

Retirement not in the plans for coastal engineer: David Willis' volunteer work in Honduras shows how a Canadian program can help older people use their skills -- and benefit the world's less fortunate, Bruce Ward reports.

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Illustration: Colour Photo: Jana Chytilova, The Ottawa Citizen / David Willis said his work abroad was very satisfying, because there's no bureaucracy to deal with and things get done immediately.

David Willis turned 65 yesterday, but retirement is not on his mind. Instead, he's doing some of the most satisfying work of his career by helping others in developing countries.

Mr. Willis is a coastal engineer. He designs harbours and navigation channels that protect the shore by taming waves and tides. His particular expertise is in coastal and estuarine erosion and sedimentation.

About 10 years ago, he became a volunteer adviser with the Canadian Executive Service Organization. CESO sends skilled Canadians abroad to provide technical assistance in developing countries. It is funded mainly by the Canadian International Development Agency

"You know how CUSO sends university students out? Well, CESO sends old retired guys and girls out," joked Mr. Willis.

In Honduras last year, Mr. Willis came up with a way to re-channel the river away from the eroding riverbank in the village of Chapagua, saving homes and buildings threatened by flooding.

A meandering river runs back and forth in the sediment like a snake, he said.

"Meandering rivers always erode on the outside of the bend and fill up on the inside of the bend, so that the bends tend to get sharper and sharper. It's a sediment thing," he explained.

"The easy way out of that, if you can get the land, is to just cut across a bend in the meander -- just cut a new channel and let it go. That's what happened in Chapagua.

"I was there to help a couple of other people reinforce dikes, but they asked me to look at this problem on the side. In Chapagua, they were already losing buildings, and were just about to lose the road.

"The people got Honduras public works to come in and cut them a new channel 250 metres long, just

cutting off the entire meander."

He also worked designing dikes on two rivers in Honduras, and wrote an engineering feasibility study of flood and erosion prevention on the Maniqui River in San Borja, Bolivia.

"It seems it's always poor people that are squatting on the flood plain, and then they get flooded. In Honduras especially, their crops gets flooded."

Mr. Willis' volunteer work highlights CIDA's International Development Week, Feb. 4-Feb. 10., which aims to increase awareness of the role hundreds of Canadians play in international development.

Mr. Willis went into business for himself in 1985, leaving his job as coastal engineer in the federal government. He set up a computer modelling company in the former master bedroom of his Vanier residence.

"I worked at the National Research Council hydraulic laboratory on Montreal Road for 21 years, building models of harbours and beaches, and trying schemes to prevent coastal erosion.

"The physical models were made of concrete. In the Mulroney days, we did a lot of work in Newfoundland, one harbour after another. I don't know if any of these were actually constructed, but we sure saw a lot of fisherman on junkets in Ottawa to see a model of their harbour."

The volunteer work he does overseas is far more pleasing, he said.

"It's very satisfying for two reasons. One, there no bureaucracy. You're always dealing with somebody who may have to deal with bureaucracy, but they're really keen to find out what you have to say. In Chapagua and Tocoa, the things got constructed and they got constructed right away.

"That hardly ever happens in the NRC hydraulic lab.

You write the report and that's the last you hear of it. Compared to the average government coastal employee, it's really wonderful working with CESO.

The toughest problem he faced in Honduras was the language barrier.

"We had to find the only English speaker in the village."

He spent about 35 days in Honduras, working long days and weekends to finish his contributions.

After he left, public works used bulldozers to cut the new channel. It took about a week to complete the job.

"You've got to give the river a new way to flow. You cut a small channel and the river does the rest."

CESO has offices in several emerging countries, he said.

"They sort of act as sales people for us. People in Honduras are talking about bringing me back to do a few more rivers, but I haven't heard yet."

Would he go?

"Oh, sure," he said.

Those two words speak volumes about CESO's work.