

## Zambia Part 1 – October 2004

My dearest people;

As I am writing this, rain drops are slowly falling outside, something that is out of the ordinary mid-October in Lusaka. My co-workers are complaining about how cold it is. "Ah," they say, "Have you seen the weather? It's not usually like this.

October-ending is usually the hottest time in the whole year. This year the rains are early, and it has become cold too soon." I try to sympathize, but I cannot. Fifteen degrees Celsius in October! They have nothing to complain about... How is the frost?

Thus far, Zambia has treated me well; it's difficult to believe that I've already been here for more than a month, but then when I think back to my 8 hour lay-over in London, it does seem quite long ago. I remember being quite relieved to be back in the tube after my sprint visit to Buckingham Palace and the Big Ben. I was glad to be off the street with its lethal left-side of the road traffic. I was glad that I had survived look right then left system of crossing the road. "I'm glad we're back in the tube," I told a fellow Canadian traveler who also had an 8 hour lay-over, "one minute longer and I would have been smoked by a car for sure." The next day in Lusaka, similar near death experiences with cars continued because in Zambia too, they drive on the left side of the road.

I'm getting used to it now though. In order to do my work here, I need to be able to drive a motorcycle. So on my first day out in traffic, things were going well, I was driving on the left side of the road and everything. Unfortunately, when I turned onto a side road, I forgot that I was supposed to stay left. Soon a vehicle was approaching me and I thought to myself, "Ah, why is this car driving on my side of the road?" It wasn't until I had driven into the ditch and the car had passed that I realized I was the one driving on the wrong side of the road. Fortunately as a learning driver, I had a huge reflective "L" on both the front and back of the bike. You'll all be pleased to know that I am still alive and I am now the proud owner of a Zambian motorcycle license.

When I first arrived, life in Zambia seemed to be quite similar to life in Ghana, but now I've come to realize some key differences. First of all in Ghana, life occurs on the street - everything. In the early morning hours (5-6am) people wake up and start moving out onto the street. Every meal is purchased and eaten on the street. Everything you'd ever want is sold on the street, from nuts and bolts to beds and armchairs. There are no stores to buy things. If you need something, you search until you find it on the streets. Only after maybe 9 or 10pm do people move back to their homes to sleep, and even then, during the hot, dry season, some people prefer to sleep on the street.

In Zambia things are different. Very little happens on the streets here (although compared to Canada, the streets are booming). There are very few vendors who sell their goods at tables on the roadside, and these vendors have to compete with actual stores that are very similar to the family shops in Toronto or the specialty shops in Europe. Here there are bakeries, vegetable stores, butcher shops, hardware shops, lumber shops, etc. Although there are a few chain supermarkets that have moved in from South Africa, that sell everything under one roof, for the most part, there are family owned businesses. As a result of things being sold in stores, goods are generally more expensive and when you factor in the fact that Zambia does not subsidize its fuel (and the Ghanaian government does), life is considerably more expensive in Zambia, especially if you eat every meal out-of-doors (the evening meal is almost impossible to find if you don't prepare it yourself).

Another difference that you notice almost instantly is the fact that there are no open sewers here. Everything is buried here, which is good because you don't have to deal with the smell, but also you don't have to worry about taking a mis-step and falling in.

The next major difference is the class structure. Although in Ghana, there are major class differences, they are not as well defined. Even in the rich neighborhoods, you will find people living in one-room shacks right next door. Even the rich are constantly reminded of the poverty in the country. In Zambia however, it is a much different picture. Here things are much more segregated. There are three classes of people. The rich class, mainly consisting of white people - commercial farmers (owners of huge factory farms), mining company representatives, or other investors have their own neighborhoods, their own places they shop and their own entertainment. The middle class consisting mainly of people of East Indians heritage, own most of the shops and they too have their own neighborhoods, places to shop and entertainment. Then the poorest class, the native Zambians struggle to find work and live in the poorest neighborhoods, or compounds as they call them here.

I suppose many of these differences stem from the history of Zambia compared to the history of Ghana. In Ghana and much of West Africa, the Europeans only reached the coast and did most of their trading with the local peoples along the coast. For the Europeans, leaving the coastal areas of Ghana proved too difficult because of the harsh environment: the climate, the rainforest along the coast and of course Malaria. These environmental conditions left most of Ghana unaffected by direct European contact, although there were harsh tribal conflicts due to the competition in obtaining goods brought by the Europeans (i.e. the slave trade). In Zambia, and in much of Eastern/Southern Africa, the situation was different. Although the climate was harsh along the coastal areas, the Europeans (mainly the British) had access to cheap labour from their other colony - near by India, to help them build transport routes into the interior of the continent. The British moved thousands of Indian people to Africa to help with the building of the railroads. The Indians were used to being colonized and were more reliable to do work. The local African population was too powerful in their own setting and it was too difficult to mobilize them to do work. As a result, there is an enormous Indian influence in Eastern and Central Africa. Also because the railroads were built, the colonizers had easy access to the mineral resources and to the fertile farmlands of the interior. The countries became quite developed (infrastructure wise) while still under Colonial rule. Since Independence though, countries like Zambia have slowly slid into a deep poverty. Initially Zambia was quite well off, especially when the world copper prices were still high, but since the early eighties, a decline in the world copper prices, a series of poorly advised loans, structural adjustment programs, national industry privatizations and corruption have lead to higher poverty levels and lower government autonomy. All in all it is providing a challenging working environment.

Before I arrived in Zambia, some people had told me that Zambians are the kindest people in the world. I was skeptical however because I remember thinking that Ghanaians were the friendliest in the world. I think that I understand now what the situation is. The main difference between Ghanaians and Zambians is the level of aggressiveness. Please note that I don't mean violent, but aggressive. Here in Zambia, people are quite timid and as a result, I need to initialize the greeting before I am covered in a blanket of friendliness. It is quite easy to walk through a city like Lusaka and catch nothing but blank stares and shy looks. Only once I smile (and trust me I can't help but do this often), that I receive a smile back or a greeting or an invitation to somewhere. In Ghana all you need to make friends is a beating heart. People will surround you, swarm to you, if there is even the slightest sign that you might be stranger in the area. Deep down inside though, the

friendliness comes from the same place and is used for the same purpose - ensuring survival of not only yourself, but your entire community.

The staple food here is called Nshima. Nshima is a porridge made out of cornmeal that is cooked until its solid. I must say it's delicious. At first it seemed like all I was eating was some tasteless ball of cornmeal - in my opinion it desperately needed some salt, not added later, but while it was being cooked. I soon have discovered the way of Nshima though and must admit that I quite enjoy it. This food truly fills you up, but not to the point where you are uncomfortable like was often the case with Fufu in Ghana, but to the point of true bliss in the stomach. You pick up a small piece of Nshima and knead it between your fingers and palm until it is a uniform ball. Then you dip it into your vegetable "relish", place it in your mouth and feel your hunger slowly fade into a state of complete satisfaction.

This "relish" is made up of variety of vegetables such as Okra (an extremely slimy vegetable if you boil it), tomatoes, onions, cabbage, or canola leaves. Canola leaves are the national vegetable and it is similar to spinach. An interesting piece of information is that Canola here (and commonly) is known as rape. When rape became a popular crop for oil extraction from the seed in North America, especially in Canada, promoters found it difficult to market a product called rape. So rape seed oil became known as CANada OiL or CANOLA. Interesting what one learns about one's own country while overseas eh?

I've started to learn the local language as well called Nyanja. Luckily this language is not tonal like twi, but relatively straight forward so within a month or four I should be fluent. I've also managed to find a guy who was willing to teach me Nyanja. We decided to meet in my office after work and he would prepare a lesson. When he showed up, he had written the alphabet on the back of poster paper and was ready to teach it to me. You don't know how excited I was to learn the Alphabet for the 3rd time (the Nyanja alphabet is the same as the English and the Twi alphabets). So after the alphabet, and he was very impressed at how quickly I caught on, the teacher pulled out the English-Nyanja dictionary, picked a letter, and started dictating English words, starting with that letter, and translating them into Nyanja, making sure that I wrote each one down as he read them. Out of all the letters he could have picked he picked the letter "V". We covered the words Vacuum and Vagabond right off the bat. Sweet. In a land where everyone has a dirt floor, concrete at the very most, and the people with electricity are few and far between, how often do I need to use the word vacuum? Or how many times in every day conversation will I explain the airless state in space? Maybe someone can explain to me what the meaning of vagabond is, because I for one, have no idea. As the lesson went on however, we reached words like velocity which of course is useful when you are calculating displacement. Needless to say that was my last Nyanja lesson from that teacher. I managed to purchase his English-Nyanja dictionary and now I am spending an hour everyday on my own working through different lessons that I've prepared for myself. As for the pronunciation of the words, I either ask my co-workers, or for the most part the spelling is pretty self explanatory.

I've found accommodation in the "backyard" of a family. I say "backyard" because realistically, this family's "yard" is in the compound, usually known as slums in other parts of the world. Rent is cheap - I'm willing to bet that I'm paying less than everyone who is paying rent, a solid \$16 CAD a month - yup living the high life. I have two rooms in what I would probably call a shed. I have electricity, although I'm not sure if it is acquired legally, but that is the family's problem and not mine. I do however have to fetch my own water, which is quite interesting in and of itself. In the compounds there are several water stations that serve between 100 to 500 homes, and they are only open between 7:00am and 5:00pm. The only time when I can go to get water is right at 7:00 because at all other times I am at work. This is however the busiest time of the day and I usually

have to wait a few minutes before I can fill my 20L container. Fetching water is a very gender-defined role, and unfortunately I don't have the right gender. Waiting for water in the morning could be interpreted as hell. The task of fetching, waiting and carrying the water is really no problem. The problem arises from the groups of little boys who torment me while I am doing "women's work". They quite openly question my manliness and they laugh about the fact that I, a full grown man, cannot convince a woman or child to carry my water for me. What they fail to realize however, is that all I need to do is ask them to carry my water for me and they would be obliged (since I am their senior) to do my "women's work" for me...

I'm enjoying the living conditions. Sure it's not as nice as some of the places that I could be staying, but at least I am surrounded by every day Zambians, experiencing true life.

If anyone would be interested in sending me mail - email is rather expensive here, and mail is rather exciting, my address is:

Paul Slomp  
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P.O. Box 510638  
Chipata, Zambia

Just a quick note before I start talking about the project, for those of you who might be interested in diving deeper into why I love Africa, or why I would choose to stay in Zambia, I strongly recommend reading "The Shadow of the Sun" by Ryszard Kapuscinski who is a Polish journalist who has spent most of the past 45 years in Africa. His stories really hit the nail in the head when it comes to trying to explain Africa. If anyone does read it, please explain to me what happens at the end of the Chapter called Salim.

Project;

The project that I am working has up to now, not yet been defined. I've been placed in Chipata, a town close to the Malawi and Mozambique border, but before I go into too much detail, I will first explain a little about International Development Enterprises (IDE).

IDE is an international development organization that has mainly been doing work in South East Asia, mostly Banladesh. They have developed a low-cost stair-master type of pump that will pull water up from a shallow groundwater table, river or stream, and dispense that water for irrigation. In 1997, the same low cost treadle pump was introduced to Zambia by IDE and they have promoted its use for small scale irrigation. Recently however, IDE realized that even though farmers were using the treadle pump for irrigation, and farmers were able to produce crops for two to three growing seasons instead of one, their income did not necessarily increase. In order to insure an increase in small-holder farmer income IDE has recently introduced a methodology that looks at all aspects of the small-holder farmer industry. Now IDE is trying to provide crop input linkages, agronomical information linkages, and output market linkages to these small holder farmers, their entry point being low-cost irrigation promotion. Most IDE field offices throughout Zambia have adopted this new methodology, although the Chipata office has not yet started implementing the new methodology. My role will be to work with the person in the IDE Chipata field office and start ensuring that at the end of the day, farmers increase their take home income. Sounds easy eh?

I'm sorry but that is all the time I have for now. I hope this finds you all well, and if not, that soon you will be well.

Peace and Global Justice,

Paul Slomp

## **Zambia Part 2**

November 18, 2004

Dearest People;

It always comes as a surprise to me when I remember that it has already been a month since I last wrote an update about my adventures. This month too, is no exception. A lot has happened since our last correspondence, both here in Chipata, but also in the rest of the world.

I would also like to thank all of you who have written me in the past month. I've enjoyed reading the letters and I'm sorry to hear about the early snowfall. On average the letters have taken about 16 days to arrive.

Let me begin with a little update about my living situation. When I last left you, I'd talked about my living in the poorest neighborhood in Chipata, the so called compound, the class 3 of living environments. I've love it there, people showing their ingenuity, creating something out of nothing, finding the value in what most have deemed value-less. Two weeks ago, for example, I was able to join a few boys in a soccer game; the ball, made out of discarded plastic bags, was kind to our bare feet, not once causing anything that would've resembled pain. People here too have not forgotten the importance of human touch, the comfort and sheer joy it can bring. I remember feeling quite uncomfortable the first time someone in Ghana grabbed my hand to take me somewhere. What if the person who grabbed my hand would get the wrong message if I accepted? What an ignorant human being I was. Now I find myself even reaching for others' hands if it feels appropriate and why not? Is there anything wrong about being a friend? Is there anything wrong in letting go of the myth that "Now that you are an adult – you are strong and independent – you don't need anything – you can take care of yourself?"

Another incident I will never forget happened about 3 weeks ago when I was coming home from the office. I'd stopped by the marketplace to pick up some onions and tomatoes for my evening meal, when I came across a mob (probably about 30 or so) of children aged 4 – 6. I have no idea what they were up to before I came, but like most children of that age, they were probably developing some evil plan. Then they saw me, a real life mozungu (white person). Within seconds they had me surrounded. So I did the only sensible thing I could possibly do, I knelt down and shook one girl's hand. I'd identified her as the most likely ring-leader out of the bunch and I figured if I befriended her, I would probably be safe. So I shook her hand and introduced myself in Nyanja. Then she told me her name was Maura. I thought I was safe. I started shaking everyone's hand. When I got to the last boy (I later found out his name was Michael), he refused to shake my hand. Instead he yelled, lunged forward, planted both of his hands on top of my head (I had knelt down remember) and let his hands slide down over my ears. The other children, eager to seize the opportunity to feel mozungu hair, too started yelling, lunging forward and feeling my hair. I was knelt down in a waterfall of children's hands and the choir of their voices will be imprinted in my memory forever. What joy can be had by simply touching something foreign. To thank the children, I too seized the opportunity to rub the top of their curly haired heads.

Unfortunately, life in the compound is not all fun and games. Alcohol is a problem. Just like the situation in the slums of Mexico City, Bangkok, and Nairobi (or so I have read), in Chipata too people are leaving their farming villages in search of the material goods they have been promised through the radio and television waves that pollute the “developing” world. Promises of more goods and riches than they would ever need, purchased in the major towns and centers. All that is required is to work hard. If you don’t have what you desire, then obviously you haven’t worked hard enough, or participated in the globalize market enough to see its benefits. Work harder. Buy and sell more. People are leaving their subsistence livelihoods, where all of their needs are taken care of, in search of more – their share of the wealth and the luxuries that are portrayed by cheesy soap operas (don’t they represent the lives of the North accurately?) and the regular everyday lives of expatriate NGO and private sector workers who generally have enough servants to do every meaningful task except for “being important” itself. I would leave my village too with the promise of such riches. Unfortunately however, the pursuit of these riches leads people to a dead end trail. Go to the towns and cities. The only place you can initially afford accommodation is in the compound, the slum. There are no jobs in the towns and cities, but is that really the problem? Didn’t they have jobs? Looking after their own basic needs – in the villages they left behind – villages they can’t return to in fear of the disgrace of returning empty-handed. There is of course comfort in the promise that one day you’ll find a job, if only you are willing to sacrifice in order to get ahead in life, if you will only accept the conditions dictated by those offering the jobs. “I’ll let you serve me only if you smile at me and say thank you.” As a result, the compound becomes the place of residence for the poorest of the poor. I’m not talking about an annual income, but actual life. In the villages people make little or no income, but they have their fields, their food storage shelters, their water source, and a roof over their heads; their basic needs are met. In the slums and compounds however, there is some income, but everything costs money, water, food, accommodation, firewood, clothes, etc. The end result is that the people in the slums and compounds don’t necessarily have their basic needs met even though they do earn a basic income. A man I work with recently said, “The people in the village aren’t poor – they have everything they need. It is just that the dust makes them look dirty, but they have clean clothes, they only wear them on special occasions. The people who live in the compounds live a more impoverished life.” A more impoverished life because people are either unemployed, or severely underemployed. These people experience unimaginable working conditions as well as living conditions. Hunger is a way of life. Inexpensive alcohol often offers an escape.

When I walk home from my work place in the afternoon, I am followed by calls of “Mozungu, how are you?” not only brought to me by children (of which this behavior is expected and normal), but also by drunk men who have forgotten how to act their age. Other times, I am approached by drunken men who see our meeting as an ideal opportunity to practice their English, a skill not practiced since they completed basic school. In the beginning of my stay these interactions were quite humorous, but these days I fail to see the humor in it. I often tell people if they truly want to talk to me, they can find me when they’re sober. Until now however, I’ve had no visits from now-sober people.

My landlord too has a drinking problem and is always scrounging around for money to drink. When I first started living in the compound, I was taking my meals with my landlord’s family and I was supplying them weekly with a chicken, a kilogram of beef, some tomatoes, onions or whatever, to show my appreciation, but also to cover the cost of my daily meal. One day however, the landlord (drunk) pulled me aside and asked me why I was eating his food and not contributing to the cost? I explained to him that I was contributing and that I solved the issue. He was looking for me to start providing more than I was consuming (so that he would have to contribute less and have more money left over for drinking) or better still give him money for

drinking. Since that day I've been preparing my own food (all local dishes) and as it turns out, I'm saving money.

Plans are now in the works for me to move out of the compound and into the village. Although I have really enjoyed staying in the compound, I feel that since my work is mainly focused on working with small-holder farmers, most of who live in the village, it would be beneficial for me to live in a village as well to experience similar living conditions. There are several advantages to living and farming in the village. At my NGO, IDE, we are promoting the use of low-cost irrigation systems to small-holder farmers to allow them to produce crops year round, even in the dry season. On my plot of land I will be farming, I'll also demonstrate the use of the low-cost irrigation systems, which will hopefully encourage farmers to do the same when they see the results. Secondly, I'll be a small-holder farmer. This means that many of the restraints faced by the farmers will also be faced by me, allowing me to fully understand what is required to empower these farmers. Thirdly, the one Lima of land (0.25 hectares) that I'll be farming will provide me with more than enough food to eat. Fourthly, I'll be submersed in the Nyanja language, allowing me to learn it fast, and lastly, I'll be staying in a vacant house in the village free of charge – no rent, only upkeep. I don't know if you can tell, but I'm pretty excited. Last week we identified the village where I'll be staying. The village is called Pashane. It's about 16 km south of Chipata on a windy gravel road through the hills. I'll be cycling into Chipata every day on a second hand bicycle to do my work with IDE. At the meeting with the village, where I was introduced and IDE asked permission for me to stay in the village, there were many questions ranging from "Who will cook for him?" (I will) to "Where will he go to the bathroom?" (the same place you go). My favourite question though came when we were discussion the issue of farming. It showed me the true value of the land and more importantly, that I'll have to earn my relationship with the community and not just expect things because I am a guest. The question was, "If we give him land, how do we know he is not a lazy person who will waste it?" I'll be moving to the village by December 1.

I recently also had a great experience that showed the importance of hierarchy in Zambian culture. I have a deck of cards that I brought with me from Canada. One day I pulled them out and my friends were interested in playing a game from Canada, so I thought the easiest game to play would be "President". For those of you not familiar with the game, the first person to get rid of all their cards becomes president, the second the vice-president, and so on until the last person, who becomes the janitor. The game however, is slanted in the favour of the president at the expense of everyone ranked below him/her. The president gives his/her lowest two cards to the janitor, who in turn gives his/her highest 2 cards to the president. The vice-president gives his/her lowest card to the vice-janitor, who gives his/her highest card back to the vice-president. Throughout the course of the game the position ranks rarely change and if they do change, it is usually only by one rank. So we were playing this game. It took quite some time before the rules of the game were communicated properly, but when my friends understood the game, they started playing it in full force. The one example that will best explain what transpired is this: at one point during the game, the youngest of two brothers found himself to be in the president's rank and the older brother in the janitor's rank. In Zambia every day life, older people have full authority over anyone younger than they are. You must understand that this younger brother had been a slave to his older brother his entire life: fetching water for his brother's bath, or running small errands for his older brother. Understanding this background, the events that transpired in the game would come as no surprise. Finding himself in the president's rank, the younger brother finally found the opportunity to get back at his older brother for the years of mistreatment. As president the younger brother halted the game, pulled a few pennies out of his pocket, gave them to his older brother and said, "Go to the market and get me some bubble-gum." The older brother obeyed – it

was a legal maneuver, his younger brother was president and he himself was only a janitor – the game said so.

Playing games in Zambia though are not always as fun as they could be. I've learnt to play a local game called nsolo which involves 32 pockets or cups, each containing 2 marbles. It's a counting game very similar to Oware, a Ghanaian game. In Zambia though, you haven't done anything wrong unless you are caught. The wrong therefore lies in getting caught, not in the wrongful act itself. This makes playing games more an art of cheating without being caught than the ability to out-play your opponent. There is an 8 year old girl who lives with my landlord's family who always manages to defeat me in 4 or 5 moves, something that no-one else has ever done to me or anyone else. Her tiny hands have perfected the art of depositing one too many or too few marbles into pockets without being detected, allowing her to win quite easily without her ever having to feel guilty – she did nothing wrong – she wasn't caught. Maybe she doesn't cheat and I'm just a sore loser.

I was prepared to go into a long rant about how I can't believe that George W. Bush won another term in office, but then again what good would that do? It would waste valuable internet time and I'm sure you've heard it all before. Instead I will shed light on two ill-practices that USAID (United States Agency for International Development), under the guidance of Bush, is enforcing. (Please note that CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency is only slightly better in terms of their conditions) With the current global terrorism threat, USAID has stopped sponsoring programs and projects that encourage the distribution or accessibility of chemical fertilizers although this would be beneficial for thousands of small-holder farmers. The reason? Chemical fertilizers can be used to make bombs and are thus a national security threat. The other ill-practice has to do with the fight against HIV/AIDS, a disease from which 35 to 40 million people in sub-saharan Africa are suffering (I'll talk more about this in a later letter). Uganda has been very successful in its fight against HIV/AIDS and has done so in promoting the ABC method: Abstain, Be faithful, and Condom use. Unfortunately, due to Bush's religious affiliations, USAID only supports programs that don't mention condoms, because condoms and education about sexuality in youth are direct causes of promiscuity. Ridiculous if you ask me.

In my last letter, I briefly started explaining what I am doing here with my work for Engineers Without Borders. The reason I had to keep it brief was mainly because the partner organization, International Development Enterprises (IDE), had really no defined "project" for me to work on and I spent the first month identifying some things that I could possibly do. I have since my last letter ran these possibilities past my supervisor and he has more or less said I should work on the things I have identified. IDE was traditionally focused on the supply of small-scale, low cost irrigation systems. The theory was that farmers would be able to use these pumps to increase their income and therefore be less poor. IDE has recently realized however that giving farmers access to the low-cost irrigation systems in itself does not guaranty an increase in income or a reduction in poverty. They went back to the drawing board and developed the PRISM methodology (Poverty Reduction through Integrated Small-holder Management) which basically looks at all the areas in which farmers could face problems; all of these areas could prevent the income increase or a reduction in poverty. These areas are: inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pest control, labour, irrigation technologies, etc.), agronomy (knowledge of crop needs, pest control, crop yields, crop quality, etc.), farm management (timing, budgeting, seeing farm as a business, etc.), and output marketing (crop storage, transportation, market linkages, etc.). The thought now is that given access to a low-cost irrigation technology (the organizations intervention entry point) and the required knowledge and contact for inputs, agronomy, farm management and output marketing, small-holder farmers will have the required control to increase their income and reduce their poverty.

The IDE office in Chipata, where I am stationed, has been in operation for 6 years. One woman, Alice Chirwa, an engineer born and raised in Chipata has been promoting the treadle pumps here since 1998. She's been very successful in making the pumps available to farmers and providing those farmers with the technical support necessary to ensure the pumps are working well. She is a little bit timid and shy though, which has prevented her from making IDE well known in the area, which in turn has left the office under-funded. In order to bring the IDE office in Chipata up to PRISM standards, more money is needed to be able to afford an agronomist, an output marketer and a farm management educator to work along side Alice who would cover the inputs. The money is available in the Chipata area, but it is just that IDE is not known to the people with the money. This is where I come in. My initial role is to make IDE and the PRISM methodology well known within the NGO and donor community in Chipata. This will theoretically release some money for IDE Chipata to continue moving towards becoming a full fledged PRISM implementing office. At the same time I am working with Alice and her assistant to prepare them for the transition. My role in the long-term will be to ensure that the transition, from only irrigation promotion to full scale PRISM implementation, happens smoothly. This will be done through team building as more people join the Chipata team, as well as establishing clear communication lines within IDE Chipata, with the IDE head office in Lusaka, and with other NGOs and community based organizations working with agriculture in the region. I will also be taking on the role of output marketer in my day to day work, until someone is hired to fill that position full time. As for output marketing strategies, I'm looking at producer first systems, which will give farmers control over their own produce. Systems such as the supply management system that is used in the Canadian dairy and poultry industry, the single desk selling system, such as the Canadian Wheat Board, or various forms of group marketing systems, to ensure that farmers get control over their own futures.

I hope this finds you all well and that everyone is feeling at least part of this Zambia sunshine that I'm sending your way,

Sincerely,

Paul Slomp

Zambia Part 3 – December 2004

Hello All;

find attached my letter below. Thanks to all of you who have been sending mail (and election results). I've received everything with a smile and a warm heart.

There are some children here asking to be pen pals so if anyone is interested, let me know...

In case anyone is wondering, my address here is  
Paul Slomp  
C/O International Development Enterprises  
Box 510638,  
Chipata, Zambia

Cherio...

December 22, 2004

Hello Everyone;

'Tis the season and so I send you the very best wishes for 2005 and a Merry Christmas from Chipata, Zambia. Although this year is the second Christmas away from home (Sniff), I have opted for a more comfortable option this year than I did last year. Although spending Christmas on a bus was not as bad as it sounds, this year I will spend it in my village – Pashane, where, I gather, the whole day is spent drinking and eating – more on this next month.

On the subject of food however, I must be quite honest with you that I deeply miss food. I miss eating for pleasure – eating for tasty goodness – the cuisine de ma mere (and de la mer). Unfortunately, up to this point, eating has been viewed as a task necessary for survival – which it is mind you, but how my mouth waters for even one course out of a seven course feast, or even one bite of pumpkin pie. Maybe I will build an oven just so that I can bake some goodness. Does anyone know how to build a wood-fired oven?

Since I last wrote, I have moved from Chipata town to Pashane village, about 16km south of Chipata. I am enjoying life in the village. The day starts at sunrise, a little before 5:00 and ends a few hours after sundown. Although I was attempting to learn the local language “Nyanja” before, I have come leaps and bounds since I have moved to the village. Unfortunately it is not quite what it should be to carry on a real conversation and that too is holding me back from experiencing the real village life. You see, I came into an already existing village as a stranger, something that I will continue to be until I can express who I really am. Give it a month or three and then it should be better.

One of the consequences of moving to a village is a problem with rats. There is a lot of tall grass around, and my hut is not what I would call “rat – tight”. I found out I had rats the hard way. I left some tomatoes out overnight and found them completely demolished in the morning. And thus began “operation Alberta-Hut” to make my hut an official rat-free zone. When I came to work the following day, I explained my problem and my colleagues were quick to supply me with the idea to by rat-poison. I went to the market and bought the poison. When I started inquiring about the strength of the poison I had just acquired, the response was consistently harsh – “Strong”. Strong enough to kill a human? – Yes. Slowly visions of me poisoning myself, or worse, a small child in the village started popping into my head and I eventually concluded that I would rather “live” with rats than be dead in a hut without rats. Time for plan B – a rattrap. The rattrap option was a little bit more expensive than the poison, but I figured that the ecologically-friendly method was better. The first night I baited the trap with a slice of tomato. The next morning however, I found the half eaten slice beside the trap which was still poised “ready to kill”. I had better luck with the Mango-bait and found one dead rat in the trap the next morning – what to do with a dead rat? Having no garbage, I threw it in a bush close to my neighbour’s house, not wanting to attract snakes to my house. Since the thought that rats are snakefood entered my mind I have been looking for a plan C. I can honestly say that I am a dog person, but now I am desperately looking for a cat.

Mango season has arrived in Zambia and how. Mangos are everywhere. Large ones, small ones, green ones, red ones, yellow ones, ripe ones, no-so-ripe ones, sweet ones, sour ones, ones that taste like soap and, my favourite, ones that taste like pineapple. Needless to say that a large portion of my diet is now mango-based. I am not sure mango is healthy in large doses, but I am

taking advantage of the situation while the mangos are still available. Soon the season will end and I will have to go without mango for 9 months so until that time, I will continue with my 6-8 mangos/day intakes.

I recently obtained a lesson in African Arithmetic, or shall I say I was schooled, by a small boy. We were sitting there on rocks, overlooking the (what some might call) mountainous landscape of Chipata, right before the sunset, when he asked me innocently, "If there are three birds in a tree, and I shoot one with my slingshot, how many will remain?" Glad that I could be of service I held up three fingers, pushing one finger down to represent the bird being shot, I showed him that there would be two birds remaining. He said I was wrong, so I tried to explain once more, this time a little more slowly, that 3 minus 1 really is 2. Once more he said I was wrong. This time he told me to look at the nearby bush where 5 birds were perched. He aimed his slingshot and fired. One bird was hit and fell to the ground, causing great commotion, "see", he said, and I looked at the bush. One bird had been shot, the rest had flown away. No birds remained - I got his point.

I have started cultivating some land, to develop a better understanding of what small holder farming is about. The people of Pashane gave me a lot more land than I had bargained for, and I don't think I will cultivate all of it, since land is a lot bigger when you are doing everything by hand. It took a week for my hands to get used to holding a hoe. Now I can make ridges (for planting maize) the entire day (or until the muscles in my arm and lower back cease to go on) without having to worry about blisters. Calluses now mark the 34 spots on my hands where blisters once stood. So far I have ridged a 25m x 25m plot and I hope to do 3 more that size. It will take me about 10 days. This year I am planting maize (the staple food crop), peanuts, sunflower (to make cooking oil), and soybeans on my upland (rain fed) fields and I hope to grow a wide variety of vegetables, herbs and spices in my low lying fields (where I will irrigate starting in March). Since I moved to the village 10 days later than expected I have been in a little bit of a hurry to get all my crops in on time. The rains are going to stop around the beginning of March, so if I have everything planted before Christmas day, I should have enough moisture to produce a reasonable yield.

Although the farm has been a lot of work and I sleep like no-one else when my head hits the pillow, I don't have an ounce of regret. I am 24, but I can honestly say that on December 19, 2004, I felt like an adult for the first time. I was seeding maize when it hit me, I was doing something I had decided to do on my own. It was not part of a job description, not part of a course requirement, but I was in full control. If I would have stopped seeding right then, no-one would have said anything to tell me to keep going. I was free. I am in full control of that plot of land (working together with mother nature). The vision is mine – the future is mine to determine. What other job, or profession allows such freedom, but is still a physical and a mental challenge? Every farmer is a CEO. Why are we promoting a system that takes freedom away from individuals and pushes those some individuals into mindless 9-5 jobs where their only "free" decision is what they will have for lunch. The future lies in freedom and freedom lies in small-scale farming.

At work we have been trying to wrap our mind around the problems small-holders are facing with marketing their products. My definition of poverty is the inability to plan ahead due to social or economic circumstances. The small-holder farmers here (much like farmers elsewhere who are operating without a Canadian Wheat Board or supply management system) are gambling what the markets will be like 4-6 months after they seed a crop. Planning starts when gambling stops.

Once again a Merry Christmas to each and everyone of you and may goodness be had in 2005. My thoughts are with you all and please serve yourselves an extra helping for me.

From Rain-Soaked Zambia

Paul

Zambia Part 4 – January 2005

Hello people,

It is January and it is hot. Although it is the rainy season, the temperature is still quite nice, I could be happy with a little less hot, but I'll take this over the cold spells I've heard about any day.

So when it rains, it pours..... (and poors). This past month I've come face to face with the reason why I'm in rural Zambia. Even during the time I spent in Ghana I really saw no dire need for development because the people there were getting by (as they are here) without any great difficulty. Sure the people I came into contact with in Ghana couldn't always do what they wanted due to financial constraints, but there was always some way of getting the basics covered (or so it seemed). Maybe the difference in the poverty level is straight forward because quite clearly the United Nations Development Program says that Zambia (ranked 164) is more poor than Ghana (ranked 132) using the Human Development Index. Somehow though, I feel that only now, after 12 months (combined time) in the developing world am I beginning to understand poverty, meaning that in Ghana the signs of poverty were probably there, I just failed to recognize them.

So it is the rainy season in Zambia, something similar to our "summer." You see even though the temperature doesn't ever really fall (I read somewhere that during the cold season, June and July, the average air temperature is between 15 and 18 Celsius) the rains do stop, forcing the plants(except most trees) into hibernation, as they do in Canada in the winter. When I arrived in Zambia, it was "winter" and most of the plant life was brown. Now that the rains have come, all the plant life is lush, wild animals and birds are well fed, Zambia is booming. Yet it is precisely at this time when the people suffer the most. Poverty. The rainy season brings the opportunity to grow food, but it also means that last year's food stocks are coming to an end. Grain sheds don't look as full when half the grain is removed for planting. Will those three bags of maize (corn) last until the new harvest comes in May? With planting, also come the other cost of fertilizer and labor (if you can afford them - unlikely), school uniforms (grade 1 - 8) and school fees/exam fees (grade 8 and above) and the wallet is starting to look pretty thin. Then, add the price of vegetables. During the dry season, vegetable production is quite high. Farmers have no work in their fields so they tend to focus on small – scale vegetable production using irrigation, comparatively quite lucrative. When the rains come however, attention focuses away from the vegetable gardens and to the production of groundnuts (peanuts), maize, cotton, etc., partially because the pests for vegetables are quiet high in the rainy season. People are hit three (3) times when they focus their attention on their fields – away from the gardens. First their garden generated income stops, then they have to start purchasing vegetables, and then lastly, as everyone else stops producing vegetables and they become scarce, the price of the vegetables rises. If you have no money left (or goods to barter with) you have problems because there is more..... The rains have only just began, the roof of your thatched house leaks – you'll have to repair it. What will you do when the heavy rains wash away the mud that is holding your hut together and your wall collapses?

Disease. Your cows and chickens don't respond well to the muddy conditions you keep them in and they fall ill, some of them die. It's okay, people are strong, the milk and meat the animals provide were luxuries, the plowing the cows did, it can be done by hand. . . . . The rains too bring mosquitoes and mosquitoes bring malaria. Weakened bodies from hard work and poor nutrition are plagued by malaria and HIV/AIDS opportunistic diseases. The rains bring hospital bills and funeral expenses. . . . .

"We Zambians, we are used." I heard one man say. The rains come every year, you are prepared – if not financially then mentally. It is rare for families to be hit by all of the above in one season, but it's been known to happen. You can expect at least half to occur, especially since, if you look a little closer, all things are interconnected.

My first month in Pashome village has been interesting, especially since my arrival has been simultaneous with the rainy season. It would've been nice to move in the village in say mid – October to get acquainted with the people and their livelihoods in a less dire situation, but instead reality hammered me in the face with two under – five mortalities in the first two weeks. In a way this is okay though things can only get better from here.

Last month I reported that all the pre – Christmas hype was about the eating and drinking that would occur, and my was I prepared for eating ! To my surprise, however, the eating did not include roasted chickens, large batches of Nshima (maize porridge) or fruit cake. No, the meal that people had been talking about for three weeks – the meal after which you could say you had properly eaten – the best meal of the year, consisted of plain white rice. Better off families ate the white rice with some vegetables prepared with cooking oil and a few rich families added pieces of pork meat. There was a lot of food though and I'm sure not one person went to sleep feeling unsatisfied. I had several people come to me and request "I want my Christmas", which I'm still not really sure what that means. Next year however, I'll prepare a huge non – Zambian dish (maybe pizza) and share it with people in the village.

I think about 60% of the people above the age of 13 years in Zambia were extremely drunk on Christmas day. Although I too enjoy a cold beverage from time to time, I have not taken part - neither while I was staying in Chipata nor since I've moved to the village. For me having a beer around a campfire or a glass of wine with a meal is purely a social thing and I know my limits. In the places where I've been living though, drinking only stops when the money or the liquor runs out – the longer the escape from reality the better. Since I don't think that type of behavior is healthy, I don't drink at all, to make a point. To my surprise however, I've found that the majority of the people in my village don't drink. They'll see a passing drunk person, as they stumble home at 4 in the afternoon and say to me "you see the problem of taking beer? That is why I don't take it." This attitude is very progressive and a rarity in rural Zambia. As a result though, I see a lot of potential in my village.

After Christmas, the village life seemed to get back to normal. People again went to the fields every day. I really wasn't at all too sure what to expect for New Years. I was expecting something around the magnitude of Christmas – a celebration, but not as big as at home. One thing was for sure though, that most people would become another year older on January 1. Not that everyone is born on that day, but I've found that most people here don't know their birthdays – they only know the year, so when the year changed from 2004 to 2005, most people too added a year to their age.

When by mid – afternoon on December 31, I still hadn't heard about anything "special" happening, I started to ask around, I didn't want to miss anything. "In the towns" was the

response, “people go to parties. Here, we used to have parties too, but due to the economics of recent years, the parties have stopped. Those who drink – drink, but the rest don’t really do anything.” Since I’d fallen behind on some of my field work, I made a comment that in that case I’d go to my field on New Years Day. “Oh no,” my informant said, “You can’t do that; it’s New Years Day – a holiday!”

At about 8:00pm on New Years Eve, the village went quiet. People went back to their huts to go to sleep. This year, I entered the New Year from Dreamland. Maybe next year I’ll bake the traditional Dutch olie bollen and invite my neighbors over for snakes and ladders and other board games.

I awoke on New Year’s Day to an empty village. A few people were at a local tavern, but most were in the fields. Apparently the “it’s a holiday!” only applies to me, a double standard that I have now come across on three occasions. “You can’t go to the fields on Sunday. Sunday is God’s day – a day for the rest.” Or “if there is a funeral, you can’t go to the fields out of respect for the deceased.” Maybe they are enjoying my gullibility, laughing at the fact that they can pull the wool over my eyes, but one thing is certain, I’ll get them back – one day – somehow.

I must thank those who mailed Christmas wishes and gifts and ideas or plans for wood fired ovens. On a side note - if any of you are ever deserted in a far off place, dying for some correspondence of any kind, send out a mass – email asking for people to assist you with ideas for wood fired ovens. I’ve received a tremendous response ranging from putting a small pot inside a big pot to empty oil drums to construction steel pizza ovens to cob (clay & strew mixture) “use your imagination” ovens. Thanks for all your ideas. I’ll get started on the project in a month or two => when the rains stop. I should also put in a warning here that some of your letters arrived with a sticker on it saying “Found open and officially sealed by Zambia Post” which probably means that someone, with access to these stickers was looking for money and some other goodies. The letters arrived safely and as far as I could tell, so did the rest of the contents.

One of the gifts I received on Christmas was a mosquito bite. After nine day incubation period I was mailed with malaria. In Zambia they grade the degree of malaria a person has. The lightest case being “malaria” and the close to death case being “malaria+++”. I was diagnosed with “malaria+”, but am almost ashamed to say I had malaria.

Malaria, as I described last year, is a parasitic worm that attacks the red blood cells, making it difficult for the muscles and brain to get the required oxygen. The result is that you feel extremely tired even after walking from one side of the room to the other. For you runners out there you feel like you’ve hit the wall continuously. Anti malarial medication does not prevent malaria; they just prevent some of the side – effects of malaria – namely death. Because I was taking anti-malaria medication, I can hardly say I had malaria when I’ve seen the destruction that it causes in bodies not on anti malarial medication. A healthy young man in my village, Julius, had malaria just about the same time as I did. In 2 days, Julius was reduced to a pile of rubble. He had a 41° fever, his face was covered with sores, he was gasping for breath, and had immense pain in his head and side. Two weeks, a dozen pills, and 20kg of body weight later, Julius is now limping around the village with a cane. It will probably take him another month or two to recover fully. I had malaria, but I’m almost ashamed to say I had the same disease that Julius had. My malaria seemed like day at the beach compared his.

Zambian cuisine is tasty, but somewhat monogamous. Most of the food is prepared the same way; the only variation is the amount of time it is boiled before it is slightly fried with onions and tomatoes. Since the preparation of the food is almost the same, so too is the taste. The mouth

however I've come leaps and bounds in adding variety to the taste, with the same ingredients. One of the main reasons why I wanted to move to the village is to have a relatively inexpensive but constant supply of milk. Since a high percentage of cows here are infested with T.B, it is extremely important to boil the milk before consuming it. One of the local delicacies is sour milk – tastes similar to yoghurt. The problem is that this local sour milk is not boiled and so – you run the risk of T.B. [correct me if I'm wrong because that would save me a lot of work]. If you boil the milk, first, it takes about four days to go sour, so I experimented by letting the milk go sour first and then boiling it. To my surprise and amazement, I ended up making cheese. This cheese, although I would like to find a way of aging it, is pretty tasty and it even melts like proper cheese. With this new cheese ingredient my food has become much more diverse in flavour.

Then two weeks ago I discovered how to make a delicious tomatoes paste when I was creamed by a farmer on a bicycle who was carrying his tomatoes to the market. In Chipata bicycles are the main mode of transportation, for people, but more importantly for produce from the small – holder farms to the market. In Zambia, as in other developing countries, vehicles are considered road – worthy when: a) you can place it on the road, and b) it has the potential of moving forward. Such was the case with this bicycle. It was missing several key components, namely brakes, a bell, and a competent rider. In short, I was crossing the road on a cross walk when tomatoe farmer Joe came cruising down a hill with 50kg of tomatoes, completely out of control, and hit me. I flew about 4meters, but was fortunate to have my fall softened by about ten shiny red tomatoes. Road accidents are the number one cause of death for Canadians in foreign countries. I was fortunate to escape with only a few scraps and bruises.

One of the consequences of malaria and a collision in the same month is the budgetary constraint. To give myself a more “genuine” understanding of what it means to live in poverty (or an average local livelihood), I've given myself \$80 CAN per month to live. This is equal to the salary of general workers; untrained, unskilled labor with steady employment. I've given myself this allowance because most Zambians fall into the category of untrained, unskilled labor, although I did not factor in the unemployment issue and the constraints attached to that. This allowance breaks down to \$32 CAN for food, \$5.33 CAN for bicycle costs, \$21.33 CAN for communication (internet, this letter), \$5.33 CAN for clothing and personal care(medicine), \$8.00 CAN for donations(beggars and people in need), and \$8.00 CAN for miscellaneous. I must say that this budget is very attainable under normal circumstances, but I will go over this month due to some unforeseen bicycle repairs and medical expenses by almost \$20.00 CAN. The problem with this budget is that I am able to spend more in cases of emergency with outside money, not accounted for in the budget, nullifying the experience. How can you pretend to live in poverty when the solution to your problem is only one bank transaction away? There is enough money in the budget to build up a surplus which I hope to draw on in cases of emergency in the future. For now though, I have to find a way to get rid of my \$20.00 CAN debt (to myself) at a standard Zambian interest rate of 30% per annum. Some other quick side notes about my salary and budget. Although most people in Zambia do not require the \$21.33 for communication, I am not paying rent, or supporting a family, so the \$21.33 would be used for that. Also, I know a night watchman, who works every night of the year and only draws a monthly salary of \$16.00, CAN.

I really don't have too much to report on the work end of things for this month. The office was closed for two (2) weeks over the Christmas season, and so far this month, operations have been pretty slow because irrigation is our starting point and well it's the rainy season. Being a small – scale farmer in a village in Zambia, I have many stories, but those too will have to wait for a later part of my Zambian tales.

For now I will bid farewell from a post – mango season, pre avocado season Zambia. I hope this letter finds you in peace, in good health, and with the knowledge that there is hope for a better world.

In solidarity with humanity;  
Paul.

Zambia Part 5 – February 2005

Dear People;

It is difficult to believe that this is already Zambia Part 5. Part of me feels like this is somehow my home, while the most of me still feels very much like a stranger in a land where things are difficult to comprehend.

Life in the village is cruising along at a rapid pace. I enjoy camping and village life, I dare say, is very similar to camping only that our accommodation is a little more permanent and a little less water proof. Seriously though, I've had no serious issues in getting used to village life. Showering with a bucket has become second nature and the cold water serves as a solid wake-up call. I would also consider myself an expert squatter, although checking the roof for snakes is still one of the most nerve-racking moments of my day. Cooking on charcoal too has now become a normality and I've gone from taking 2.5 hours to prepare my meals to around 1 hour, which is not bad for 2 or 3 different dishes on only one burner. I would say though that the only luxury I miss is a comfy chair or couch in which to relax or read. My lifestyle has again caused some weight loss and a bone-y buttocks on the hard wooden stools and benches is not what I'd call comfortable, but hey, I'll survive. Maybe I'll string up some empty maize bags to make a hammock type of recliner.

Some might think that there is nothing to do in a village, no entertainment, it'd be boring, but I assure you, there is no boredom when there are kids around and in the village, children are everywhere. One afternoon, as I was trying to find something to keep me busy so that I wouldn't have to do laundry (hand-washing does not fall in the entertainment category), some children provided the required comic relief. A kid, of the baby goat variety, had been calling for its mother for 5 minutes, but the goat was apparently enjoying some time to herself and was noticeably absent. Seizing the opportunity, some children aged 8-10 decided to play a game called "tease the baby goat" and started to chase after the frightened goat. The kid, screaming at the top of its lungs, would be cornered by the children. The children would try to catch it (only to let it go again) or let it escape from their trap to start the pursuit all over again. It was comical to watch, especially because the goat wasn't being hurt, but the real entertainment started when the alarmed mother goat made her appearance. Alerted by her little one's screams, she too joined the chase to protect the kid from its tormentors. This added element of danger only excited the children even more so more children joined in to torment the kid. Soon the dogs in the village noticed the excitement. Misinterpreting the game, the dogs thought the children were trying to outrun the mother goat, assumed to be the aggressor. Without hesitation, 3 dogs joined the chase to protect the children from the goat. It was a noisy procession of chaos, the frightened kid, the screaming children, the protective mother goat, and the loyal dogs, but it was very entertaining. Then the goat's owner jumped out from behind a hut, scooped up the baby goat and scolded the children. In Zambia too adults do just not understand some children's games.

Although I'm living a very rural African lifestyle, I feel like I am more aware of global goings on than I ever am in Canada. Short-wave radio brings me news from around the world via the BBC,

Radio Netherlands, Deutsche Vella Radio, and on Wednesdays Radio Canada International keeps me up to date on the “same-sex marriage” and “marijuana decriminalization” issues, which in the grand scheme of things, don’t really seem like issues when you’re in rural Zambia. I must say though that I am very pleased with Canada’s official stance against the missile defense system.

Honestly, I have been having a few sleepless nights lately. This, like I’ve mentioned in my previous emails, is the rainy season in Zambia - a time when 75% of the food and export crops are grown. The season normally starts in mid-November and ends in mid-March, a perfect amount of time to grow maize and peanuts, two key elements in the Zambian diet. Although the rains haven’t been “normal” since that El Nino year in the late ‘90’s and there has been a noticeable decrease in the amount of rainfall each year, this year the rains stopped on February 2, 6 weeks shy of its mid-March target. Crops like maize, with its shallow root system don’t last long without rain in the African sun, especially non-fertilized maize (the majority of the maize). Two days of cloudy weather with the occasional shower brought some relief on February 14 and 15, only to be followed by more intense heat, without rain. Soils are turning to dust and what were promising maize crops are turning yellow, even shrinking somewhat in height. Worrying yes, but “the rains will return” was the unspoken optimism that kept people going - the hope that was preventing thoughts of crop-failure from entering the brain. Then someone told me in words that I hadn’t fully understood – and still don’t fully understand, “We are going to be hungry this year.” Crop failure in Canada, although terrible, loss in income, larger debt, etc. are solved by visiting the insurance company, going to the bank, or worst declaring bankruptcy and moving to the nearby town or city to get a job. Crop failure here means hunger, famine, starvation. Try explaining this concept to me, someone who has never missed food for more than 30 hours (a planned fund-raiser). What does hunger really mean? What has been keeping me awake these past few nights? Is it the fear of something that I can’t comprehend? Or, is it the knowledge that I, the “rich” man from Canada, will not go hungry (the rich never do – they’ll always find food somehow, buy the available food or imported food at a price that no poor person can afford) and will be forced to eat my properly balanced meal under the hungry gaze of my starving neighbours? My neighbours, who have up to this point in time refused food every time I’ve offered (a local tradition to offer food to anyone you see while you’re eating), would I imagine continue to refuse, lying straight to my face that they’d eaten saying, “Thank-you, I’m satisfied.” Then I would have to eat, knowing that they’d lied to me in order to be polite. If they would begin to accept my offers however, at what point in time do I draw the line and stop offering? In Africa (at least in Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Zambia) the pot of food is split evenly between everyone who partakes. In this communal way of living, how can I ensure that I get enough food to live and do my work, if I am the only one contributing to the communal pot? Why do I have these selfish thoughts? Then last night, it rained again. I don’t know if the rains are here to stay or if yesterday’s rain was just a rainy-season aftershock. All I can say is that despite the leaky thatched roof over my bed, I slept like a (wet) log, hoping with my all that the rains have returned, to finish the growing season it had so convincingly started.

Although I have not traveled extensively or done any real investigation into the matter, it seems to me that everywhere I have been recently has been experiencing “abnormal” weather patterns as of late – particularly when it comes to precipitation. Now if this is part of a natural phenomenon, fine, but since there is a possibility that this climate change may be due to human activity, shouldn’t we do everything in our power to ensure that our activity is not the cause of this climate change – especially if it is the activity of the “rich” minority that is making the livelihoods of the “poor” majority much more difficult? – Just a thought.

I’ve recently admitted defeat in my battle to learn Nyanja, the local language, on my own. When I first moved to the village, I was learning new words and phrases at light speed, but unfortunately

the learning soon leveled off to a point where I was having the same conversation with about 20 different people every day – leaving my innermost thoughts and feelings untouched and un-talked about. I’ve decided to get professional help from a grade 5 teacher, Mrs. Mbewe, who is doing her best to bring my Nyanja up to speed. Unfortunately, a professional teacher also meant a start at the beginning. I think I’ve now learned the Latin alphabet in 4 different languages. Isn’t it strange how the alphabet never changes? Seriously though, I find it interesting how many English words have made it into the official Nyanja language. When reading the words below, you’ll get a bit of an understanding of the accent people have here. Here is the phonetic guide: “a” as in “haha”, “e” as in “hey”, “i” as “ie” in “piece”, “o” as in “hope”, and “u” as “oo” in “hoop”. Enjoy: chechi is church, pepala is paper, poto is pot, botolo is bottle, tebulo is table and kabati is cupboard.

The most difficult part about life in Zambia is trust – or the lack thereof. Ever since I have been a small boy, I’ve been taught to see the good in people, to trust them, let them have the benefit of the doubt. If someone tells me something, I’m going to trust that they are telling the truth. If someone offers me something, I am going to trust that it hasn’t been tampered with. If someone is making a decision about me or for me, I trust that they will do so in my best interest, using their own understanding of what is right and wrong. Here there is no trust. Starting from when children are still very young, they are taught by their parents to never trust anyone – not even your siblings. There is a saying here that the only person you can trust is your mother because if she wanted you dead, she would have killed you when you were a baby. People here don’t even (or especially don’t) trust their spouses. Most people will evaluate everything all the time – why is she offering me this food? Why is he telling me this? Is it safe for me to share this information with this person? It is driving me crazy. People will tell you lies at the drop of a hat – I stopped school at grade 7 (finished grade 12, but if he told me he had his grade 12, I’d be less likely to give him something and my expectations of him would be higher). Or make promises that will never be kept – tomorrow we’ll go to the lake to go fishing (never intended on coming, just wanted me to be happy at his departure). The problem with this lack of trust is that no one needs to be reliable because no one is expecting them to be.

You become unsure which came first, the lack of trust caused by people not being dependable or people not being dependable because of the lack of trust. I guess to get a true understanding of the lack of trust issue, you’d have to spend some time here on the ground, but it is by far the most difficult thing to deal with, especially when I normally make a point of trusting people 100% right off the bat.

When I started typing this email, I was hoping to shed some light on the beliefs here in Zambia, or the fourth dimension, the spiritual element of life that we have long since been ignored or discarded from our own “scientific” world understanding. Unfortunately, my time is drawing to an end and I will have to postpone this part of the letter until next time. It will give me one more month to dive into this world to which too I am a stranger.

My work with here with small-holder farmers is moving along slowly. Like I have briefly touched on before, I am working here with an organization called International Development Enterprises to promote low-cost irrigation systems to vegetable producers who are currently using watering cans to irrigate their crops. This vegetable production usually happens during the dry season, so our work is just starting to pick up. One thing that I have discovered however is that these “low-cost” irrigation systems are still not cheap. Since I’ve adopted my budget, I am beginning to understand that it would take a small-holder farmer up to three years to save enough money to purchase a pump (current prices are about \$110 US per pump) which doesn’t sound like a lot to us, but when your annual income is less than \$350 US, the price is quite out of reach. I’m currently trying to find a way to halve the price of the pump – something that should be very do-

able, with some minor design and material modifications. One of the many problems in development however is that it is people like you or I who are trying to “assist” or come up with solutions to problems. We use our understanding of the world to solve these problems and we seldom take the time to look at the problem through the eyes of the people facing the problem. The development industry is filled with people who have resources or the time to “assist” or come up with solutions. The poor are too busy trying to survive that they are often taken into account theoretically, but seldom from a practical standpoint. The perspective that I’m gaining at a village level is somehow trying to bridge the theoretical to practical gap, but no matter how hard I try, I will never be “poor”.

Well peoples, that is about it for me this time around. I hope this finds you all in good health, great spirits, and well fed. Please too note that there is an open invitation to everyone to join in the work for a better world.

In solidarity with all that is and shall be;

Paul

Zambia Part 6 – April 2005

Hello all;

I hope you all had a happy Easter. I decided to take a small break from village life and spent my Easter with friends, both Zambian and new arrivals from Engineers Without Borders, engaged in thought-provoking conversation and filling my stomach with tasty dishes.

I think the past month has been the most difficult month in Zambia so far. On the one hand there was (and still is) the looming drought, and on the other hand, I was in less than perfect health, which made the looming drought more difficult to handle. Luckily I am back on solid ground health wise and ready to do what it takes to minimize the effects of the drought.

Shortly after I wrote Zambia Part Five, I called a meeting with the village headman to discuss the drought and what options there are available for the village to deal with it effectively. He agreed to call a village meeting where the village could sit down together and brainstorm ideas. I’d had a few sleepless nights myself trying to think of possible solutions or plans of attack, and I had a few ideas of my own and there was no doubt in my mind that people in the village too would have ideas of their own. Unfortunately this was not the case. During our first village meeting, people were asked what their plans were to minimize the effects of the drought. After an hour and a half of trying to facilitate a brainstorming session there were two ideas on the floor: we [Pashane] will do whatever you [me] think we should do and you [me] will write a letter to the President telling him that we are hungry. Not only was the drought a problem, these people had lost all survival skills that they once had. After years of culture erosion during the colonial era, Zambian independence brought a wave of “development aid” creating a dependence on agricultural inputs and food aid. Every ounce of independence has been lost. I am planning on running a program with the people in the village to change their perspective on what poverty really is and how a person who is in full control of their food, health, clothing, shelter and water supply is very rich. Until I know enough language to run that program however, I will spend my time working with the people in Pashane to either grow food in their gardens, and facilitating the discussion on other possible income generating activities. One thing is for sure though, there will be a severe food shortage in Zambia this year. The government reported that there is a 300 000 metric tonnes of

maize shortfall this year. In other words that is approximately 250 kg per person or 70% of the annual consumption.

Now that the rains have stopped, work with International Development Enterprises (IDE) has again shifted from mainly in the office to mainly in the field. The field work allows me to see parts of Zambia that few tourists will ever see. I've really found that my appetite for traveling has disappeared. I meet so many different people with real lives and real struggles that I prefer to keep a low profile in my time off, to give myself the opportunity to digest the experiences of the week. My hope for this country comes from some of the farmers that I come into contact with during my work with IDE. One of the smallholder farmers that we work with, Paul Zulu is 21 years old. Through his hard work and dedication he is able to support himself and 18 other dependents. His gardening efforts feed his brothers and sisters and several other orphans in his village. He told me that if he didn't do the work, his dependents would have nowhere to turn for help. This man in a teenager's body inspires me to continue my work with IDE. Another inspiration is a women's group of about 20 members that use all the profit and a majority of the vegetables from their garden to feed and support a local orphanage where about 250 children are cared for. These are just two examples of people who carry the future of the country on their shoulders. The truth is that everyone carries the future of their country on their shoulders, although few people like Paul Zulu and the women's group choose to accept the challenge.

This month I also had an opportunity to get a better understanding of the corruption in Zambia. Up until this point in time I had heard that there was a lot of corruption, but I hadn't really seen or been exposed to it. Corruption mainly affects the poor in any society. The rich have more connections to people in power; they have more options. For example, a rich person is more likely to have an understanding of what their rights are, and know who to talk to once those rights are violated. Poor people too are in a more dire need to succeed in all of their doings. If, for example, a person is applying for a \$100 loan, but the bank manager will only agree to the loan if it is documented as a \$110 loan, giving the client the requested \$100, keeping \$10 for himself, forcing the client to repay the full \$110, a rich person has the option to refuse because they don't need the \$100 to survive. A poor person would need the \$100 to survive and so would have no choice but to accept the \$10 bribe price. The same is true here in Zambia. The poor are in such need to improve their life that they are willing to do anything. Since I am "rich" and a muzungu, I have not been exposed to any corruption at all. People would be scared of the consequences to make me a corrupt offer. A soldier of the lowest rank in the army receives a decent salary of about \$240 CAD a month. One man in my village, Patrick is set on improving his life by joining the army. There are several problems however, and that is where the corruption comes into play. In order to be accepted into the army you need to be between 20 and 25 years of age. Patrick is 27. When he spoke with me, he had just overcome that obstacle. He'd gone to the National Registration office where he had spoken to the officer in charge of issuing identification cards. He'd laid his problem out on the table directly, explaining his problem to the officer in charge. Patrick asked if he would be able to get his age reduced to 23 on his national identification card. The officer had explained to him that would be illegal and if he would help Patrick, it could cost him his job. Perhaps he'd be willing to take the risk for a small sum of \$15 CAD. Patrick bargained him down to \$10 – Corrupt transaction # 1. Now that he is 23, he can apply for the army. In order to be accepted into the army, you need to pass academic and physical tests, a background check and a series of interviews. Patrick told me that he is pretty confident that he will be able to pass the physical and academic tests, but he will again face problems when it comes to his background check. His high school certificate explains that he finished grade 12 in 1997. Since the youngest that a Zambian will be when they graduate from school is 19, when the army officials do the math, they will see that Patrick's actual age is 27 or older. Patrick has put another \$30 aside for passing his background check. Then the final hurdle comes from trying to

compete for a limited number of available openings in a corrupt system. Approximately 200 soldiers will be selected in this province of Zambia this year. Since about 150 applicants are children, nieces or nephews of army officers, there really are only about 50 positions available to the general public (another form of corruption). Patrick explained to me that in order to be one of the 50 selected you either needed to be a beast for punishment – willing and capable of doing anything, or you needed to be more “willing” to join the army than the other applicants. Patrick has \$100 set aside to make sure that the army officers know that he is very “willing” to join the army. Hopefully Patrick will get selected. If not, he’s just spent almost half of his annual income supplementing the salaries of those who are underpaid. It is easy to point a finger and say that corruption is bad. The truth is however, that these corrupt officials are only trying to feed their families. Without corruption, they too would be struggling to make ends meet.

My farm too has suffered from the lack of rain. My millet, a drought resistant crop, has suffered the most because it was very small when the drought hit. I’ll be planting my millet earlier next year, and I suppose I will have to purchase flour instead of making it myself. My sunflower crop too has done very poor, although not because of the drought, but because of economics. The soil fertility of my field is very poor, but the low sunflower prices make it uneconomical to fertilize. Next year though, through crop rotation, my sunflower yield should be 100%. My maize crop has been very poor from the beginning due to low quality seed, but did reasonably well despite the drought. Termites are now causing havoc on the stems and I have to harvest cobs prematurely everyday to ensure that the termites don’t eat my labour. Fortunately I’ve been able to use my basic knowledge economics and the supply and demand curves to secure a full year supply of maize before the prices went up too high, I’ll have enough to eat this year, and hopefully I’ll be able to invite some of the hardest hit individuals to share a meal with me every once in a while. The real farming success so far this year lies in my peanuts and soybeans. It looks like in two to four weeks I’ll start to harvest. The best part about these crops too is that they are nitrogen fixing. That means that since they did well this year, they will facilitate the other crops to do well next year. One thing is certain though. I’ve faced almost every problem that farmers could possibly face with their crops from poor seed quality, to pests, to infertile land, but I’m learning a lot and through some progressive farming methods, will be able to mitigate most of those problems next year. This is important because if I can do it, so can the others who are living in the village with me.

With that I think I will leave you for another month. I hope that all is well in your lives and that every morning the sun too will rise in your life. I wish you nothing but peace, love, and happiness. But more than anything else, I wish you truth.

Sincerely;

Paul

Zambia Part 7 – May 2005

Dearest People;

My deepest apologies for the amount of time that has lapsed since I was last able to send an update from Zambia, the country that is growing closer to my heart every-day. Fortunately, my work here with International Development Enterprises has kept me quite busy, which is good because at least then my time is being put to good use. The only down side is that it sometimes makes communication with people outside of Zambia somewhat difficult.

Let me begin this letter with my village Pashane, where the people are harvesting their harvestable rain-fed crops and preparing for the cold –dry season. In Zambia there are three seasons – the wet season, which normally lasts from November until the middle or end of March, the cold-dry season, which lasts from June until the middle of August and then the hot-dry season, which is between the middle of August until the end of October. I like the way the seasons are set up and named because the months are pretty flexible and the names of the seasons are pretty self-explanatory. The only problem is that there is no season between the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the cold-dry season; there is however a two to three month gap between the two. I guess that means that we are officially season-less. This season is nice though, hot, but not too hot, and sunny during the day, and cold at night. Maybe we could call this season the lukewarm-dry season.

I think in my last email, I discussed that some of the families in my village were already short of food because of the lack of rain we experienced during the rainy season. I think the main reason for the food shortage was because the last-year's food supplies were finished and people had not yet started harvesting this year's crop. Everyone in the village has started to harvest their crops that are in the field now and it seems that the food-shortage is not quite as bad as it could have been. It seems that most people will have enough maize to eat until about the middle of September (some families will run out of food in August, and others will have enough until October). The situation is better than it was originally expected, but there will still be a food shortage for about 7 months. Luckily we still have about 4 months to prepare for the absolute food shortage to arrive.

Through the meetings we've had in the village to discuss the food shortage, a village development committee has been set up consisting of 4 women and 4 men that will first tackle the food shortage situation, and then focus on other problems that are present in the village, to move the village forward. The committee is free to discuss and decide anything, but before any plans are put into action, the plan needs to be presented to the village headman for his approval. This way, problems in the village can be discussed and debated freely, but the traditional political structure is still involved in the final decision. I don't know if I mentioned this before, but before the development committee was established, people in the village were afraid to share their ideas for the community's benefit because someone in the village might mistake their contribution as trying to slight the village headman, leaving them vulnerable to witch-craft. In other words, if, as a regular villager, you have an idea that would benefit the whole village, there was no venue to share that idea because other villagers might interpret your idea as a suggestion that the headman's method of dealing with the situation is not good enough – an insult to the headman. Since an insult to the headman is not acceptable, the person with the idea is susceptible to having a cast spelled on him by other people living in the village, to protect the integrity of the headman. Because of the witch-craft potential, people seldom shared their thoughts and feelings about problems in the village, putting tremendous pressure on the headman himself to come up with appropriate solutions, and leaving many problems unsolved – stagnating the development of the village. Through my discussions with the headman, the idea of the Pashane development committee was born, and through this committee, solutions to village problems can be suggested and discussed, without taking away the headman's integrity. My work in the village will be mostly with this development committee, first to help the committee identify crucial problems in the village, and then to build their capacity of tackling the same problems. I honestly think though, that I will be learning far more from this process than any one person in the development committee will.

We've had several meetings with the development committee to discuss the hunger problem. The first two meetings were terrible. The only suggestions that came were the same as the ones that

were presented in the meeting with the entire village. How could I get the people in the committee to see that “Waiting for the Government to assist us,” and “Paul will write a letter to donors to give us money,” are not solutions that you can depend on. Of course if it happens, that is great, but if it doesn’t, what would happen then? Finally in my third meeting with the committee, we were able to break the problem down small enough that committee members were able to come up with some solutions. We were discussing that in order to acquire food, we could either grow it or we had to buy it. Unfortunately, the rainy season has come to an end, and the amount of land located close to a river or a stream is too small to grow enough food, which leaves the purchasing option. Then the question was posed to the committee, “what can we do to make the money necessary to purchase food?” Then, like the voice of an angel, an elderly woman on the committee suggested, “We can sell bananas.” WHAM – the floodgates of ideas opened. The other committee members suddenly realized that a simple activity such as selling bananas could generate income to help cover the extra food costs of the year.

Last weekend the committee was able narrow down the list to five activities that they would like to further investigate to see how viable they are to generate enough money to buy maize for the people in the village. These activities are the buying and selling of Kapenta (small dried fish that are part of the Zambian diet), the buying of sunflower seeds, pressing them into oil and selling the oil, buying flour and yeast to bake bread and buns for sale, buying laying hens, feeding them properly, and selling the eggs, and buying soybeans to sell soya-pieces (another favourite in the local cuisine). This week the people of the committee have gone out to find the prices of inputs and possible product prices to see how viable each of the businesses are. We will most likely do two or three of the businesses to increase our likelihood of success. I’m pretty certain that the effect of the drought will be felt in our village, but not to the extent it would’ve been felt if the village had continued waiting for the government to step in to assist. Unfortunately the government does not have enough money to ensure that all people in Zambia have enough food, and there are many villages that are in more dire need of food assistance than Pashane.

Other than the food shortage, the other problem that arises when the rainfall stops too early is one of ants. I have been at war with ants for the last 6 weeks. These are not the big red fire ants, the big black ants, or the small white ones. No, these ants are small and black. They are about the size of the hole you make when you squeeze your two index fingers and two thumbs together – no big deal right – wrong. These things will not let you rest in peace. Although the crawling of these ants on you, everywhere, is annoying, that is not the worst part. The worst is that about one in ten of these ants carries a big war-head. These kamikaze warriors carry vice-grips on their head and they clamp down – they don’t let go – ever. And they are organized – and loud. You’ll be lying in bed, trying to ignore the tickling of crawling ants, when, from under your pillow you’ll hear the high-pitched war cry “Chachachachacha,” and five seconds later there is an attack. Ants will be biting and sending in back-up from all sides. You’ll brush away the warheads only to expose more flesh for others to dig into.

I put up with it some time, only to have the problem get worse, not better. I tried every remedy in the book – placing hot ash on the floor (apparently this only works for the big black ants), pouring paraffin into the holes that these ants come out of (only to have them dig holes right beside the ones you have targeted 5 minutes earlier), sacrificing a part of my house to the ants and leaving food for them there (led to the breeding of more ants), putting moats of water around my bed footings (led to ants committing suicide in the water until a bridge had been formed across the water. Other solutions I’ve thought about, suspending everything I own from the rafters (until I found ants on the rafters) and burning down my house, but then where would I sleep? Luckily, it is not only my house that has been targeted, but every house in the village, and houses in random villages across the country. I am sad to admit that I had no choice but to succumb to using a

chemical pesticide to controlling them. After refusing to spray my house for mosquitoes everyday, and refusing to wear Deet insect repellent, because you don't know what effects those have on your body in the long-run, I had to spray my house against these ants. I reached a point where I either had to move out of the village, or spraying my floor against the devils. I sprayed my floor and now I wake up every morning to a carpet of ant carcasses, that I sweep out of my house before I go to work. I am told the ants will leave with the arrival of the cold dry season, although others have told me the ants will stay until the rains come again in November. Either way, I'll be one content man once they are gone.

I've had several guests who came to stay with me in the village, which have given me a break from my own thoughts and re-motivated me to put more effort into the learning of Nyanja, the local language. I've reached the point of Nyanja-knowledge where I just need to take the plunge and start speaking with people. My vocabulary is now decent and what do I have to lose? I think I can only gain.

So one of these visitors that stayed with me, traveled all the way from Lusaka, some 570km away, to see me for the weekend. After spending a solid day working my soybean field, we returned to the village to prepare our evening meal and to shower. When I had gone to fetch water, the assistant headman of the village came to my house and was speaking with my guest. When I returned to my house, I discovered that the headman's assistant was drunk and hurling insults at my guest. Soon though he grew tired of insulting my guest and moved on to his next victim. The wife to the headman, however, had seen everything and came to talk to my guest and myself, saying that the same man had insulted several people on the way from the bar to his home. The following morning my guest returned to Lusaka, and I thought the assistant headman would come by to offer an apology, but he never came. At noon, the headman came to see me and asked me to come to his house that evening at sundown. When I arrived at the headman's house, I found a group of seven village elders, and the assistant headman waiting. They discussed the situation of my guest being insulted for a few minutes and then lectured the assistant headman together for 30 minutes about what the potential consequences are to his insults – "What do you think Paul's guest will tell people in Lusaka about Pashane village?" They tore into the man, making him aware that his behaviour does not reflect only himself, but also the entire village. He was forced to make an apology to me and pay a fine to me of one chicken in order to ensure the village's integrity was maintained. I thought it was an interesting situation, being amongst the elders of the village who all played a part in the discipline. It was sort of like I had always imagined the decision making of the Native North Americans to be. It was like being in a movie, and all turned out well, except for the chicken...

When I came to Zambia, I was expecting to be slapped in the face with the reality of the HIV/AIDS. In Canada I had read statistics that about 33 percent of the people in Zambia were HIV positive, while other estimates were about 22 percent. All in all I was expecting to have people around me die - to see people who were obviously suffering from HIV related diseases. The reality, though, is that I didn't and haven't really seen the effects of HIV and AIDS - until this past weekend. That is why it has taken me so long to write about it in an email. So far, I have one person who was close to me pass away. She had cancer – a foreign disease to Zambia. Only in recent years has cancer started to rear its head here.

Where are all the cases of HIV and AIDS infected people that I was expecting to see? The truth is that most patients themselves don't know they are infected or they are in denial. Most people die of pneumonia or tuberculosis or other opportunistic infections, not of AIDS...

You find that the truly sick people are at home in bed, or in the hospital. The sick are hidden from view, to prevent shame from being brought upon the family. NGOs are in the streets, in the villages, on the airwaves, and in the taverns and bars, educating the public about HIV and AIDS to what appears to be a healthy population. Unless you visit or work in a hospital, you believe that the statistics of infected people are incorrect. I too questioned them – where are the sick? I believed President Mwanawasa when he said that through his party's policies, the number of infected people is decreasing, (the government is claiming an infection rate of 19%), but in reality the infected people are dying too fast to maintain the infection rate. I was confronted with that fact this past weekend. On behalf of IDE, I was asked to bring a donated treadle pump to an orphanage about 100km from Chipata. What I found there was disturbing.

The orphanage was opened in 2002, to cater to the excess 150 orphans that existed in that chiefdom at that time (a chiefdom has between 50 and 100 villages of 60 families). The reason I say excess 150 orphans is because until recently, the term "orphan" was not known in Zambia. Any aunt or uncle is called mother or father – your cousins are all brothers and sisters – so how could it be possible to be an orphan when you have so many mothers and fathers? This past weekend, I attended the third year anniversary of the orphanage opening. It now is home to 400 orphans, all from the same chiefdom. Volunteers from the communities within the chiefdom operate the orphanage, but it was not the sight of the ten volunteers preparing lunch for the children, or the sight of the 400 orphans, between the age of 3 and 14 that made me realize the extent of the HIV/AIDS crisis. It was not until I saw a group of 40 elderly people present their situation to the local government official that I understood the depth of the crisis and I was hit with a wave of emotion. The man speaking on the group's behalf was 73 years old. He stood there and begged the government official for assistance. He has 20 dependents at home. They are the children of his children. His children, who should be looking after him and his wife, have all died, leaving him as the only living relative to care for these children. These children are not "orphans" because they are under their grandfather's care. Each elder represented a similar story. How are these people, after a long life of hard work, supposed to start afresh with their children's children? How can an old man and his wife grow enough food to support 22 people? The reality of HIV/AIDS hit me. There is an entire missing generation. This is nothing like the fears of the baby-boomer retirement that we have been discussed in Canada – this real, this is now, this is a problem that is crippling and will continue to cripple much of Zambia, the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, and soon to cripple Eastern Europe, India, South East Asia, and South America. Based on what I saw, there are approximately 3000 orphans in the chiefdom I visited. I am sure that the situation in my village is similar, although I am not sure which children are sons and daughters and which children are nieces and nephews of their parents. I suppose that too is a sad picture that only time will unveil.

Being the lucky person who was asked to make a donation to the orphanage this weekend, on behalf of IDE, I was presented with a chicken as a token of appreciation, it was by far the best gift that I have ever received and I haven't even tasted it yet. I am sorry that at this point in time, I will have to leave you and sharpen my knife. I will admit once more that everything in my life is well, but unfortunately, I can't say the same for the chicken...

Bon Appetite;

Paul

Zambia Part 8 – July 2005

Hello Everyone;

Well, I guess it has now been over two months since most of you have heard anything from this side of the world. Things in Zambia have been quite busy, and things finally seem to be falling into place.

These last two months many realities have sunk in - the kind of realities that floor you for a week or two - the kind of realities that anyone who works in another culture faces - the unavoidable realities. Culture Shock.

Before going overseas, I went through rigorous training to prepare me for the things that I would have to deal with while in Zambia. Culture shock was one of the topics.

When you first arrive on your placement, you experience what is called the "honey-moon phase". Everything is awesome. Sure there may be some not so awesome things, but you see solutions to all the problems - the world is your oyster.

When you reach the 1/3 mark of your time overseas, you slowly start to realize how much you were dreaming. Although you were looking at the world through critical eyes during the honeymoon phase, you realize that you were asking the wrong questions. The crucial bits of information, that at one point seemed so important, now appear to be useless. The many different worlds that you were so involved in before seem to be falling apart one by one. At the lowest point a friendly question by someone on the street such as "What is your name?", can be the trigger to a public explosion of frustration. Fortunately, the situation always improves shortly after such an explosion. The explosion is necessary to start the epiphany phase - the phase of growing, a phase of external and internal reflection.

After the explosion, the situation gradually improves until the end of the project or placement. You realize how naive you were at the beginning and you are now able to piece together everything that you fully understand into the puzzle that is your purpose. You start to develop a realistic picture of what is desired and what is do-able within the time and budget constraints of the project. I've been through the major valley, and I'm happy to say that the only way to go from here is up.

It all started with my village development committee meetings. As I have explained in earlier emails, there is a major food shortage here this year and I thought I would initiate a village program that would allow the village to generate some income to purchase food with. After a few

successful meetings, at least I thought that they were successful, we had narrowed down our possible income generating activities to five, including bread baking, processing of soyabeans, raising chickens for eggs, making vegetable oil from sunflower, and buying dried fish in bulk to sell them per cup at the market. I thought we were getting somewhere. At the following meeting, the group was to decide which of the activities we would engage ourselves in. The following meeting however, didn't take place. I arranged the meeting about five different times. Each time the committee members promised that they would come, but each time I was left waiting by my hut for the people to show up. They never came.

The next major upset was at my work. I'd always seen my role in Zambia as an educator. I was to take the field office in Chipata and facilitate a smooth transaction from one full time employee to three full time employees. I was going to work with the one existing full time employee to train her to be the office leader. I was to work with Alice to develop her vision and team building skills. I was up for the task, and still am up for the task, unfortunately though, Alice isn't. After 8 months of working with Alice to build her leadership skills, Alice and I had an afternoon peer review session, where we looked at our own and each other's strengths and our weaknesses. In this meeting I tried to get Alice to start thinking about the possibility of becoming the team leader for the Chipata office. Instead, I discovered that becoming the team leader was the last thing that Alice wanted to do. She would rather be asked to take on certain tasks that she could complete in a day or a week. The office leadership position, she felt, would require her to give up too much of her family time.

So there I was in Zambia, involved in two tasks that were meaningful to me, but not to the people who they were supposed to be meaningful for. I felt that I had pretty much wasted 8 months of my time on nothing. It was not a great place to be. How could I work with the people in my village if they didn't want to work with me? What was my role with International Development Enterprises (IDE – the NGO I am working with in Zambia) if the person whose leadership skills I was supposed to developing did not want to be a leader?

I became bitter. I wasn't very fun to be around. You can ask Alice in the office, or anyone in the village. My fuse was short. Why should I answer questions with full sentences when only a word would do? Why should I smile when I would only be faking it? Why should I pretend to care about people when they don't care for themselves?

I desperately needed a tissue – so that I could cry myself back into reality. I needed someone or something to help me snap out of it. That someone took the form of Mr. Museche.

Mr. Museche is a 93 year old man who has the sparkle of an eight year old in his eye. He lives in a neighbouring village. He used to be a school teacher under the British system and he tells me that he has been to most places in Zambia. He retired in 1967 and has been living in the village since then. He's outlived two wives and told me that he will not marry again because he feels his

heart will not be able to handle it. At the age of 93, he is the toughest man I know. He is the type of man who will walk over mountains rather than around them simply because he enjoys the challenge.

Mr. Museche came for a visit one afternoon and pointed out to me that the problem with the people in the village is that they don't look for the long-term benefit. "We look for immediate gratification," he told me. He suggested that since the people of the development committee had not seen any money come into the village after the first few meetings, they had lost interest. They had better things to do with their time. He gave me a reality check - that I would be just like the people in the village if I were to give up after only one try. He told me to keep on trying - if not for my own sake, then for his.

Two days after I spoke with Mr. Museche, I took a few days off and traveled to Lusaka, where I spent some quality time with some other overseas volunteers with EWB. There are four of us here now on longer-term placements, although Zambia is a large country and we are almost two days of travel apart, and seven students on short-term summer placements. The conversations were refreshing and I re-found my motivation to continue the work that I started.

I was still reluctant to return to my village after my few days off. I'd been able to connect with the people I'd talked to in Lusaka on such a different level than I would be able to connect with the people in my village. I was dreading, as I realize now, the loneliness of the village. The village, where I could be surrounded by people, but there would be no common things to talk about - and even if there was a common ground - the language would be a barrier.

To my pleasant surprise however things have been going a lot more smoothly in the village this time around. I don't know if I learned more of the language when I was in Lusaka or I somehow found the courage to speak the Nyanja that I already know, but I am finally having conversations with the people in my village that go beyond - Good evening, how was your day? Or I am cooking food, and I am finally able to start sharing some of my ideas and more importantly, have some ideas shared with me. A few nights ago, some preschool children took full advantage of the situation and spent half an hour asking me whether or not I ate onions, tomatoes, salt, cooking oil, or any other type of food that they could think of. At any other point in time a conversation like that can be annoying, but I enjoyed it. I took it as a sign of the things that are still to come.

As I've previously shared, there is a definite down side to living in a hut. In my last email, I talked about the ant infestation, which fortunately disappeared as quickly as it appeared. When the "cold season" hit (and as a person from Canada, I am almost ashamed to associate the word cold with these conditions. I still wear my shorts and sandals at the coolest hours of the day) all of a sudden the ants disappeared down the holes from which they had emerged. Honestly I don't miss them - really I don't.

The rats however, are still a problem. Now that I have been able to harvest my maize, groundnuts, sunflower and soyabeans I store them in the corner of my hut. The rats are enjoying the smorgues board (and I have no idea how to spell that one) and seem to be multiplying in number rather than reducing in number. Like I have explained in previous emails, I have tried several things – from rattraps (they eat the bait, but the trap doesn't close) to cats. The cat option seemed to be the best one; although I have now had two cats, or shall I say kittens, and neither of them did anything to deter the rats from entering my house. I suppose the problem was that the cats were both too young to really pose a big threat to the rats. The last cat I owned was showing some real potential until my neighbour's dog got a hold of him and ended his nine lives prematurely. Honestly that was a pretty sad day, it's amazing how close you can get to a cat – especially when you're a dog person. So I've given up on rat catching. If they want my food, they can have it, as long as they leave enough for me. The funny part is however, that since I've given up on catching the things, I've caught and killed two – by accident.

I normally keep my water in a pail by the door, but when ants invaded my house, I had to move the pail to the middle of the room to prevent the ants from finding it. The rats live in the thatch of my hut and on some nights, I can hear them fighting with each other. Then all of a sudden, one of the rats will fall from the thatch and land on the floor. The fallen rat will get up and run out of my hut (There is no such thing as frost here, so my hut isn't exactly air-tight). Since I've moved my pail to the center of the room however, it has caught two falling rats. Since the pail is normally about half full of water, the rats try to climb out, but they can't and end up drowning instead. Yup, I've caught more rats with my water pail than the rattrap and the cats combined. Maybe I will start placing half full pails of water around my room until the rat that is the king of the thatch is the only one remaining in my house. Wouldn't that be sweet?

One of the local delicacies here (although I don't know if you can call it that because people seem to only eat here for the sole purpose of getting food into the system. I would kill to sit down for a meal simply to enjoy the food and to enjoy the act of eating and the company – for now though I'll eat for the sole purpose of my calorie intake). So one of the local delicacies here is rat. I'd heard people talk about how people in the Eastern Province of Zambia eat rat, but I'd never witnessed it. About a month ago however, when I had some flu-ish tendencies, and I was a little bit nauseous, a kid in my village showed up with a bowl of something he had prepared for me to eat. Despite my nausea, I was pretty excited until I looked into the bowl. There it was, a cooked rat. Some of you might picture some pieces of meat in a stew with some vegetable chunks, and others might picture a skinned mouse-like figure in some broth. Both are wrong. In the bowl was a rat – dead of course – that looked wet. Everything was still in tact – tail, head, and even the hair. In fact the rat looked exactly like the two rats that I had found in my water pail. Pretty tasty eh? I asked him how I should eat it and he ripped off a front paw stuck it in his mouth and began to chew. I thanked him and took the bowl inside of my hut.

That night I prepared some maize porridge and some vegetables and I pulled out the bowl with the rat. It was dark so fortunately I didn't have to look at what I was eating, because as I have already said, I was a bit nauseous (otherwise there would have been no problems) and I ate it.

Tail, hips, head, and hair – all of it. You know what, it actually tasted pretty good - somewhat like beef jerky but tender, except some parts were a bit tough, but I think that was because of the hair. I don't know if I ate him the right way, but one thing is for sure, it definitely won't be the last one I eat.

I hope that this letter has found you all well. Do the things you wanted to do when you were a kid, challenge yourself to try new foods, and take a minute to do something for someone you've never done anything for. This is your world, make it what you want it to be.

Send my greetings to all;

Paul Slomp

PS. While I am here in Zambia doing hands-on work to try to create a better world - one person at a time, there has been a campaign going on in Canada called the Make Poverty History campaign. If you don't know what this campaign is about, I have attached the details of the campaign below. Although the main purpose of my emails is to let you all know what I am doing in Zambia, another is to bring the reality in the majority of the world, one step closer to you, the inhabitants of richer parts of the world.

I strongly encourage you to learn more about the great divide of the peoples of this world and how you can make a difference. Wear a white band, sign the petition on [www.live8list.com](http://www.live8list.com), or write a letter to Paul Martin or your local MP.

The reality is that although people like me are trying to alleviate poverty on the ground - working day by day, one person, one community, one organization at a time, but with the stroke of a pen the leaders of G8 countries can make the resources needed on the ground available to truly end poverty.

Think about it, discuss this issue with your friends and family, act in a way that you think is suitable. A better world is possible - the future lies with us.

#### **MAKE POVERTY HISTORY**

Make Poverty History is an international campaign that is being run in 50 countries during 2005. The premise of the campaign is not to raise money but rather awareness that the Millennium Development Goals will not be reached unless western governments make a serious commitment to curb extreme poverty in Africa now. The campaign aims to mobilize public support, encouraging citizens in the West to call on their governments to:

- 1) deliver more and better aid (with a big push towards reaching 0.7% of GDP);
- 2) make trade fair;
- 3) forgive the debt;

This has pushed Africa to the forefront of Canadian media over the past month and an intense public discourse surrounding the desired role that Canada should take in the international community has been spurred.

EWB has actively promoted the Canadian campaign – our office is full of boxes of white wristbands (the international campaign symbol), and EWB volunteers have attended major events such as U2 concerts, the Juno awards, and most recently Live 8.

#### LIVE 8

Nine Live 8 concerts were held throughout the world last weekend, all with the same message – that meeting the first three pillars of the MPH campaign should be the primary goal of the G8 summit in Scotland, July 6-8th. The Canadian concert, though small by comparison, received a lot of attention and tickets were gone within 21 minutes. 110 EWB volunteers were there, promoting the campaign and ensuring that people realized it was much more than just a concert.

In wake of Live 8, G8 leaders have responded by announcing that they will continue to move forward with the recently established debt cancellation plan and they will double aid to Africa by 2010. No commitments to reaching 0.7%, expanding debt cancellation or reducing trade barriers have been made. Paul Martin, leader of the only G8 country that has been running a surplus in recent years, has been especially non-committal when it comes to 0.7%, so we are continuing to raise awareness in Canada, hoping to increase public pressure on the PM to take on a leadership role towards the alleviation of poverty in Africa.

You can find out more about the campaign on [www.makepovertyhistory.org](http://www.makepovertyhistory.org).

#### Zambia Part 9 – October 2005

Hello People;

I send you all the greetings of the people of my village. I told some people that I was going into Chipata to write this message and they said, "Be sure to send your people in Canada our greetings." This section of the email is therefore a sincere hello from one of my communities to another.

As most of you are enjoying turkey, mashed potatoes, various vegetables, (and did anyone say stuffing and pumpkin pie!) today, I too am thankful for many things this past year. I am thankful for the sun and the moon - the two amazing creatures that add life to night and day in the village; for the fact that I am in good health, and despite the fact that I had several bouts of malaria, I didn't have several bouts plus one; I am thankful for my family; for my friends; for the goodness that is in mankind - allowing me to feel at home in a strange land; for the fact that I am two continents away and can still share my thankful list. I am thankful that despite the lack of rain, the lack of food and the hunger, people are managing to continue life - to dream of a better tomorrow. I am thankful for peace. I am thankful for my supervisors, who despite everything I put them through, still put up with me and allow me to push their buttons further. Mostly I am thankful for being alive - for having an opportunity to explore this world and all that it has to offer.

Personally I hope that this email finds you all thankful for being alive as well. I must admit that I am in a much better state of mind today than I have been in quite some time. I have begun to realize, that some of the issues that I was facing with the world "outside" had nothing to do with the outside world, but with my state of being within. There are at least two "characters" in every conflict. Although it is difficult to make friends in a cross-cultural setting, it is even more difficult to make friends if, as an outsider, you expect friends to come to you. It is up to you to make the effort to find friends. Since I've come to that realization - life has become much easier.

About two days after I sent my last email, a small baby girl was born in my village. In true Zambian fashion, I will now describe my relationship to her. She is the daughter of the eldest son of the woman where I get my hot coal to start my charcoal stove - or can I say - I'm her uncle. On the day after this small girl's birth, I happened to be talking with the lady where I start my fire, and I asked her what she had done that particular day. She told me that she had gone to visit her granddaughter. I then asked what the name of the child was and she said that the child hadn't been named yet. I told the lady that I would not be coming to the village in the next couple of days because my work would take me too far to commute.

When I returned to the village a five days later and I was getting the hot coal for my stove, the lady informed me that the family had decided to ask me to name the baby, since I had shown interest. In the tradition of the Ngoni people in Zambia, the paternal side of the family normally gives names to babies. Sometimes the father gives the name, other times it is Aunts, Uncles or Grandparents. This is why I am her paternal uncle I suppose. I was quite honoured with the task and I thought for quite some time because I had never named anything other than a pet before or culinary invention.

There really wasn't too much pressure though - I mean this is Zambia, a land where many people are named after colours, furniture, household utensils, geographical features, and pop culture. Names in Zambia such as White Ndhlovu (elephant), Table Phiri (mountain), Spoon Daka (soil), and Gearbox Shawa (groundnut) are not uncommon. With the rise of cell phones, there are bound to be names like Motorola, Talk-time, or Simcard. So like I said, the pressure was not too great to come up with a name that would be acceptable.

She was born into the Shawa family so that name was my starting point. After some thought, I came up with the name "Fiona Ekwia Shawa". The trick was that this needed to be a name that her family would be able to pronounce. I also felt that she should have somewhat of a cultural name. Since names in Zambia are not all that cultural, I thought I'd throw in some Ghana into the mix. Ekwia is the name given to girls in Ghana who are born on a Wednesday (I think because I don't fully remember - if it isn't, don't let the word get out in my village).

Her family was happy with the name and for the next 2 days I had children coming to my hut to ask what the name of the baby was. It was good and it made me feel at home in the village. This family had embraced me as one of their own, and for that I was grateful.

I've been playing my guitar almost everyday since I have come to Zambia. I'm not great, but it's enjoyable, at least for me. From time to time I try to figure out the chords to random songs to keep myself entertained. Since I am in Africa, although not really in the jungle, I decided to figure out the chords to "In the Jungle". It's a pretty easy song to play so within a few minutes, I was belting out some "Ooo-eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee-hum-humbaway" and a crowd of children gathered - laughing at the crazy guy with the guitar. Good times. The following evening, when I got back from work, there was a crowd of children waiting for me, which was not too normal. Since I get back just before nightfall, I am normally in quite a hurry to fetch water from the well and to get started on my supper, but this particular night, children were yanking buckets and charcoal stoves out of my hands, saying, "Let us fetch your water." Or, "We'll be right back with your fire." I had no idea what was going on - this had never happened before. Then when I came outside after I had changed into my anti-mosquito-bite (and thus anti-malaria) attire, the water had been fetched and the pot was on the stove, one kid came up to me and asked me to sing the "Oooo-eeeeeeeeeee" song. Since then it has become a nightly ritual. I'm thinking about translating the song into Nyanja - that way they'll be able to sing along.

For the first time since I've been here, I was able to take some time off two weeks ago. It was quite enjoyable - a much needed break. A friend of mine from school had come to visit me for a month. We managed to go to Livingstone, a touristy Zambian city that is home of one of the Seven Wonders of the World - Victoria Falls. Since we are approaching the tail end of the dry season, the river was at its lowest, and despite the fact that meant the falls were almost dry, the white-water river rafting at the bottom of the falls was unreal - low water means crazy rapids. We managed to get a group of 10 people together and spent the whole day fighting the river. We had a good battle, but I think in general the river won. It was definitely one of the single most fun things that I have done while in Zambia. Unfortunately the burgers at the end of the day had not been prepared properly and 8 people out of the 10 spent the next 2 days not feeling too hot (The one vegetarian and a "friend" who decided not to eat the meat because he thought it smelled funny when they opened the container - thanks for telling the rest of us - did not get sick). So the food poisoning fact almost caused me to miss seeing the falls for the second time I was in Livingstone, but a quick 1.5 hour jaunt enabled us to see the falls just before we traveled back to Lusaka. Mosi-ao-tunya or the Wall that Thunders is an amazing sight even when the falls are nearly dry. The sheer size of the falls (the size of the un-vegetated rock face that spans about 100m across) is baffling. I promised myself I'd go back to the falls when they are full of water, but to anyone looking to visit Zambia, the falls are worth a visit even during the dry season.

One thing that I do struggle with is shifting from being a resident to becoming tourist and vice versa. I must admit that while I was visiting Livingstone I was 100% a tourist, but I did struggle with it. It would be alright if there were local people enjoying the same things that I was enjoying, but the fact of the matter is that most Zambians are going have problems eating three meals a day this year and there is no possible way to spend money on a whitewater rafting adventure. How does it make logical sense that one day I am doing my best to integrate into my village, refusing

to purchase a tomato because it is 2 cents too expensive, while the next minute I am roaring down some rapids on a rafting trip that cost more than a tonne of tomatoes? I suppose the question should be - how is it fair that I am able afford a tonne of tomatoes because it seems like a good idea, when my fellow man isn't able to eat one tomato because he can't afford it? I've struggled with this question for many years now and I still don't really know the answer. Is it wrong to enjoy white water rafting? No. It's wrong that my brother cannot afford a tomato. I suppose the major struggle I have with shifting back and forth between being a tourist and being a resident is that the grotesque inequality is so large that I start feeling responsible for the inequality, but more importantly, responsible for being part of the solution to the inequality. It's tempting to not think about it, or to over compensate by refusing myself any pleasure, but I am not going to stop living life and enjoying the odd luxury. I am however making a commitment to do whatever I can to combat the global inequality. I hope that you too have an opportunity to one day experience the inequality in the world. I encourage you to not shy away from the conflict, but instead join me with the commitment for a better tomorrow.

Finally I am thankful that a better world is possible,

Paul

Zambia Part 10 – January 2006

Hello Everyone;

If anyone is wondering when it's time to send an email home, it's when you start receiving email from your friends and family asking if you are still OK or if you're already home because they haven't heard from you in a while. So for my loyal readers who have been asking themselves (or me) if I'm still living the good life - yes I am - and I am sorry for not writing sooner. I would make a New Year's Resolution to write more often, but we all know that no-one ever really sticks to New Year's Resolutions anyways so I won't waste your time. I do however wish everyone a healthy, successful, righteous, hopeful and happy 2006.

Unfortunately I have some sad news to share with all of you. I don't live in Pashane anymore. There, I said it. While I was writing my last email, I was feeling the after effects of some turbulence that I caused at work. This turbulence has changed what I am doing here in terms of work, but unfortunately, it has also forced me to move into the town of Chipata itself. After 10 months of learning and living in the village, growing my own food, protecting my food from rats, cycling the 32km round-trip to and from work at least 4 times a week, fetching my own water, getting eaten by ants, etc. I had to leave Pashane. My supervisor in Lusaka said that I had to move to town because it was "unprofessional" to live in a village. That was almost enough to get me to stay. I left on my own terms - my new position (which I will get into later) requires me to travel a lot and at a moment's notice. Living in Pashane would mean that I would continue living in a free house and cultivating on free land, but I would be away too often to be making good use of either of them. More importantly, I would not be able to contribute enough time to the people of Pashane themselves to make it worth their while to supply me with a house and a plot of land. That aside, for practical reasons, if I need to be able to travel to another project area at a moment's notice, it makes sense that I live in Chipata, a major stop on several bus-routes.

As I was leaving Pashane, I could help but feel a lump in my throat. Most of the people in the village didn't seem to care much. They were more concerned about getting the items that I couldn't move (because they were too bulky to be put on the back of a bicycle) or items that I wouldn't need in Chipata. People I had only met once or twice gathered around my hut to ask for a going away present from me (wasn't it supposed to be the other way around?). I only ended up giving things to the families that had played a major part in my Pashane experience. Even those people expressed more joy in receiving something than grief over my leaving. When I had finished packing and cycled my last ride into town, I was all too ready to close the village chapter of my life.

In hindsight though, I don't think I spent enough time with the people in the village to make them really care whether I stayed or went. In reality I was at work 5 days a week, in my field every Saturday, and on Sundays I tended to rest by my hut. I was always busy doing something - but never busy enough with the people of the village, or the real problems they faced. Yes I did learn a tremendous amount of village life and about how people in a village setting tend to think. I did not however, ever use that knowledge to benefit any one individual or the community as a whole while I was there. From a villagers perspective, it makes sense that they were indifferent to see me go. Even though I was only moving to Chipata, a short bike-ride away, I doubt anyone in the village thought that they would ever see me again. In their eyes, I was rarely seen when I lived there, why would it be any different after my departure?

I have made an effort though to go back to visit - at least once a month. Although my departure was cold, I was welcomed back with open arms on my first visit back (and my subsequent visits). Some boys had seen my coming and had rushed into the village to tell them I was coming. I was met by a screaming wall of children. Upon my first return, people realized that I appreciate Pashane and its people. I almost feel as if I am more part of the community now than I was when I lived in their midst.

So I no longer live in a hut, I now have brick walls around me and iron sheet over my head. I also live with people - that is where the differences end between where I live now and the village.

One of the most difficult things that I found about living in the village was the loneliness factor. Although there were plenty of people around, I never found any friends or people that I could talk to that I could share something with. The forward people were looking to get to know me better to get ahead in life. The people I could've befriended - already had friends or were too shy to approach me first. I'd made several friends through work, but they all lived in Chipata, not in the village and as it turns out, I ended up alone most of the time, which in itself was a good learning experience for me. The loneliness factor was one thing that I could get rid of if I found the appropriate accommodation - I decided to try to find a host family.

Several options arose instantly - mainly through friends at work - who were either looking for someone to rent a room in their house, or who knew someone who was. Most of these families though spoke English at home, and really didn't need the money that I would be paying for rent. Finally I came across the family where I live now. I am 100% satisfied with my selection.

I am now the youngest son of Mrs. Mwanza (all those of you who are first borns in your families note that the last borns have it way easier in life). Mrs. Mwanza is the wife of the late Mr. Mwanza. Although widows often have a difficult time in Canada where there is a social safety net, in Zambia losing an income generating spouse is shocking - literally. I have heard all too many

stories of well-to-do husbands passing away leaving the rest of the family with a few nice assets and a dire situation. For not well-to-do families, the situation is worse.

I now live with Mrs. Mwanza, her daughter Maureen (31), her son Jonathan (27), three of Maureen's 4 children Richard, Joffrey, and Modest (12, 9, 4), Jonathan's wife Irene (25) and two children Nellia and Steven (10, 2). Guess who's no longer lonely. The family though lives in poverty. My monthly contribution (I can't really call it rent because I do pay according to the situation that I am in) is the only steady income that the family receives. Part of the food for the family is grown on rented land, a 6 km walk from where we live. The rest of the family's expenses are met by doing what is called piece work - unskilled, impermanent, poorly paid manual labour. This includes anything from working in another person's field for a day, to carrying buckets of water from a well to a building site, to hammering rocks into gravel.

In the village, people lived in poverty and had no money, but at least food was grown on free land, and firewood is readily available. In the outskirts of town, people too live in poverty. They have no money, but everything costs money. Still more and more people flock to town to try their luck at finding piece work. At least in town, they no longer live in a village - they are one step closer to development.

The house that we live in is not our house. In Zambia there is no such thing as a building contractor or a mortgage to build a home. As a result, cities, towns and settlements are filled with partially finished homes and cleared plots of land with only the foundations of what might one day become someone's dreamhome. People build and finance their homes from scratch. The employed save for a few years to have enough to buy a plot of land to build a home. A few years later, they might have saved enough to have some piece-workers dig a hole and make bricks. A few years later, there might be enough money for a few bags of cement and a skilled worker to build the foundations. Some more years and the bricks might be finished - without rafters or a roof. Little by little the house reaches its completion. The building becomes ready to be inhabited as one reaches retirement. Such it is with the place where I am living - but, alas, it is not the dreamhouse of my family.

The house I am living in has a roof, but there are still several phases the house must pass through before it is complete. There are no windows or doors, there is no floor, and maybe the house will one day have plumbing and electricity. For now though, those features are only a dream. My family has a symbiotic relationship with the house owner. The owner has invested a lot of money into building the house and its materials. My family is providing security for those building materials. In return, the house owner is providing my family with free accommodation. I dare not ask what will happen to my family when the house owner finds enough money to finish the house and wants to move into it...

The house is quite large and I even have my own room, which is pretty sweet. I enjoy living with the family and my Nyanja has improved a lot since I moved there. I must too admit that I've become quite lazy since I moved there because all the cooking and house related activities are looked after by the three adult women in the family (and their children). Fortunately I've been able to convince them that I can clean my own room, wash my own clothes, and fetch my own bathwater from the well. After a month of confusion, I too was able to convince my family that I wanted to eat with the family. In Zambia, guests normally eat with the male head of the household in a separate room, while the women and children will eat out of the pots in the kitchen or outside. After a long struggle, I've been able to shed my guest status and now eat with the rest of the family, albeit from a plate.

When I arrived in Zambia, International Development Enterprises (IDE), the organization that Engineers Without Borders has partnered me with, was hoping to take advantage of me as an extension officer - someone who could work directly with the beneficiaries of the programme. For my first year and a bit, this is exactly what I did. Together with another field officer in the Chipata office, we held low-cost irrigation equipment demonstrations, promoted vegetable production, and created a vegetable producer network. This work gave me an opportunity to learn a lot about the farmers we work with as an organization, what their current work involves and how their gardening businesses can be improved. I also learned a lot about how IDE functions as an organization, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and how the service that IDE provides to the smallholder farmers can be improved.

Although I learnt a lot while I was doing extension work, I felt that I was not working at my full capacity or that I was underemployed. I saw certain inefficiencies in the work that I was doing, that could easily be eliminated - for example, although I have put a lot of effort into learning Nyanja, I still use a translator when it comes to conducting meetings or presenting at workshops. This requires two people to do the work that one person should be doing. I also felt that, although I would be assisting the IDE programme while I was a field officer, my contribution to IDE would not be institutionalized and would stop as soon as I left. I did however see an unfilled role that I would be willing and capable of filling where I would be working at capacity.

In September I assembled a multi-page report regarding the IDE Chipata field office and the work that we had accomplished in the last year of my presence and issues that had prevented us from accomplishing more. One of the main obstacles had been the lack of communication between the field office project implementers and the head office project designers. Often the project implementers were ill-informed about what was required and often the project designers were not familiar with the actual starting point. The among other problems were with resource allocation to certain field activities (both human resource and financial), making it difficult for implementing staff to meet certain expectations and deadlines. I submitted the report to my supervisors within IDE in Lusaka and suggested that I would be interested in filling more of a communications role - ensuring that both project designers and implementers are on the same page and working towards the same solution.

In the middle of September, a Zambian was hired to fill my role as Chipata field office project implementer and in October, I started my work in project communications. I am now responsible for linking field officers in Chipata, Zambia and Villa Ulongue, Mozambique to the IDE office in Lusaka. This is a new position and hopefully IDE will see the value in hiring someone permanent (not volunteer) to fill this role in the future. I am extremely excited with this challenging new role as it allows me a perfect mix of office work, field work, interaction with other organizations and institutions, planning and implementing. More importantly though, I am now carrying more responsibility for the success of the programme.

I hope you are all well. I much appreciate the fact that you read my messages home and the response that they generate. I hope you have all had a wonderful Christmas and that you are all excited about the possibilities that 2006 has brought with it. For those of you who are wondering, I will most likely be in Zambia/Mozambique until the end of June in 2007, but I will be back on Canadian soil for a day or two this coming summer. I am still reachable at:

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although I must warn you that I am terrible at writing back.

Once again I wish you all a Happy New Year.

I believe in you.

Paul Slomp