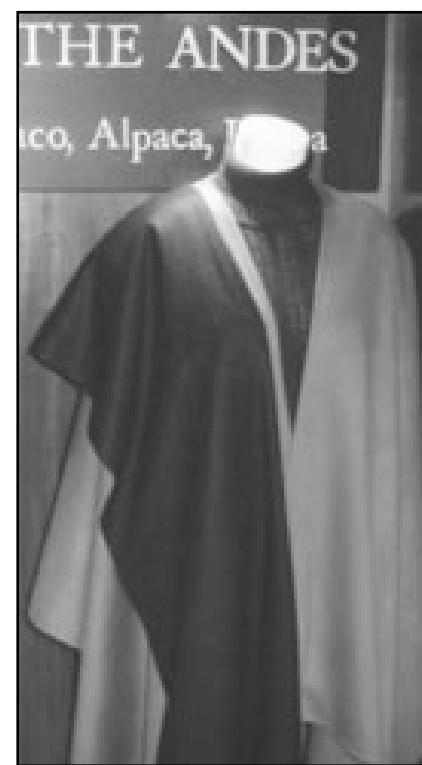


PHOTOS: LOGAN MULLER



PEASANT FARMER: A cash society has meant an 85% decrease in real wages.



PROFIT MARGIN: The garment sells for \$1300 but the farmer gets \$3.

New Zealand aid project is linking Peruvian peasants to the world

by Edward Gay

With one in 5000 people having access to a telephone, Logan Muller's task of connecting Peruvian peasant farming communities with each other and the outside world, via the internet, may seem impossible.

But believe it or not, it is happening.

As the manager for the Latin projects Centre of Information Technology Research at Unitec, Muller left for Peru in late July to continue his two-year networking project.

The township of Antabamba in the Apurimac region is 17,000 feet above sea level with annual temperatures ranging between 20 and 30 degrees celsius.

Until 15 years ago it was largely isolated.

"These people had a barter economy and before the increase in demand for Alpaca wool they were pretty much cut off," says Muller.

"A phone call costs a month's wages and the nearest airport is an 18-hour bus trip away."

A world-wide increase in demand for Alpaca wool brought regular buyers to the region and improved road access.

Coupled with the arrival of television, the area saw a surge of new products become available.

However, the outside suppliers were not interested in bartering and as a consequence a cash economy was established.

"This cash society saw an 85% decrease in real wages for people living on less than \$1 a day," says Muller.

But he is affecting change.

Three years ago, the Peruvian embassy in New Zealand asked him to help educate peasant farmers.

With funding from a New Zealand government aid agency, Muller was able to connect Antabamba with the world via the internet.

Muller says the internet allows villagers to access education programmes they see as relevant to their needs and environment, which is an integral part of the project.

"It's important that the recipients decide the content of their education — not the providers," he says.

Muller is now continuing the process with other remote villages.

"We're putting in the links which will allow the villagers to communicate what they need," says Muller.

These needs include business and agricultural education packages as well as sourcing new markets for their produce of high quality Alpaca wool, which provides a living for 90% of the population.

"From a garment that retailed in the US for \$1300 — the Peruvian producer and farmer would receive only \$3."

Adding to the economic hardships is the harsh weather that has hit the region recently.

Heavy snows forced the government to declare a state of emergency in early July.

Throughout July the temperature hovered around the minus 15 degree mark.

This caused an unknown num-

"It's important that the recipients decide the content of their education — not the providers."

ber of stock losses.

But since August, the weather has improved and medicines for the animals and people of the region has been moved in — mostly on horseback.

"The request from the people has been clear. They wanted medicines for their animals. They're putting the animals before themselves," says Muller.

New access roads have been built by foreign-owned gold mining companies.

But Muller says gold mines are creating huge problems in the area.

"These companies are pulling millions of dollars worth of 18

carat gold out of the mountains and in the meantime the local birthing clinic has a broken toilet and a cold shower," he says.

Muller says the mining companies are investing little back into the local community.

"The midwife at the local birthing clinic has to walk between three and 18 hours to service all the communities she's in charge of.

"Why can't the mining company donate her an old truck?"

The mining companies are also responsible for dumping chemicals into the Antabamba river, which is up-stream from three communities' water supply, says Muller.

"Why are they doing it if it's not sustainable?"

"They're not allowed to do it in their own countries but all they see are financial goals. Not social goals."

Muller sees citizens of western countries as partly responsible.

"We don't have any idea in the West.

"We can't see a link between the gold watch and responsible gold mining.

"I'd like to see consumers in the West take some responsibility [for what they're buying]."



LIVING ROUGH: "People survive on less than \$1 a day."



NEW SKILLS: Children in the isolated town of Antabamba are taught via the internet.