

Practice Report: When Life Gives you Apricots

by JOHN STANSFIELD



When Life Gives you Apricots is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

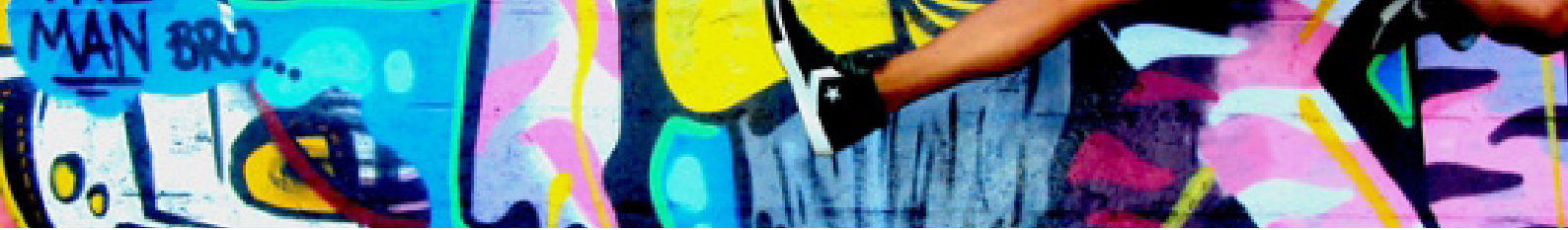
Founded at Unitec Institute of Technology,
Auckland, New Zealand, in 2015



This publication may be cited as:

Stansfield, J. (2016). When life gives you apricots, *Whanake: the Pacific Journal of Community Development*, 2(2), 31-32

ISSN 2423-009X



Aorahi's apricot kernel processor in action, Satoli, Uttarakhand.
Image: John Stansfield

Practice

Practice Report: When Life Gives you Apricots

by JOHN STANSFIELD

The International Association for Community Development (IACD) practice exchange in India this March gave me a whole new take on the saying “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade”, and a good lesson in the ways of an enterprising community to boot! Twenty of us travelled by train and minibus from Delhi as part of a two week travelling community development (CD) learning community. We were hosted by the Pan Himalayan Grassroots Development Foundation (Grassroots) - the lifework of visionary IACD vice president [Anita Paul](#) and her ever smiling husband Kalyan.

[Grassroots](#) is one of many inspiring community initiatives we visited and is justifiably famous for its integrated environmental and economic work. As Kalyan notes, “You cannot protect a forest if the people have no cooking fuel.” The organisation’s brilliant [Sustainable Energy](#) projects have reduced pollution, improved sanitation and soil fertility, improved health through eliminating smoky cooking fires and saved the forests and the labour of harvesting firewood by utilising household-scale biogas plants. The plants are installed and maintained by villagers and plants put in 25 years ago are still performing well.

Another welcome initiative in the chilly climate was the women’s self-help group Mahlia Umang Samiti, famous for their knitted woollens and preserves. Today over 2500 rural women are involved with [Umang](#) in enterprises including beekeeping, spice harvesting and pickle-making alongside the woollens and jams. The group is now an independent producer company and has its own [shop](#).

For sheer enterprise in the face of adversity, however, I was most impressed and encouraged by the story of the humble Wild Himalayan Apricot and what a little ingenuity helped it achieve.

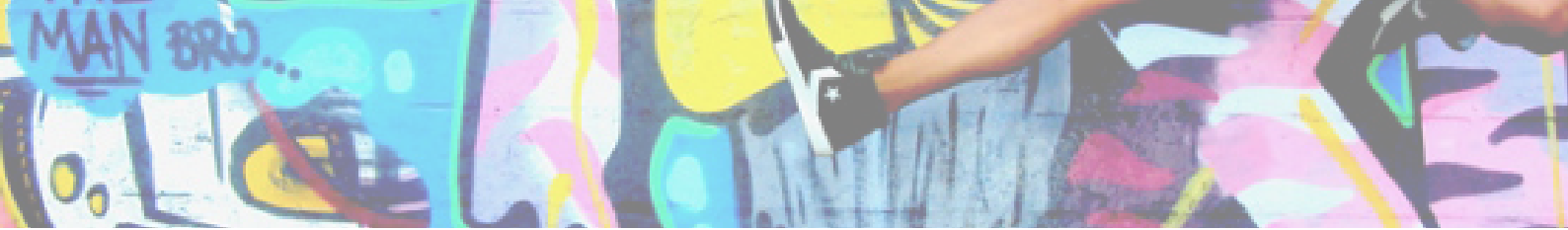
The late Oona Sharma, visionary co-founder of non-profit organisation [Aarohi](#), will be smiling somewhere in the vast Himalayan sky, looking down on the enterprising and resourceful followers who have carried on her brilliant community development work amongst mountain communities.

Life in the mountains is hard. The inspiring and stunning scenery belies an existence of harsh conditions and frugal subsistence. The mountain villagers in Satoli, Uttarakhand, rely on a coarse apricots as a cash crop from which they make jam. When a freak hail storm knocked every single green apricot from the trees despair, although understandable, was simply not an option.

The resourceful Aarohi leadership that built a remarkable hospital and boasts an immunisation rate of 99% in some of the most inaccessible country in the world, rose to the challenge. From the devastating hailstorm a new social enterprise was born: Apricots kernels are dried and then ground and cold-pressed to produce a very high value oil used as the basis for a range of cosmetics which we saw marketed across the region. There is even an [online shop](#).

The villagers now have a factory and ever expanding product list, a distribution network and an insulating safety net to protect the apricots from the next hailstorm. The value of the crop is now almost three times what it was before the hailstorm. Many villagers are now sustainably employed and contributing to their community health centre and school and are able to build a better life for their families and communities – thanks to that freak hailstorm.

Beyond the apricot initiative, the health centre and outreach work of Aarohi were ably explained to us by the affable Dr Paneet, a retired Indian Army surgeon who



regaled us with his stories of resourcefully staffing the hospital with specialist doctors:

“What I do is wait till it is insufferably hot in Dehli and then I phone my old colleagues and complain about how cold it is here. When they have accepted my invitation for a visit I tell them how sad it is for a friend in the village who could really use a specialist like my friend. By the time the visiting doctor arrives there are enough patients for several days of clinic. It is an old ruse and my friends humour me and the villagers get the finest medical services.”

As further noted in its impressive [annual report](#), Aorahi’s work is indeed extensive:

[This is a companion piece. Click here to read the first apricot report by John Stansfield.](#)



The Community Development practice exchange group stops in a village in a valley of the Uttarakhand to learn about the community’s work with the Pan Himalayan Grassroots Development Foundation. Image: John Stansfield

“Our 24-year journey has been one of trials and tribulations, and full of excitement and growth. Today, the organisation employs 112 full-time staff, and is supported by 371 members from all over the world. We actively operate in 141 villages, working with some 65,606 people. Village Satoli, our headquarters, has transformed into a buzzing node of positive grassroots action.”

The integration of community enterprise with healthcare, education, improved livelihoods and environmental protection were strong features of all the CD organisations we visited on the exchange, where we saw sustainable development so clearly expressed we might have been looking at case studies for the [UN Goals](#) for sustainable development.



The Community Development practice exchange group stops in a village of Peora to learn about the community’s work with the Pan Himalayan Grassroots Development Foundation. Image: John Stansfield



JOHN STANSFIELD is a Senior Lecturer in Community Development at Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. He is the chair of Aotearoa Community Development Association, board member Oceania for the International Association for Community Development and a Trustee at Waiheke Resources Trust, Auckland, New Zealand.

Contact jstansfield@unitec.ac.nz