

Extension Learning Exchange: Nicaragua



In September of 2012 a diverse group of extension workers from the U.S. visited communities in Nicaragua during a nine day exploratory trip. Enfolded in a larger cross-cultural learning initiative originating at Cornell Cooperative Extension, this initial “learning exchange” to Nicaragua was intended to build a foundation for future growth and collaboration. Trip participants were drawn from the fields of community development, agriculture and youth development. This diversity in participants created a fertile cross-discipline team that engaged with participants in Nicaragua across disciplinary boundaries. Learning together, sharing meals and miseries, the connections built during this trip have the potential to endure and (hopefully) lead to future collaboration.

During our time in Nicaragua we spent three days in San Ramon – a small community in the heart of the coffee producing region – and participated in the homestay experience. This was a deliberate choice made in order to allow the group to experience a small taste of daily life in a rural community. Living, for even three days, with a family exposed some of the richness and diversity of life that is otherwise hidden to the visitor. While in San Ramon we visited a coffee cooperative (complete with fire ants), several small women’s economic development projects, a local youth development program and the local cooperative of cooperatives.



One of the lessons learned during our time in San Ramon was that extension work happens in a variety of ways and in a diversity of settings that arise out of necessity. Without the long established infrastructure we enjoy here in the United States, extension work in Nicaragua arises from a diversity of groups working within a community. Sometimes this is connected to a formal research program (often through informal channels), but often it is the result of a group or organization attempting to work through critical community issues with whatever resources are at hand.



We were able to see extension in action during our visit to the UCA (Union of Farming Cooperatives). The UCA is a cooperative of cooperatives active across the municipality of San Ramon and has a member base that includes coffee, honey, milk and other agricultural producers. A recent law had been passed in Nicaragua addressing violence against women. The UCA was engaged in educating some of its member cooperative constituents about violence against women. During our visit we witnessed an educational theater performance - theater being an effective and engaging method for conveying information when literacy is low. This

performance provided a reminder of, and link to, the tradition of popular education which has been historically important across Latin America.

From San Ramon we traveled to Leon. In Leon we engaged with faculty and staff from UNAN Leon (The National Autonomous University of Nicaragua) around issues of community development and agriculture. During two very packed days we visited an iguana nursery, women's economic development project, sustainable farming project and many faculty from the schools of agroecology and veterinary sciences. Whirlwind comes close to describing the experience. But it was a very rich and deep time with focused discussions on the potential for future collaboration around topics such as sustainable development, climate change and youth and community development.



We visited several research labs on the campus of UNAN Leon, which was an eye opening experience for everyone, regardless of their program focus. When we think of research at an academic institution we often picture pristine labs adorned with the latest high tech equipment. Perhaps we imagine a few beakers burbling away while a centrifuge whirrs in the background, with intent researchers peering into scanning electron microscopes.

The reality, in Nicaragua, is starkly different. The scientists and researchers we met were as intent and dedicated as any you could find, but the labs and equipment they have to work with are limited. In the second poorest country in our hemisphere this probably isn't all that surprising – but until you encounter the reality you don't really understand how challenging the research conditions are. That being said, research was underway and results were having a direct and positive impact in Nicaragua and other Latin American countries. Necessity truly is the mother of invention and the faculty and staff at UNAN Leon play midwife on a continual basis, giving birth to necessary research and practical applications.

In both San Ramon and Leon we encountered hope and a conviction that it is possible to change the world. This animating hope often breaks through material or economic restrictions and powers small engines of transformation. While we saw this in the labs, it was also apparent in the women's economic development project we encountered in Leon.

Small scale and spread across several communities on the fringes of Leon this project is being facilitated by UNAN Leon, but is firmly rooted in the realities and needs of the individual communities. Our time visiting the women's group in Pueblo Redondo offered a glimpse at the challenges they face. Layered beneath poverty, and a historical reality of machismo, these women are seeking and dreaming of a better life for their children



and communities. Small scale, often micro, enterprises are being explored by the women as means of increasing income, which will lead to increased food security and health. Staff from UNAN Leon are facilitating these explorations and helping to map out the unique needs and niches of each community.

While in Nicaragua we encountered many women who were actively pushing against the boundaries of traditional roles, moving forward with a conviction that things can change. Efforts to support these women, to re-cast community in a new light, were often supported by work that we would call extension. Likewise, youth development is facilitated by a variety of groups and organizations that have no formal designation as extension, but are doing extension work.



Our goals in engaging in an international learning exchange included creating a foundation for future international collaboration. There was also a lot of interest and enthusiasm for the work of 4-H among the groups we met with in September. We hope that we can kick start the development of several 4-H groups in the San Ramon region by bringing one or two younger Nicaraguans here for training in June and July. We are also exploring the potential for reciprocal visits by some members of UNAN Leon.

In March of 2013 a group comprised of Landscape Architecture and Planning students from Cornell University, as well as several extension professionals, will return to San Ramon to begin work on a project we are calling Semillas de Verde (Seeds of Green). And in August we are organizing a longer (11 day) trip to Nicaragua that will be project focused. We are hoping this trip will include pairings of extension professionals with university students who will engage in short term research projects while in Nicaragua. If you are interested in learning more about upcoming trips please email Paul Treadwell – pt36@cornell.edu

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