Bangladesh.

Pattinathar's whole life used to be a small hut and endless days making *beedi* cigarettes. Five years ago, the boy, then 12, labored for little more than \$1 a week in a beedi-making factory in North Arcot, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He spent long hours sitting cross-legged, elbow-to-elbow with other youths, rolling tobacco into cut leaves and closing the ends of the slender, locally popular cigarettes while constantly breathing in carcinogenic tobacco dust. If he failed to complete his daily quota of 2,500 beedis, the foreman beat him.

SANJAY SOJWAL / WORLD VISION



Pattinathar

Pattinathar was a victim of bonded labor, an especially egregious form of child labor prevalent in societies where borrowing and indebtedness are customary for poor families. Impoverished parents take out loans and put up their children as living collateral. Although Indian law prohibits bonded labor, impoverished parents continue to mortgage children to pay for medical expenses, funerals, or weddings.

Pattinathar's father, Alagesh, sold the boy and two brothers into bonded labor to pay off a \$35 loan for medicine and hospital bills. Alagesh suffered from asthma and tuberculosis, and could only work sporadically. His wife collected and sold firewood, earning only about 32 cents a day. The family could not afford meat or milk, and sometimes had to rely on gifts of rice from a neighbor.

Soon, the exorbitant interest rate made it impossible for Alagesh to repay the loan, leaving the three boys indefinitely bonded. High-spirited Pattinathar tried to escape eight times, always unsuccessfully. After his last attempt in 1989, the foreman chained his legs with shackles, binding him to the factory even in his sleep.

Child labor in various forms is hardly restricted to India—or even to Asia. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that, worldwide, up to 200 million children under age 15 work in gainful labor, more than 95 percent of them in developing countries.

Despite governments' bans on underage workers, children as young as 5 become wage earners—sometimes primary wage earners—for impoverished families. Thousands of children toil in gold mines in Peru, in sweatshop garment factories in Bangladesh, and in Indonesia's rattan furniture industry, a large exporter to the United States. In glass factories in Firozabad, India, barefoot children stand on floors littered with broken glass in front of hot furnaces to make the bangles, ashtrays, jugs, and bowls for which the town is famous. Lebanese children dodge between moving cars in Beirut, selling candy or offering to clean windshields. And in war-torn African nations such as Sudan, young boys are recruited as soldiers and trained to kill.

In factories, farms, on the streets, and in private homes, children work in miserable conditions that often contribute to permanent health damage. They toil long hours in cramped positions, straining their eyes and limbs. Temperatures are often too hot or too cold. Often they aren't given protective clothing to shield them from sharp or hot items or chemicals. Abuse is common—children are beaten by foremen if they don't complete their quota of work, or sexually mistreated by employers, especially in domestic jobs.

"A child who has given his childhood to work is way behind developmentally and will never catch up," says Jeffrey Newman of the National Child Labor Coalition, citing the organization's extensive research over almost 100 years. "The likelihood is extremely great that children's lifespans will be shorter, they will be less capable of entering adulthood with the chance for economic and human success. [Child labor] puts them in the position of almost certainly being locked into lower socio-economic classes."

"Child exploitation means the loss of something we all take for granted: the ability to have a carefree, nurturing, learning, affirming childhood," says World Vision President Robert A. Seiple. "Anybody who would exploit a child, anybody who would rob a child of his childhood, is robbing God."

CHILDREN AT WORK WORLDWIDE

The ILO estimates that approximately half of the world's working children are in South and Southeast Asia. India reportedly has the largest number of child workers in the world. Its government acknowledges 17.5 million working children. The ILO and other groups, however, estimate the figure is between 44 million and 100 million. In rural Tamil Nadu alone, children make up as much as 14 percent of the workforce, laboring in matchbox, firecracker, and beedi cigarette factories.

The majority of the estimated 15 million underage laborers in Bangladesh work in the garment industry, started in

Easwaris, 14, bears burn scars from an explosion in a fireworks factory where she worked.



SANJAY SOJWAL / WORLD VISION

1977 and thriving since the mid-1980s, a nation in which over half the population are landless rural farmers, Bangladesh dependent on exporting garments to the West—nearly \$750 million worth to the United States in 1993. A 1994 U.S. Department of Labor study reported that underage workers in 1,600 garment factories toil all day without breaks in dimly lit, poorly ventilated buildings, sometimes behind locked doors.

In Thailand, an estimated 2 million children work as prostitutes in the thriving sex trade. Some have been sold into the profession by their parents, despite the attempts of teachers and authorities to dissuade families from this practice.

Child labor is increasing in Latin America, where more than 30 percent of households live below the poverty line. Children toil illegally in such industries as commercial agriculture, mining, domestic work, and *maquiladora* assembly factories in Mexico and Guatemala.

According to government estimates, approximately 800,000 Colombian children 17 and younger work, many in mining and farming. On 300 flower plantation children help grow and cut flowers for export, and are paid less than minimum wage. Usually not provided protective clothing, they are exposed to toxic pesticides known to cause cancer.

In many African nations children traditionally work in rural areas, performing tasks such as gathering water and firewood, harvesting crops, and herding animals. Many families view work as beneficial to children, promoting responsibility and participation in the community. But as populations migrate to urban centers where industrialism is on the rise, more African children are joining the workforce as hawkers, shoe-shiners, factory workers, car washers, and domestic workers. Although few formal studies of child labor in individual countries exist, the United Nations reports that children make up 17 percent of the continent's workforce.

Many of Tanzania's 13.2 million underage workers labor as long as 12 hours a day, six days a week, on sisal plantations, growing fibers for twine, cable, rope, and other products for export to the United States and other countries. Street children in Nairobi, Kenya, rummage in the city dump for recyclable items such as paper, plastics, glass, and scrap metal and get paid a pittance from middlemen for what they find. Sometimes their only pay is old food—just before it's thrown into the dump. The children risk catching pneumonia in the rainy season, cutting themselves on sharp pieces of rubbish, and being bitten by rats and poisonous snakes lurking in the garbage. Yet the middlemen do not

provide them with medical care.

Although most prevalent in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, child labor is on the rise in Eastern European countries, according to UNICEF officials.

Here in the United States, child labor is "not a non-issue," says Jeffrey Newman of the National Child Labor Coalition, which began in 1904 to combat child exploitation in the U.S. workforce. "There is still a great deal of exploitative labor in violation of both federal and state laws. Children as young as 4, 5, 6—the vast majority are American citizens—are exploited in fields such as medium-size manufacturing and agriculture. It's not an issue that we see much on the front pages of American newspapers, but it does exist."

LIFELONG SCARS

Child labor is more than grim statistics. Stories of individual children whose lives have been irrevocably altered prove its tragic proportions.

Five years ago, 9-year-old Easwaris labored in the Sivakasi fireworks factory in Tamil Nadu, India. Packed into a 15- by 20-foot room with 11 other children, she toiled 12 hours a day loading sulphur, aluminum dust, and coal into firecracker tubes. In this region where farming is dependent on unreliable monsoons and thwarted by long dry spells, farmers like Easwaris' father, Subbaraj, are often forced to abandon their small patches of land and seek other work. Subbaraj became a field hand for 50 cents a day—not enough to purchase the family's daily portions of rice, let alone other necessities. So two of his young daughters went to work.

An estimated 70,000 children work in the Sivakasi fireworks and match industry, producing firecrackers and materials for Dwali, the Festival of Lights. "I was always scared of fire and handling the chemicals," Easwaris says. "I had heard of accidents, but I never thought I would experience one."

One day, an explosion ripped through the factory when some of the children attempted the highly dangerous task of cutting gunpowder fuses. The blast killed 12 children, including Easwaris' 8-year-old sister, Munnishwaris, and burned Easwaris and six others.

The self-conscious girl, now 14, bears burn scars on her arm, hips, and back. Easwaris worries that her scars will decrease her chances for marriage.

In the wake of the accident, ruthless employers easily took advantage of Easwaris' illiterate parents. The factory foreman had Easwaris' father, Subburaj, sign a blank sheet of paper, which later turned out to document his supposed receipt of about \$400, compensation for

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"I have killed too many people," says Junior, 12, one of many boy soldiers who fought in a brutal civil war in the West African country of Liberia. Child soldiers are used increasingly in wars around the world.

Munnishwaris' death, and his promise not to involve the police. Since then, Subburaj has received only half the recompense, while the factory dangles the balance before him so he won't go to authorities. Easwaris, forced to "sign" a fake document with her thumbprint while lying in pain in the hospital, never received compensation for her injuries.

In some countries, those speaking out against child labor are persecuted and sometimes killed. Police harassment and death threats levelled at Kailash Satyarthi, chairman of the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude, have prompted worldwide concern for the Indian activist's safety. But it's too late

for Pakistani Christian Iqbal Masih, 12, a former bonded carpet-weaver who traveled the world crusading against child labor and succeeded in shutting down many carpet factories in Pakistan. On Easter Sunday, 1995, he was shot dead in his home village.

A NECESSARY EVIL?

In many countries, the majority of child laborers work in the "informal economy," which avoids governmental regulation. Because so much of child labor lurks under the surface of society, statistics—not to mention solutions—are difficult to come by.

Manufacturers subcontract labor to

enterprises in villages, small workshops, and homes where children do most of the work. Children become unofficial employees when parents, usually single mothers without money for child care or school fees, bring them along to their workplaces. Or employers exploit children under the guise of apprenticeships, the time-honored model in which experienced professionals teach youngsters skills, promoting lifelong careers. In the absence of contracts and regulation, however, employers pay apprentices very little, if at all, while charging living expenses.

Many employers also exploit children separated from their families, such as orphaned or abandoned children, or those tricked or lured away from villages to urban centers. Jitti Tumrin, 13, was whisked away from his rural home to a leather factory in Bangkok, Thailand, where he and many other children worked until midnight with few breaks. "The other children did not seem to be as tired as I was," Jitti says of that first day. "I thought if they could do it, so can I." When allowed to rest, he slept in a factory room with six other boys.

"I don't like what I'm doing, but I don't know what else to do, so I guess I will stay where I am," the boy says.

Facing international criticism, many developing-world pragmatists say that some nations' economies as well as individual family incomes would collapse if their children did not work. India's late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi once called child labor "a necessary evil," entrenched by the deep poverty so many Indian families face. A Bangladeshi trade unionist, arguing against U.S. Senator Tom Harkin's Child Labor Deterrence Act of 1993, which called for banning imports made by underage children, wrote in the Dhaka Courier, "The children working in the various industries in Bangladesh, whether in garments or in other sectors, live in relatively better circumstances than their neighbors in the villages. ... It is debatable if a ban on child labor is likely to lead them to the benefits of education." Indeed, a recent Oxfam study found that many Bangladeshi children forced under international pressure out of their textile factory jobs wound up on the streets, some in prostitution.

Children often must work out of dire economic necessity. Families struggling to survive in developing countries put all members to work, young and old alike. Some children become important wage contributors when parents or siblings fall sick. As AIDS devastates the adult population in parts of East Africa, children have little choice but to support families themselves. In some countries, religious beliefs prohibit women from holding jobs, so children fill the income gap.

But many non-governmental organizations and human rights groups assert that poverty is not the only reason child labor exists, and it cannot excuse child exploitation. Children's income is rarely enough to make or break families' household income—proportionately less than 10 to 20 percent, according to a UNICEF report on Latin America.

Children's advocates point to greed and exploitation at the root of child labor. Manufacturers and employers intent on profit perpetuate the problem because they can pay children less and control them more easily than adults. Children do not know how to organize themselves into unions, and are afraid to complain about poor working conditions.

Organizations such as UNICEF and the ILO know that abolishing all child labor is unachievable as an immediate goal. They call for eliminating its most abusive forms, such as bonded labor and prostitution, and for governments to strictly regulate remaining forms to better protect those children who must work to survive.

PROTECTING THE CHILDREN

Response to child labor has increased in the past decade on international, national, and grassroots levels. Recognizing the importance of global cooperation in abolishing the problem, the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 1989 a resolution on the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "States shall protect the child from economic exploitation and work that may interfere with education or be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development."

Groups including Amnesty International, UNICEF, Human Rights Watch/Asia, and Defense for Children International place child-focused advocacy and public education programs high on their agendas. One of the most successful organizations in these efforts, the ILO, helps countries gather more accurate statistical information regarding the extent of child labor. Through the initiative called the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor, the ILO has formed cooperative programs with Brazil, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Thailand, and Turkey, and plans future programs with Bangladesh, Cameroon, Egypt, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Tanzania.

Most countries where child labor exists already have laws prohibiting underage labor, variously defined as below 14, 15, or 16. But some governments, including those of Bangladesh and China, have strengthened the existing child labor legislation in the last year. Several countries have established government-fund-

ed alternative schools for children who want to learn marketable skills.

This type of nonformal school was available for Easwaris after she recovered from her burns. The Indian government provided a stipend to train the teenage for safer jobs such as tailoring and printing in a school run by the National Child Labor Project, associated with the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary.

As the United States imports good made in countries where child labor thrives, U.S. government representatives, companies, and non-governmental groups seek to combat child labor at the economic level. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) introduced in 1993 the Child Labor Deterrence Act banning import of goods made by child labor (later voted down in Congress) and directed the U.S. Department of Labor to conduct a global study of the problem. Reebok and Levi Strauss are among companies that have taken measures to ensure



their overseas contractors do not hire children younger than 14. The Child Labor Coalition, comprising more than 32 nongovernmental organizations, raised U.S. consumer awareness in 1994 with the Rugmark campaign, affixing labels on carpets to indicate they were not produced by children.

SHOWING A BETTER WAY

World Vision projects in countries where child labor is most prevalent have rescued children like Pattinathar from bonded labor. While still in chains, the boy hoped that "God would send someone to rescue me." When World Vision staff discovered Pattinathar in 1992, they purchased his release from bonded labor, freeing more children from the beedi factory in 1993.

World Vision trains these rescued children for better jobs. Pattinathar now attends tailoring school, aspiring to be a

successful "big tailor." He also wants to give some of his good fortune back by sewing uniforms at low cost for local World Vision sponsored children.

But buying children back from bondage is only a partial solution. To eliminate child labor on a global scale, measures must move from the curative to the preventative. Long-term solutions must go beyond buying back individual children to restoring childhood—the chance to go to school, play, dream, and discover.

Currently 25 percent of developing-world children do not enroll in school, UNICEF reports. These children comprise a potential labor pool to greedy employers. Providing education, allowing children to develop imagination and self-esteem, gives them a better chance of securing opportunities for better lives and lifting themselves out of poverty.

"You need to show people a better way," says World Vision's Seiple. "You

can't just say something's wrong—you've got to show them something that's right."

World Vision sponsorship does this for more than 1 million children by removing many poverty-related obstacles that keep children in factories instead of classrooms. Sponsorship funds pay tuition and material expenses that many poor families cannot afford, enabling children to attend school. Community programs such as skills training, revolving loans, income generation schemes, and health promotion help children stay in school. With education, these children will be better able to protect the next generation from exploitation, ending the child labor cycle.

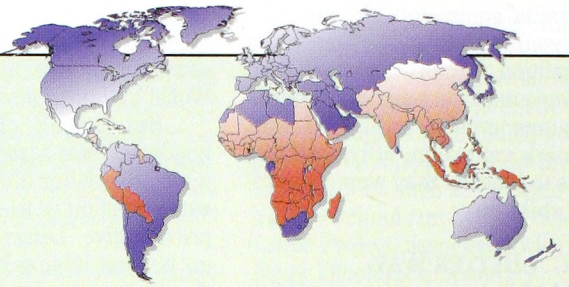
More importantly, the children gain a sense of their possibilities and importance in the world. As Pattinathar exuberantly put it: "Now I am free. ... Wherever I want to go, I go." 🌐

Collecting rubbish for recycling, an anonymous boy is one of millions of children all over Latin America who work the streets to survive.



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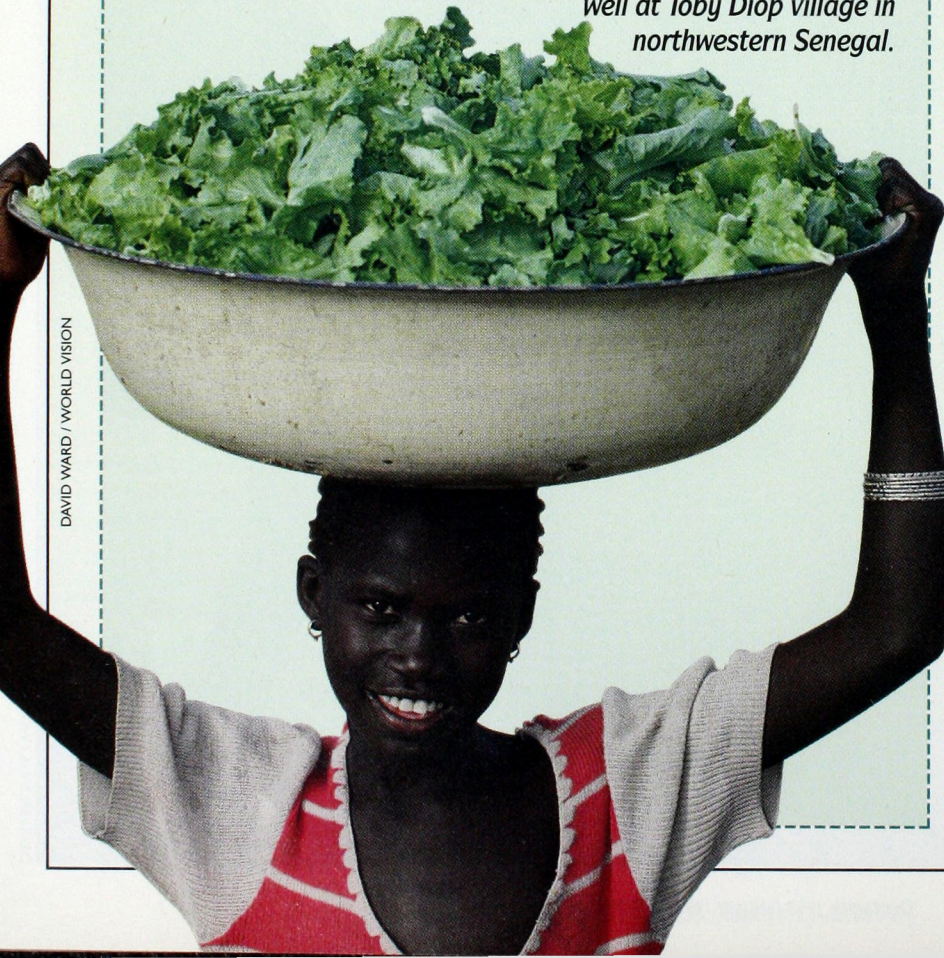


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Selected from among 70 submissions from around the world, the work combats desertification caused by drought, erosion, and land degradation. To keep land productive, World Vision's Senegal staff installed 52 boreholes tapping underground supplies of fresh water. They also offered local farmers thousands of tree seedlings and seed potatoes for irrigated farms. Meanwhile, the agency trained volunteer "bush consultants" to educate farmers about soil conservation, crop production and protection, irrigation, and improved farming methods.

Soda Diop, 13, balances a basin of fresh lettuce from a vegetable garden irrigated by a World Vision borehole well at Toby Diop village in northwestern Senegal.



DAVID WARD / WORLD VISION

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The situation always is fragile in southern Sudan, but mass starvation predicted for mid-1995 averted," said World Vision's program director for the East African region, Bruce Menser.

Good rains and agricultural packages of seeds and tools distributed by World Vision allowed many people in the war-ravaged area to harvest ample crops of corn, sorghum, and vegetables. World Vision also supplied fish equipment and tree seedlings, stocked aquaculture ponds, provided medical care and water pumps, and offered vocational training as part of its program there.

The decade-long war between Sudan's Islamic government and Christian and animist black African rebels in the country's south has driven millions of southerners from their homes and caused the death of at least 2 million. In the brutal conflict, villages have been burned, tens of thousands of women have been raped, children as young as 7 have been crucified, and, according to a 1993 U.S. State Department report, women and children routinely are transported north as slaves.

Meanwhile, the war has driven southern Christians of all traditions closer, and the hardships of the conflict have not weakened their faith; it renewed it. According to *Christian Today*, more than 75 percent of the region's Christians consider themselves "born again."

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KING OF CAMBODIA PRAISES WV'S WORK

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"Your diversified and coherent noble humanitarian action toward ... women, children, orphans, and the disabled ... in areas such as hygiene, sanitation, education, provision of housing, agriculture development, skills development, land mine awareness, etc., are causes that I fight for," the monarch wrote in French.

"I would like to render my homage to your organization and to your sponsors for all your efforts at reconstruction and development of my country, and I express my profound gratitude," King Sihanouk concluded.

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"The needs are overwhelming," a World Vision staff report said of the predominantly Moslem enclave of Chechnya, home to 1 million people. Chechnya declared independence from Moscow in 1991. In a delayed reaction, Russian forces surrounded its rebels into submission in 1995.

The military campaign that began in December 1994 devastated the Chechen capital city of Grozny. The central water system was destroyed beyond repair, as were most other public facilities.

World Vision shipped trucks, hospital equipment, and medical supplies from the United States and Canada to Chechnya, also assisting refugees displaced in the nearby territory of Dagestan. The United Nations, meanwhile, worked to bring clean water to the region to avert epidemics of cholera, typhoid, and diarrhea.

World Vision gave high priority to aiding reconciliation among people traumatized by the war. "It is heart-breaking to think of 6-year-old girls and boys [vowing] to avenge their parents," said the report, adding that revenge is a relentless pursuit in the traditionally clan-structured Chechen society.

"The conflict between Russia and Chechnya has gone on for three centuries with, at most, 40 years of inter-emption. Today's children will be tomorrow's killers unless their traumatic experiences can be redeemed by God's grace," the report said. World Vision's reconciliation program is focused on slowly reopening schools.

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Farmers in the richly fertile region grow beans, potatoes, and bananas, as well as crops relatively rare to Malawi, such as wheat, macadamia nuts, apples, and coffee. Yet crops cannot be transported to distant markets, because seasonal rains shortly after harvest make a dirt road about 13 miles long leading out of the area impassable. "Our produce simply rotted in our homes," the chief recalled.

Now crop yields are selling well locally and the area's people have gained government support for an all-weather road.

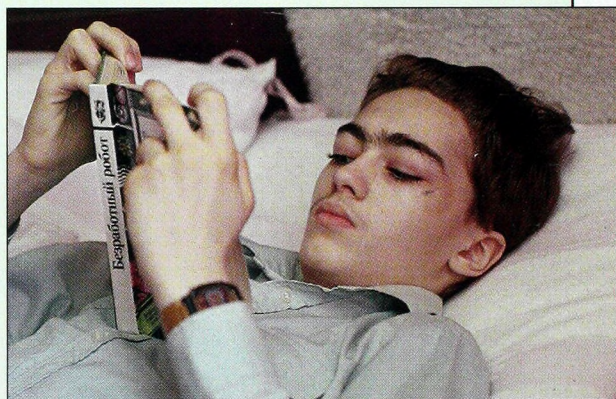
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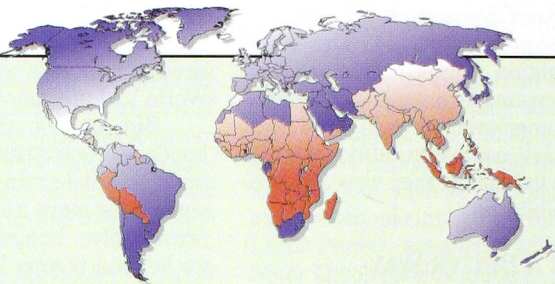


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Belarus, in 1991. Agency staff test food products and educate residents about special hygiene measures near the 19-mile "dead zone" around Chernobyl. They also distribute clothing and medicines to local hospitals, orphanages, churches, and Christian missions. World Vision also has provided psychological counseling for families affected by the disaster. Another program, called "New Beginnings," offers seminars on parenting and training on the topic for lay instructors.

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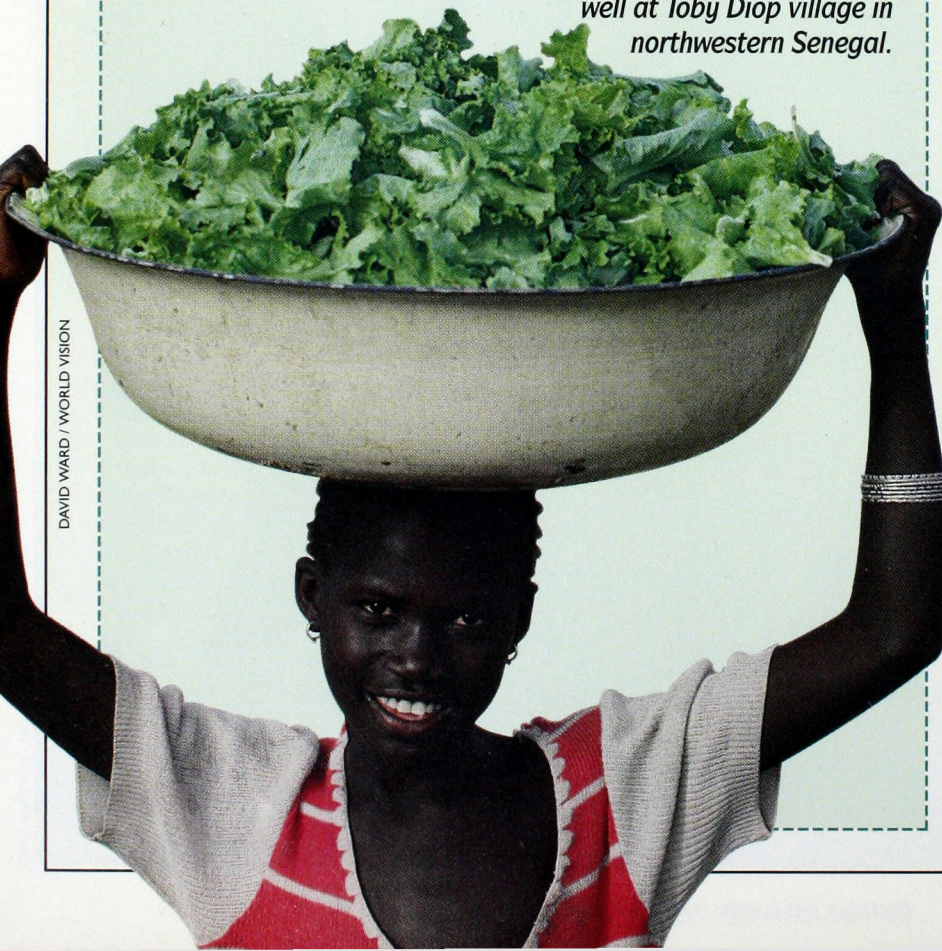


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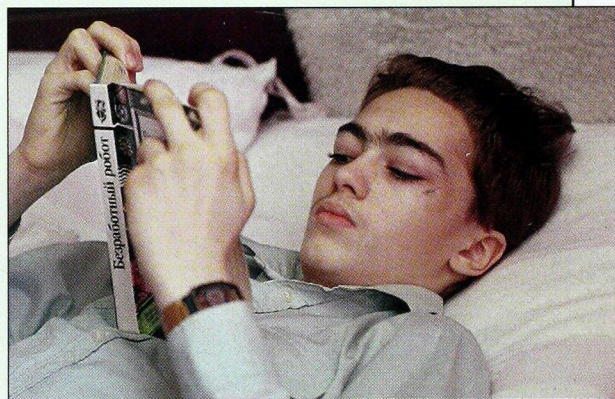
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SIGNS OF HOPE IN

GUATEMALA



A woman with dark hair, wearing a vibrant red blouse with intricate floral embroidery in yellow, purple, and blue, is focused on her craft. She is seated at a wooden loom, with her hands positioned to weave threads. The blouse features a large floral design on the chest and smaller patterns on the sleeves. The background is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the woman and her work.

Maria Elena Saquach weaves bright threads into traditional Guatemalan cloth at a loom in her home in Xipiacul, a village near the provincial capital of Chimaltenango about 20 miles northwest of Guatemala City. A member of a women's group that receives community development loans from World Vision, she sells tablecloths and *huipiles*, or folk dresses, during lean times before harvest.

Of the Central American country's 10 million people, nearly one-third live in rural areas. There, fewer than 2 percent of all property owners hold more than 65 percent of the land. The rest of the rural population scratches out a meager living on farms in least fertile areas. They suffer from food shortages, inadequate water supply, and poor sanitation. Most farmers supplement their income by working on *fincas*, or large agricultural estates. Often they receive only subsistence wages and are beaten to spur faster labor.

World Vision began work in Guatemala in 1962, organizing the first of several conferences for pastors isolated in remote regions. World Vision donors began sponsoring children in the country in 1975, providing them with health care, educational assistance, and spiritual nurture.

In 1985, the agency initiated community development programs in Guatemala. In 1993, economic development programs began offering training and loans for farming and small businesses to help people build self-reliance. 🌐

Photo by Piet VanLier

SAMARITAN SAMPLER

RESOURCES FOR
HELPING OTHERS
IN THE NAME
OF CHRIST



SAVING KIDS' LIVES

Why would a teen go hungry for 30 hours? Angelina Alvarez, 14, participated in World Vision's annual 30 Hour Famine, going without food to raise funds for hungry children. She explains: "I always see pictures and television ads about sending money to Africa, and I just wanted to do something."

This year, more than 180,000 teens across the United States participated in the famine, raising \$2.8 million to help World Vision provide food, education, medical care, and community development assistance for people in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Teens between 14 and 19 who raise \$500 or more are eligible to enter the World Vision Study Tour essay contest. Winners for 1995 traveled to Ethiopia and Kenya to visit World Vision projects.

The next 30 Hour Famine is scheduled for Feb. 23-24, 1996. World Vision supplies videos and activity guides for famine leaders. For information, call 1-800-7-FAMINE. It's about saving kids' lives!

TUMBLIN' WALLS OF JERICHO

The *Jericho Hour* is a recent book that tells how understanding "warfare prayer" and evangelism strategies is vital to reaping a harvest of many souls by the end of the 20th century.

Author Dick Eastman, international president of Every Home for Christ, believes Christians can make "principalities and powers crumble through daily prayer and an intimate walk with Christ."

For a copy of *The Jericho Hour*, priced at \$9.99, contact Creation House at (800) 451-4598, or your local Christian bookstore.

To request a copy of World Vision's monthly prayer guide, call (206) 815-1000 or write George Marhad at World Vision, P.O. Box 9716, Federal Way, WA 98063-9716.

A.D. 2000's quarterly catalog, *The Arsenal*, is another resource for books on prayer. To order, call (818) 577-5599.

WOMEN OF VISION

It takes more than tears to change a world. It takes courage," Roberta Hestenes, president of Eastern College in St. David's, Pa., told the 1994 national Women of Vision conference.

"Courageous Women: Women at Risk and Women Taking Risks" is the theme for the second biennial conference of World Vision's Women of Vision, planned for Jan. 25-27, 1996 in Newport Beach, Calif. Founded by a group of women from Orange County, Calif., Women of Vision is committed to reaching out to poor women and their families in the developing world.

Since the 1994 conference, several

Women of Vision groups have formed in cities across the United States.

This year, featured speakers include Susan Baker, wife of former Secretary of State James Baker III; the Baroness Caroline Cox, deputy speaker in the British Parliament's House of Lords; and Robert A. Seiple, president of World Vision. The Lamb's Theater of New York will present a drama, "Mary and Joseph," at the conference.

Women of Vision groups learn about the plight of women living in poverty, pray, and raise funds for World Vision projects. They attend seminars on cross-cultural studies, organize fund raising events, participate in local ministries, and travel overseas to build relationships with women in need. Their work has provided food, water, housing, health care, and literacy training for impoverished families in World Vision projects in Africa and Latin America.

For more information about Women of Vision or the conference, contact Women of Vision at P.O. Box 10372, Newport Beach, CA 92658, or call (206) 815-1000.



GAIL FISHER / LOS ANGELES TIMES

compiled and written by Stephanie Stevenson

'TIS THE SEASON

Helping someone in need this Christmas could be as simple as a lick and a seal on Christmas card envelopes.

The theme of Wheat Ridge Ministries' annual Christmas seals program is "Great Joy For All People." Donations to the program provide grants to more than 65 ministries, not only during Christmas, but year-round, through Lutheran churches and related agencies. Programs range from helping families in crisis to giving support to disabled people.

Wheat Ridge Ministries also offers a video called "Good News to Every Home". The video tells the traditional Christmas story through children's artwork from around the world, and is narrated by an elementary-school boy.

To order Wheat Ridge Christmas seals, a 1995 Advent devotional booklet costing 50 cents, or a "Good News to Every Home" video costing \$19.95, call (800) 762-6748.



“ The Son of God became man to enable men to become the sons of God. **”**
—C. S. Lewis

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It's about saving kids' lives.

B620--



BY LARRY WILSON

In Costa Rica:

LAND REFORM TAKES ROOT

Throughout the region surrounding the frontier-like city of Nicoya in northwestern Costa Rica, the sun is beating the land into dry, crusty submission. It's April, the end of a six-month dry season. Farms lie dormant and untended, waiting for May and six months of rain.

Most of the region's poor farmers have left their families to work in the country's capital of San Jose or on banana plantations in the south. But not Daniel Arias. The weathered 50-year-old farmer stands on a hill overlooking his thriving fields of dry rice, corn, fruits, vegetables, and groves of young trees he plans to sell to the government for reforestation.

His feet are planted firmly on this, his own land, and with hands on hips he smiles proudly. He remembers too well that just three years ago this land was barren and he, like so many other farmers he knew, was unemployed, his family scattered.

Arias moved onto this land full of promise in 1979. As part of a government effort to help the country's landless peasants, Arias was given 25 acres in exchange for a promise that he would make it productive.

Daniel Arias, 50, takes a stand on land of his own developed with the aid of World Vision.

He soon found, however, that without irrigation he could grow food only six months a year; and without money, he could not get the irrigation, fertilizer, pesticides, and equipment he needed. He had land, but he was still poor.

His life changed three years ago when he heard about a World Vision program that helps farmers like him. He attended seminars that showed him improved farming techniques and how to make his own organic fertilizer. Then World Vision helped him install an irrigation system and obtain seeds to start a tree business. Today, his wife, six children, and eight grandchildren all live on his land and help farm it.

"To have my own land, and to have it so productive, is a very great thing," he says. "Now I know that if something happens to me, my family will be taken care of. It is also a great joy to have my grandchildren working with me!"

Over the past 25 years, political instability and wars have rocked much of Latin America. At the heart of these problems, most notably in Nicaragua and El Salvador, is land—or lack of land. Millions of peasants have no hope for decent lives because they have no way to grow food.

While many Latin American countries, including Costa Rica, are addressing the problem of land, most are finding that it's not enough to just get land into the hands of poor peasants like Arias. Giving land to the poor without also giving them the means to make it productive is merely to turn landless poverty into landowning poverty.

NO LAND FOR POOR PEOPLE

Latin America is full of people "who work on other people's land," says David Befus, World Vision's regional director of program development in Costa Rica. "The rural farmer either works for someone else or rents land that he has no control over. He doesn't have a plot of his own."

In Costa Rica, as elsewhere, the distribution of land is highly unequal, says Christopher Baker, a travel writer and authority on Latin America. Today, 71 percent of Costa Rica's rural population is landless. The poorer 50 percent of all landholders own only 3 percent of the land.

Nowhere is the problem worse than in the Guanacaste region in northwest Costa Rica, where the average size of a wealthy person's holding is almost 155 acres, twice the national average of 74 acres. Fifty-five percent of the region's rural families fall below the poverty line. Their inability to satisfy basic material needs of life is so pronounced that mortality rates are 50 percent higher here than in the rest of the country.

"Without land," Befus says, "the people don't have a stable income or a way to provide for their families. It's a pattern of



World Vision helps farmers with a simple irrigation system: a well and bucket that women use to irrigate crops for a harvest during dry-season months

underemployment. They'll work during the harvest. They'll work during the planting season. But during the dry season, from November to May, they're unemployed." The average peasant farmer in Guanacaste earns \$61 a year.

WORKING TOGETHER

The solution is land reform. Peasants see land as their only means of access to better income and security. Land reform—transferring ownership and control from rich landowners to landless farmers—has taken many forms throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In 1961, the Costa Rican government started a land reform program which identifies unused plots, negotiates a fair price and purchases the land, then grants it to landless farmers.

World Vision worked with Guanacaste's poor for several years before recognizing that it could not truly help them without addressing the root problem of

land. Plenty of land was going unused in Guanacaste. So in 1992, World Vision and the government's Institute of Agricultural Development (I.D.A.) began to experiment with several peasant groups.

Says World Vision's Gerardo Campos, who works with the landless in Guanacaste, "We decided to work together on two fronts: helping peasants who have land but who have not been able to substantially better their economic status, and working with landless peasants to initiate a struggle for land."

HELPING LANDLESS PEASANTS

Two years ago, when Henry Hernandez, 37, and other men in the Christian Evangelical Church in the community of San Martin heard that World Vision was helping poor, landless farmers like them, they sent a letter to the agency and started praying for God's wisdom. A month later World Vision was helping them organize

their own peasant association.

World Vision is helping make the government's land program succeed. "We're working in 26 communities with hundreds of people," Campos says, "and we know those who are eligible for this land program. We're the channel to help people access what the government is providing."

Befus says, "The government does that which only governments can do, because they have clout and resources. World Vision fills in the cracks. We don't have the resources to buy land for people, but we do have resources to help people get land for themselves."

World Vision's first step is to help start a government-recognized organization. The government grants land only to approved peasant associations, not individuals, so World Vision helps form community groups to meet government eligibility requirements. The agency also helps groups prepare their applications for land and obtain necessary permits.

After an association has applied for land, World Vision shows farmers how to obtain financing, how to make the land productive, and how to market their crops. These lessons also include Bible studies about the importance of land, working the land, and God's relationship to it.

At the same time, the association looks for land that the government has already obtained or for unused land that the government might purchase for them.

Henry and the others have already targeted the land they want, and World Vision is helping them negotiate for it. "Now when I dream about the future," Henry says, "I dream about prosperity. To have our own land will change our health, our security, and how we look at our lives economically. This is how God has seen fit to bless us and enable us to be prosperous."

Over the past two years, World Vision has helped more than 105 families in Guanacaste acquire land of their own.

MORE THAN LAND

To help new landowners, the government theoretically offers access to credit, farm machinery, and technical help. But given growing economic woes in Costa Rica, most peasants receive little more than raw land to work.

"The government has cut back on its programs," Befus says. "All the budgets for technical assistance, training, marketing assistance, and experimental activity have been eliminated. So the government does only one part of agrarian reform: buying land."

To help new landowners, World Vision has developed an integrated strategy of development that involves agricultural training, better irrigation, an agricultural school, and development of new crops.

TRAINING AND WATER

"In Guanacaste, peasants cultivate by using annual burning of fields as fertilization, and digging sticks as the basic tools," says Marc Edelman, assistant professor of anthropology at Yale University. "And many are reluctant or unable to invest in modern technologies, such as chemical fertilizers or herbicides."

To overcome these obstacles, World Vision educates farmers in improved methods of agriculture. "To make small-scale agriculture sustainable and profitable," Befus says, "we are teaching farmers methods of organic farming and showing them how to produce crops out of season by using irrigation, and how to use natural fertilizers and pesticides."

Without better access to water, however, most farmers still must rely on a single growing season. "More than 85 percent of the rains come between June and November, creating a major bottleneck to agricultural production, especially for small farmers," says Manfredo Grellert, who studied landlessness in Costa Rica as a student intern in 1994.

"Irrigation will allow communities to grow crops year-round," Grellert adds. "Fathers will be able to stay in the area, and families will be able to stay together."

Every year after harvest, Jorge Luis Awando, 36, has to leave his wife and two daughters in Moracia while he seeks work in San Jose. It's the only way to make ends meet during the six-month dry season. Leaving humiliates him because he knows that until he can start sending funds his wife must borrow money. She also must be both father and mother to his children.

"It's very bad for my two girls when I cannot be here," he says. "If I had my own land and a good irrigation system, I would never have to leave my children."

World Vision is helping some farmers with simple irrigation systems. In one community, that means a well, a pump, a long hose, and lots of women with buckets. The women fill the buckets with water and spread out over the field watering the crops. It's a lot of work, but the system has enabled the women's organization to grow crops in both winter and summer.

SCHOOL FOR SOWERS

To help small farmers make their land more productive, World Vision also is opening a school for experimental farming. The agency already has success with experimental farms in the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, where some farmers have increased their yield tenfold without chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

"The methodologies we're experimenting with go back to ancient ways of planting," Befus says, "back to using the leaves of trees as insecticide and using

compost for fertilizer. These methods are making small-scale agriculture profitable."

As important as the land itself is, profitability is the key to sustainable development. "The school will identify and disseminate technologies that will not only help make agriculture profitable, but help sustain nutrition levels in the family, and do these things in a way that's culturally acceptable," Befus says.

NEW CROPS, OLD FORESTS

"People here tend to grow the traditional crops, like rice, corn, and beans," Befus says. "But these bring people the lowest prices, because everyone grows them." The government and World Vision are encouraging small farmers to grow more remunerative crops, like spices and fruit, potatoes and tomatoes.

Trees, however, are one of the most lucrative crops today, used for reforestation in Costa Rica's severely depleted rain forests. Daniel Arias is growing *caoba* (a native mahogany), *coco bolo* (a shade tree), and cedar (used for parquet floors). But he is most proud of his *cenizaro* trees, a native wood that once flourished in the area but today is practically nonexistent.

"GOD IS PROVIDING FOR ME"

Since 1962, the Costa Rican government has purchased and resold more than 1.6 million acres of land to more than 33,000 families. When the program began, there were more than 100 Costa Rican families who owned plantations larger than 6,000 acres. Today there are fewer than 38.

Landlessness continues to overwhelm many poor families and retard significant economic development in Costa Rica. Yet organizations like World Vision, by working with the government and providing tools to make land more productive, will continue to help these people rise from the soil of poverty.

"Introducing better production methods, community development and organization, finding new markets—these are the basic tools farmers need to succeed in a land reform project," Befus says. "Without these, you're just parcelling out land. The farmers eventually sell it or lose it, because they can't really make it productive. "Our programs," he adds, "give people a chance to provide for themselves."

World Vision's help, says farmer Charamia Luis, 47, "has reassured me of God's provision. God is the one who's done everything up to now. There are so many people who have needs, so many communities who want this kind of help—but World Vision, a Christian organization, has chosen to help me. This can only be the hand of God. It's made my faith grow, because now I see how God is providing for me." ☉

The two tiny figures inching their way down the hallway looked like lost orphans in a darkened alley. But it was midday and the sun shone brightly into the open-air corridor.

The figure in front reached out with one hand to feel the wall as she shuffled tentatively down the passageway. The one in back held her head downward as if staring at an invisible line on the floor. The two little girls held hands partly to keep from being separated in a strange place partly for courage.

Both girls are 5 years old, and they are indeed in a strange place. It is the first time either of them has been more than a few feet from their home. They are in a place their parents never expected them, as blind children, to be. They are in school.

Finally the pair find the open door that leads to their classroom. The girls enter triumphant after an unescorted trip to the bathroom. They are welcomed back with shouts of congratulations from their teacher and 15 other 5- and 6-year-olds. In this school every achievement is celebrated.

*A blind man's
vision changes
his nation's
view of the
handicapped.*

Lighting the Way for Thailand's Blind



In a special catch-up class for handicapped students at Sanambin Primary School, a teacher helps a blind boy feel shapes that correspond with words that he knows.

The school is part of the Christian Foundation for the Blind in Thailand. The organization was founded in 1984 by a onetime recipient of a World Vision scholarship, Prayat Punongong. It is dedicated to helping blind people in its home country and other Southeast Asian lands. Its preparatory school in northeast Thailand where the two little wanderers live has become a very special place, changing not only the lives of many blind children but also the attitude and mentality of a nation.

"Our goal is to prepare blind students to enter the public school system so they can receive the education they are entitled to," says Prayat. He opened what is officially known as the Christian Home for Education for the Blind in 1978 in half a rented house with 13 donated beds. At that time, only 180 blind students in the whole of Thailand

attended school. Today that number has grown to 8,000, including 2,000 who have been "mainstreamed" into public schools.

CHANGING SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Social change is hard won in a 3,000-year-old culture like Thailand's. In many places—particularly in rural areas—blind people are looked down upon, almost dehumanized. Children who are blind often are considered mentally retarded as well as physically handicapped. Taught that they are inferior, they often end up begging or playing music for small change on the streets of Bangkok, the country's crowded capital city.

This social rejection in Thai society of anyone deemed abnormal Prayat finds deeply disturbing. He knows all about it. Blinded in a car accident at the age 8, he often was locked up in a room for long

periods of time by his parents. It wasn't until he was discovered by two Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries that his life began to change. They took Prayat into their home and raised him as their own child.

The missionaries introduced Prayat to Christianity and he was baptized in 1966. He says it was his adopted parents who inspired him to start his foundation. "They were very dedicated Christians," he said. "They always prayed that I would bring glory to God in whatever avenue of life I chose."

His faith also helped him endure many painful episodes.

"I remember once I was passing church and heard beautiful, happy singing inside," Prayat recalls. "As I was about to go in, someone saw me and immediately took my arm and led me away. They thought I must be lost." It was

Prayat Punongong (left) joins government officials and educators discussing distribution of Thailand's budget for education. As founder of the Christian Home for Education for the Blind, he works tirelessly against social stigmas on the handicapped.



a painful reminder that blind people are not welcome in most public gatherings.

Often relegated to standing outside during weddings and other ceremonies, the blind are considered an embarrassment, a blight on society who are better kept out of sight.

Buntan Monthien, a blind professor of music theory at Bangkok's prestigious Chulalankorn University, says, "People equate blindness with lack of ability or even intelligence. We are perceived to be incapable in practically every aspect of life. In short, we are second-class citizens.

"If you are taught that you are a burden to society," he continues, "you begin to think and act like a burden. If you are taught from birth that you cannot learn, by the time you are old enough to go to school, you don't even feel like trying." One becomes, he says,

an unwilling participant in one's own alienation.

For both Prayat and Buntan, the most painful moments in their lives have come not because they are blind but from the rejection they feel from their society.

"Somebody else always was telling me how to think, how to act, even what to do vocationally," Buntan says. "I grew up thinking the only thing I could do was become a musician, because that's what blind people do in Thailand."

BAD KARMA

Perhaps central to the belief systems that Prayat and others face is the Buddhist notion of karma—that misfortunes you suffer now are the result of bad things you did in a previous life. Prayat says that this religious dimension to the problem of blindness is particularly devastating to children.

"When I was a boy," he says, "I was told that I had committed *kamkau*, an action in a previous life that was so bad it caused my blindness in this life." He said that only added to his feeling of inferiority. There also is a more sinister side to the plight of the blind in Thailand. Police records are filled with stories of their abuse and neglect. Blind children often are tied to a bed post and left all day while their parents work. Some are sold to organized begging rings in Bangkok and other major cities. The rings force blind men, women, and children to beg on street corners, near pedestrian crosswalks, or at shopping malls for up to 18 hours a day.

EDUCATION IS THE KEY

Most experts agree that only by educating blind people can the country's attitude toward them be changed. Meanwhile, the task of educating any handicapped people is daunting.

Every year thousands of blind children are denied access to education for lack of space in special schools. According to Prayat, only about 10 percent of children with handicaps receive education in Thailand. The reasons vary from the high cost of providing special materials and teachers to cultural barriers. But the fact remains that the handicapped face systematic discrimination.

According to government statistics there are 140,000 handicapped children in Thailand—Prayat says the actual number is far greater. Yet there are only 13 special schools in the country with space for about 8,000 students.

The answer, experts say, is integration. Through persistent lobbying efforts by Prayat and others, government officials and education experts have come to realize that blind students can be integrated successfully into normal school

classrooms. Now the Thai government is proceeding with a national plan for integration that so far has included about 2,000 students.

"Blind students often are the best in the class," says Sudsawad Suchardpong, a mathematics teacher at the public Sanambin Primary School. "Visually impaired students usually are smart and pick up on ideas and concepts missed by some sighted students. Most of the teachers I have spoken to like having blind students in their class."

Somphan Wongskuk, assistant principal at Sanambin Primary, agrees, adding that it has taken considerable time and effort for blind students to gain acceptance in public schools. "When we began integrating blind students at our school, some parents couldn't understand why. They didn't want their children mixing with blind children." The problem, he says, called for a creative public relations effort.

"We began telling parents about the many blind people in Thailand who have gone on to lead successful lives. We used our PTA meetings to convince them that integrating blind children into our school would be a positive influence not only for the blind children but for the sighted children as well." Slowly the attitudes of parents started to change.

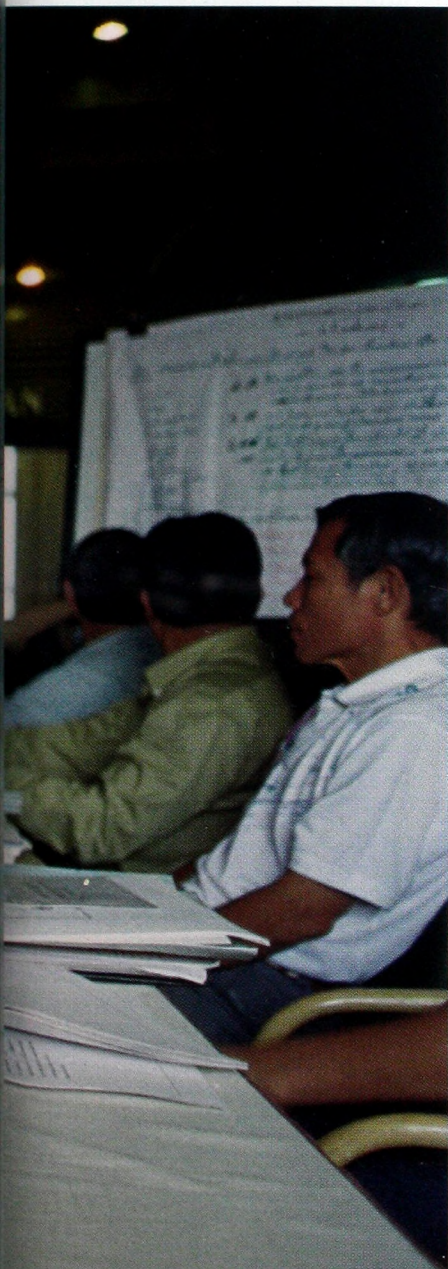
"Today we have one of the most successful integrated programs in the country," he says. "Our program is being used as a model all over Thailand."

Eleven-year-old Siripattarn Punturn is a happy, friendly fifth grader at Sanambin. A visitor would have no idea that she was any different from more than 1,000 other girls at the school. She talks and laughs and seems to revel in school life. Siripattarn is blind, and she is one of the top students in the school.

Raised near the school, Siripattarn was fortunate to have Prayat's foundation for the blind based near her home. When her parents heard about the organization, they applied to send their daughter there to study. That was five years ago, when Siripattarn was 6.

Siripattarn entered the foundation's preparatory school, where she began an intensive training course in basic mobility skills and braille. As soon as she completed the preparatory program, Siripattarn was enrolled at Sanambin. An exceptionally bright student, Siripattarn has consistently ranked at the top of her class. Earlier this year, she won second place in a national braille reading and writing competition.

"I know I have a handicap," says Siripattarn. "But I do not feel separated from the other students." She says she prefers to study at an integrated school because of many opportunities there not available at



special schools. She adds, "I have many friends here. Some are blind, but most of them can see."

CHANGE: A LONG TIME COMING

Besides gaining education for blind children, Prayat and his foundation have steadily pressured the Thai government to change laws that discriminate against the blind. This, he says, has been one of his most difficult and frustrating tasks.

In 1978 he attacked a law that exempted blind children between age 7 and 14 from compulsory education. Then he went after a law that denied a national identification card to handicapped persons.

"The ID card is the most important document any citizen in this country can have," he says. "Without it you cannot get a passport, register ownership of property, or even open a bank account. The only thing you can do without an ID card is die." After a long battle, the law was revised to allow blind people to hold identification cards and thus participate more fully in their society.

Perhaps Prayat's most powerful ally is Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The Thai royal family has taken a keen interest in helping Prayat's foundation and in helping handicapped people in general. Besides granting his organization royal patronage—a significant advantage in a country where the king commonly is considered to be descended from divinity—the royal family has given Prayat's foundation considerable material support.

"Without the efforts of the royal family, I'm sure we would not have seen as many changes in the government's attitude toward the handicapped," Prayat says.

Yet education remains the major the key to change, Prayat insists. "It was such struggle for me to get the education of my choice," he recalls. "Because it was so difficult, I made it my business to see that handicapped people are integrated into mainstream schools and into the society in general. I want blind people to have an equal opportunity to enjoy life.

"The Bible teaches that we do not walk by sight but by faith," he continues. "I always have believed this, and it has been a great source of encouragement to me."

With this in mind, Prayat chose Isaiah 42:16 as the guiding scripture for his organization: "I will lead my blind people by roads they have never travelled. I will turn their darkness into light and make rough country smooth before them. These are my promises, and I will keep them without fail." ☉

Steve Reynolds is a World Vision journalist based in Bangkok, Thailand.

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WORLD VISION
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NEXT TO THE LAST WORD

In principle, we're all against child labor. The challenge comes in defining the term. When does the work children do become "child labor?" When it keeps them out of school? When it threatens their health?

I recall a discussion with one of my colleagues in Bangladesh. I had expressed revulsion at the use of children to smash rocks and bricks to make gravel. He gently chided me: "If these children don't work, they and their families will starve. Do you want that?"

No, we certainly don't! That's why child sponsorship is so vitally important. Sponsorship helps provide sustenance, education, and training for children, their families, and their communities to prevent exploitation, bring people dignity, and make them self-sustaining.

You might recall reading about World Vision nurse Heather MacLeod in the June/July issue. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II thought enough of Heather's work with children in Pakistan, Romania, and Rwanda to award her the Queen's Service Medal.

—Terry Madison

WORLD VISION

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World Vision is a nonprofit, Christian humanitarian agency dedicated to serving God by helping people care for those in need. It ministers to children and families, provides emergency aid, fosters self-reliance, furthers evangelism, strengthens Christian leadership, and increases public awareness of poverty around the world.

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WHEN WORDS BECOME FLESH

The setting was simple. A group of women from late teens to middle age sat on floor mats in a small concrete building. A chicken strutted into the room. A goat stuck its head through the only window. A literacy class was in session.

The question was direct. "Why do you want to read?" In the West, the answer would be so easily assumed that the question never would be asked. But this is Mauritania, a rural country where poverty is so deeply entrenched that nothing about life can be assumed. The struggle for daily survival in a harsh desert land is the reality. This reality can be especially oppressive for women.

For many women, marginalization begins at birth with the custom of female circumcision. It is a custom that both mutilates and denigrates.

Young girls are force-fed. Plumpness is considered both virtuous and fashionable. What is desirable in the eyes of others, however, can be a painful humiliation for children. Threats and beatings are carried out until volumes of food are ingested.

Marriage happens early and is all prearranged. Divorce is frequent. Women have no say. They are simply told that their husbands have lost interest and are moving on. Invariably women, and perhaps a child or two, are left on their own to eke out an existence in absolute poverty.

"Why do you want to read?"

The answers speak to the pathos of oppressed women.

"You are a nonperson if you can't read," one woman remarked matter-of-factly.

"I want to read so I can keep my own secrets in my letters," said another.

A woman quietly offered, "I don't want to have to ask someone else to read my divorce papers."

And the answer of a marginalized people: "We won't know anything about the outside world if we can't read."

This is the scourge of illiteracy: a gift withheld, a potential unrealized.

We sometimes understate the tremendous loss of order at the Tower of Babel. The gift of a common language, known and owned by all, was taken away. Order was gone. Confusion reigned. Shared meanings and shared understanding, essential elements of shared visions, were destroyed. In a real sense, the gift of literacy was destroyed.

Today, cultural misunderstandings, indeed, family dysfunctions, are very much tied to our inability to communicate. Our world becomes narrow and circumscribed by barriers that prevent understanding.

Illiteracy precludes poetry and dilutes one's

ability for reflection and contemplation. It is a prison of the worst kind—a punishment that intensifies with time, as a life limited by inarticulacy is mindlessly passed along to succeeding generations.

But once the cycle is broken, a whole new world begins. Women who are given the opportunity for literacy, as World Vision offered these Mauritanian women, don't keep it for themselves. They want it for their children as well.

"I can read and write!" Words take on meaning, and life will never be the same. Literacy brings dignity. It promotes self-awareness. It enhances life.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning ... In him was life, and that life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, but the darkness did not overcome it," (John 1:1-2,4-5).

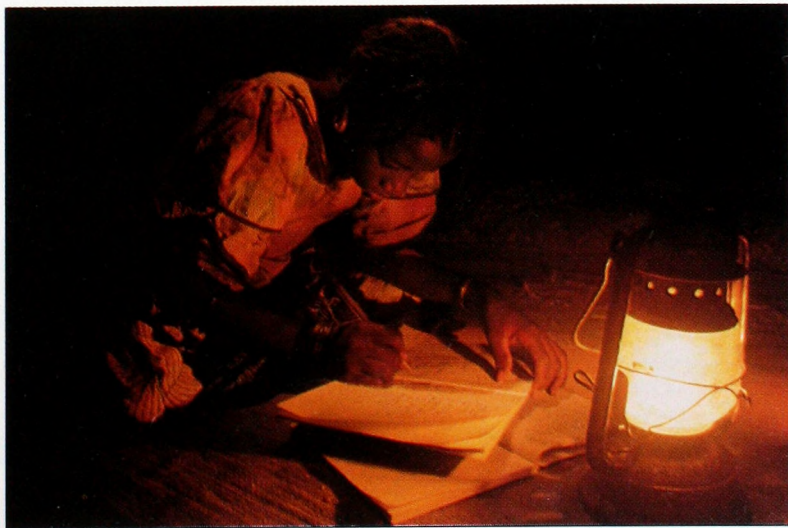
Christmas is a celebration of God's gift to us, when the Word became flesh "and made his dwelling among us." Literacy is a celebration of liberation, when words take on flesh and meaning, and people are empowered to be all that God intended. This magnification of life brings honor to God, and it can bring people to God.

The excitement among the women in the small building was growing. Soon they would be able to write their own questions and read what others have written down through the ages, including the words of holy people inspired by God.

Their dignity and self-esteem will grow with the knowledge of Christ's love and a heavenly kingdom offered to those the world seeks to marginalize. 🌍

"We won't know anything about the outside world if we can't read."

A young girl reads by lanternlight in Mauritania.



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CONTENTS

CHILD LABOR:
Robbing God's Cradle **2**

World Vision News **8**

SIGNS OF HOPE:
Guatemala **10**

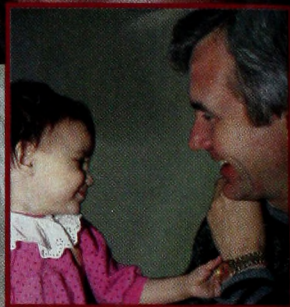
Samaritan Sampler **12**

COSTA RICA:
Land Reform
Takes Root **14**

PROFILE:
Lighting the Way for
Thailand's Blind **18**

FROM THE PRESIDENT:
When Words Become
Flesh **23**

JESUS STILL MULTIPLIES LOAVES TO FEED THE HUNGRY



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is a way your congregation can make a difference in the world. I have seen World Vision feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and bring the good news of Jesus to the poor. Your giving through the Love Loaf program not only allows World Vision to care for the needs of children worldwide, but that care then opens the door for Christ to be seen. This is a great ministry that makes a tremendous difference.

Gary Dennis,
Pastor, La Cañada
Presbyterian Church

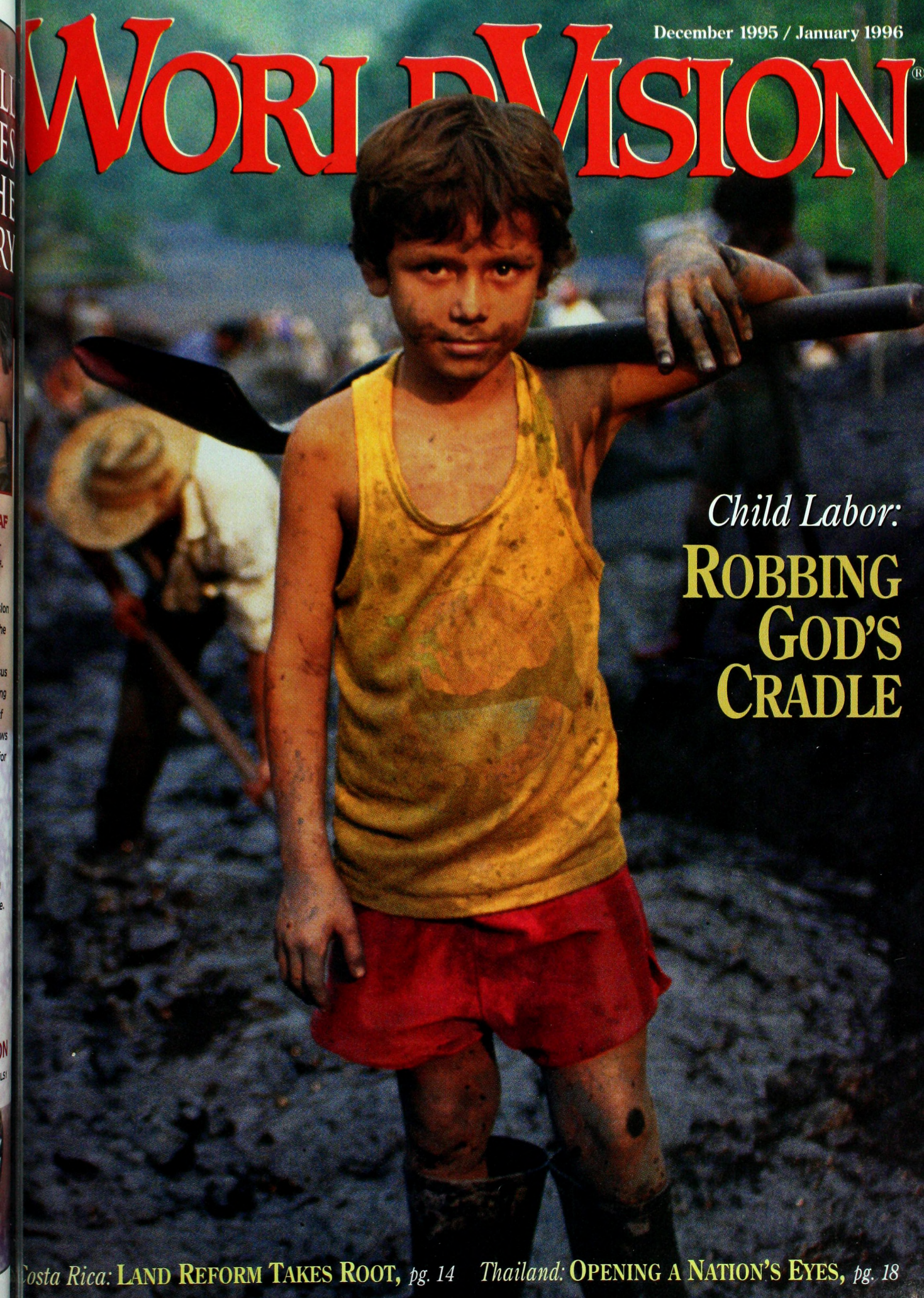

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Child Labor:
**ROBBING
GOD'S
CRADLE**

Child Labor: **ROBBING**



GOD'S CRADLE

BY JANE SUTTON

A child apprentice
learns handloom
weaving from an
older boy in a cloth
factory in Dacca,
Bangladesh.

Pattinathar's whole life used to be a small hut and endless days making *beedi* cigarettes. Five years ago, the boy, then 12, labored for little more than \$1 a week in a beedi-making factory in North Arcot, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He spent long hours sitting cross-legged, elbow-to-elbow with other youths, rolling tobacco into cut leaves and closing the ends of the slender, locally popular cigarettes while constantly breathing in carcinogenic tobacco dust. If he failed to complete his daily quota of 2,500 beedis, the foreman beat him.

SANJAY SOJWAL / WORLD VISION



Pattinathar

Pattinathar was a victim of bonded labor, an especially egregious form of child labor prevalent in societies where borrowing and indebtedness are customary for poor families. Impoverished parents take out loans and put up their children as living collateral. Although Indian law prohibits bonded labor, impoverished parents continue to mortgage children to pay for medical expenses, funerals, or weddings.

Pattinathar's father, Alagesh, sold the boy and two brothers into bonded labor to pay off a \$35 loan for medicine and hospital bills. Alagesh suffered from asthma and tuberculosis, and could only work sporadically. His wife collected and sold firewood, earning only about 32 cents a day. The family could not afford meat or milk, and sometimes had to rely on gifts of rice from a neighbor.

Soon, the exorbitant interest rate made it impossible for Alagesh to repay the loan, leaving the three boys indefinitely bonded. High-spirited Pattinathar tried to escape eight times, always unsuccessfully. After his last attempt in 1989, the foreman chained his legs with shackles, binding him to the factory even in his sleep.

Child labor in various forms is hardly restricted to India—or even to Asia. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that, worldwide, up to 200 million children under age 15 work in gainful labor, more than 95 percent of them in developing countries.

Despite governments' bans on underage workers, children as young as 5 become wage earners—sometimes primary wage earners—for impoverished families. Thousands of children toil in gold mines in Peru, in sweatshop garment factories in Bangladesh, and in Indonesia's rattan furniture industry, a large exporter to the United States. In glass factories in Firozabad, India, barefoot children stand on floors littered with broken glass in front of hot furnaces to make the bangles, ashtrays, jugs, and bowls for which the town is famous. Lebanese children dodge between moving cars in Beirut, selling candy or offering to clean windshields. And in war-torn African nations such as Sudan, young boys are recruited as soldiers and trained to kill.

In factories, farms, on the streets, and in private homes, children work in miserable conditions that often contribute to permanent health damage. They toil long hours in cramped positions, straining their eyes and limbs. Temperatures are often too hot or too cold. Often they aren't given protective clothing to shield them from sharp or hot items or chemicals. Abuse is common—children are beaten by foremen if they don't complete their quota of work, or sexually mistreated by employers, especially in domestic jobs.

"A child who has given his childhood to work is way behind developmentally and will never catch up," says Jeffrey Newman of the National Child Labor Coalition, citing the organization's extensive research over almost 100 years. "The likelihood is extremely great that children's lifespans will be shorter, they will be less capable of entering adulthood with the chance for economic and human success. [Child labor] puts them in the position of almost certainly being locked into lower socio-economic classes."

"Child exploitation means the loss of something we all take for granted: the ability to have a carefree, nurturing, learning, affirming childhood," says World Vision President Robert A. Seiple. "Anybody who would exploit a child, anybody who would rob a child of his childhood, is robbing God."

CHILDREN AT WORK WORLDWIDE

The ILO estimates that approximately half of the world's working children are in South and Southeast Asia. India reportedly has the largest number of child workers in the world. Its government acknowledges 17.5 million working children. The ILO and other groups, however, estimate the figure is between 44 million and 100 million. In rural Tamil Nadu alone, children make up as much as 14 percent of the workforce, laboring in matchbox, firecracker, and beedi cigarette factories.

The majority of the estimated 15 million underage laborers in Bangladesh work in the garment industry, started in

Easwaris, 14, bears burn scars from an explosion in a fireworks factory where she worked.



1977 and thriving since the mid-1980s. A nation in which over half the population are landless rural farmers, Bangladesh is dependent on exporting garments to the West—nearly \$750 million worth to the United States in 1993. A 1994 U.S. Department of Labor study reported that underage workers in 1,600 garment factories toil all day without breaks in dimly lighted, poorly ventilated buildings, sometimes behind locked doors.

In Thailand, an estimated 2 million children work as prostitutes in the thriving sex trade. Some have been sold into the profession by their parents, despite the attempts of teachers and authorities to dissuade families from this practice.

Child labor is increasing in Latin America, where more than 30 percent of households live below the poverty line. Children toil illegally in such industries as commercial agriculture, mining, domestic work, and *maquiladora* assembly factories in Mexico and Guatemala.

According to government estimates, approximately 800,000 Colombian children 17 and younger work, many in mining and farming. On 300 flower plantations children help grow and cut flowers for export, and are paid less than minimum wage. Usually not provided protective clothing, they are exposed to toxic pesticides known to cause cancer.

In many African nations children traditionally work in rural areas, performing tasks such as gathering water and firewood, harvesting crops, and herding animals. Many families view work as beneficial to children, promoting responsibility and participation in the community. But as populations migrate to urban centers where industrialism is on the rise, more African children are joining the workforce as hawkers, shoe-shiners, factory workers, car washers, and domestic workers. Although few formal studies of child labor in individual countries exist, the United Nations reports that children make up 17 percent of the continent's workforce.

Many of Tanzania's 13.2 million underage workers labor as long as 11 hours a day, six days a week, on sisal plantations, growing fibers for twine, cable, rope, and other products for export to the United States and other countries. Street children in Nairobi, Kenya, rummage in the city dump for recyclable items such as paper, plastics, glass, and scrap metal and get paid a pittance from middlemen for what they find. Sometimes their only pay is old food—just before it's thrown into the dump. The children risk catching pneumonia in the rainy season, cutting themselves on sharp pieces of rubbish, and being bitten by rats and poisonous snakes lurking in the garbage. Yet the middlemen do not

provide them with medical care.

Although most prevalent in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, child labor is on the rise in Eastern European countries, according to UNICEF officials.

Here in the United States, child labor is "not a non-issue," says Jeffrey Newman of the National Child Labor Coalition, which began in 1904 to combat child exploitation in the U.S. workforce. "There is still a great deal of exploitative labor in violation of both federal and state laws. Children as young as 4, 5, 6—the vast majority are American citizens—are exploited in fields such as medium-size manufacturing and agriculture. It's not an issue that we see much on the front pages of American newspapers, but it does exist."

LIFELONG SCARS

Child labor is more than grim statistics. Stories of individual children whose lives have been irrevocably altered prove its tragic proportions.

Five years ago, 9-year-old Easwaris labored in the Sivakasi fireworks factory in Tamil Nadu, India. Packed into a 15- by 20-foot room with 11 other children, she toiled 12 hours a day loading sulphur, aluminum dust, and coal into firecracker tubes. In this region where farming is dependent on unreliable monsoons and thwarted by long dry spells, farmers like Easwaris' father, Subbaraj, are often forced to abandon their small patches of land and seek other work. Subbaraj became a field hand for 50 cents a day—not enough to purchase the family's daily portions of rice, let alone other necessities. So two of his young daughters went to work.

An estimated 70,000 children work in the Sivakasi fireworks and match industry, producing firecrackers and materials for Dwali, the Festival of Lights. "I was always scared of fire and handling the chemicals," Easwaris says. "I had heard of accidents, but I never thought I would experience one."

One day, an explosion ripped through the factory when some of the children attempted the highly dangerous task of cutting gunpowder fuses. The blast killed 12 children, including Easwaris' 8-year-old sister, Munnishwaris, and burned Easwaris and six others.

The self-conscious girl, now 14, bears burn scars on her arm, hips, and back. Easwaris worries that her scars will decrease her chances for marriage.

In the wake of the accident, ruthless employers easily took advantage of Easwaris' illiterate parents. The factory foreman had Easwaris' father, Subbaraj, sign a blank sheet of paper, which later turned out to document his supposed receipt of about \$400, compensation for



"I have killed too many people," says Junior, 12, one of many boy soldiers who fought in a brutal civil war in the West African country of Liberia. Child soldiers are used increasingly in wars around the world.

Munnishwaris' death, and his promise not to involve the police. Since then, Subbaraj has received only half the recompense, while the factory dangles the balance before him so he won't go to authorities. Easwaris, forced to "sign" a fake document with her thumbprint while lying in pain in the hospital, never received compensation for her injuries.

In some countries, those speaking out against child labor are persecuted and sometimes killed. Police harassment and death threats levelled at Kailash Satyarthi, chairman of the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude, have prompted worldwide concern for the Indian activist's safety. But it's too late

for Pakistani Christian Iqbal Masih, 12, a former bonded carpet-weaver who traveled the world crusading against child labor and succeeded in shutting down many carpet factories in Pakistan. On Easter Sunday, 1995, he was shot dead in his home village.

A NECESSARY EVIL?

In many countries, the majority of child laborers work in the "informal economy," which avoids governmental regulation. Because so much of child labor lurks under the surface of society, statistics—not to mention solutions—are difficult to come by.

Manufacturers subcontract labor to

enterprises in villages, small workshops, and homes where children do most of the work. Children become unofficial employees when parents, usually single mothers without money for child care or school fees, bring them along to their workplaces. Or employers exploit children under the guise of apprenticeships, the time-honored model in which experienced professionals teach youngsters skills, promoting lifelong careers. In the absence of contracts and regulation, however, employers pay apprentices very little, if at all, while charging living expenses.

Many employers also exploit children separated from their families, such as orphaned or abandoned children, or those tricked or lured away from villages to urban centers. Jitti Tumrin, 13, was whisked away from his rural home to a leather factory in Bangkok, Thailand, where he and many other children worked until midnight with few breaks. "The other children did not seem to be as tired as I was," Jitti says of that first day. "I thought if they could do it, so can I." When allowed to rest, he slept in a factory room with six other boys.

"I don't like what I'm doing, but I don't know what else to do, so I guess I will stay where I am," the boy says.

Facing international criticism, many developing-world pragmatists say that some nations' economies as well as individual family incomes would collapse if their children did not work. India's late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi once called child labor "a necessary evil," entrenched by the deep poverty so many Indian families face. A Bangladeshi trade unionist, arguing against U.S. Senator Tom Harkin's Child Labor Deterrence Act of 1993, which called for banning imports made by underage children, wrote in the *Dhaka Courier*, "The children working in the various industries in Bangladesh, whether in garments or in other sectors, live in relatively better circumstances than their neighbors in the villages. ... It is debatable if a ban on child labor is likely to lead them to the benefits of education." Indeed, a recent Oxfam study found that many Bangladeshi children forced under international pressure out of their textile factory jobs wound up on the streets, some in prostitution.

Children often must work out of dire economic necessity. Families struggling to survive in developing countries put all members to work, young and old alike. Some children become important wage contributors when parents or siblings fall sick. As AIDS devastates the adult population in parts of East Africa, children have little choice but to support families themselves. In some countries, religious beliefs prohibit women from holding jobs, so children fill the income gap.

But many non-governmental organizations and human rights groups assert that poverty is not the only reason child labor exists, and it cannot excuse child labor exploitation. Children's income is rarely enough to make or break families' household income—proportionately less than 10 to 20 percent, according to a UNICEF report on Latin America.

Children's advocates point to greed and exploitation at the root of child labor. Manufacturers and employers intent on profit perpetuate the problem because they can pay children less and control them more easily than adults. Children do not know how to organize themselves into unions, and are afraid to complain about poor working conditions.

Organizations such as UNICEF and the ILO know that abolishing all child labor is unachievable as an immediate goal. They call for eliminating its most abusive forms, such as bonded labor and prostitution, and for governments to strictly regulate remaining forms to better protect those children who must work to survive.

PROTECTING THE CHILDREN

Response to child labor has increased in the past decade on international, national, and grassroots levels. Recognizing the importance of global cooperation in abolishing the problem, the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 1989 a resolution on the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "States shall protect the child from economic exploitation and work that may interfere with education or be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development."

Groups including Amnesty International, UNICEF, Human Rights Watch/Asia, and Defense for Children International place child-focused advocacy and public education programs high on their agendas. One of the most successful organizations in these efforts, the ILO, helps countries gather more accurate statistical information regarding the extent of child labor. Through the initiative called the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor, the ILO has formed cooperative programs with Brazil, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Thailand, and Turkey, and plans future programs with Bangladesh, Cameroon, Egypt, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Tanzania.

Most countries where child labor exists already have laws prohibiting underage labor, variously defined as below 14, 15, or 16. But some governments, including those of Bangladesh and China, have strengthened the existing child labor legislation in the last year. Several countries have established government-fund-

ed alternative schools for children who want to learn marketable skills.

This type of nonformal school was available for Easwaris after she recovered from her burns. The Indian government provided a stipend to train the teenager for safer jobs such as tailoring and printing in a school run by the National Child Labor Project, associated with the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary.

As the United States imports goods made in countries where child labor thrives, U.S. government representatives, companies, and non-governmental groups seek to combat child labor at the economic level. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) introduced in 1993 the Child Labor Deterrence Act banning import of goods made by child labor (later voted down in Congress), and directed the U.S. Department of Labor to conduct a global study of the problem. Reebok and Levi Strauss are among companies that have taken measures to ensure



their overseas contractors do not hire children younger than 14. The Child Labor Coalition, comprising more than 32 nongovernmental organizations, raised U.S. consumer awareness in 1994 with the Rugmark campaign, affixing labels on carpets to indicate they were not produced by children.

SHOWING A BETTER WAY

World Vision projects in countries where child labor is most prevalent have rescued children like Pattinathar from bonded labor. While still in chains, the boy hoped that "God would send someone to rescue me." When World Vision staff discovered Pattinathar in 1992, they purchased his release from bonded labor, freeing more children from the beedi factory in 1993.

World Vision trains these rescued children for better jobs. Pattinathar now attends tailoring school, aspiring to be a

successful "big tailor." He also wants to give some of his good fortune back by sewing uniforms at low cost for local World Vision sponsored children.

But buying children back from bondage is only a partial solution. To eliminate child labor on a global scale, measures must move from the curative to the preventative. Long-term solutions must go beyond buying back individual children to restoring childhood—the chance to go to school, play, dream, and discover.

Currently 25 percent of developing-world children do not enroll in school, UNICEF reports. These children comprise a potential labor pool to greedy employers. Providing education, allowing children to develop imagination and self-esteem, gives them a better chance of securing opportunities for better lives and lifting themselves out of poverty.

"You need to show people a better way," says World Vision's Seiple. "You

can't just say something's wrong—you've got to show them something that's right."

World Vision sponsorship does this for more than 1 million children by removing many poverty-related obstacles that keep children in factories instead of classrooms. Sponsorship funds pay tuition and material expenses that many poor families cannot afford, enabling children to attend school. Community programs such as skills training, revolving loans, income generation schemes, and health promotion help children stay in school. With education, these children will be better able to protect the next generation from exploitation, ending the child labor cycle.

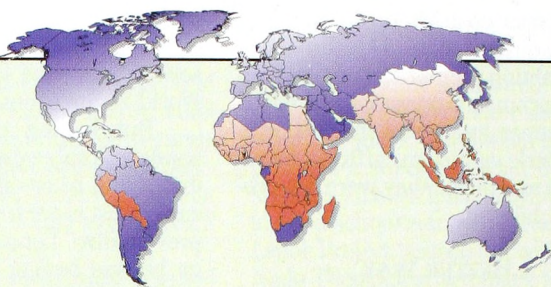
More importantly, the children gain a sense of their possibilities and importance in the world. As Pattinathar exuberantly put it: "Now I am free. ... Wherever I want to go, I go." 🌐

Collecting rubbish for recycling, an anonymous boy is one of millions of children all over Latin America who work the streets to survive.



DAVID BROWNE / WORLD VISION

WORLD VISION NEWS

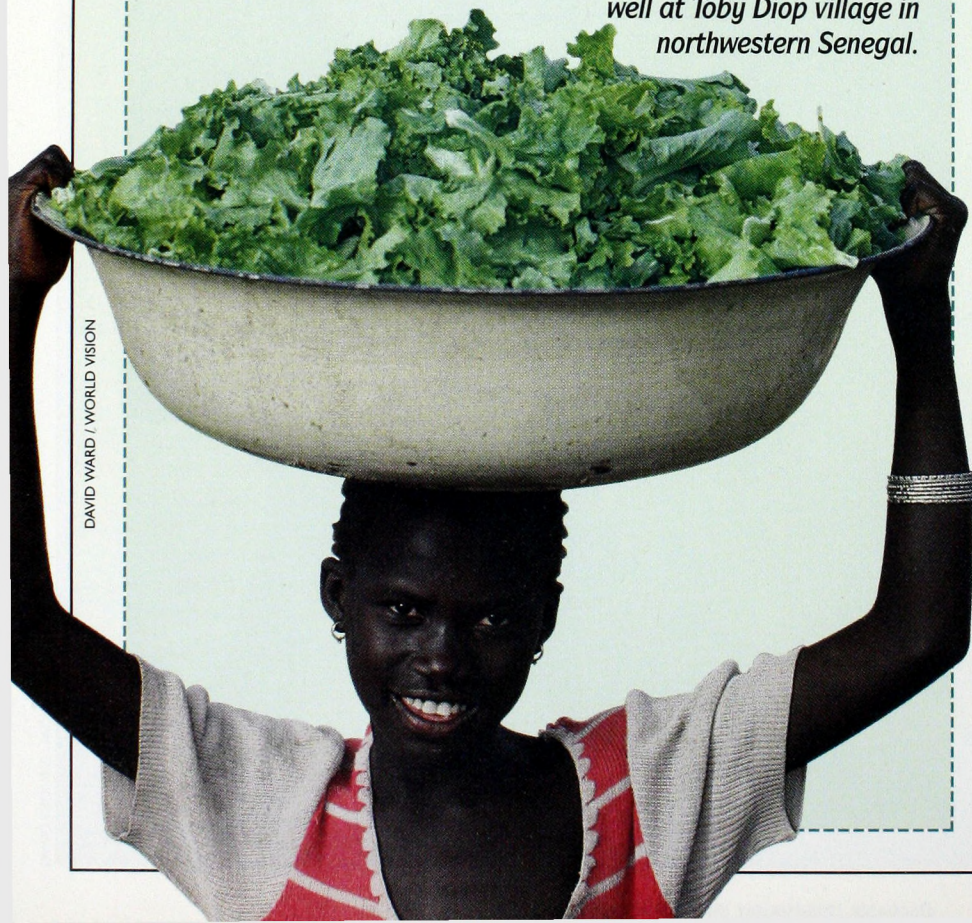


ANTI-DESERT PROJECT WINS UN AWARD

A World Vision project to hold back the southward drift of the Sahara Desert in parts of the West African country of Senegal has won a prestigious award from the United Nations Environment Program.

Selected from among 70 submissions from around the world, the work combats desertification caused by drought, erosion, and land degradation. To keep land productive, World Vision's Senegal staff installed 52 boreholes tapping underground supplies of fresh water. They also offered local farmers thousands of tree seedlings and seed potatoes for irrigated farms. Meanwhile, the agency trained volunteer "bush consultants" to educate farmers about soil conservation, crop production and protection, irrigation, and improved farming methods.

Soda Diop, 13, balances a basin of fresh lettuce from a vegetable garden irrigated by a World Vision borehole well at Toby Diop village in northwestern Senegal.



DAVID WARD / WORLD VISION

SUDAN STARVATION AVERTED BUT SITUATION "FRAGILE"

The situation always is fragile in southern Sudan, but mass starvation predicted for mid-1995 was averted," said World Vision's program director for the East African region, Bruce Menser.

Good rains and agricultural packages of seeds and tools distributed by World Vision allowed many people in the war-ravaged area to harvest ample crops of corn, sorghum, and vegetables. World Vision also supplied fishing equipment and tree seedlings, stocked aquaculture ponds, provided medical care and water pumps, and offered vocational training as part of its program there.

The decade-long war between Sudan's Islamic government and traditional Christian and animist black Africans in the country's south has driven millions of southerners from their homes and caused the death of at least 2 million. During the brutal conflict, villages have been burned, tens of thousands of women have been raped, children as young as 7 have been crucified, and, according to a 1993 U.S. State Department report, women and children routinely are transported north as slaves.

Meanwhile, the war has drawn southern Christians of all traditions closer, and the hardships of the conflict have not weakened their faith but renewed it. According to *Christianity Today*, more than 75 percent of the region's Christians consider themselves "born again."

NEEDS FROM CHECHNYA WAR CALLED "OVERWHELMING"

As World Vision trucks carrying relief supplies to Chechnya used a safe route through passes in Russia's North Caucasus mountains to avoid looters, the

KING OF CAMBODIA PRAISES WV'S WORK

King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia has praised the work of World Vision and its supporters in a letter to the director of World Vision Cambodia, Jaisankar Sarma.

"Your diversified and coherent noble humanitarian action toward ... women, children, orphans, and the disabled ... in areas such as hygiene, sanitation, education, provision of housing, agriculture development, skills development, land mine awareness, etc., are causes that I fight for," the monarch wrote in French.

"I would like to render my homage to your organization and to your sponsors for all your efforts at reconstruction and development of my country, and I express my profound gratitude," King Sihanouk concluded.

agency worked with the United Nations to offer medical assistance in the area.

"The needs are overwhelming," a World Vision staff report said of the predominantly Moslem enclave of 1.1 million people. Chechnya declared independence from Moscow in 1991. In a delayed reaction, Russian forces pounded its rebels into submission in 1995.

The military campaign that began in December 1994 devastated the Chechen capital city of Grozny. The central water system was destroyed beyond repair, as were most other public facilities.

World Vision shipped trucks, hospital equipment, and medical supplies from the United States and Canada to Chechnya, also assisting refugees massed in the nearby territory of Ingushetia. The United Nations, meanwhile, worked to bring clean water to the region to avert epidemics of cholera, diphtheria, and diarrhea.

World Vision gave high priority to aiding reconciliation among people traumatized by the war. "It is heart-breaking to think of 6-year-old girls and boys [vowing] to avenge their parents," said the report, adding that revenge is a relentless pursuit in the traditionally clan-structured Chechen society.

"The conflict between Russia and Chechnya has gone on for three centuries with, at most, 40 years of interruption. Today's children will be tomorrow's killers unless their traumatic experiences can be redeemed by God's grace," the report said. World Vision's reconciliation program is focused on newly reopening schools.

MALAWI CHIEF SEES WV AS "LOVING FATHER"

I think it will be fitting to salute World Vision as a loving father for a voiceless people," said a tribal chief in the southern African country of Malawi when traditional leaders and civil servants gathered in his territory to review the agency's development work there recently.

Themba (Chief) Mwankhunikira, leader of more than 10,000 people in the remote Mphompha region of northern Malawi, commended World Vision for persuading the government to establish an official market to sell their agricultural products locally.

Farmers in the richly fertile region grow beans, potatoes, and bananas, as well as crops relatively rare to Malawi, such as wheat, macadamia nuts, apples, and coffee. Yet crops cannot be transported to distant markets, because seasonal rains shortly after harvest make a dirt road about 13 miles long leading out of the area impassable. "Our produce simply rotted in our homes," the chief recalled.

Now crop yields are selling well locally and the area's people have gained government support for an all-weather road.

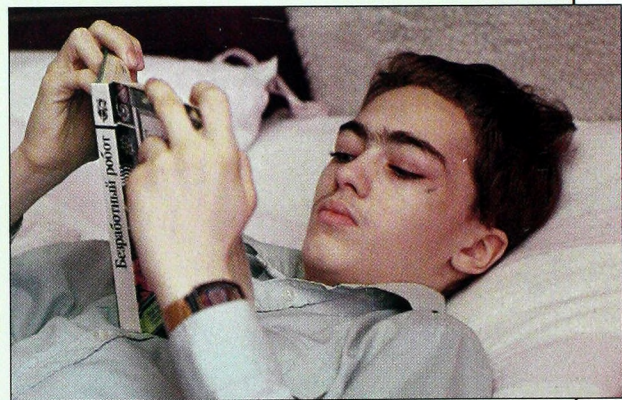
World Vision also maintains a revolving loan program in Mphompha. Under the plan, people borrow to establish small businesses, then repay the money for others to borrow.

OFFICIAL SAYS 125,000 DIED FROM CHERNOBYL DISASTER

In the nearly 10 years since a reactor in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant exploded on April 26, 1986, more than 125,000 people have died from ailments caused by radioactivity, according to Ukraine Health Minister Andrei Serdyuk. Disease rates have soared among the 2.1 million people still living in the contaminated area, he added.

The blast and later emissions spewed about four metric tons of nuclear fuel and other dangerous materials into the atmosphere.

World Vision began work in Gomel Province, the most contaminated part of




Andrei Kurdesov, 15, lost one leg to bone deterioration believed to be caused by radiation.

Belarus, in 1991. Agency staff test food products and educate residents about special hygiene measures near the 19-mile "dead zone" around Chernobyl. They also distribute clothing and medicines to local hospitals, orphanages, churches, and Christian missions. World Vision also has provided psychological counseling for families affected by the disaster. Another program, called "New Beginnings," offers seminars on parenting and training on the topic for lay instructors.

SIGNS OF HOPE IN **GUATEMALA**



A woman with dark hair, wearing a vibrant red blouse with intricate floral embroidery in yellow, blue, and green, is focused on her work. She is seated at a traditional wooden loom, with her hands positioned to weave threads. The background is dark, highlighting the woman and her craft. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

Maria Elena Saquach weaves bright threads into traditional Guatemalan cloth at a loom in her home in Xipiacul, a village near the provincial capital of Chimaltenango about 20 miles northwest of Guatemala City. A member of a women's group that receives community development loans from World Vision, she sells tablecloths and *huipiles*, or folk dresses, during lean times before harvest.

Of the Central American country's 10 million people, nearly one-third live in rural areas. There, fewer than 2 percent of all property owners hold more than 65 percent of the land. The rest of the rural population scratches out a meager living on farms in least fertile areas. They suffer from food shortages, inadequate water supply, and poor sanitation. Most farmers supplement their income by working on *fincas*, or large agricultural estates. Often they receive only subsistence wages and are beaten to spur faster labor.

World Vision began work in Guatemala in 1962, organizing the first of several conferences for pastors isolated in remote regions. World Vision donors began sponsoring children in the country in 1975, providing them with health care, educational assistance, and spiritual nurture.

In 1985, the agency initiated community development programs in Guatemala. In 1993, economic development programs began offering training and loans for farming and small businesses to help people build self-reliance. 🌐

Photo by Piet VanLier

SAMARITAN SAMPLER

RESOURCES FOR
HELPING OTHERS
IN THE NAME
OF CHRIST



SAVING KIDS' LIVES

Why would a teen go hungry for 30 hours? Angelina Alvarez, 14, participated in World Vision's annual 30 Hour Famine, going without food to raise funds for hungry children. She explains: "I always see pictures and television ads about sending money to Africa, and I just wanted to do something."

This year, more than 180,000 teens across the United States participated in the famine, raising \$2.8 million to help World Vision provide food, education, medical care, and community development assistance for people in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Teens between 14 and 19 who raise \$500 or more are eligible to enter the World Vision Study Tour essay contest. Winners for 1995 traveled to Ethiopia and Kenya to visit World Vision projects.

The next 30 Hour Famine is scheduled for Feb. 23-24, 1996. World Vision supplies videos and activity guides for famine leaders. For information, call 1-800-7-FAMINE. It's about saving kids' lives!

TUMBLIN' WALLS OF JERICHO

The *Jericho Hour* is a recent book that tells how understanding "warfare prayer" and evangelism strategies is vital to reaping a harvest of many souls by the end of the 20th century.

Author Dick Eastman, international president of Every Home for Christ, believes Christians can make "principalities and powers crumble through daily prayer and an intimate walk with Christ."

For a copy of *The Jericho Hour*, priced at \$9.99, contact Creation House at (800) 451-4598, or your local Christian bookstore.

To request a copy of World Vision's monthly prayer guide, call (206) 815-1000 or write George Marhad at World Vision, P.O. Box 9716, Federal Way, WA 98063-9716.

A.D. 2000's quarterly catalog, *The Arsenal*, is another resource for books on prayer. To order, call (818) 577-5599.

WOMEN OF VISION

It takes more than tears to change a world. It takes courage," Roberta Hestenes, president of Eastern College in St. David's, Pa., told the 1994 national Women of Vision conference.

"Courageous Women: Women at Risk and Women Taking Risks" is the theme for the second biennial conference of World Vision's Women of Vision, planned for Jan. 25-27, 1996 in Newport Beach, Calif. Founded by a group of women from Orange County, Calif., Women of Vision is committed to reaching out to poor women and their families in the developing world.

Since the 1994 conference, several

Women of Vision groups have formed in cities across the United States.

This year, featured speakers include Susan Baker, wife of former Secretary of State James Baker III; the Baroness Caroline Cox, deputy speaker in the British Parliament's House of Lords; and Robert A. Seiple, president of World Vision. The Lamb's Theater of New York will present a drama, "Mary and Joseph," at the conference.

Women of Vision groups learn about the plight of women living in poverty, pray, and raise funds for World Vision projects. They attend seminars on cross-cultural studies, organize fund raising events, participate in local ministries, and travel overseas to build relationships with women in need. Their work has provided food, water, housing, health care, and literacy training for impoverished families in World Vision projects in Africa and Latin America.

For more information about Women of Vision or the conference, contact Women of Vision at P.O. Box 10372, Newport Beach, CA 92658, or call (206) 815-1000.



My family has been witnessing for the Lord while supporting World Vision since 1954

My grandfather was a part-time evangelist and he shared his love for the Lord with my father. They were both very active in church and my father spent a lot of time witnessing through Christian Endeavor meetings with my mother, when she was alive, and later with my step mother, Evelyn Kepple Kay.



Lois Kay, Host of Hope member

Papa knew Bob Pierce at the beginning of World Vision's ministry. As soon as we heard about the child sponsorship program, our family became sponsors and we added more children to our family over the years.

Now, I've become a member of the Host of Hope, another wonderful way to continue to spread Christ's message of love

and hope far into the future. I'm very grateful to have learned the valuable lessons of contribution from my father and step mother.

Encouraging you to make a gift and join me as a member of the Host of Hope is one of my ways of witnessing for the Lord.



1-800-426-5753 WORLD VISION



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FWW125

'TIS THE SEASON

Helping someone in need this Christmas could be as simple as a lick and a seal on Christmas card envelopes.

The theme of Wheat Ridge Ministries' annual Christmas seals program is "Great Joy For All People." Donations to the program provide grants to more than 65 ministries, not only during Christmas, but year-round, through Lutheran churches and related agencies. Programs range from helping families in crisis to giving support to disabled people.

Wheat Ridge Ministries also offers a video called "Good News to Every Home". The video tells the traditional Christmas story through children's artwork from around the world, and is narrated by an elementary-school boy.

To order Wheat Ridge Christmas seals, a 1995 Advent devotional booklet costing 50 cents, or a "Good News to Every Home" video costing \$19.95, call (800) 762-6748.

Good News to Every Home



“The Son of God became man to enable men to become the sons of God.”

—C. S. Lewis





BY LARRY WILSON

In Costa Rica: **LAND REFORM
TAKES ROOT**

Throughout the region surrounding the frontier-like city of Nicoya in northwestern Costa Rica, the sun is beating the land into dry, crusty submission. It's April, the end of a six-month dry season. Farms lie dormant and untended, waiting for May and six months of rain.

Most of the region's poor farmers have left their families to work in the country's capital of San Jose or on banana plantations in the south. But not Daniel Arias. The weathered 50-year-old farmer stands on a hill overlooking his thriving fields of dry rice, corn, fruits, vegetables, and groves of young trees he plans to sell to the government for reforestation.

His feet are planted firmly on this, his own land, and with hands on hips he smiles proudly. He remembers too well that just three years ago this land was barren and he, like so many other farmers he knew, was unemployed, his family scattered.

Arias moved onto this land full of promise in 1979. As part of a government effort to help the country's landless peasants, Arias was given 25 acres in exchange for a promise that he would make it productive.

Daniel Arias, 50, takes a stand on land of his own developed with the aid of World Vision.

He soon found, however, that without irrigation he could grow food only six months a year; and without money, he could not get the irrigation, fertilizer, pesticides, and equipment he needed. He had land, but he was still poor.

His life changed three years ago when he heard about a World Vision program that helps farmers like him. He attended seminars that showed him improved farming techniques and how to make his own organic fertilizer. Then World Vision helped him install an irrigation system and obtain seeds to start a tree business. Today, his wife, six children, and eight grandchildren all live on his land and help farm it.

"To have my own land, and to have it so productive, is a very great thing," he says. "Now I know that if something happens to me, my family will be taken care of. It is also a great joy to have my grandchildren working with me!"

Over the past 25 years, political instability and wars have rocked much of Latin America. At the heart of these problems, most notably in Nicaragua and El Salvador, is land—or lack of land. Millions of peasants have no hope for decent lives because they have no way to grow food.

While many Latin American countries, including Costa Rica, are addressing the problem of land, most are finding that it's not enough to just get land into the hands of poor peasants like Arias. Giving land to the poor without also giving them the means to make it productive is merely to turn landless poverty into landowning poverty.

NO LAND FOR POOR PEOPLE

Latin America is full of people "who work on other people's land," says David Befus, World Vision's regional director of program development in Costa Rica. "The rural farmer either works for someone else or rents land that he has no control over. He doesn't have a plot of his own."

In Costa Rica, as elsewhere, the distribution of land is highly unequal, says Christopher Baker, a travel writer and authority on Latin America. Today, 71 percent of Costa Rica's rural population is landless. The poorer 50 percent of all landholders own only 3 percent of the land.

Nowhere is the problem worse than in the Guanacaste region in northwest Costa Rica, where the average size of a wealthy person's holding is almost 155 acres, twice the national average of 74 acres. Fifty-five percent of the region's rural families fall below the poverty line. Their inability to satisfy basic material needs of life is so pronounced that mortality rates are 50 percent higher here than in the rest of the country.

"Without land," Befus says, "the people don't have a stable income or a way to provide for their families. It's a pattern of



World Vision helps farmers with a simple irrigation system: a well and buckets that women use to irrigate crops for a harvest during dry-season months.

underemployment. They'll work during the harvest. They'll work during the planting season. But during the dry season, from November to May, they're unemployed." The average peasant farmer in Guanacaste earns \$61 a year.

WORKING TOGETHER

The solution is land reform. Peasants see land as their only means of access to better income and security. Land reform—transferring ownership and control from rich landowners to landless farmers—has taken many forms throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In 1961, the Costa Rican government started a land reform program which identifies unused plots, negotiates a fair price and purchases the land, then grants it to landless farmers.

World Vision worked with Guanacaste's poor for several years before recognizing that it could not truly help them without addressing the root problem of

land. Plenty of land was going unused in Guanacaste. So in 1992, World Vision and the government's Institute of Agricultural Development (I.D.A.) began to experiment with several peasant groups.

Says World Vision's Gerardo Campos, who works with the landless in Guanacaste, "We decided to work together on two fronts: helping peasants who have land but who have not been able to substantially better their economic status, and working with landless peasants to initiate a struggle for land."

HELPING LANDLESS PEASANTS

Two years ago, when Henry Hernandez, 37, and other men in the Christian Evangelical Church in the community of San Martin heard that World Vision was helping poor, landless farmers like them, they sent a letter to the agency and started praying for God's wisdom. A month later, World Vision was helping them organize

their own peasant association.

World Vision is helping make the government's land program succeed. "We're working in 26 communities with hundreds of people," Campos says, "and we know those who are eligible for this land program. We're the channel to help people access what the government is providing."

Befus says, "The government does that which only governments can do, because they have clout and resources. World Vision fills in the cracks. We don't have the resources to buy land for people, but we do have resources to help people get land for themselves."

World Vision's first step is to help start a government-recognized organization. The government grants land only to approved peasant associations, not individuals, so World Vision helps form community groups to meet government eligibility requirements. The agency also helps groups prepare their applications for land and obtain necessary permits.

After an association has applied for land, World Vision shows farmers how to obtain financing, how to make the land productive, and how to market their crops. These lessons also include Bible studies about the importance of land, working the land, and God's relationship to it.

At the same time, the association looks for land that the government has already obtained or for unused land that the government might purchase for them.

Henry and the others have already targeted the land they want, and World Vision is helping them negotiate for it. "Now when I dream about the future," Henry says, "I dream about prosperity. To have our own land will change our health, our security, and how we look at our lives economically. This is how God has seen fit to bless us and enable us to be prosperous."

Over the past two years, World Vision has helped more than 105 families in Guanacaste acquire land of their own.

MORE THAN LAND

To help new landowners, the government theoretically offers access to credit, farm machinery, and technical help. But given growing economic woes in Costa Rica, most peasants receive little more than raw land to work.

"The government has cut back on its programs," Befus says. "All the budgets for technical assistance, training, marketing assistance, and experimental activity have been eliminated. So the government does only one part of agrarian reform: buying land."

To help new landowners, World Vision has developed an integrated strategy of development that involves agricultural training, better irrigation, an agricultural school, and development of new crops.

TRAINING AND WATER

"In Guanacaste, peasants cultivate by using annual burning of fields as fertilization, and digging sticks as the basic tools," says Marc Edelman, assistant professor of anthropology at Yale University. "And many are reluctant or unable to invest in modern technologies, such as chemical fertilizers or herbicides."

To overcome these obstacles, World Vision educates farmers in improved methods of agriculture. "To make small-scale agriculture sustainable and profitable," Befus says, "we are teaching farmers methods of organic farming and showing them how to produce crops out of season by using irrigation, and how to use natural fertilizers and pesticides."

Without better access to water, however, most farmers still must rely on a single growing season. "More than 85 percent of the rains come between June and November, creating a major bottleneck to agricultural production, especially for small farmers," says Manfredo Grellert, who studied landlessness in Costa Rica as a student intern in 1994.

"Irrigation will allow communities to grow crops year-round," Grellert adds. "Fathers will be able to stay in the area, and families will be able to stay together."

Every year after harvest, Jorge Luis Awando, 36, has to leave his wife and two daughters in Moracia while he seeks work in San Jose. It's the only way to make ends meet during the six-month dry season. Leaving humiliates him because he knows that until he can start sending funds his wife must borrow money. She also must be both father and mother to his children.

"It's very bad for my two girls when I cannot be here," he says. "If I had my own land and a good irrigation system, I would never have to leave my children."

World Vision is helping some farmers with simple irrigation systems. In one community, that means a well, a pump, a long hose, and lots of women with buckets. The women fill the buckets with water and spread out over the field watering the crops. It's a lot of work, but the system has enabled the women's organization to grow crops in both winter and summer.

SCHOOL FOR SOWERS

To help small farmers make their land more productive, World Vision also is opening a school for experimental farming. The agency already has success with experimental farms in the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, where some farmers have increased their yield tenfold without chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

"The methodologies we're experimenting with go back to ancient ways of planting," Befus says, "back to using the leaves of trees as insecticide and using

compost for fertilizer. These methods are making small-scale agriculture profitable."

As important as the land itself is, profitability is the key to sustainable development. "The school will identify and disseminate technologies that will not only help make agriculture profitable, but help sustain nutrition levels in the family, and do these things in a way that's culturally acceptable," Befus says.

NEW CROPS, OLD FORESTS

"People here tend to grow the traditional crops, like rice, corn, and beans," Befus says. "But these bring people the lowest prices, because everyone grows them." The government and World Vision are encouraging small farmers to grow more remunerative crops, like spices and fruit, potatoes and tomatoes.

Trees, however, are one of the most lucrative crops today, used for reforesting Costa Rica's severely depleted rain forests. Daniel Arias is growing *caoba* (a native mahogany), *coco bolo* (a shade tree), and cedar (used for parquet floors). But he is most proud of his *cenizaro* trees, a native wood that once flourished in the area but today is practically nonexistent.

"GOD IS PROVIDING FOR ME"

Since 1962, the Costa Rican government has purchased and resold more than 1.6 million acres of land to more than 33,000 families. When the program began, there were more than 100 Costa Rican families who owned plantations larger than 6,000 acres. Today there are fewer than 38.

Landlessness continues to overwhelm many poor families and retard significant economic development in Costa Rica. Yet organizations like World Vision, by working with the government and providing tools to make land more productive, will continue to help these people rise from the soil of poverty.

"Introducing better production methods, community development and organization, finding new markets—these are the basic tools farmers need to succeed in a land reform project," Befus says. "Without these, you're just parcelling out land. The farmers eventually sell it or lose it, because they can't really make it productive. "Our programs," he adds, "give people a chance to provide for themselves."

World Vision's help, says farmer Charamia Luis, 47, "has reassured me of God's provision. God is the one who's done everything up to now. There are so many people who have needs, so many communities who want this kind of help—but World Vision, a Christian organization, has chosen to help me. This can only be the hand of God. It's made my faith grow, because now I see how God is providing for me." ☉

The two tiny figures inching their way down the hallway looked like lost orphans in a darkened alley. But it was midday, and the sun shone brightly into the open-air corridor.

The figure in front reached out with one hand to feel the wall as she shuffled tentatively down the passageway. The one in back held her head downward as if staring at an invisible line on the floor. The two little girls held hands, partly to keep from being separated in a strange place, partly for courage.

Both girls are 5 years old, and they are indeed in a strange place. It is the first time either of them has been more than a few feet from their home. They are in a place their parents never expected them, as blind children, to be. They are in school.

Finally the pair find the open door that leads to their classroom. The girls enter triumphant after an unescorted trip to the bathroom. They are welcomed back with shouts of congratulations from their teacher and 15 other 5- and 6-year-olds. In this school every achievement is celebrated.

*A blind man's
vision changes
his nation's
view of the
handicapped.*

Lighting the Way for Thailand's Blind



In a special catch-up class for handicapped students at Sanambin Primary School, a teacher helps a blind boy feel shapes that correspond with words that he knows.

The school is part of the Christian Foundation for the Blind in Thailand. The organization was founded in 1984 by a onetime recipient of a World Vision scholarship, Prayat Punongong. It is dedicated to helping blind people in its home country and other Southeast Asian lands. Its preparatory school in north-east Thailand where the two little wanderers live has become a very special place, changing not only the lives of many blind children but also the attitude and mentality of a nation.

"Our goal is to prepare blind students to enter the public school system so they can receive the education they are entitled to," says Prayat. He opened what is officially known as the Christian Home for Education for the Blind in 1978 in half a rented house with 13 donated beds. At that time, only 180 blind students in the whole of Thailand

attended school. Today that number has grown to 8,000, including 2,000 who have been "mainstreamed" into public schools.

CHANGING SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Social change is hard won in a 3,000-year-old culture like Thailand's. In many places—particularly in rural areas—blind people are looked down upon, almost dehumanized. Children who are blind often are considered mentally retarded as well as physically handicapped. Taught that they are inferior, they often end up begging or playing music for small change on the streets of Bangkok, the country's crowded capital city.

This social rejection in Thai society of anyone deemed abnormal Prayat finds deeply disturbing. He knows all about it. Blinded in a car accident at the age 8, he often was locked up in a room for long

periods of time by his parents. It wasn't until he was discovered by two Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries that his life began to change. They took Prayat into their home and raised him as their own child.

The missionaries introduced Prayat to Christianity and he was baptized in 1966. He says it was his adopted parents who inspired him to start his foundation. "They were very dedicated Christians," he said. "They always prayed that I would bring glory to God in whatever avenue of life I chose."

His faith also helped him endure many painful episodes.

"I remember once I was passing a church and heard beautiful, happy singing inside," Prayat recalls. "As I was about to go in, someone saw me and immediately took my arm and led me away. They thought I must be lost." It was

Prayat Punongong (left) joins government officials and educators discussing distribution of Thailand's budget for education. As founder of the Christian Home for Education for the Blind, he works tirelessly against social stigmas on the handicapped.



a painful reminder that blind people are not welcome in most public gatherings.

Often relegated to standing outside during weddings and other ceremonies, the blind are considered an embarrassment, a blight on society who are better kept out of sight.

Buntan Monthien, a blind professor of music theory at Bangkok's prestigious Chulalankorn University, says, "People equate blindness with lack of ability or even intelligence. We are perceived to be incapable in practically every aspect of life. In short, we are second-class citizens.

"If you are taught that you are a burden to society," he continues, "you begin to think and act like a burden. If you are taught from birth that you cannot learn, by the time you are old enough to go to school, you don't even feel like trying." One becomes, he says,

an unwilling participant in one's own alienation.

For both Prayat and Buntan, the most painful moments in their lives have come not because they are blind but from the rejection they feel from their society.

"Somebody else always was telling me how to think, how to act, even what to do vocationally," Buntan says. "I grew up thinking the only thing I could do was become a musician, because that's what blind people do in Thailand."

BAD KARMA

Perhaps central to the belief systems that Prayat and others face is the Buddhist notion of karma—that misfortunes you suffer now are the result of bad things you did in a previous life. Prayat says that this religious dimension to the problem of blindness is particularly devastating to children.

"When I was a boy," he says, "I was told that I had committed *kamkau*, an action in a previous life that was so bad it caused my blindness in this life." He said that only added to his feeling of inferiority. There also is a more sinister side to the plight of the blind in Thailand. Police records are filled with stories of their abuse and neglect. Blind children often are tied to a bed post and left all day while their parents work. Some are sold to organized begging rings in Bangkok and other major cities. The rings force blind men, women, and children to beg on street corners, near pedestrian crosswalks, or at shopping malls for up to 18 hours a day.

EDUCATION IS THE KEY

Most experts agree that only by educating blind people can the country's attitude toward them be changed. Meanwhile, the task of educating any handicapped people is daunting.

Every year thousands of blind children are denied access to education for lack of space in special schools. According to Prayat, only about 10 percent of children with handicaps receive education in Thailand. The reasons vary from the high cost of providing special materials and teachers to cultural barriers. But the fact remains that the handicapped face systematic discrimination.

According to government statistics there are 140,000 handicapped children in Thailand—Prayat says the actual number is far greater. Yet there are only 13 special schools in the country with space for about 8,000 students.

The answer, experts say, is integration. Through persistent lobbying efforts by Prayat and others, government officials and education experts have come to realize that blind students can be integrated successfully into normal school

classrooms. Now the Thai government is proceeding with a national plan for integration that so far has included about 2,000 students.

"Blind students often are the best in the class," says Sudsawad Suchardpong, a mathematics teacher at the public Sanambin Primary School. "Visually impaired students usually are smart and pick up on ideas and concepts missed by some sighted students. Most of the teachers I have spoken to like having blind students in their class."

Somphan Wongskuk, assistant principal at Sanambin Primary, agrees, adding that it has taken considerable time and effort for blind students to gain acceptance in public schools. "When we began integrating blind students at our school, some parents couldn't understand why. They didn't want their children mixing with blind children." The problem, he says, called for a creative public relations effort.

"We began telling parents about the many blind people in Thailand who have gone on to lead successful lives. We used our PTA meetings to convince them that integrating blind children into our school would be a positive influence not only for the blind children but for the sighted children as well." Slowly the attitudes of parents started to change.

"Today we have one of the most successful integrated programs in the country," he says. "Our program is being used as a model all over Thailand."

Eleven-year-old Siripattarn Puntturn is a happy, friendly fifth grader at Sanambin. A visitor would have no idea that she was any different from more than 1,000 other girls at the school. She talks and laughs and seems to revel in school life. Siripattarn is blind, and she is one of the top students in the school.

Raised near the school, Siripattarn was fortunate to have Prayat's foundation for the blind based near her home. When her parents heard about the organization, they applied to send their daughter there to study. That was five years ago, when Siripattarn was 6.

Siripattarn entered the foundation's preparatory school, where she began an intensive training course in basic mobility skills and braille. As soon as she completed the preparatory program, Siripattarn was enrolled at Sanambin. An exceptionally bright student, Siripattarn has consistently ranked at the top of her class. Earlier this year, she won second place in a national braille reading and writing competition.

"I know I have a handicap," says Siripattarn. "But I do not feel separated from the other students." She says she prefers to study at an integrated school because of many opportunities there not available at



special schools. She adds, "I have many friends here. Some are blind, but most of them can see."

CHANGE: A LONG TIME COMING

Besides gaining education for blind children, Prayat and his foundation have steadily pressured the Thai government to change laws that discriminate against the blind. This, he says, has been one of his most difficult and frustrating tasks.

In 1978 he attacked a law that exempted blind children between age 7 and 14 from compulsory education. Then he went after a law that denied a national identification card to handicapped persons.

"The ID card is the most important document any citizen in this country can have," he says. "Without it you cannot get a passport, register ownership of property, or even open a bank account. The only thing you can do without an ID card is die." After a long battle, the law was revised to allow blind people to hold identification cards and thus participate more fully in their society.

Perhaps Prayat's most powerful ally is Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The Thai royal family has taken a keen interest in helping Prayat's foundation and in helping handicapped people in general. Besides granting his organization royal patronage—a significant advantage in a country where the king commonly is considered to be descended from divinity—the royal family has given Prayat's foundation considerable material support.

"Without the efforts of the royal family, I'm sure we would not have seen as many changes in the government's attitude toward the handicapped," Prayat says.

Yet education remains the major the key to change, Prayat insists. "It was such struggle for me to get the education of my choice," he recalls. "Because it was so difficult, I made it my business to see that handicapped people are integrated into mainstream schools and into the society in general. I want blind people to have an equal opportunity to enjoy life.

"The Bible teaches that we do not walk by sight but by faith," he continues. "I always have believed this, and it has been a great source of encouragement to me."

With this in mind, Prayat chose Isaiah 42:16 as the guiding scripture for his organization: "I will lead my blind people by roads they have never travelled. I will turn their darkness into light and make rough country smooth before them. These are my promises, and I will keep them without fail." ☉

Steve Reynolds is a World Vision journalist based in Bangkok, Thailand.



"I saw the need, and I wanted to do more."

—Sandi Patty

I was a World Vision sponsor before my trip to Ethiopia. But after seeing the urgent need, I wanted to do more. Six-year-old Fatima and three-year-old Aley captured my heart. Having seen the impact of sponsorship in the lives of children and communities, I decided to sponsor them. Now they have lasting hope for nourishment, health, and education.

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NEXT TO THE LAST WORD

In principle, we're all against child labor. The challenge comes in defining the term. When does the work children do become "child labor?" When it keeps them out of school? When it threatens their health?

I recall a discussion with one of my colleagues in Bangladesh. I had expressed revulsion at the use of children to smash rocks and bricks to make gravel. He gently chided me: "If these children don't work, they and their families will starve. Do you want that?"

No, we certainly don't! That's why child sponsorship is so vitally important. Sponsorship helps provide sustenance, education, and training for children, their families, and their communities to prevent exploitation, bring people dignity, and make them self-sustaining.

You might recall reading about World Vision nurse Heather MacLeod in the June/July issue. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II thought enough of Heather's work with children in Pakistan, Romania, and Rwanda to award her the Queen's Service Medal.

—Terry Madison

WORLD VISION

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Dorene Young

World Vision is a nonprofit, Christian humanitarian agency dedicated to serving God by helping people care for those in need. It ministers to children and families, provides emergency aid, fosters self-reliance, furthers evangelism, strengthens Christian leadership, and increases public awareness of poverty around the world.

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WHEN WORDS BECOME FLESH

The setting was simple. A group of women from late teens to middle age sat on floor mats in a small concrete building. A chicken strutted into the room. A goat stuck its head through the only window. A literacy class was in session.

The question was direct. "Why do you want to read?" In the West, the answer would be so easily assumed that the question never would be asked. But this is Mauritania, a rural country where poverty is so deeply entrenched that nothing about life can be assumed. The struggle for daily survival in a harsh desert land is the reality. This reality can be especially oppressive for women.

For many women, marginalization begins at birth with the custom of female circumcision. It is a custom that both mutilates and denigrates.

Young girls are force-fed. Plumpness is considered both virtuous and fashionable. What is desirable in the eyes of others, however, can be a painful humiliation for children. Threats and beatings are carried out until volumes of food are ingested.

Marriage happens early and is all prearranged. Divorce is frequent. Women have no say. They are simply told that their husbands have lost interest and are moving on. Invariably women, and perhaps a child or two, are left on their own to eke out an existence in absolute poverty.

"Why do you want to read?"

The answers speak to the pathos of oppressed women.

"You are a nonperson if you can't read," one woman remarked matter-of-factly.

"I want to read so I can keep my own secrets in my letters," said another.

A woman quietly offered, "I don't want to have to ask someone else to read my divorce papers."

And the answer of a marginalized people: "We won't know anything about the outside world if we can't read."

This is the scourge of illiteracy: a gift withheld, a potential unrealized.

We sometimes understate the tremendous loss of order at the Tower of Babel. The gift of a common language, known and owned by all, was taken away. Order was gone. Confusion reigned. Shared meanings and shared understanding, essential elements of shared visions, were destroyed. In a real sense, the gift of literacy was destroyed.

Today, cultural misunderstandings, indeed, family dysfunctions, are very much tied to our inability to communicate. Our world becomes narrow and circumscribed by barriers that prevent understanding.

Illiteracy precludes poetry and dilutes one's

ability for reflection and contemplation. It is a prison of the worst kind—a punishment that intensifies with time, as a life limited by inarticulacy is mindlessly passed along to succeeding generations.

But once the cycle is broken, a whole new world begins. Women who are given the opportunity for literacy, as World Vision offered these Mauritanian women, don't keep it for themselves. They want it for their children as well.

"I can read and write!" Words take on meaning, and life will never be the same. Literacy brings dignity. It promotes self-awareness. It enhances life.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning ... In him was life, and that life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, but the darkness did not overcome it," (John 1:1-2,4-5).

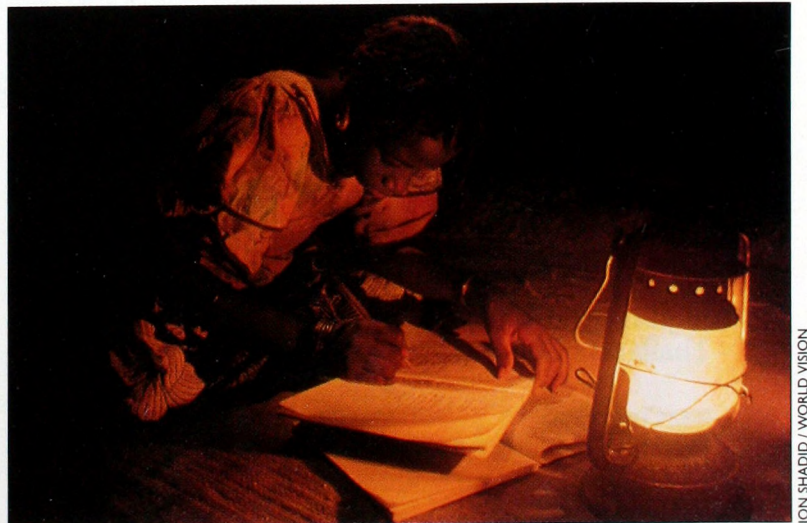
Christmas is a celebration of God's gift to us, when the Word became flesh "and made his dwelling among us." Literacy is a celebration of liberation, when words take on flesh and meaning, and people are empowered to be all that God intended. This magnification of life brings honor to God, and it can bring people to God.

The excitement among the women in the small building was growing. Soon they would be able to write their own questions and read what others have written down through the ages, including the words of holy people inspired by God.

Their dignity and self-esteem will grow with the knowledge of Christ's love and a heavenly kingdom offered to those the world seeks to marginalize. ☉

"We won't know anything about the outside world if we can't read."

A young girl reads by lanternlight in Mauritania.



JON SHADID / WORLD VISION

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CONTENTS

CHILD LABOR:
Robbing God's Cradle **2**

World Vision News **8**

SIGNS OF HOPE:
Guatemala **10**

Samaritan Sampler **12**

COSTA RICA:
Land Reform
Takes Root **14**

PROFILE:
Lighting the Way for
Thailand's Blind **18**

FROM THE PRESIDENT:
When Words Become
Flesh **23**

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