

INTERVIEW WITH VIRGINIA THOMAS – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SDIA

by Imke Wolf-Doettinchem of SD Germany for their national newsletter August 2007



Since January you are the Executive Director of Susila Dharma International. What exactly is the job of the Executive Director?

Since January I have been mainly learning! First and foremost, I think the job is to translate the vision of our Board of Directors and members around the world into practical actions. Our members have given us tasks at various meetings and AGMs - like providing coordination or coming up with a common mission statement and guiding principles for our network - and we have to make these things happen.

After that, the job is being aware of the needs and helping members of our network in different countries. Some of our network members are very strong and don't need much technical support or guidance, others from time to time need a lot of assistance. The job is also about knowing what different members of our network are good at, and being aware of opportunities to pool the strengths and resources of our members so our Association can have a maximum impact.

What do you like about this job and what is the most difficult thing you have to do?

What I like about the job is getting to know and working with an incredibly diverse group of people on diverse group of activities (in health, education, micro-finance, etc.) in 27 countries, and trying to see what we can create that is positive for local communities. Each country has its own specific cultural assumptions and developmental context - so working together as an international network is a very exciting challenge.

What I find most difficult is that because the possibilities are so vast and the needs and challenges in the world are so great, the job feels endless. There is never a day when I feel I have reached the bottom of my list of things I should do. I think the hardest thing is saying 'ok, I have done what I can today' and accept that that has to be good enough.

On what do you spend most of your working time?

Communications. Everyday I wake up and there are 30 e-mails already arrived and another 30 that come in during the course of the day. I think that serious thinking and writing work like drafting proposals and concept papers often gets put off, because there seem to be so many 'urgent' messages flying around. I am learning how to prioritize the different aspects of my work, but it is not always easy!

Who are the people you are working with?

In our SDIA Office team, we are now four: Rafaela Alvarez in Montreal, who is our new bookkeeper and financial administrator; Simon Bland, who manages our Virtual Office on the web; Rosanna Hille in Vancouver is our Communications Coordinator, and myself as Executive Director. The Office staff work closely daily, and also with Sharifin Gardiner, SDIA Chairman based in Lewes, UK, and his deputy, Lusana Blond who is based in Washington D.C. We work with other Directors around the world on general policy or specific country issues. I also work closely with project leaders and specific national SDs on practical things like fundraising, coordination, information sharing, etc.

How do you keep your motivation in spite of the distance you have to all your colleagues and partners?

That is a good question, because it is actually quite hard sometimes! The first thing we have done, because our Chairman and office staff are quite spread out in different localities and time zones is to hold regular Monday conference calls to discuss issues and look at how the work will be divided. That has helped build a feeling of teamwork despite the distances. E-mail is obviously a key communications tool. But in reality there is no substitute for getting together (even once or twice a year) with our network members, Board and staff, so to feel connected once again and that we are all working in the same direction, despite the fact that we do not always agree on the details!

What is your profession and what have you done before joining SDI?

I worked as a consultant and researcher in international development and human rights. I worked for UN agencies, bilateral aid agencies, and international NGOs. I have worked all over the world, and know enough about the successes and challenges of other development organisations to be able to put those of SD into perspective.

And how did you get in contact with Susila Dharma?

When I was eight years old, my parents had a guest at our house. Her name was Hasijah Rosefield, and she managed an SD project in Jakarta - The Shoe-Shine Boys project - that worked to protect and assist children who had left their families to work as shoe-shine boys in the city. In essence, they became urban street children and child labourers. She spoke about their vulnerability, their lack of protection, and how solutions needed to be found to help them and their families so that they could get an education. Something like a switch went on in me...I think I knew then that I wanted to work in social development; I wanted to be like her in some way.

Why do you think it is important that the national SDs have this network – what is the value added?

The value added of working in an international network is that as SD national organisations, our knowledge and resources are quite limited. SD Germany is one of our biggest SD Nationals, but even then there are many German NGOs that have more resources. When we come together as national SDs to find solutions to challenging problems such as how best to support projects in developing countries, we share our

knowledge and resources, and by doing so, we diminish the risks of making mistakes, which are easy to make when you are working across cultures and socio-economic contexts.

For example, a number of national SD nationals are working to support a school in the Democratic Republic of Congo to develop a TeleCentre (Cybercafe) as a resource to its students and to the community. The rising cost of fossil fuels had made the use of an ordinary diesel generator too expensive. To make this project happen we need to find an alternative energy to run the TeleCentre, but we need to learn about what to invest in and we need to raise more money. While renewable energy is cheaper in the long run, the start-up costs are higher. Renewable energy is a new thing, for our projects, for us as SD Nationals, as the SDIA network, and for the world in general. By drawing on expertise and resources from many countries, we will learn more and get a better result than if one national SD took on this project alone.

Do you think our work in SD is political work? If yes, why?

Yes, whether we are conscious about that or not. I don't mean political in the sense of being aligned with a particular ideology or political party. I mean that ultimately, our SD work has an impact on power structures and how power is distributed throughout a society or community. Many of our projects focus on education, health, developing skills, etc. All of these things, directly or indirectly, affect the ability of people to shape their destinies and give them more power in their own lives. If you cannot read or write, it is much harder to be informed and question decisions and use of resources by your leaders. Most poverty and human misery in the world does not derive from insufficient resources, but the abuse of power by leaders and the inability of ordinary people to hold them to account. Overall, I think it is better to be more conscious, rather than less, of the political implications of our SD work.

Where do you see the major challenge for SD International Association for the next years?

The major challenge I see is for us to emerge from our shells, where we have worked quietly and unobtrusively, learning bit by bit what works and what doesn't work in managing social change processes and development projects in many different countries. The major challenge for us is to first recognise and consolidate what we have learned, and start to share this with more and more partners or allies who are working for common goals. I think we tend to be shy, because many of us come to our SD work as volunteers, and we think we don't know that much. But having worked with many professional development agencies, I can tell you that compared to others, we have had quite a lot of success and wasted a lot less money! So increasing the reach and inclusiveness of our network is a definite challenge and objective.

For more information about Susila Dharma see www.susiladharm.org