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# ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

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## Sugar

DURBAN, South Africa

July 1996

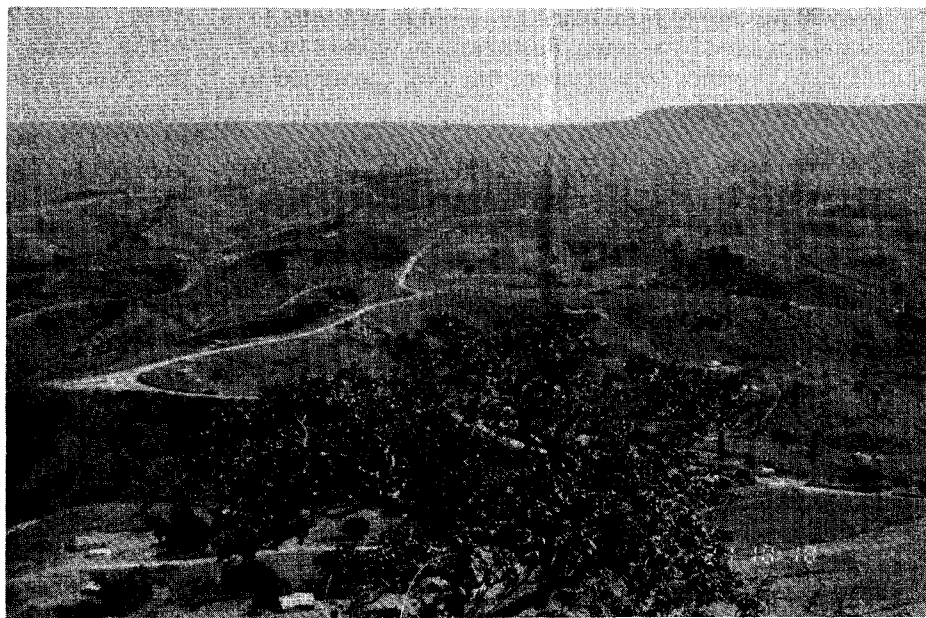
By Sharon F. Griffin

Sugar cane is to KwaZulu-Natal what tobacco and pig farming are to my home state of North Carolina. Everything! It is the largest single industry in this province. Drive north, south or west of Durban and you'll see stalks growing on hills and in valleys. From a distance, the cane looks like waving grass — soft, inviting — the kind in which children love to roll and play.

There are 50,000 sugar cane growers in KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga. The majority (47,000) are small cane farmers,<sup>1</sup> and 70 percent of them are African women. Small-scale growers account for 10 to 15 percent of the country's total cane crop. The bulk of sugar cane production comes from private commercial farmers and about 20 percent comes from estates operated by sugar mills.

Sugar cane, or the sweet grass scientifically known as *saccharum officinarum*, is not indigenous to KwaZulu-Natal, although Africans have used it for domestic purposes since the 17th century. Edmund Morewood was the first British settler to plant sugar cane. He cultivated a small field on the North Coast in 1849. By the 1850s, the small British settler population in the Colony of Natal recognized that sugar cane grew well in the rich coastal belt and presented more economic possibilities than any other crop.<sup>2</sup>

The Zulu people, however, were neither willing nor interested in helping British



*The hills and valleys of KwaZulu-Natal are covered with sugar cane.*

1. The sugar industry classifies small growers as those producing up to 3,600 tons of cane per year. The number of small cane growers has increased dramatically, from 3,000 in 1973 to 38,000 in 1991 to 47,000 today. Production of sugar cane by small growers has increased from 350,000 tons in 1973/74 to well in excess of 1.5 million tons per season.

2. Freund, Bill. *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban 1910-1990*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995:4.

*The Umvoti River valley. On the right are private commercial fields in which the late Cecilia Khuswayo once labored. Khuswayo lived on the left side of the river. In the early 1980s, she decided to plant a small field of cane in her area. Her decision inspired thousands of rural women to follow her lead.*



capitalists cultivate sugar cane. So the British settlers found cheap labor outside of South Africa. They imported slightly more than 15,000 indentured laborers from India between 1860 and 1911.

Over time, Indian laborers abandoned the sugar fields of KwaZulu-Natal for the prospect of better wages in the city. This meant that by the 1960s the sugar industry became dependent on the hired labor of local African workers, particularly women. Rural African women became the primary source of labor for the sugar industry because the men took jobs in urban centers and in the mines of Johannesburg. Today, more than 50 percent of rural black households in South Africa are headed by women. Furthermore, women in rural areas produce 60 percent of the food consumed in rural households.

In the early 1980s, a Zulu woman, the late Cecilia Khuswayo, made a decision that rippled far beyond her rural community. Instead of working as a laborer for a big commercial farmer, Khuswayo planted her own small field of cane. Soon thereafter, thousands of Zulu women followed her lead, and this continues even till today.

It might sound impressive that black women dominate KwaZulu-Natal's largest industry. But it's a bitter-sweet reality. The average small-scale farmer earns between \$418 and \$571 per year. This is considerably less than the per-capita income of \$2,670 for all South Africans. There's a big difference in earning among the many races in South Africa. For example, 48 percent of African men earn between \$116 and \$232 per month, while 68 percent of white men earn between \$1,860 and \$3,488 per month. The World Bank, in its 1994 report, "Reducing Poverty in South Africa," found that 51 per-

cent of the annual income goes to the richest 10 percent of households. Less than four percent goes to the poorest 40 percent.

People who trade on the streets and others who are involved in micro-enterprises earn more on average than small-scale cane growers. A study by Natal University, Durban, found that nearly 60 percent of the informal-sector entrepreneurs in the Durban area earn more than \$116 per month.<sup>3</sup> "Why grow sugar cane and be hungry?" said Patrick Sokhela, deputy director of development for the South Africa Cane Grower's Association. "The industry must not perpetuate poverty."

The South Africa Cane Grower's Association (SACGA) represents all independent cane growers. Individual growers are not direct members of the association, but are members of grower groups that constitute the member organizations of SACGA. As the association's liaison officer, Sokhela is charged with looking after the agricultural needs of small cane growers. He is also the fundraising chairman of the Small Grower Development Trust, an initiative launched four years ago to uplift rural cane farmers.

My first meeting with Sokhela took place in his 13th-floor office, which overlooks the Durban harbor. He is 38, married with four children, and he himself is a small cane grower. His farm is located north of Durban in the town of Stanger. He cultivates about 60 hectares of cane.

The Small Grower Development Trust grew out of a recognition that small growers face five essential needs, namely: farmers lack the knowledge to grow crops; they lack basic training; they lack representation in the industry; they lack access to capital and to certain

3. The study surveyed 645 businesses in the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, as well as in small towns and rural areas.

services, such as agricultural extension services; and lastly, they need a coordinated means by which to communicate. Communication is difficult among 47,000 small-scale growers, the majority of whom are illiterate. Further, the bureaucratic system of the sugar industry is about as complicated as DNA.

The trust has taken several steps to deal with these needs. Since its inception, more than 1,200 small cane growers have received training in planting, fertilizing, weeding, irrigating, harvesting, tractor care and repair, and business management.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, SACGA has also restructured itself to recognize and integrate all independent cane growers. Prior to 1990, the sugar industry was as segregated as South Africa. Black, white and Indian cane growers had their own associations, each association independent of the other.

Access to capital remains a problem, for multiple reasons. First, 43 percent of KwaZulu-Natal falls within the jurisdiction of tribal authorities. This means that the land is communally occupied and controlled. Users of communally-occupied land do not hold title to the property they occupy. Therefore, they are unable to use their land as collateral to raise a mortgage or other loans. This also means that lenders cannot hold title to communally-occupied land, a situation they generally find unacceptable.

Second, until three years ago Zulu women were considered minors by law. A woman farmer needed a husband, father or brother to secure a loan on her behalf. This only served to exacerbate her problems. Polygamy remains a common practice among rural Zulus. In the past, there have been cases where a husband split the money among his wives, regardless of whether all culti-

vated cane or not. In other instances, husbands kept the money for themselves.

The sugar industry dealt with impediments such as these by devising a program to assist small cane growers financially. In 1973, the South African Sugar Association, a non-governing body of the country's sugar industry, launched the Small Growers' Financial Aid Fund. The fund has made more than 50,000 loans totaling more than U.S.\$32.5 million to small cane growers. The cane is used as security and loans are repaid after the cane is cut.

Since the Government of National Unity took control in 1994, further inroads have been made into the economic sphere of the sugar industry, especially with regard to the small cane grower. In reaction to new policy directions and priorities, sugar mills began subdividing and selling land to small-scale black farmers in response to calls for land reform. It is expected that within five years, black small cane growers will own up to 40 percent of sugar-producing land.

Recently, the South African Sugar Association signed a government contract that allocated more than \$2.7 million to communities that rely on small-scale growers. The funds are earmarked for infrastructure improvements, including water and sanitation facilities and environmental projects, for example, stemming soil erosion.

My second meeting with Sokhela took place when we toured sugar cane fields between Durban and Stanger. During the daylong trip, we talked about a wide range of issues, particularly problems unique to small cane farmers and the mass migration of ru-



*About 30 tons of sugar cane are loaded onto a truck for transport to a local mill. At one time, KwaZulu-Natal was home to 64 sugar mills. Today, there are 16 mills in the whole of South Africa.*

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4. The main source of funding for the startup of the Trust was a grant of U.S.\$1 million from the sugar industry.



*Victoria Khuswayo, left,  
and Patrick Sokhela, right.*



ral people to cities.

The Durban metropolitan area draws rural people from all corners of KwaZulu-Natal like a magnet. Most flock to the city with little more than the clothes on their backs in search of jobs and a better life — the same reason Mexicans illegally cross the border into the U.S. or Chinese people cram into less-than-seaworthy ships to sail to America's Pacific shores.

If more attention were paid to rural development, Sokhela believes people would remain in their communities. But this is not the case. A lot of lip service is paid to rural development, yet little has happened. The smallest towns in rural South Africa remain out-of-sight and out-of-mind, characterized by poor roads, limited water resources, no electricity, and inadequate schools, housing and health services.

Of the 47,000 small cane growers, only 15,000 rely on cane as their sole source of income. Those who are close to Durban tend to work in the city to supplement their meager farming income. Many women farmers take jobs as maids. And, ironically, some of the homes in which they work are located in upmarket housing developments where sugar cane fields once existed. A new development called the Mt. Edgecombe Country Club, for example, is located on the site of the former Mt. Edgecombe sugar mill, which closed more than a year ago. It was sold by its owner, Tongaat-Hulett Sugar Ltd., one of the top sugar-producing companies in the country. The problem with taking jobs as maids is that farms are left unattended until weekends and

holidays. This often results in improperly fertilized land and poor crop yields.

The good news is the prediction that the 1996/97 crop is expected to top 2.4 million tons of sugar. I say good news because prior to 1996, four consecutive years of drought crippled small cane growers. The industry expects the bumper crop to inject more than \$800 million into the country's economy, and push export earnings to between \$197 million and \$209 million. Moreover, the U.S. government has increased South Africa's sugar import quota by 11.8 percent for the 1995/1996 season, thus effectively generating an extra \$12 million for the South Africa Sugar Association to buy land and provide training for small-scale growers.<sup>5</sup>

From my discussion with Sokhela, I discovered that there are two ways to effectively improve the plight of small cane growers. First, the sugar industry should not financially or technically support small cane growers who do not earn above a certain income. Second, small cane growers must diversify to survive. Their farming should include growing fruit and vegetables. This would force subsistence farmers to form groups. Instead of one family farming a few acres and another farming a few more, they'd pool their resources and cultivate a large piece of land. At present, the average small grower cultivates about four acres in the Durban metropolitan area, while farther away on the North Coast the average is about 10 acres. Industry-wide, small farmers cultivate an average of six acres.<sup>6</sup>

The problems that small cane growers face today are

5.The season ends September 30, 1996. The quota for the 1995/1996 season started at 31,176 tons, but the increase raises the quota to 51,277.

6.U.S.\$116 is the industry average for startup costs. The amount covers the cost of seeds, chemicals and plowing the land. Sugar cane then takes anywhere from 12 to 18 months to grow, depending on whether the sweet grass is planted in coastal areas or in the midlands of KwaZulu-Natal.

no different than those endured by Cecilia Khuswayo, who despite limited technical skills and a drought in 1981, proved to be a successful small cane grower in the Umvoti River valley north of Durban. She recruited many women to the small cane-growing industry and together they pooled their resources to build a community hall and school. Their effort demonstrated that there's a social benefit to growing sugar cane, despite the meager income it produces. The community hall is a child-care center by day and, by night, a vocational training center for adults. The school, which is built on a hilltop, accommodates more than 300 pupils in grades one to seven.

One of the women Cecilia Khuswayo recruited was her daughter-in-law, Victoria Khuswayo, whose interest in uplifting the community is as keen as that of her late mother-in-law. Farmers in the area are now raising funds to build a medical clinic and a child-care center separate from the community hall. Victoria Khuswayo, like any good fund-raiser, didn't hesitate to make a pitch to me. She said the estimated cost of the medical clinic is \$64,000 of which \$8,500 has already been donated by the U.S. government.

Victoria Khuswayo's cane farm is 13.5 acres, and it falls within the Mansomini Irrigation Project. As the leader of the 63 women and four men farming in the Mansomini area, her job is to make sure that weeding is kept up-to-date, that the correct fertilizer has been applied and that the local mill, Glendale Sugar Ltd, knows what's happening with small farmers.

The Mansomini Irrigation Project includes 460 acres, and it is one of four irrigation projects in the Umvoti River valley. A total of 3,880 small growers cultivate in the valley. To its credit, Mansomini is one of the few areas that has seen the return of men from the cities,

reversing the normal drift from the countryside to urban areas.

Victoria Khuswayo accompanied Sokhela and me on our tour. We passed field after field, and the sweet grass that looked so inviting from a distance took on a different appearance close up. In fact, I now know that a walk through a sugar cane field can be dangerous. The blades on stalks cut like a knife. But I suppose that's the paradox of sugar cane; as small-scale growers know all too well, it's a matter of taking the bitter with the sweet.

### Rural Women at Work

- More than 50 percent of rural households in South Africa are headed by women.
- Women in rural areas produce 60 percent of the food consumed by rural households and contribute about 80 percent of unpaid labor, mainly as unpaid family labor.
- Women in most poor rural African households spend more than four hours a day (28 hours a week) fetching water and firewood.
- About 260,000 women work on commercial farms in South Africa and of those employed in agriculture 43 percent are regular workers and 57 percent are casual laborers who are often paid less than men.

Sources: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit at the University of Cape Town. Land and Agricultural Policy Centre. *Daily News*, "Little Progress yet for Rural Women," 8 Aug. 1996:25.

*Victoria Khuswayo, right, at a meeting at the Glendale sugar mill. Khuswayo is one of 17 trustees of the Small Growers Development Trust. J. W. Mthemba, seated on the left with his hands stretched out on the table, said he started growing sugar cane in 1981. He also plants cash crops, such as cabbage and potatoes, and maintains fruit tree orchards. The income he earns allows him to send his son to university, he said.*





## Institute of Current World Affairs

### Fellows and their Activities

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Christopher P. Ball.** An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**William F. Foote.** Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

**Sharon Griffin.** A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

**John Harris.** A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Pramila Jayapal.** Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

**John B. Robinson.** A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an english teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

**Teresa C. Yates.** A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]



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