

# How I Came to Join the ILO

## Basil Loveridge

My employment with the ILO, was, I suspect, like many others, an accident for which I have been very grateful. In the summer of 1951 I found myself deprived of a promotion which I thought I richly deserved. I still do, but I give thanks daily that I was not. I wrote to Norman Lamming, Co-operative Section, and asked if there was a job in Geneva. He replied that the only post they could offer was a team to be set up in Ceylon to help co-operatives in South-East Asia. We discussed it, but Olive, my wife, felt she could not cope with the tropics and a very new baby.

Will Watkins, Director of the International Co-operative Alliance, passed through Geneva and Lamming discussed my case with him. Watkins knew of my work in London between 1945 and 1947, and the outcome was another letter from Lamming, dated early December 1951, which ended with a sentence saying: "At this stage we do not know what the salary scales will be". Watkins arrived home and talked us into it. Was I the first person approached about a contract with the UN Development Programme?

In early June I was called to the ILO Office in Whitehall to be told that the two-year post in Asia (now transferred to Lahore) had been offered to an English friend of a new member of staff in Geneva, but would I be prepared to go to Ceylon for 16 weeks to do a study of their education programme and make recommendations for the future. I was furious and almost decided to have nothing to do with it. However, it proved by far the better offer. It led to a two-year service in the great co-operative laboratory of Ceylon. In 1955 there were 77 different types of co-operatives in Ceylon and working among them, and with some of the older staff who were very capable and wise, I served a two year apprenticeship which was to prove invaluable in my future work over a total of 25 years' field service. Great co-operative administrators like Calvert and Campbell had served there

and Gunasena de Soyza, the Secretary of External Affairs, had been the first Asian, perhaps the first non-white Director of co-operatives, to serve in Colonial days.

Now we enter the typical phase of waiting. And then the rush. On 10 October 1952 I received a cable saying (in 122 words) please be in Geneva on the 14th. On that day I signed my first contract after arrival at the old ILO headquarters down by the lake. For the only time in my UN career the terms of appointment gave me £100 clothing allowance. I saw no point in buying tropical gear for a 16-week safari and bought an English style blazer and grey flannel trousers. I also took a Yorkshire worsted suit. At that time north of Enfield there were no shops selling tropical gear and the safari suit had not been invented. Joan Smalley was my personnel contact and we remained good friends throughout her life. She always referred to me as one of her "boys". Late in life we were neighbours and I would take her to her clinic appointments in Bournemouth. I also attended her funeral.

I must have left Geneva for Cairo and Bombay on 22 October in an old "steam" plane, an Argonaut or Constellation, the kind of lumbering old plane that you thought might never clear the Alps. A brief stop in Cairo where the waiters were barefooted and wore a dishdash and a fez, and then a nine or ten hour flight to Bombay and the shattering experience of arriving in an Asian city with its steaming heat and the poverty of a city full of refugees from the division of India just four years earlier. I was taken to the Taj Mahal Hotel. It still had its colonial atmosphere with no air conditioning and large windows wide open with giant noisy fans overhead. I can still remember the feeling of utter desolation as I looked down on the vast milling crowds. It was all beyond my experience and, as my work is essentially with the working poor, I began to feel I had bitten off more than I could chew. It wasn't long before I was travelling between Asia and London and feeling completely at home in both places.

The next day I was on a smaller plane bound for Colombo. We stopped in Madras and the young Indian air hostess sat with me as we watched an American leave the plane and be richly garlanded by his local staff. I said that my

turn would come when we reached Colombo, to which she replied, "You conceited man". We stopped in Jaffna and then on to Ratmalana airport near Colombo. Up the steps came an official who asked for Mr. Loveridge and I made my way down the plane past a very embarrassed air hostess.

In the airport lounge I found the UN Resident Representative and the Permanent Secretary for External Affairs. In those early days the Resident Representative came to greet new arrivals and at the airport he had met Gunasena de Soyza, who, learning that a co-operative expert was arriving, had said that he too must meet me as he had formerly been head of co-operatives ... Over the years things changed and I can remember arriving in Iraq at midnight and nobody to meet me and having to find a hotel for the night.

In 15 weeks I travelled extensively and wrote a report in which there were 29 recommendations, mainly about developing an extension service. They already had a residential college. Gunasena de Soyza liked my report and said that I could expect an invitation to return and "eat my own words". After ten months I had heard nothing so I wrote to de Soyza and enquired what had happened. My report had arrived several months before and he had told a messenger to take it to the department. The messenger read the word "labour" on the cover and took it to the Ministry of Labour. They thought it was a courtesy copy and promptly filed it. And then the world went mad.

Geneva offered me a two-year contract in Manila. Ten days later the United Kingdom Foreign Office asked me to go to Gambia for three years and in another ten days Geneva informed me that I was wanted in Ceylon.

They were two good years and I still keep in touch with my two senior counterparts. After four years back in the United Kingdom we "burned our boats" and set off to spend the next 20 years working in Burma, the Philippines, Iraq, Botswana, Indonesia and the West Indies. Did we achieve anything and was it worthwhile?

In Botswana in 1972 the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives wrote to me as follows:

I think you know how much I appreciate the efforts made by all the staff in the co-operative department to build a strong co-operative sector ... I am especially appreciative of the way you have applied yourself since you have arrived in this country. I think your ability to inspire enthusiasm is outstanding and this country is indeed fortunate to have your services.

This was written by a man who had spent 17 years as a colonial officer in Botswana.

The Foreign Office Adviser on Co-operatives said of the large scale project in Indonesia:

I have no doubt that this project is fundamentally on the right lines; it is directly tackling the most important problems in the area of management and is tackling them in the right way. It is obviously accepted by the people with whom it has to deal. It constitutes the basic aid project for co-operatives.

In both Botswana and Jakarta the project manager had left after one year because it was a hopeless task. I redesigned both projects and stayed five years. My service started in 1952 and ended with short-term contracts in 1988. They were often tough years but they were very good years.