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**VERN MCGINNIS
ACDI/VOCA**

UNCHAINING COOPERATIVES



Trip Brings Appreciation of Challenges Faced in Developing Countries

Vern McGinnis has worked for one of the largest U.S. agricultural cooperatives for four decades. But it took only five days observing a cooperative development project in Serbia to give him an appreciation for the challenges faced by farmers in developing countries.

Corn and soybean plots in the Eastern European republic were in about the same growth stage as the fields McGinnis left behind in Illinois, where he is a vice president for GROWMARK, a grain, seed and farm supply co-op with \$2.8 billion in sales.

But that's where the similarity ended. McGinnis found a nation still in transition from communist influence and recovering from a war that split the region.

He saw men and women cutting and stacking hay, mostly by hand. "The average farmer might work just a few acres, and if he has more than one dairy cow, he's rich," said McGinnis, who is also board chair of ACDI/VOCA, a development organization formed largely by farm co-ops that has assisted people in 142 countries in 40 years.

McGinnis was observing the results of a five-year, \$40 million ACDI/VOCA project concentrated around Kragujevac, a community of 200,000 in central Serbia.



ACDI/VOCA board member Vern McGinnis, left, addresses the staff of the Regional Economic Development Agency in Kragujevac, Serbia. Together with the agency, ACDI/VOCA has helped 300 new businesses, from flower nurseries to tailors to cosmetics retailers, get off the ground.

He helped distribute purebred heifers to Serbian co-op members and observed farmers working together to improve apple storage and procure feed for hogs.

While the Serbian project mostly benefits farmers, it also assists start-ups involving

crafts, painting, plumbing, electric services and sewing—businesses that create jobs.

"A new strategy in U.S. foreign policy focuses funding on broader projects," McGinnis said. "Our background in co-ops and agriculture represents a huge advantage for us... But we need to stretch our wings

a bit and also work in community and enterprise development."

The Serbia project received funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development. As a result, at a thriving open-air market that received coolers and other equipment from the project, McGinnis saw signs everywhere reading, "From the American people."

Kragujevac's mayor, Veroljub Stevanovic, thanked McGinnis and the others on the trip, the first to include ACDI/VOCA board members in many years. "We expected a lot. We got a lot," said Stevanovic, adding that the project is helping improve the Serbian impression of the United States.

McGinnis brought home both an appreciation for ACDI/VOCA's work and a new grasp of what we have here at home.

"One person, one family, one business at a time, ACDI/VOCA's work is improving Serbian quality of life, instilling democratic values and boosting productivity," he told a dedication ceremony for a regional development facility. "I will take back to the U.S. the message that our investment is working, and it is worth it."

—Nancy Jorgensen