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## **Introduction**

In 2009, the number of starving people throughout the world reached a historic peak of 1.02 billion (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010). Statistics like this gives rise to organizations such as ECHO (Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization), who seeks to combat world hunger by educating the underprivileged so that they can effectively provide for themselves. This non-profit Christian organization exists to equip people with agricultural resources and skills to reduce hunger and improve the life of the impoverished. ECHO assists a global network of development workers and missionaries by providing seeds, information, training and ideas for combating world hunger in environmentally sustainable ways. Their main focus is to help those working internationally with poor communities to be more efficient, particularly in the area of agriculture.

## **History of ECHO**

In the early 1970's, Indiana businessman Richard Dugger took a group of college students on a mission trip to Haiti. There they saw drastic poverty of an underdeveloped country. Dugger and others made a personal commitment to help the poor people of Haiti. To help meet the needs they had seen in Haiti, they decided to dedicate their time and resources to this cause. In 1973, ECHO (Educational Concerns for Haiti Organization) was born. One of the first steps they took as an organization was getting agricultural interns to spend time in Haiti to learn, do researchers, and go back and implement some changes. Their main goal was to bring good nutrition to that population. According ECHO's Public Relations & Communications Manager Danielle Flood, ECHO started off with five acres of rented land in North Fort Myers, with only one staff member and two volunteers (personal correspondence, November 18, 2011).

ECHO worked in various projects in Haiti and about seven years later they involved one of their advisors full time, Dr. Martin Price Former Executive Director; he moved to their facility in North Fort Myers and started experimenting with agricultural. Dr. Price suggested their agricultural methods be used and shared around the world. All of ECHO's resources were redirected towards strengthening the work of other organizations, and the work in Haiti was consequently closed. In 1981, ECHO officially changed their name to Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization. Under Dr. Price's direction, the organization became a channel for sharing their resources, such as: ideas, information, books, agricultural methods and techniques, seeds and plants, solutions, anything that can help reduce world hunger.

Thirty years later, ECHO has more than 50 acres of land, a growing staff with over 35 members, hundreds of volunteers, and the organization has efficiently helped communities in 180 countries and provided services to 4,400 organizations and individuals throughout the world. Today, ECHO is a leader in small-scale agricultural training for missionaries and volunteers, and the development working in international settings (ECHO – History, n.d.).

### **Main Objectives**

ECHO's primary core value is "being committed to helping those who help the poor" (ECHO Website – Core Values). Since its inception, ECHO has been continuously working towards improving the lives of the hungry worldwide. The overall objective of the organization involves providing useful, imperative information to international development workers to increase their abilities in assisting poor farmers. They also equip the workers with the skills and resources necessary to teach the impoverished farmers how to efficiently provide for themselves.

To meet the primary objective of the organization, ECHO focuses on acquiring ingenious knowledge of a region or climate, and sharing it with others. The term indigenous knowledge

refers to the information base for a society, it is a valuable commodity used for local level decision making in agriculture, health care, education, natural-resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities (Warren, 1991; Flavier et al. 1995). ECHO collaborates with other hunger-fighting organizations, as well as some of the best universities in the United States, such as Iowa State University, Michigan State University and The University of Illinois. These universities and organizations help ECHO research and assemble a database of significant information about these struggling rural communities for others to study. With these valuable partnerships, ECHO is able to serve the poor more effectively than it can alone.

An effective approach that ECHO uses to reach the large number of people in these struggling communities is by providing important information on their website gathered from workers in the field. ECHO is confident that this information will be able to make a significant impact when others with the same vision as ECHO are able to view this material, providing them with the resources to help make a difference in impoverished nations worldwide. A major benefit that results from teaching these people how to farm more efficiently is the better development of their youth. With improved nourishment in the first part of a child's life, there is an increased chance for the brain to develop in a healthier state, thus allowing a higher chance of learning and understanding the abilities needed to provide for themselves in the future.

In spite of the fact that ECHO does not consider themselves to be competitive, this not-for-profit organization possesses a great deal of unique qualities that set them apart from others. The primary focus is on providing high quality information in a timely manner. Based on their work from the past three decades, ECHO has gained a global knowledge in agriculture, and is able to provide this pertinent information supported by critical field research and experimentation. ECHO uses their innovative methods and techniques to help meet the different

needs of each culture by actually traveling to these destinations and living among the impoverished. They go to these places in order to study the environment, the climate, weather patterns, as well as the types of soil used for growing crops (D. Flood, personal communication, November 18, 2011). There is an abundance of research and experimentation that must take place before ECHO is truly qualified to make the most efficient suggestion on how to improve the lives of these cultures.

One thing that sets ECHO apart from other organizations is their understanding that there is wealth of agricultural knowledge among the poor farmers they seek to assist. As such, ECHO does not "teach" people how to farm, instead they work with the farmers to help them understand how to be more effective at growing food producing crops. ECHO's vision is to "honor God through sustainable hunger solutions" (ECHO Website – Core Values). A specific way they work to achieve this vision is by providing rare, non-indigenous seeds from their unique seed bank that are able to produce even in the harshest of conditions. ECHO seeks to assist the struggling farmers by providing agricultural training, education, and networking opportunities to missionaries, indigenous church leaders, nurses, doctors, and various other development personnel determined in order to reduce famine and improve lives (ECHO Website – Innovative Options/History).

### **Main Initiatives**

Collier and Evans define social sustainability as “an organization's commitment to maintain healthy communities and society that improve the quality of life” (2011). In compliance with this definition, ECHO is dedicated to combating world hunger and improving the lives of the people living in harsh impoverished conditions . They strive towards this goal through a couple of initiatives. For example, ECHO utilizes various networking opportunities, such as training programs, workshops, as well as regional and international conferences in order to educate internal and external workers, recruit prospective workers, and to increase awareness of the organization (D. Flood, personal communication, November 18, 2011). Additionally, in order to help the small farmer, ECHO operates regional impact centers in regions where there is a need for agricultural improvement on a small farmer scale (D. Flood, personal communication, November 18, 2011).

According to their company website, ECHO operates a program in which they “send free, trial packets of seed to international development workers, community leaders and missionaries” (ECHO – Innovative Options). In order to provide high quality information to those who work with agricultural development and those who work internationally with the poor, ECHO issue a variety of publications, such as ECHO Technical Notes, Plant Information Sheets, and a central publication entitled ECHO Development Notes (EDN).

ECHO Development Notes are comprised of “the most helpful, practical information that we come across about growing food under difficult circumstances” and are distributed quarterly “to thousands of people in over 160 countries” (ECHO - Agricultural Resources:: ECHO Development Notes). As a distinctive and intricate initiative, this publication requires a

comprehensive amount of research and a variety of experimentations in order to accomplish ECHO's socially sustainable objectives.

ECHO's primary focus is on researching both agricultural techniques and sustainably appropriate technology. According to Danielle Flood, the basis for the research can stem from a variety of circumstances, such as nutritional deficiencies, unmanageable weather conditions, poor soil quality, or other problems. If an area or community, such as Southeast Asia or parts of Africa, is facing hunger-related issues, it is essential to identify the problem and study the culture and the environmental patterns (personal communication, November 18, 2011). This can be done directly by sending trained ECHO interns or through correspondence with other developmental workers. In an attempt to resolve the issues, ECHO develops holistic solution that supports both the community and their environment. Once data has been collected and analyzed, ECHO can formulate a solution that best fits the ailing community through a myriad of experimentations, such as introducing innovative and nutritious plants or testing out the most viable farming solutions (D. Flood, personal communication, November 18, 2011).

ECHO also strives towards heavily researching unique seeds and plants in an attempt to discover any unknown nutritional values. Viable seeds are methodologically tested in different farming conditions in order to determine its adaptability and responsiveness to different techniques. Research topics can also be derived from existing studies taking place in universities around the country. Due to the ECHO headquarters' desirable climate, Danielle Flood also cited many occasions in which universities collaborate with the organization by having ECHO workers and interns conduct experimental procedures on their behalf.

Once experiments have yielded relevant results and sufficient research has been gathered, the data is transformed into information that ready to be published in the ECHO Development

Notes bulletin. The ECHO website is then used as a file repository for archived EDN in order to connect the development workers with resources that help them. This allows them to be able to quickly find information that is pertinent to their work, share it, and get the resources that they need in a timely manner.

### **Analysis of Social Sustainability**

As previously stated, their objective is to improve the quality of life of those that live in developing countries where nutritional scarcity exists. In order to achieve this objective in an industry full of competitors, ECHO places strategic emphasis on being a uniquely equipped and highly credible organization. In comparison to their competitors, ECHO differentiates themselves from other non-profit organizations that strive towards ending world hunger by taking a more holistic approach to solving the problem. Their information, the way they gather it, what they do with it is what sets them apart from other non-profit organizations.

### References

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