

A signing ceremony with local community members



# The Mita'i Foundation

ONE WOMAN AIMS TO  
AID A NATION

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**W**HILE Paraguay is one of the world's leading producers of soybeans and cotton, the nation's heavy reliance on agriculture and its susceptibility to volatile weather and global commodity prices renders its national economic development precarious from year to year.

Dr. Yoko Fujikake, a professor at the Graduate School of Urban Innovation at Yokohama National University, first visited Paraguay as a volunteer with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 1993. Discovering a bond with the socially restricted women she met there, she felt the need to continue her work after the end of her dispatch period in 1995.

Upon returning to Japan, Fujikake established the Mita'i Mitakuñi (hereafter Mita'i) Foundation, which aimed to support the inhabitants of Paraguay's rural areas. Taking its name from the words for 'boy' and 'girl' in the language of Paraguay's indigenous Guarani people, the foundation has now constructed new schools and a health center as well as conducted classes for cooking and nutritional education that benefit entire communities.

In one of her early classes, Fujikake taught the local women how to bake cake - something they had never done before. The recipe they used needed no eggs, and they made do with what was on hand. Improving women's situation, Fujikake discovered, wasn't necessarily a matter of providing resources, but about realizing they could change their lives with what they had. "Each small success leads to confidence," she says.

Now, garnering support from local NGOs and receiving dozens of proposals from Paraguayan municipalities and local people through the the post and e-mail each year, Fujikake and the Mita'i Foundation show no signs of slowing down. The organization is currently building its fifth school in the village of Santo Domingo in Paraguay's Coaguazu Department and is also planning to add a small library.

But it wasn't always so easy. More than a century of conflict and military dictatorship took its toll on this central South American nation, with Fujikake noting that at some points Paraguay was populated by as many as five women to every man. This scarcity of men contributed to an enhanced sense of male importance and an even lower position for women in an already conservative society.

Many women who participated in Fujikake's early projects were met by opposition, and even violence, from the men in their communities. With no precedent for women traveling the red dirt roads and running errands outside of their villages, women attending Fujikake's workshops were suspected of calling on lovers in neighboring towns.

Throughout, Fujikake acted as mediator and sounding board, doing so entirely on her own until 2004. As communities grew accustomed to these new



Above: Paraguayan village women selling their fresh produce at an open-air market in the early morning  
Left: Preparing tomatoes for processing in Paraguay

undertakings, women acquired skills such as knitting and jam-making, and were able to instruct their children in effective practices for personal hygiene. "These activities might seem simple or uncontroversial to people here in Japan," Fujikake observes. "But most of the women I worked with had never been exposed to the idea that they had the agency to shape their own lives."

Some women who collaborated with Fujikake were eventually able to begin selling fresh vegetables or hand-made processed foods in open-air markets, gaining more confidence and independence through these new means of self-sufficiency.

Prior to 2004, Fujikake had been administering aid on a truly micro scale, offering assistance to one small group or even one person at a time,

traveling to Paraguay annually both as an expert in international cooperation and at her own expense. When a child she had intended to help died during her time away, she realized that bringing help to these rural communities was a greater goal than she could ever achieve on her own. She sought out cooperation from Paraguayan NGOs, JICA volunteers and local agricultural leaders, developing the cooperative network that defines the Mita'i Foundation today.

Fujikake also delights in the changes she sees among the men in these communities. "Several husbands and sons have taken on tasks like preparing breakfast and ironing clothes," she notes. Perhaps in the future they'll get involved in other household chores and traditional women's tasks as well. **J**



Dr. Yoko Fujikake, now a professor at the Graduate School of Urban Innovation at Yokohama National University