ICWA
LETTERS

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

CG-10
Southeast Asia

Curt Gabrielson, a science teacher and an Institute Fellow, is observing the re-establishment of education in East Timor.

Consumption and Life In East Timor: Part 2

By Curt Gabrielson

OCTOBER 1, 2001

DILI, East Timor — In my previous newsletter, I laid out various differences in consumption I see between the US and East Timor. Whenever someone comments on another culture or society, it is important to know where that person is coming from. With this in mind, I'll give a bit of background here on myself.

When I was very young, I had the deeply rooted impression that my family was not well off. My father was furloughed from his primary employment for 11 out of the 18 years I lived at home, so he and my mother were led to pursue various odd jobs and to develop our side-hill Missouri farm into as many productive enterprises as possible. I had a wonderful childhood, all the time thriving on the impression that we were barely eking out our living and leading the simple life.

This impression was to stand until long after I had graduated from university. Then one day I was paging through a book on current economics and saw a chart which gave the breakdown of yearly earnings in the US. I was surprised to find that my family's combined salary currently fell very near the top of the fourth quintile, and even in our years of working hard on the farm, was comfortably within the third quintile. To me that meant that more than half the folks in our nation were financially worse off than we were, and that my impression of childhood had been incorrect: we were actually comfortable in comparison to many of those around us.

Having lived most of my life in the US at the third and fourth quintiles, my perspective is obviously quite distorted. The US leads the world in consumption of both energy and raw materials, and I have spent my days consuming with the best of them. The level of my consumption has been set largely by the social economy in which I have resided.

Silverio, a friend of ours here in East Timor, has had a different experience. He lives in the village of Bukoli, about two and a half hours by bus from Dili. The 2,000 people who call Bukoli home make their living primarily from the land: small terraced fields marching up each gradual hill, and patches of forests thick with trees that supply food, tools and shelter. Silverio's cash crops are minimal. His family sells chickens and pigs, vegetables and fruits, coconut oil and baskets whenever he can, but buyers are scarce. The market in the nearby city of Baukau is jam-packed with people peddling these same items.

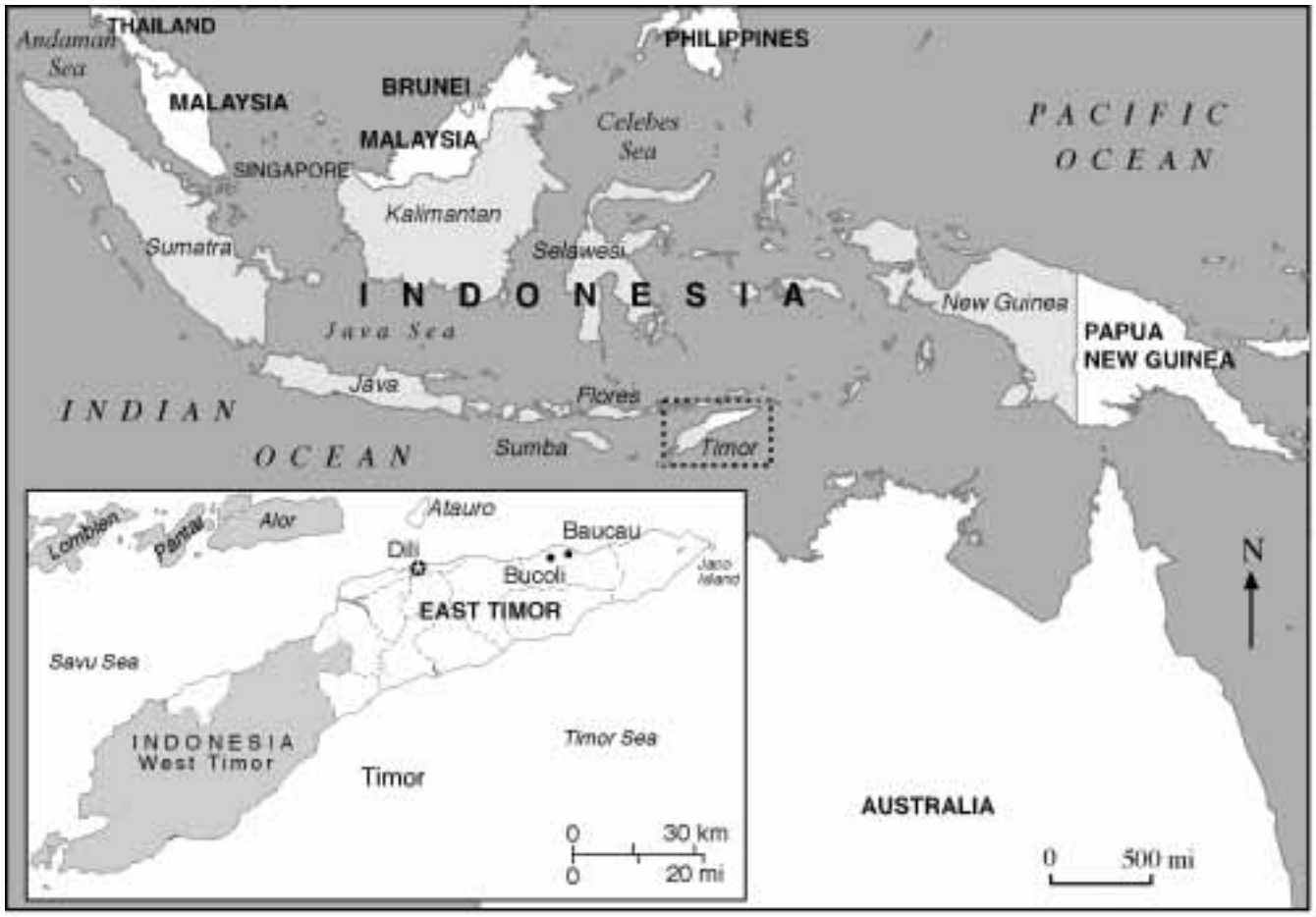
Bukoli is not severely poor. It lies on the main road between Dili and Baukau, and this gives a few more opportunities to its people. At one end of town an entrepreneur has set up a gas station, consisting of a dozen or so 200-liter drums, a few smaller jugs and a funnel. At least one Bukoli resident works as a driver for the UN in Baukau, though that job will end as soon as the UN pulls out. By and large, however, people in Bukoli do not receive salaries. Silverio and his family consume very little beyond what they grow and gather in Bukoli. They trade with family members living in other places to round out their diet and acquire other necessities. Their level of consumption, as is the case with most people in East

Clockwise from top: Silverio, Lucrecia, Florentina and Evangelina, in front of their home.

Timor, is set by limits in the availability of resources, especially those resources that can be traded for cash.

It is relatively easy to measure consumption here. The things and energy that one uses to live are nearly all very tangible and local. Widely used imported items include clothes, sandals, kitchenware, batteries, candles, axe and shovel heads, and a few items of food such as sugar and instant noodles. These things still come mostly from Indonesia, and their price reflects the boat ride from Java to Timor and the truck ride from Dili to their place of use. This is the extent to which the "global economy" touches the majority of East Timorese: simple goods from Java and a bit of petroleum to deliver them.

Much harder to measure are "standard of living" and "quality of life." The standard of living of a nation is often defined as its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) divided by its population. There seem to be two main problems with this definition: first, GDP-per-person does not tell how well the GDP is actually distributed among the population, and second, the number does not tell us how much a person can purchase with this amount. Two other tools



of measure were created in an attempt to arrive at measurements of distribution and purchasing power. The Gini Coefficient gives a rough idea of how evenly wealth is distributed within a nation, and the GDP per capita can be adjusted to Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), which takes into account the cost of a basket of essential goods.[1]

Neither of these tools can yet been applied to newly independent East Timor, due to the lack of good data. The current East Timor GDP is estimated at $350 million, dividing out to $440 per person[2], but it is hard to tell what it will be in even a year or two for at least two reasons: East Timor is currently in a state of rebuilding after the tragic destruction of 1999, and this massive construction effort distorts views of base economic activity. Also, a vast mish-mash of donor funds currently swirls through the local economy, confusing calculations of what is produced and how.

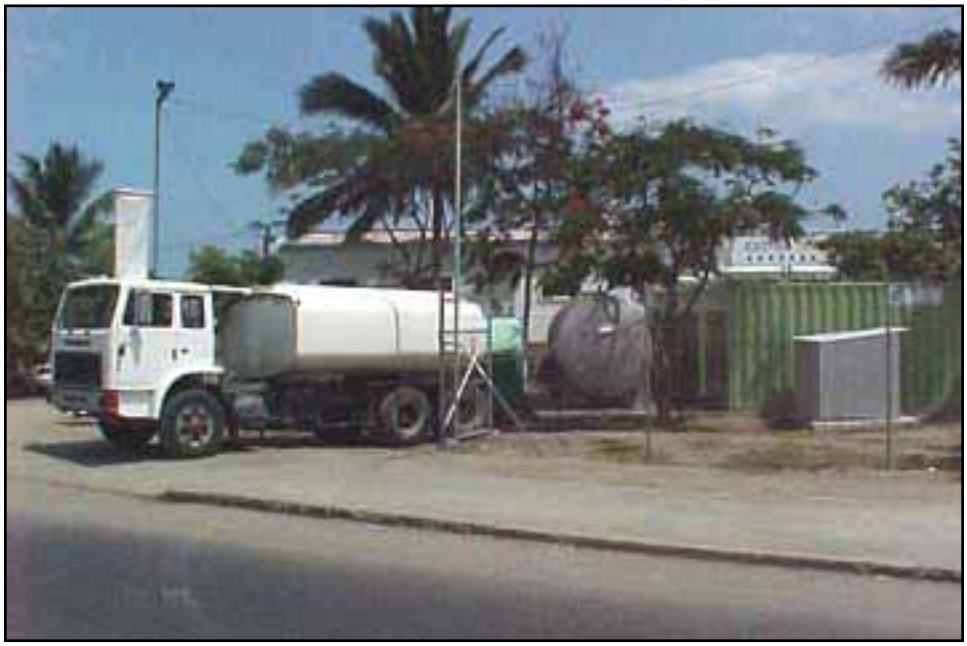
Even when good numbers are available, none of this figuring will take into account what our friend Silverio does day-in and day-out, for he does not contribute significantly to the GDP. One could even say that he is a liability to East Timor's GDP, because his work does not result in much cash to purchase anything, or to be taxed.

A nation's GDP is as closely linked to consumption as to production. No enterprise will produce for long if there is not a customer who's got the wherewithal to consume its product. Thus, standard of living as defined by GDP per capita is tied very closely to levels of consumption. According to these shaky definitions, higher levels of consumption mean higher standards of living.

However, as many have long recognized, consumption itself does not make life good. While it may be conceivable to call a person's consumption or production level her "living standard," no one would agree to call it the quality of her life. Is there a better way to measure quality of life?

A simple search for "quality of life" on the worldwide web reveals many websites that list indexes of the quality of life in various cities throughout the world. This search also leads to medical sites offering counsel on how to maintain one's quality of life as age and infirmity set in. The factors these two groups of organizations use to describe quality of life are many and varied: personal safety, personal independence, recreation options, ease of transport and communication, climate, limitations on personal freedom, political stability, security of one's economic position, access to medical treatment, etc. Clearly many of these are social or even psychological considerations, and very difficult to put a number on.[3]

In the '70s, under former ICWA Trustee Jim Grant, the Overseas Development Council of Washington, D.C. made an attempt to isolate certain concrete variables that affect the quality of life. Their Council's Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI) combines three factors into a single number: life expectancy, infant mortality and literacy. The implication is that if these three factors are all favorable, a quality of life can be established. The UN Development Program currently uses another yardstick called the Human Development Index (HDI) to rank various nations, regions and groups of people. The HDI combines life expectancy, educational attainment and GDP per capita. UNDP also has a sort of anti-quality of life measure, the Human Poverty Index, which takes into consideration the number of people who die before age 40, the number of adult illiterates, the number of families lacking access to health services and safe water, and



Petroleum flows into the tanks of two large generators that provide a complete artificial environment for those with $150 to blow for a night on the "Central Maritime Hotel," one of the giant floating hotels polluting Dili's harbor.

[1] The scheme for PPP sets the US as a standard 100, and rates all nations from this base line. Given the extraordinary consumption and waste of the US, this seems a highly dubious method of standardization.
[2] The US GDP per capita is around $28,000, Indonesia $1,000, and India $380.
[3] See "*Dying for Growth*" Jim Yong Kim, Joyce V. Millen, Alec Irwin, and John Gershman, Common Courage Press, Maine, 2000, page 16 and 17, for an excellent breakdown on measuring poverty, quality of life, and social inequality.

the number of children underweight at age five.

Each of the elements used in these methods to measure quality of life requires consumption. To combat disease, increase the survival rate of infants, increase educational and health opportunities and provide for adequate nutrition all require at least some consumption of both goods and services, as well as energy.

At the same time, Silverio, at his extremely low level of consumption, is doing quite well in almost every department. He is 46 years old and healthy as ever. His mother is 73 and still helping out around the house. Safe water pours from a spring five minutes' walk from their house, and the Baukau hospital is only a half-hour away down a well-trafficked road. Even in years with poor growing conditions, the village of Bukoli can feed itself. Furthermore, each of Silverio's nine children is in school, or ready to enter. His wife Florentina has only lost one child, largely due to circumstances linked to the brutal Indonesian occupation.

Silverio lives a life of considerable quality by his own definition, as well as those more technical ones above. While he is not satisfied and has plans to increase his lot, one could almost conclude that he has enough.

Silverio may not be the statistical "average resident" of Bukoli, but he is quite representative of the village. He has always been a fast learner and knows Portuguese, but he spent only four years in school. He may have more connections to the cities, and thus the city economy, than others in Bukoli, but his relatives in the cities are by no means well-to-do. His house looks like everyone else's, as do his fields. Thus it is very tempting to conclude that life in Bukoli is ok; that folks there have enough.

I am reminded of what I heard several times upon my return from a six-month journey in South Asia. Upon showing my friends and family pictures of people I had met who were apparently poor by US standards, several commented: "Such poverty! But are they happy?"

I found it quite a fascinating question. I could only reply that the situation is likely much more complex than "happy" or "unhappy." And after all, if they were happy, would my family and friends have been relieved? I later decided that a much more relevant question would have been, "But do they have enough?"

For obvious reasons, I have rarely seen definitions of how much is "enough." The World Bank has stated for several years that $1 per person per day is "not enough," defining poverty as living beneath that level of income.[4] However, the Bank stops far short of looking in the other direction and saying that $1.10, for instance, is "enough."

Morrison and Tsipis, in their book "*Reason Enough To Hope,"* (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1998) use two numbers for "enough" when making forecasts about what will be needed on a global scale throughout the next century to make life comfortable for all. They cite annual Chinese grain consumption per person — one-quarter ton — for a food requirement, and an average flow of two kilowatts per person as a base energy requirement.[5] They point out that people living in France in the 1960s — with indoor plumbing, good food variety, good health care, even refrigerators — used energy at this rate.

Again, I find Silverio and his family live below the "requirements." I estimate that his whole family's grain consumption is roughly equal to an annual quarter-ton of grain per adult person, plus some for the kids. They produce all their own rice and corn, using virtually no outside energy sources, and also rely for their base caloric intake on many cassava plants and various trees with carbohydrate-rich fruits unknown to us in the US. As there is no electricity in Bukoli, Silverio consumes energy in the form of wood for fires, with a bit of kerosene for lamps, an occasional bus trip to the city, candles and a few batteries for his flashlight. I calculate the sum total of his family's primary energy consumption to be approximately 0.1 kilowatt per person.[6]

And do we have "enough" in the US? If the amount of food wasted in agriculture, restaurants and retail operations is any indication, the available food in the US is well past plenty. I got some basic energy data from my parents, two very informed and energy-conscious US citizens, who have much more than $2 per day to live on. According to my rough calculations, they consume 0.25 kilowatts per person in home electricity, and 1.3 kilowatts per person in gas for their cars. After those considerations and a few airplane trips per year, the calculations go

[4] It is not clear at all that this line is meaningful. Silverio and the 11 members of his family that live in his house would then need a salary of $4,000 a year to avoid poverty. His immediate family's total cash income is well below $500 per year, and even if you include some monetary value for all the food and other items his family produces, it would come to much less than $4,000. It seems very much like the World Bank is defining poverty in a manner that invariably includes all those who subsist off their own land.

[5] A kilowatt is a unit of power; that is, a rate of energy use. As an example, a house with twenty 100 watt bulbs burning at all times is using energy at a rate of two kilowatts. All forms of energy use may be measured by this unit. As another example, burning 1.5 gallons of gas each day uses energy at a rate of around two kilowatts.

[6] Using information gathered from other friends who cook with kerosene, I estimate that a family of 12 burns approximately 30 liters per month which translates into 600 million joules of energy. If we take wood fires to be only one-fourth as efficient as kerosene stoves, Silverio's family consumes around 2.4 billion joules of energy each month burning wood. A watt is a joule per second, and there are 2.6 millions seconds in a month, so Silverio's family uses energy from firewood at a rate of just under 1 kilowatt. This divided by 12 gives 0.08 kilowatts per person.

A row of humming generators in front of a row of buzzing air conditioners in the main "camp" of the UN Peace Keeping Force in East Timor.

speculative. How much energy does the Walmart my parents frequent use to keep its aisles clean and bright? How much for the mail system to deliver their mail? The work places of my parents? Factories, mines, the military, the entertainment industry? Furthermore, electricity production in the US loses around 60 percent of its energy to inefficiencies, so all calculations of electrical energy use must be multiplied by three to arrive at a number for primary consumption. "*Reason Enough to Hope"* puts the US primary energy consumption ten years ago at just below 9 kilowatts per person — nearly 100 times that of Silverio's family. We US citizens may ask ourselves if this level is "enough."

East Timor is a small place. Fewer than a million people make their home on this half-island about the size of Massachusetts. Yet the lives and consumption patterns of the East Timorese are representative of much of the world. The World Bank says around a quarter of the world lives on less than $1 per day, and over half lives on less than $2 per day.

Before I came to East Timor, I knew these World Bank statistics and had visited many corners of the world where people are living on little. But when I moved in among the East Timorese, my consciousness rose to new heights, as did my search for understanding of the situation. Answers or conclusions, however, are not often forthcoming.

When I make a trip to a fancy store to buy imported milk, orange juice, cheese, pasta and sauce, jam, peanut butter or pancake syrup, I know I'll have to haul this precious cargo to the house past all our neighbors sitting in front of their homes. These bags full of standard US fare are entirely out of my neighbors' economic reach. What should be my reaction to this fact?

Our wealth and high levels of consumption bring Pamela and me power, freedom and opportunities that are inaccessible to the average local. We flew in to work in East Timor, and have the option of leaving whenever we want. We have access to top-quality medical care whether at the Australian mission in East Timor, or back in our home countries. We have access to the petroleum and vehicles required for easy transport within East Timor, as well as access to international communication systems. We have access to an enormous bank of knowledge through the Internet and other sources, and can easily keep informed of news from any corner of the planet. We can participate at a high level in the global economy, purchasing things from all over the world, gaining interest on our money, and even scoring jobs with higher and higher incomes. Perhaps most notable, despite the fact that we consume so much, we spend a tiny amount of our time thinking or planning about how to meet our basic needs of food, clothing and shelter; our lives are spent searching for satisfaction at "higher" levels. Having realized this, what should be my response?

Meanwhile, many of our neighbors here in East Timor are struggling with their few resources to make sure they

Our jacked-up, four-wheel-drive, power wagon gives us comfortable, fast, easy access to nearly every road in East Timor, a privilege completely out of reach of most of the people living on those roads.

won't be hungry in the next few months. We claim many of these neighbors as our friends, as they do us, and certainly we get along well together. But what does a friendship mean if the wealth and consumption levels of one side are so much higher than the other; when the items one side consumes are completely inaccessible to the other?

More concretely, should we expect that our neighbors treat us as equals, with respect and kindness? Should we expect that they have no envy of us, or eyes for the things we consume? And, if we decide to "share" some of our wealth with them, how much and in what manner should we give?

Experiencing the collision of these two consumer groups here in East Timor leads one to wonder how things got to be the way they are today. The dark history of colonialism over the last five or six hundred years played a large part in setting up the current inequality. In addition, the fascinating (and sometimes questionable) book "*Guns, Germs and Steel*" (Jared Diamond, Vintage, London, 1997) makes an unquestionable point that, from the dawn of human existence, various geographic locations offered their inhabitants very different resources with which to live. Considering both these realities, it is hard to believe one other explanation, still widespread among the less informed, that certain groups of people get to consume more because they're smarter.

More pertinent still are the questions of how current consumption across the globe is interrelated, what is a "fair share" of consumption and who is taking more than their share. An elementary method for calculating a "fair share" is to divide up what is available among the current population. Thus global food production is divided by population, the global energy available is divided by population, etc. Though simplistic, this method is hard to argue against — who can make a case for themselves to get more than this "fair share?"[7]

And yet, as we have seen, plenty of people (including most readers and the writer of this newsletter), are taking more than their "share," while others are not getting "enough." This is particularly discouraging when is it found that the "fair share" is more than "enough." Our planet can currently provide the necessary physical elements of a quality life to each of its inhabitants, and probably will be able to indefinitely, in that the earth's population is expected to plateau within 50 years. These estimates are generally agreed upon by The Institute for Food and Development (FoodFirst), the Institute for Health and Social Justice, the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN Development Program, the UN Research Institute for Social Development, as well as physicists Morrison and Tsipis.

Hello Mister, which takes its name from the common East-Timorese greeting to a random foreigner, is the largest shop in Dili with imported consumer goods. Many foreigners we know have never entered the Dili's markets, and consume primarily Australian products from this shop. Most East Timorese we know can afford very little in this Australian-owned shop.

"Development" then, to answer perhaps the slipperiest of the questions from my last newsletter, may perhaps be defined in terms of consumption as: 'increasing avenues for people to get access to and control over their "fair share" of consumption, with priorities toward those kinds of consumption and that directly improve the quality of life.'[8] This is clearly not possible for many if we in the rich world are using more than our "share." It just may be plausible that the technology of the future could enable the earth to produce arbitrarily high levels of energy, food, and other important stuff, but at any given time (right now, for example) the pie is finite, and we, the members of the rich world, are hogging the trough.

The book "*World Hunger, Twelve*

[7] Anyone wishing to make arguments about families from third-world nations littering the planet with people while lacking sufficient land to support themselves will first need to usher all fair-skinned peoples back to Europe to stay and earn their livelihood solely from the land therein. Arguments for lazy people getting less also fail when the world is actually observed — both Studds Terkel and I have seen that many of the people who work the hardest get the least compensation for their work.

[8] Development, as Jan Black points out so well in "*Development in Theory and Practice*," (Westview Press, 1999), is a user-defined term. In future newsletters, I hope to write more about organizations "doing development" in East Timor.

Myths" by Frances Moore Lappe and FoodFirst (Grove Press, New York, 1998) points out in the opening chapter that guilt and fear are unproductive, sometimes destructive, responses to the grim situation of hunger and inequality in the world. The book offers information on the roots and structure of hunger, and outlines paths to change. Like the authors of "*Reason Enough to Hope*," Moore Lappe and her colleagues are confident that the world *can* make a transition to more just consumption patterns, if the rich world is truly interested in this outcome.

As for Silverio, I feel sure the last thing he is looking for from us in the rich world is pity or guilt. He is, however, looking for a bigger piece of the pie. I have spoken with him at length about what priorities he has for the development of Bukoli.

Silverio wants better production from the fields of Bukoli. He knows there are better agriculture techniques available, most of which involve investment of energy and materials, and he wants to begin employing them in Bukoli as soon as possible. Silverio wants better education in Bukoli. He currently leads literacy groups, youth groups, and agriculture groups, all of which are taking

They're smiling, but they want more. Three of Silverio's kids. From left: Romana, Tivorcia, and Evangelina.

advantage of what knowledge already exists in the community and spreading it to everyone. At the same time, he wants community computers with which to gain access to global information, language courses in order to collect information in other languages, and connections with foreign institutions, which have knowledge and experience that could be of use in Bukoli. Silverio wants better access to medicine. He thinks the expensive half-hour ride to Baukau should not be necessary to get common medicines and talk to a medical professional. Silverio wants better facilities for community activities in Bukoli. A large community center is planned and widely desired, but cash for materials is yet to be found.

Silverio sees that the community of Bukoli is not getting its "fair share." He knows the reasons for this are political, historical and geographical, and that it has nothing to do with the desires or capacities of the people of Bukoli. The people in Bukoli are, and have always been, doing their best to seek a better "quality" of life. He sees that we in the US have access to resources unfathomable to most Bukoli residents, and knows that this is also due to political, historical and geographical reasons.

Silverio contemplating life in Bukoli

I think Silverio is right and I'm working to help him get what he's looking for.

It is easy to let our income determine our level of consumption. Those with very small incomes can all tell us that this is not an ideal arrangement. Those of us with plenty have the freedom to think about our consumption levels from a philosophical, hypothetical perspective. Things might be different, however, if we had to face the residents of Bukoli each day before starting our regimen of consumption, and explain to them why we are justified. I think we're not, and as I work with Silverio to increase his consumption I'm beginning to reduce my own. ❑

Florentina, Romana, and her friend, look through the smoke as they boil coconut milk to extract the oil.

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Author:	Gabrielson, Curt
Title:	ICWA Letters - South Asia
ISSN:	1083-4257
Imprint:	Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type:	Serial
Language:	English
Frequency:	Monthly
Other Regions:	East Asia; The Americas; Europe/Russia; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters **(ISSN 1083-4257)** are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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